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# Widows in the Early Patristic Period: Ecclesial Ministry and Theological Significance

## NAŠLIŲ VAIDMUO ANKSTYVUOJU PATRISTINIU LAIKOTARPIU: BAŽNYTINĖ TARNYSTĖ IR TEOLOGINĖ REIKŠMĖ

**SUMMARY.** The paper analyzes the role of widows, as members of the Christian community, during the early patristic period, examining their communal function, spiritual ministry, and theological significance. Special attention is given to the so-called “enrolled widows”, i.e., widows who were officially registered in the community and had specific pastoral and social responsibilities. Based on the writings of the Church Fathers, it is revealed how the way of life and moral example of widows became an ethical standard within the community, and how their active participation in ministry through prayer, fasting, and charitable works secured their special place in the community’s spiritual life. “Enrolled widows” were perceived as symbols of spiritual maturity and righteousness, and their activities were considered theologically significant, expressed through the metaphor of the “Altar of God”. At the same time, early patristic sources testify that they were forbidden to perform sacramental ministry, and their teaching activity was strictly limited. Nevertheless, the “enrolled widows”, who formed a certain order, held a unique position in the early Church, becoming an important part of the spiritual life of the Christian community.

**SANTRAUKA.** Straipsnyje analizuojama, koks buvo našlių, kaip krikščionių bendruomenės narių, vaidmuo ankstyvoju patristiniu laikotarpiu, nagrinėjant jų bendruomeninę funkciją, dvasinę tarnystę ir teologinę reikšmę. Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas vadinamosioms „įrašytoms našlėms“, t. y. našlėms, kurios buvo oficialiai registruotos bendruomenėje ir turėjo konkrečias pastoracines bei socialines pareigas. Remiantis Bažnyčios Tėvų raštais atskleidžiama, kaip našlių gyvenimo būdas ir jų moralinis pavyzdys tapo etikos standartu bendruomenėje ir kaip jų aktyvus dalyvavimas tarnystėje per malda, pasninką ir labdaros veiklą joms užtikrino ypatingą vietą bendruomenės dvasiniame gyvenime. „Įrašytos našlės“ buvo laikomos dvasinės

brandos ir teismo simboliais, o jų veikla laikyta teologiškai reikšminga, nusakoma „Dievo altorius“ metafora. Tačiau ankstyvieji patristiniai šaltiniai liudija, kad našlėms buvo draudžiama atlikti sakramentinę tarnystę, o jų mokymo veikla buvo griežtai ribojama. Nepaisant to, „įrašytos našlės“ sudarė atskirą luomą, užėmė išskirtinę vietą ankstyvojoje Bažnyčioje ir tapo svarbia krikščionių bendruomenės dvasinio gyvenimo dalimi.

KEYWORDS: the Early Patristic period, “enrolled widows”, Order of widows, widow as the Altar of God.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: ankstyvasis patristinis laikotarpis, „įrašytos našlės“, našlių ordinas, našlė kaip Dievo altorius.

## Introduction

In the New Testament, the status of widows and their role in the Christian community are defined both through the material care provided by the community and through the services they perform for the benefit of believers. This dual perspective reveals that widows in the early Church were not perceived solely as a socially vulnerable group, but also as having a distinct spiritual purpose in the life of the community. In this way, the figure of the widow acquires not only pastoral but also theological significance. The ideal of the “good widow” formed in biblical tradition is associated with a devout and virtuous life: she is considered to have been the wife of only one man, characterized by obedience, modesty, temperance, compassion, and readiness to serve the needs of the community. These qualities reflect the evangelical model of life and become the criterion by which early Christian communities evaluated the lifestyle of widows and their spiritual authority. Widows are understood as witnesses of faith, whose lives testify to their faithfulness to God and continual devotion to prayer<sup>1</sup>.

In the texts of the Church Fathers, such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, as well as early Church sources, such as the “Didascalia Apostolorum” and the “Apostolic Constitutions”, the role of widows is examined in a broader ecclesiological context, revealing their place and significance in the life of the Church. These texts testify to the early Church’s efforts to understand the nature of the life of widows and their spiritual role within the community, seeing their ministry as an integral part of the life of the Church. Following the teachings of the New Testament, special attention is given to the lifestyle of widows, the significance of their prayer, fasting, and other ascetic practices, as well as the question of how these practices were understood and incorporated into the life of the community. At the same time, the need to define the nature and limits of the service of widows emerges, and this issue becomes an important part of the theological reflection of the early Church, revealing the desire to reconcile spiritual vocation, community order, and consistent witness of faith.

<sup>1</sup> See Vilma Šliužaitė, “A New Testament Perspective on Widows’ Ministry in the Early Church”, *Soter* 97 (125) (2026): 19–33, [https://doi.org/10.7220/2335-8785.97\(125\).2](https://doi.org/10.7220/2335-8785.97(125).2).

This paper analyzes texts from the early patristic period seeking to reveal how the sources articulate theological understandings of the functions of widows and their communal mission. The study focuses on the spiritual and communal functions assigned to widows in early Church and the early Church's efforts to reconcile care for vulnerable members of the community, its call for widows to pursue the ideal of an ascetic life, and the emergence of institutional regulations for widows.

## The Early Church Fathers' Views on Widows

In the writings of the Church Fathers of the early centuries, on the one hand, the continuity of the New Testament understanding of widows is maintained, and on the other hand, it is theologically developed, highlighting new aspects. In early Christian literature, there is a gradual shift from emphasizing the social care of widows toward interpreting widowhood as a distinct spiritual vocation and an ideal of ascetic life. This conceptual change is already present in the texts of the apostolic fathers. For example, Clement of Rome, although he does not provide a systematic teaching on widows, nevertheless attests to the early Church's view of their place and role, adopting the ethical paradigm of the Old Testament in the Christian discourse. In his *First letter to the Corinthians*, referring to Isaiah's call to "hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow" (Isaiah 1:16–17), he presents the widow as a measure of justice and closeness to God<sup>2</sup>. In this respect, Clement remains close to the spirit of the New Testament, i.e., the widow is the one through whom the community is tested in its faithfulness to God's commandments<sup>3</sup>.

Ignatius of Antioch mentions widows in three of his letters – the *Letter to the Philadelphians*, the *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, and the *Letter to Polycarp*, thus showing that this group within the community was theologically and pastorally significant to him. In the *Letter to the Philadelphians*, in a longer version, in the fourth chapter, Ignatius gives specific instructions to widows on how to behave: "Let not the widows be wanderers about, nor fond of dainties, nor gadders from house to house; but let them be like Judith, noted for her seriousness; and like Anna eminent for her sobriety."<sup>4</sup> In this passage, Judith and Anna are consciously presented as biblical examples, defining the ideal pattern of a widow's behavior. Judith's way of life is particularly highlighted: she "lived as a widow in her home for three years and four months" (Jud 8:4), "fasted all

<sup>2</sup> Clement of Rome, *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, trans. by Charles H. Hoole (1885), 8, <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-hoole.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 59.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Ignatius of Antioch, "To the Philadelphians", 4, trans. by Gerald G. Walsh, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. by Dr. Roy Joseph Deferreri (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-philadelphians-longer.html>.

the days of her widowhood” (Jud 8:6), and “[n]o one had a bad word to say about her, for she feared God greatly” (Jud 8:8). In this way, the figure of Judith becomes paradigmatic: she embodies piety, self-discipline, and moral authority, which is not limited to private religious devotion but also has a clear communal dimension. In Ignatius’s text, the widow is no longer perceived merely as a group of people in need of care, but as an active participant in spiritual life and an example for the entire Christian community.

In the *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, after greeting the bishop, priests, and deacons, Ignatius of Antioch additionally singles out a specific group within the community: “Greeting to the families of my brothers, along with their wives and children, and to the virgins called widows.”<sup>5</sup> This wording raises a hermeneutical question regarding the meaning of the term “widows”, as it is applied not to women who have actually lost their spouses, but to virgins. Roger Gryson, analyzing this passage, notes that there was a group of virgins in the Smyrna community, consciously referred to as “widows”. According to him, the use of this term was not accidental but theologically significant since it reflected a chosen way of life and a specific spiritual ideal. In R. Gryson’s interpretation, Christian virgins who chose to live in chastity were called ‘widows’ because their way of life essentially corresponded to the life of ‘true widows’. The logic of this correspondence included an ascetic lifestyle, constant prayer, and works of mercy, as well as dependence on the support of the community in cases where they lacked family support or economic backing<sup>6</sup>. In this way, the term ‘widows’ in Ignatius’ letter describes not a woman’s marital status but rather her spiritual status as well as her ecclesiastical role.

In his personal Letter to Polycarp, Ignatius of Antioch, like Clement of Rome, returns to the New Testament’s pastoral guidance and emphasizes the necessity of caring for widows as socially vulnerable members of the community. He directly addresses Bishop Polycarp, stating: “Let the widows not be neglected; after the Lord, you be their guardian”<sup>7</sup>. This wording clearly resonates with the teaching of 1 Timothy 5:3–4, where the Church’s leadership is entrusted with the responsibility to care for “true widows”, those without the support of relatives. Ignatius’ position in this respect remains close to the logic of the New Testament: widows are seen as individuals in a vulnerable social position who require institutional and communal care. At the same time, however, Ignatius’ text shows that this care is not merely material or social but rather it is based on respect for widows as a group belonging particularly to the Church.

Polycarp of Smyrna continues and develops the direction initiated by Ignatius, and his teaching about widows acquires a clearly sacred and normative character. Polycarp does not limit himself to urging care for widows but also defines how they themselves should understand their identity and vocation in the context of the Church. He indicates that widows should nurture themselves in two interrelated directions: on the

<sup>5</sup> Saint Ignatius of Antioch, “To the Smyrnaeans”, 13, trans. by Gerald G. Walsh, in *The Apostolic Fathers*.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1980), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Saint Ignatius of Antioch, “To Polycarp”, 4, trans. by Gerald G. Walsh, in *The Apostolic Fathers*.

one hand, they are encouraged to avoid certain forms of vicious behavior, and on the other hand, they are called to embrace their widowhood as a vocation to live a life consecrated to God. Polycarp expresses this dual perspective concisely and theologically with the statement: “Teach the widows to be discreet in the faith of the Lord, praying continually for all, being far from all slandering, evil-speaking, false-witnessing, love of money, and every kind of evil; knowing that they are the altars of God.”<sup>8</sup>

The metaphor of the altar signifies an important shift from the pastoral concept of the New Testament towards a theological definition of the status of widows. While in 1 Timothy 5 widows are primarily evaluated based on their social position, moral reputation, and prayer practices, in Polycarp’s text they are already perceived as a sacred part of the community, whose life in itself has the nature of a sacrifice to God. By listing the vices inappropriate “for God’s altar”, Polycarp indirectly presents a positive portrait of the true widow, that is, a woman characterized by spiritual wisdom, seriousness and self-control, faithful to her commitments to the Lord, and whose conduct nurtures the entire community. In this way, the texts of Ignatius and Polycarp reveal a clear trajectory of development. In Ignatius’ Letter to Polycarp, the New Testament’s social and pastoral concept of widows still dominates, emphasizing their care and protection, while in Polycarp’s teaching, this concept is transcended, giving widows a sacred dimension of identity. Here, widows become not only recipients of support but also subjects of spiritual life and normative examples of Christian behavior. This transition lays the groundwork for the later tradition, especially in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, where widows are finally defined as an institutionalized, strictly regulated, and ascetically oriented group within the Church.

In his writings, Tertullian presents a detailed portrait of the ideal widow, building upon the teachings of earlier Church Fathers – Polycarp and Ignatius. He advocates eternal widowhood, reminding readers that a widow, as a symbol of God’s image and the altar, is to be “set forth pure.”<sup>9</sup> Tertullian believes that the husband’s death may be God’s way of calling the woman to continence, while continence is “a means of attaining eternal life” and “a proof of the faith.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, a woman who chooses chastity over the possibility of marriage is seen as one who “chooses to be wedded to God” and “lives with Him”, “communes with Him”, and “with Him treat[s] on intimate terms day and night.”<sup>11</sup> Tertullian even suggests that widows can be considered “members of the angelic family, even while on earth,” highlighting the sacred status of their life<sup>12</sup>.

It seems that Tertullian ranks the widows even above the virgins, justifying this view by the greater moral and spiritual challenge that falls to the widows. Although

<sup>8</sup> *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians*, IV.3–4, New Advent, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0136.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Tertullian, *To His Wife*, I. 7, New Advent, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0404.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, I. 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, I. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

virgins, according to him, possess “perfect integrity” and “entire sanctity,” allowing them to see the face of God most directly, the truly widowed woman faces a tougher task: “it is easy not to crave after that which you know not, and to turn away from what you have never had to regret.”<sup>13</sup> Tertullian emphasizes that continence is all the more glorious the more it is rooted in experience and conscious choice. As he himself states: “More glorious is the continence which is aware of its own right, which knows what it has seen.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, although a virgin may be considered happier due to preserved goodness, the widow’s merit is regarded as greater, because she attains this goodness through renunciation. From this perspective, the chosen ascetic chastity of the true widows in Tertullian’s thought becomes a mark of conscious sacrifice and spiritual maturity, surpassing the way of life of both virgins and married women.

Tertullian also emphasizes the real dangers accompanying widowhood and highlights the importance of discipline. He urges widows to avoid “[t]alkative, idle, winebibbing, curious tent-fellows” as such relations “do the very greatest hurt to the purpose of widowhood”<sup>15</sup>. Talkativeness is understood as the opposite of modesty; idleness as an obstacle to ascetic life; winebibbing insinuates any and every evil; and curiosity sparks a spirit of competitive rivalry, which can block the way to God. For this reason, Tertullian encourages cultivating “the virtue of self-restraint, which ministers to chastity; cultivate industry <...> temperance <...>. Keep company and converse worthy to God.”<sup>16</sup> In short, Tertullian treats the true widows as a model of sexual asceticism, dedication to God and to the community, as well as moral integrity, which should be recognized and respected within the Christian community.

While Tertullian was active in the West, at the same time in the East Clement of Alexandria and Origen were shaping their views on widows. Both authors took a radical stance on the possibility of remarriage, asserting that a second marriage for widows was sinful. For example, Origen, in one of his sermons on Luke, writes:

Not only fornication, but also a second marriage, excludes someone from office in the Church. Anyone twice married may be neither a bishop nor a presbyter nor a deacon nor a widow. <...> For I think that the man who married only once, and the virgin, and he who perseveres in abstinence, belong to the Church of God.<sup>17</sup>

This radical position, which limits remarriage, was nevertheless not dominant in the early Church communities. More often, Christian authors, both in the East and the West, emphasized not the prohibition of remarriage, but the chaste and devout life of

<sup>13</sup> Tertullian, *To His Wife*, I. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Origen, “Homily 17”, 10, in *The Fathers of the Church: Homilies on Luke, Fragments on Luke/Origen*, vol. 94, trans. by Joseph T. Lienhard (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

widows as a priority. For example, the works of St. Ambrose and St. Jerome, aiming to present the ideal life of a widow, draw on the stories of Sarepta, Anna, Naomi, Judith, Furya, and Agerucia. All these women are perfect examples of chastity, devotion, and service to the community. As St. Ambrose emphasizes, the state of widowhood in itself is not a guarantee of virtue: “there is no praise simply in widowhood, unless there be added the virtues of widowhood”<sup>18</sup>. In Ambrose’s thought, the decisive factor is a person’s moral attitude, not their social status. Therefore, a widow is valued not for the mere fact of widowhood, but for whether this state is accompanied by a consciously chosen chastity, which Ambrose describes as “a large and most abundant exercise of virtue”<sup>19</sup>. This view aligns with St. Paul’s teaching that marriage remains a legitimate and even recommended path for those who do not have the gift of self-restraint: “it is better to marry than to be on fire” (1 Cor 7:9). Thus, in Ambrose’s theology, widowhood acquires value only when it becomes an active practice of virtue, rather than merely a passive life circumstance.

On the other hand, it seems that to Jerome second marriage is simply relatively good, preventing prostitution and other evils. In letter 123, *To Ageruchia*, Jerome demonstrates a critical attitude towards a woman who marries more than once. According to him, such a woman may think she is worthy of praise, but in reality her behavior is considered only comparatively less sinful than that of a prostitute<sup>20</sup>. However, despite such a critical evaluation, Jerome emphasizes that he does not condemn a second marriage. As he himself states: “Do I condemn second marriage? not at all; but I commend first ones. <...> I urge those who have been once married to live of continence.”<sup>21</sup> With this statement, Jerome emphasizes that practicing continence, chosen after a spouse’s death, is a deliberate moral decision reflecting a higher ideal of virtue than simple marital duty. Like Tertullian, Jerome treats the death of a spouse as God’s call to continence, and he supports this decision with theological reasoning, using the indissoluble marriage between Adam and Eve and the example of Christ and the Church<sup>22</sup>.

In summary, it can be stated that the concept of the role of widows in the community is consistently developed: the texts of the New Testament already show the main features emphasizing their spiritual function and moral authority, and in later patristic sources these elements become clearer, more normatively defined, and integrated into the community’s structure. This lays the foundation for moving on to the analysis of widows’ duties and responsibilities, which are described in later texts in a specific and systematic manner.

<sup>18</sup> “The Treatise of St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. Concerning Widows”, I. 3, in *Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, trans. by H. De Romestin et al. NPNF s. 2 vol. 10, reprint (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Jerome, “Letter CXXIII. To Ageruchia”, 9, in *St. Jerome. Letters and Select Works*, trans. by Tr. H. Fremantle, NPNF s. 2 vol. 6., reprint (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Jerome, “Letter CXXIII. To Ageruchia”, 12.

## The Rights and Duties of Widows

As has already been shown in this paper, in the early Church widows were perceived in two ways: on the one hand, they were included in the life of the church community and the performance of certain duties; on the other hand, there was also a group of widows who required material and social support from the community. This section examines what it meant to belong to the widow's order in the early Church, that is, what their participation in community life was, the nature of the duties they performed, and the extent of their limited rights. In answering this question, reference will be made to the testimonies of Tertullian, as well as to so-called the *Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome*, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Apostolic Constitutions* as normative and theological sources.

The writings of Tertullian, in which the possibility of women participating in Church ministry is rather categorically rejected, simultaneously reveal, indirectly, the actual activity of women in the early Christian community. In polemics against heretics in his work *Prescription against Heretics*, he writes: "The very women of these heretics, how wanton they are! For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures – it may be even to baptize."<sup>23</sup> Although this critique clearly shows Tertullian's disapproval of women's involvement in teaching, theological discussions, and sacramental actions, the very tone of outrage indicates that such practices were not merely theoretical but actually existed in certain communities of the 3rd century.

An even more systematic and normative position of Tertullian is presented in the treatise *On the Veiling of Virgins*, in which he quite categorically states: "It is not permitted to a woman to speak in the church; but neither (is it permitted her) to teach, nor to baptize, nor to offer, nor to claim to herself a lot in any manly function, not to say (in any) sacerdotal office."<sup>24</sup> According to R. Gryson, this teaching shows that in Tertullian's ecclesiology, hierarchical Church authority and the right to administer the sacraments was strictly reserved for men: primarily to bishops, followed by presbyters and deacons, and in extreme cases, to lay men. Nevertheless, R. Gryson notes, these normative boundaries paradoxically confirm the historical fact that in the third century in the Western Church women (including widows) actually taught, baptized, and performed exorcisms, even though such activity was incompatible with the official Church regulations<sup>25</sup>.

Despite the strict stance on women's liturgical and sacramental roles, Tertullian's writings attest to the presence of women within certain Church structures.

<sup>23</sup> Tertullian, *The Prescription against Heretics*, 41, New Advent, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0311.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 9, New Advent, Accessed February 18, 2026, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0403.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 18–19.

In the treatise *On Exhortation to Chastity*, he says: “How many men, therefore, and how many women, in Ecclesiastical Orders, owe their position to continence, who have preferred to be wedded to God.”<sup>26</sup> This passage shows that women, and including widows, were incorporated into ecclesiastical “ordination” and participated in the community, guided by ascetic discipline and chastity. In the treatise *Ad uxorem*, Tertullian emphasizes: “For men who have been married twice are not allowed to preside in the Church nor is it permissible that a widow be chosen unless she was the wife of but one man.”<sup>27</sup> R. Gryson interprets these passages as demonstrating that widows had a defined role within the community, though this position was not equivalent to the liturgical service of a clergy.

Even though Tertullian mentions the order of widows, in *The Apostolic Tradition* St. Hippolytus states: “When a widow is appointed, she is not ordained (*χειροτονειν, non ordinatur*), but she is chosen by name (*eligitur ex nomine*). <...> Let the widow be instituted by word only (*καθίστασθαι, instituitur*)<sup>28</sup>. The further instructions regarding widows indicate the reason why they cannot be ordained: “Do not lay hands upon her, for she does not offer the oblation, nor does she have a liturgical duty (*quia non offert oblationem* [προσφορά] *neque habet liturgiam* [λειτουργία]).”<sup>29</sup> Thus, it is clearly emphasized that ordination is intended only for the clergy due to their liturgical service. This difference reveals the hierarchical order of the early Church, where widows’ participation in community life was real and organized, but their ministry was neither liturgical nor sacramental and was within the framework of the community’s spiritual structure, subordinate to the authority of the clergy.

*Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome* mentions prayer as the main duty carried out by widows, emphasizing their role in the spiritual life of the community. However, this text does not specify any other activities that could be attributed to the duties of enrolled widows. According to this source, the function of widows in the early Church appears to be narrowly defined and primarily focused on the practice of constant prayer. However, Ute E. Eisen provides an important observation on this issue, which helps reconsider the previous understanding. She notes that prayer should not be underestimated, as intercessory prayer indicates that widows were closely connected to the life of the community and acted as pastoral workers, supporting other

<sup>26</sup> Tertullian, *On Exhortation to Chastity*, 13, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0405.htm>. R. Gryson explains: “The term *ordo*, borrowed from ancient Roman institutions, was applied analogously by Tertullian to those who occupied an official position in the Church.” See Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Tertullian, *To His Wife*, I. 4, 20.

<sup>28</sup> *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr*, ed. by Gregory Dix (London: Published for the Church Historical Society by S.P.C.K., 1968), II. 1–5.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

members of the community through their spiritual assistance<sup>30</sup>. In this way, even seemingly passive and “limited” prayer ministry takes on a concrete social and pastoral dimension.

Moreover, U. E. Eisen presents *The Canons of Hippolytus*, which provides further information about the service of widows in the Christian community. She quotes Canon 9, which states: “The function of widows is important by reason of all that is incumbent upon them: frequent prayer, the ministry of the sick, and frequent fasting.”<sup>31</sup> This text expands the previous understanding of the duties of widows – in addition to prayer, mentioned in the *Apostolic Tradition*, the list includes pastoral and ascetic aspects, such as caring for the sick and fasting. In this way, the service of widows in the early Church was not only spiritual but also a concrete, community-supporting, integral pastoral function.

More information about the widows’ duties and rights in the early Church can be found in two normative ecclesiastical documents, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Constitutiones Apostolorum*. In these texts, the ministry of widows is described in more detail, specifying the main areas of their activity within the community.

The primary duty of widows is praying and fasting for benefactors and for the whole Church. For example, the *Constitutiones Apostolorum* describes the life of a widow as a continual spiritual practice, stating that the widow is “praying, and reading, and watching, and fasting; speaking to God continually in songs and hymns”<sup>32</sup>. This practice is closely connected with the community’s commitment to caring for widows, as prayer and fasting were their primary service. Through this ongoing spiritual activity, widows not only fulfilled their duties but also contributed to the prosperity and spiritual strengthening of the entire community. In other words, their prayer and fasting were seen as intercession for the benefit of community members, while the community, by ensuring the support and protection of the widows, essentially upheld this important spiritual function. This creates a reciprocal relationship, in which the community cares for widows, and the widows contribute to the community’s spiritual health and unity through their constant prayer and fasting.

The second duty of widows is visiting the sick and praying for them, laying hands upon them. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* emphasizes that a widow’s prayer for the sick was particularly valued, especially when combined with fasting as a practice of intercession for the sick. This combination of actions shows that prayer

<sup>30</sup> Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, trans. by Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 148.

<sup>31</sup> *The Canons of Hippolytus*, ed. by Paul Bradshaw (New York: Gorgias Press, 2010), 16. See Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity*, 148–149.

<sup>32</sup> *Constitutiones Apostolorum*, III, 7, trans. by William Whiston, accessed February 19, 2026, <https://ldsfocuschrist2.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/apostolic-constitutions-william-whiston.pdf>.

and care for the sick were understood as an integral part of the widow's ministry. The text strictly condemns widows who neglect this duty, stating: "O widow who art without discipline, sees... thy brethren in sickness, and hast no care to fast and pray over thy members, and to lay hand upon them and to visit them, but feigns thyself to be not in health, or not at leisure."<sup>33</sup> At the same time, the document clearly states that the laying on of hands and prayers for the sick were performed only with the permission of a bishop or deacon, and widows could not carry out these activities independently<sup>34</sup>. This shows that their pastoral role was formalized, i.e., although widows undertook important spiritual and community work, the scope of their activities was clearly defined by church authority. This indicates that in the context of the early Church, the service of widows was significant but strictly regulated.

Lastly, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* discusses the right of widows to teach. In chapter 15, the document very clearly forbids widows from doctrinal teaching, stating: "It is neither right nor necessary therefore that women should be teachers, and especially concerning the name of Christ and the redemption of His passion."<sup>35</sup> This provision is based on the potential distortion of doctrine, as the document also notes: "For when they speak without the knowledge of doctrine, they will bring blasphemy upon the words."<sup>36</sup> However, the it states that widows may speak about righteousness, faith in God, and dispute about idolatry<sup>37</sup>. Thus, the activity of widows in the field of teaching was clearly limited and defined, separating it from official Church teaching, emphasizing the distinction between the service of doctrinal authority and the limited function of moral and faith testimony.

In a similarly strict tone, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Constitutiones Apostolorum* forbid women from administering baptism. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* states: "That a woman should baptize... we do not counsel."<sup>38</sup> This prohibition is based on the fact that there are no precedents in the Gospels allowing women to perform this sacramental ministry. The documents argue: 1) if baptism could have been administered by women, Jesus would have been baptized by his mother Mary, not by John; 2) if Christ had wanted women to participate in administering baptism, He would have sent them for this purpose<sup>39</sup>. Based on these arguments, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* states: "We not advise a woman to baptize or to be baptized by a woman, for that is a transgression of the commandments, and there is great danger to her who baptizeth and also to him

<sup>33</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum. In English*, trans. from the Syriac by Margaret Dunlop Gipson M. R. A. S. (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1903), XV, iii, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., XV, iii, 6; *Constitutiones Apostolorum*, III, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., XV, iii, 5.

<sup>37</sup> See *Didascalia Apostolorum*, XV, iii, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., XV, iii, 9.

<sup>39</sup> *Constitutiones Apostolorum*, III, 9; *Didascalia Apostolorum*, XV, iii, 9.

who is baptized.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, these sources indicate that widows’ right to administer sacraments was strictly limited, and their activities were confined to supporting the community, practicing prayer and fasting, and other pastoral functions that contributed to the community’s spiritual well-being.

Finally, widows were advised to serve community members in need of material support, emphasizing their social and pastoral role within the community. They were encouraged to stay at home and “work at (their) wool” for the sake of others, which Charles C. Ryrie interprets as making garments for those who are in need, thereby ensuring a regular supply of assistance to those living in poverty or deprivation<sup>41</sup>. This interpretation can be supported by the story of Tabitha in the Acts of the Apostles (9:36–43), which tells of a widow who made “coats and garments” for poor widows. This attests to the fact that in the early Church, the social ministry of widows was not only about addressing material needs but also a concrete pastoral activity that strengthened community unity, promoted solidarity, and ensured that the most vulnerable members of the community received their support.

In summary, the sources of the early Church suggest that the primary duty of the widows was constant prayer and fasting for the entire Church and for its supporters. As for other communal tasks, they were invited to visit the sick, where bedside prayers were especially valued, particularly if combined with fasting and intercessory prayer. Also, they were encouraged to stay at home, to avoid seeking material gain, and to work for the poor. Thus, it is evident that in the early Church, the activity of widows was significant to the community, but they were prohibited from performing sacramental ministry and were strictly limited in teaching activities.

## The Widow as the Altar of God

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In concluding the analysis of the role of widows in the early Church, it is worth drawing attention to a significant theological image consistently recurring in early Christian literature – the concept of the widow as the “altar of God”. This metaphor allows the ministry of widows to be considered not merely in functional or disciplinary terms, but also from a theological point of view, highlighting their unique place in the community’s life of prayer and spiritual witness. As mentioned in this paper, Polycarp, in his *Epistle to the Philipians*, was the first to describe widows as the “altar of God”, urging them to cultivate prudence in the faith of the Lord and emphasizing their spiritual status, founded on constant prayer, purity, and faithfulness to God<sup>42</sup>. In this way, the ministry of widows is understood not only as the performance of specific duties or

<sup>40</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*, XV, iii. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *The Role of Women in the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), 132.

<sup>42</sup> *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philipians*, IV.3–4.

adherence to disciplinary norms but also as a theologically significant reality, revealing their symbolic importance in the life of the early Church.

In later early Christian literature, the image of widows as the “altar of God” is adopted and further developed. In his letter *Ad uxorem*, Tertullian, speaking about widows, employs the same metaphor, stating that “the altar of God must be an altar of manifest purity”<sup>43</sup>, thus emphasizing not a ritual act but a lifestyle grounded in abstinence, moral integrity, and constant prayer. In this context, widows are equated with a place of spiritual offering, where the main “offering” is understood as their personal devotion and their ascetic life. As Thurston notes, both Polycarp and Tertullian link this metaphor with the biblical image of the altar and Paul’s instructions in 1 Timothy 5:5–10, where widows are encouraged to remain in prayer and pursue purity<sup>44</sup>. This analogy is later reinforced in normative Church documents. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* urges widows to be “reckoned <...> in the likeness of the altar”<sup>45</sup>, while simultaneously criticizing wandering widows who “does not conform to the altar of Christ”<sup>46</sup>, thereby emphasizing the requirement of stability, discipline, and dedication to community life. The *Constitutiones Apostolorum* largely follows the same rhetoric, urging, “Let the widow <...> own herself to be the altar of God”<sup>47</sup>, and also applying this analogy to other community members who have chosen an ascetic life, thus showing that this metaphor is associated with a specific spiritual way of life, and not merely with the status of widows and virgins, thereby expanding the theological significance of ascetic life.

It is important to note that the scientific literature presents various interpretations of widows as the “altar of God”, revealing different authors’ positions on this issue. In the book *The Role of Women in Early Christianity*, Jean La Porte argues that Polycarp, by comparing widows to the altar of God, emphasizes their complete devotion to God and their special mission to pray for the entire community<sup>48</sup>. So, according to J. La Porte, the image of the altar reveals the importance of widows in the public worship of the community. Moreover, this metaphor describes the ideal way of life for widows, presented as an example for all Christians. By contrast, another interpretive approach, presented by H. Wayne House, argues that Polycarp, as well as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Constitutiones Apostolorum*, when using the term “altar of God”, not only praise widows but also emphasize their duty to remain at home being calm and unmovable, like the altar itself<sup>49</sup>. This interpretation is based on the teaching of the

<sup>43</sup> Tertullian, *To His Wife*, I. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Thurston, *Widows*, 108–112.

<sup>45</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*, IX, ii. 26.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, XV, iii. 6.

<sup>47</sup> *Constitutiones Apostolorum*, III, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Jean Le Porte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 60.

<sup>49</sup> H. Wayne House, “Distinctive Roles for Women in the Second and Centuries”, *Bibliotheca sacra*, 146.581, Jan-Mar 1989, 47.

*Didascalía Apostolorum*: “[L]et her (widow) sit ever at home, and not stray and run about among the houses of the faithful to receive. For the altar of God never strays about anywhere, but is fixed in one place.”<sup>50</sup>

Mary T. Malone agrees with H. W. House’s interpretation, but she clearly expresses a stricter stance, emphasizing the evident limitation of widows’ social life in the early Church. M. T. Malone notes that the “altar of God” is the best metaphor to express the sad reality of widows: “The fixity of the altar seemed the best image for the desired quiet, hidden, inactive life of the widows.”<sup>51</sup> She appears to associate the image of the altar with an attempt to restrict the activities of widows and emphasizes institutionalized control. On the other hand, some authors believe that the metaphor, *the altar of God*, reveals the existing problems in the lives of widows and is often used as a counterpoint to undesirable practices, aiming to present an ideal example of a “good widow”. For instance, R. Gryson argues that widows in the early Church often failed to exercise discretion or restraint, for they went from house to house seeking gifts, spread rumors, and caused quarrels<sup>52</sup>. R. Gryson’s arguments likely rely on the *Didascalía Apostolorum*, which criticizes bad widows who are “not fitted for the Altar of the Christ”, since “they care for nothing but Mammon, those whose gods are their purses, and their glory is their bellies”<sup>53</sup>. Such widows are not fully devoted to God; they pray with a “divided heart”, meaning that while they pray, their thoughts are directed toward material pursuits. In this context, the widow as an image of the altar becomes a moral ideal that every widow is called to strive for, that is, to stay at home, pray without ceasing, and keep her heart detached from unnecessary matters, thereby demonstrating complete devotion to God.

Francine Cardman offers yet another interpretation of the altar image, linking widows with the altar of incense and the offering of prayer, noting that widows function like an altar from which prayer and incense rise to God; otherwise, if they pray lazily or pursue only selfish goals, their prayers scatter, and God does not hear their requests, because such widows do not “conform to the altar of Christ”<sup>54</sup>. Furthermore, widows are called “the altar of God” because they receive offerings brought to the church during worship; Mary L. McKenna emphasizes: “They are the altar on which the offerings were piled.”<sup>55</sup> In this respect, the activities of widows take on a rather passive character, limited to receiving offerings brought during community worship; on the other hand, if widows are interpreted as an incense altar, they are recognized as having a special intercessory power in prayer, and therefore community members would give offerings in exchange for their spiritual service.

<sup>50</sup> *Didascalía Apostolorum*, XV, iii.6.

<sup>51</sup> Mary T. Malone, *Women & Christianity*, vol. 1 (New York: Maryknoll, 2000), 129.

<sup>52</sup> Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> *Didascalía Apostolorum*, XV, iii.6.

<sup>54</sup> Francine Cardman, “Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity”, in *Women & Christian Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1999), 310.

<sup>55</sup> Mary L. McKenna, *Women of the Church: Role and Renewal* (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1967), 51.

In short, based on interpretations by various authors, the metaphor the “Altar of God” reveals different aspects of the reality of widows in the early Church. On one hand, this metaphor emphasizes the special significance of widows in the spiritual life of the community, their unique ability to intercede through prayer, and their strong trust in God. On the other hand, the image of the altar highlights the passivity and immobility of widows, reflecting the institutional and social limitations of the early Church on their activities.

## Conclusions

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The study showed that widows in the early Church were perceived in two ways: on the one hand, they were objects of community care, receiving material and social support; on the other hand, a certain group of widows was integrated into the organized community life and participated in defined ministries. Based on the testimonies of the early Church fathers, the *Apostolic Tradition*, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and the *Apostolic Constitutions*, it can be stated that women belonging to the order of widows performed clearly defined duties, although their rights and areas of activity were limited. Their primary ministry was continuous prayer and fasting for the whole Church and its supporters, as well as visiting the sick and intercessory prayer, which was especially valued as a form of spiritual assistance. At the same time, they were encouraged to live a modest life free from material pursuits and to serve the poor.

Explanations of the widow as the “altar of God” provided by various authors reveal different aspects of the reality of widows in the early Church. On one hand, this metaphor emphasizes the widows’ special contribution to the community’s spiritual life through their unceasing prayer and unconditional devotion to God. On the other hand, the image of the altar also reflects institutionally defined boundaries of their activity, emphasizing focus, steadfastness, and modesty. Although the activities of widows were considered significant for the spiritual life of the community, early Church sources clearly indicate that they were not entrusted with sacramental ministry, and teaching activities were strictly limited. The ministry of widows was integrated into the Church’s structure, clearly distinguishing their ministries from the institutional ministries carried out by bishops, priests, and deacons.

The practices of the early Christian Church remain relevant in the context of today’s Church. The experience of the first centuries invites contemporary Christian communities not only to pay special attention to widows as a vulnerable social group but also to seek ways to empower them to participate meaningfully in pastoral, spiritual, and social activities. This participation can be carried out through prayer, support, and especially caring for the weak, thus reflecting the ideals of the early Church. By involving widows in the life of the community – not only supporting them materially

but also providing opportunities for active service – a tradition based on historical experience would be restored, in which widows were considered not merely as recipients of aid but as active participants in the Church's spiritual life, contributing to the community's needs and social well-being. In this way, the experience of early times can be modeled today to balance care, spiritual responsibility, and the practical implementation of faith.

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