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A New Testament Perspective on Widows' Ministry in the Early Church

NAŠLIŲ TARNYSTĖ ANKSTYVOJOJE BAŽNYČIOJE PAGAL NAUJOJO TESTAMENTO MOKYMĄ

SUMMARY. The paper examines the ministry of widows in the early Church from a New Testament perspective. The introductory section briefly analyses the terminology used to denote a “widow” in the Ancient World, which helps to understand the socio-economic, existential and spiritual aspects of their position. The attitude of Jesus towards widows and His ministry to them is then considered as a key to understanding their place in God’s plan. It is shown that Jesus’ care and compassion for widows go beyond social assistance, and in His teaching, the image of the widow becomes an example of true devotion and genuine trust in God. The concluding section analyses the role of widows in the life of the early Church based on the texts Luke 2:36–38, Acts 6:1–7, 9:36–43, and 1 Timothy 5:3–16, demonstrating that widows in New Testament communities were not only recipients of assistance but also active participants in spiritual and social service, including prayer, testimony, and works of mercy. Thus, the image of the widow in the New Testament is revealed as theologically significant, combining widows’ vulnerability with a calling to spiritual and communal service.

SANTRAUKA. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama našlių tarnystė ankstyvojoje Bažnyčioje žvelgiant iš Naujojo Testamento perspektyvos. Įvadinėje dalyje trumpai aptariama terminologija, vartota „našlės“ sąvokai apibūdinti, sudarant prielaidas nuosekliau ir išsamiau atskleisti našlių padėties socialinius, ekonominius, egzistencinius bei dvasinius aspektus. Jėzaus požiūris į našles ir Jo tarnystė joms nagrinėjami kaip esminis raktas, padedantis suprasti našlių vaidmenį Dievo plane. Atskleidžiama, kad Kristaus rūpestis ir gailėstingumas peržengia vien socialinės paramos ribas, o Jo mokyme našlės paveikslas tampa autentiško atsidavimo ir nuoširdaus pasitikėjimo Dievu pavyzdžiu. Baigiamojoje dalyje aptariamas našlių vaidmuo ankstyvosios Bažnyčios gyvenime, remiantis Luko 2, 36–38, Apaštalų darbų 6, 1–7; 9, 36–43 ir 1 Laiško Timotiejui 5, 3–16 tekstais, parodydami, kad Naujojo Testamento bendruomenėse našlės ne tik sulaukdavo paramos, bet ir aktyviai įsitraukdavo į dvasinę bei socialinę tarnystę, apimančią malda, liudijimą ir gailėstingumo darbus. Taigi našlės

įvaizdis Naujajame Testamente atsiskleidžia kaip teologiškai reikšmingas, jungiantis našlių pažeidžiamumą ir jų pašaukimą dvasinei bei bendruomeninei tarnystei.

KEYWORDS: early Church, widow care, “enrolled widows”, widows’ ministry.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: ankstyvoji Bažnyčia, našlių priežiūra, „įrašytos našlės“, našlių tarnystė.

Introduction

The role of widows in the early Christian Church is a topic that is gaining new relevance today, both theologically, pastorally, and socially. Modern society, especially in the Western world, faces the challenge of a rapidly aging population, and Lithuania is no exception. Demographic data show that the proportion of older people in society is steadily increasing, and the number of women – especially widows – significantly exceeds that of men. According to data from *Statista* and *Destatis*, Lithuanian men have the shortest life expectancy of all European Union countries: in 2023, their average life expectancy was 72,5 years, falling short of the average life expectancy of women in Lithuania by as much as 9,2 years.¹ This demographic situation calls for rethinking the place of widows in the life of the Church, their social status and participation in the spiritual life of the community, as well as the community’s responsibility towards them.

The contemporary Catholic Church’s social teaching has repeatedly emphasized the importance of elderly people to the community of believers. In papal teaching, elderhood is understood not as a passive stage of life, but as a time of maturity, wisdom, and spiritual fruitfulness. On November 8, 2015, in St. Peter’s Square, Pope Francis,² commenting on the Gospel of Mark’s story of the poor widow who “put in more than all the others” (Mark 12:38–44), emphasized that this woman, although in a vulnerable social position, played a very significant role in the community at that time. She taught by her life how to love God. Her sacrifice reveals that the true criterion is not quantity, but sincerity – complete trust in God and His love with all one’s heart, which turns into selfless service to others. The Pope urged the faithful: “Let us ask the Lord to admit us to the school of this poor widow, whom Jesus places in the cathedra and presents as a teacher of the living Gospel even to the astonishment of the disciples”.³ This appeal

¹ “Life expectancy at birth (male), Lithuania, 2023”, Federal Statistical Office of Germany (Destatis), accessed 5 January 2026, https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Countries-Regions/International-Statistics/Data-Topic/Tables/BasicData_LifeExpectancyMale.html. See also, “Life expectancy at birth in Lithuania from 2013 to 2023, by gender”, Statista, published 16 March 2026, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/970873/life-expectancy-at-birth-in-lithuania-by-gender/>.

² Pope Francis, “Angelus”, Vatican.va, 8 November 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2015/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20151108.html.

³ Ibid.

emphasizes that the Church does not undervalue widows, but recognizes their calling and seeks to integrate them into active community life.

Drawing on texts from the New Testament, this article seeks to show that the Christian tradition, from the very earliest centuries of Christianity, recognized the contribution of widows to the life and mission of the Church. In the early Christian Church, widows were seen not solely as a socially vulnerable group in need of help and care, but they played an active role in the community being active in prayer, ministry, witnessing, and even part of a certain church structure. This assumption contradicts the sometimes noticeable contemporary tendency to marginalize older widows, seeing them primarily through the prism of weakness, dependency, or burden, and therefore it compels us to reconsider the Church's relationship with an aging society, especially with older women, who often remain invisible both in public and Church discourse.

Terms Used to Describe “Widow” in the Ancient World

Most English-language dictionaries define the term “widow” as referring to a woman whose spouse has died and who has not remarried again.⁴ In the ancient world, the figure of the widow is not only a social category. Terminology used in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin to refer to a “widow” allows a 21st-century reader to grasp a deeper socio-economic, existential and spiritual realities of widowhood in the early centuries of Christianity. The analysis of terms provides a space for theological reflection about widows' social vulnerability, dependence on others, as well as the authenticity or absence of their faith, what is meant by the terms “real” and “self-indulgent” widows.

The Hebrew word for “widow” is *הַגְּמְלָה* (*almanah*), which etymologically linked to the word *מְלִיא* (*alem*), meaning “unable to speak”, “to be mute”, or “to have no voice”. In some sense, the widow is the “silent one”. This linguistic connection reflects the position of the widow in ancient Israelite society, where she often had neither inheritance rights nor social protection mechanisms, and the one whom others see as helpless and vulnerable to humiliation or exploitation.⁵ This meaning is further emphasized by the term *תּוֹנְמְלָה* (*almenuth*), which depicts widowhood as a condition in which a woman's life depends on the mercy of others. “Widowhood,” *תּוֹנְמְלָה* (*almenuth*), in the Hebrew means “silence”. This etymology suggests that the widow in ancient Israelite

⁴ For instance, “Widow”, in *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, accessed 5 January 2026, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/widow_1?q=widow; “Widow”, in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, accessed 5 January 2026, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/widow>; “Widow”, in *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed 5 January 2026, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/widow>.

⁵ Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 9.

society was perceived as 'silent', lacking a voice in both legal and social spheres. It reflects the legal and economic helplessness of the widows and their dependence on the goodwill of others.⁶

The Greek term for "widow" is χήρα (*chēra*). In the ancient world, the word χήρα (*chēra*) had a broader semantic meaning than the modern definition of "widow". Researchers such as Bonnie B. Thurston link this term to the Indo-European root *ghe*, meaning "forsaken" or "left empty" as well as to the preposition χωρίς (*chōris*), meaning "without", "apart from", or "separately" and to the noun χώρα (*chora*), meaning "space", "dwelling-place".⁷ So χήρα primarily describes a woman who is without protection, without support, without backing. It follows that in the New Testament this word encompasses a broader semantic field and can refer to a woman living without a husband. As Mary L. McKenna notes in her work *Women in the Church: Role and Renewal*, the term χήρα denotes anyone "destitute, miserable"; anyone who lives "in solitude" as well as the woman who has chosen a celibate lifestyle.⁸ Moreover, in the New Testament, χήρα indicates not only the fact of marital status but also a specific social and economic reality, defining the woman as a person without a stable source of material or social support.⁹

In Latin, the term *vidua* was the most common term for a widow in the Roman Empire and in general meant a woman who had lost her husband. However, as B. B. Thurston notes, from the 8th century B.C. up to the Christian period, the word *univira* was also used, which had a more specific meaning. This term described a woman who, after the death of her first husband, did not enter a new marriage, thus emphasizing her fidelity to a single marital bond. Unlike *vidua*, which described the factual situation of marital status, *univira* conveyed both the moral and social dimensions related to a woman's virtue, loyalty, and social status.¹⁰ This terminological difference indicates that in the Roman context widowhood was not perceived solely as a legal reality but was also assessed through the lens of normative expectations and moral ideals, which later influenced the Christian understanding of widowhood.

Leonard Swidler notes that the most oppressed in society were widows, for they had almost no means of livelihood, no standing before the law, and no one to provide for them.¹¹ In the First Letter to Timothy, the term 'widow' defines a specific group of women. In this context, the term 'widow' is not used in a general sense but refers to a

⁶ Paul J. Achtemeier, Gen. Ed., *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 1212. "Israel's legal corpus provided some measure of security for the widow. If a deceased Israelite had brothers, a levirate marriage could be arranged, but this was not always done (Deut 25:5–10; Gen 38). A priest's daughter could return to her father's house (Lev 22:13). Often, however, widows had no respectable recourse but to rely on public charity."

⁷ Thurston, *The Widows*, 9.

⁸ Mary L. McKenna, *Women of the Church: Role and Renewal* (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1967), 37.

⁹ James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 137–138.

¹⁰ Thurston, *The widows*, 16.

¹¹ Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 183.

specific group of widows – those women who have no material or financial support from their children or close relatives. Such widows live in real poverty and are entirely dependent on external aid, thus becoming a special object of care for the Christian community. In 1 Timothy 5:3, the apostle Paul urges to “honour widows properly”, and this instruction encompasses not only an attitude of respect, but also concrete material care. The Greek verb τιμάω means “to honour”, “to value”, yet in Paul’s argumentation it takes on a practical meaning – respect is expressed through actual provision for widows who have no other sources of support.

The Greek phrase ὄντως χήρα (“truly widow”, “the real widow”), where the Greek adverb ὄντως emphasizes the real, objective situation of the widow, is of particular importance.¹² This term describes a woman who is “truly” a widow – that is, left completely alone, without the support of relatives, and therefore having no other means of assistance. The concept of “real widow” refers to those women who meet the criteria laid out in 1 Timothy 5:3–16 and, as a result, can receive material support from the church.¹³ This terminology does not imply that other widows are not widows in the usual sense of the word; rather, it distinguishes theologically and communally qualified widows from those who must be cared for by their own family members. In the ancient context, such differentiation was particularly significant, as widows often did not have the means to engage in socially honourable or economically stable activities.

The “real widow” described by Paul is a woman who not only has no children or relatives to support her but also has faith in God.¹⁴ Such a widow is said to “has set her hope on God” (Gk. μεμονωμένη ἠλπικεν ἐπὶ θεόν). The Greek verb ἠλπικεν signifies a firm, trust-based expectation oriented toward God’s action in the future. This trust includes not only the hope for daily provision but also the eschatological expectation of receiving God’s reward for faithful belief and good deeds. Such a widow is presented as an example of spiritual trust in God.

The opposite of a “true widow” is a widow who is “self-indulgent” and, therefore, “dead while she lives” (1 Tim 5:6) (Gk. ἡ δὲ σπαταλώσα ζῶσα τέθνηκεν). The verb σπαταλώ describes living for pleasures and seeking a materially comfortable life. Such a widow, although formally belonging to the Christian community, lives secularly and spiritually empty, and therefore is not considered a “true widow” and is not eligible for church support. The verb τεθνήκεν (“dead”) is used here metaphorically and describes a spiritual condition – a distancing from communion with God and a surrender to the desires of sinful nature. This attitude is considered the consequence of unbelief and the rejection of God’s word.

¹² Angelo Nicolaides, “A Critical Investigation into the Role of Widows in Early Church Life”, *Pharos Journal of Theology* 103 (2022): 6, <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.1032>.

¹³ Miruka Philip, Aloo Mojola, Nathan Joshua, Onginjo Mary, “The Role of the Church and the Christian Family Towards Widow Care as Highlighted by Paul”, *Sociology and Anthropology* 3 (1) (2015): 54–56, <https://doi.org/10.13189/sa.2015.030107>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

In short, in the ancient world, the concept of a widow denoted not only a social status but also had a clear moral and theological significance. It becomes a theologically differentiated category, through which not only a woman's social and economic status is revealed, but also the authenticity of her faith or its absence. Although some authors suggest a broader meaning of this term, in Paul's context, "widow" primarily describes a woman who does not remarry after her husband's death and whose way of life and spiritual disposition become the criterion for communal care.

Jesus' Attitude towards Widows and His Ministry to Them

This chapter examines texts from the New Testament that convey Jesus' teachings and actions as a deliberate response to the vulnerability of widows. The aim of this analysis is to show that Jesus' approach to widows is characterized by mercy, a pursuit of justice, and active engagement, which during the early Christian period shaped the community's ethical stance toward the most vulnerable.

The figure of the widow in the Synoptic Gospels becomes an important theological and social theme, illustrating God's mercy, justice, and care for the marginalized. In Luke 4:24–27, Jesus, drawing on events from the times of Elijah and Elisha described in the Old Testament, reveals the logic of God's action, which is particularly evident regarding widows. Although 'many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah' (Luke 4:25), the prophet "was sent to none of them, but only to a widow in the town of Zarephath in the land of Sidon" (Luke 4:26; cf. 1 Kings 17:8–16). This example shows that God's mercy is not limited by ethnic or religious affiliation but is given wherever faith and obedience to God's word are found. The widow of Zarephath, though she herself experienced extreme poverty, trusted the promise of God proclaimed by the prophet, and thus became the recipient of God's saving action. The comparison presented by Jesus also carries an implicit critique of his listeners in Nazareth, reminding them that "no prophet is accepted in his hometown" (Luke 4:24), and emphasizes that God's grace often manifests in socially vulnerable or marginalized individuals. Therefore, the figure of the widow in this text appears not only as a symbol of social weakness but also as an example of faith and openness to God's action, in line with the broader biblical tradition in which the Lord "defends the rights of the widow and the orphan" (Deut 10:18; cf. Psalm 68:6).

The evangelist Luke emphasizes Jesus' special compassion for socially vulnerable individuals, including widows. This is vividly illustrated in the story of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11–17), where Jesus takes the initiative to directly intervene in the woman's existential situation. The widow's condition is described here as extreme vulnerability: she had already lost her husband, who in ancient society played the role of the primary provider and protector, and now she also loses her "only son" (Luke 7:12),

that is, her last support for social and economic security. The evangelist highlights Jesus' emotional response to this situation – “When the Lord saw her, he was moved with compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep’” (Luke 7:13). Abel Aor Inyaregh points out that in this text the word “compassion” is expressed by the Greek term *σπλαγχνίζεσθαι* (*splanchnizesthai*), which in meaning is close to the Hebrew word *אָהַם* (*āham*), describing a deep, strong emotion that motivates a person to act.¹⁵ This means that the raising of the dead son is not merely a demonstration of miraculous power, but a concrete response to the widow's suffering. By raising the young man and “giving him back to his mother” (Luke 7:15), Jesus not only restores life, but also restores the widow's social and existential wholeness. In other words, Jesus' mercy toward this widow encompasses not only compassion, but also effective assistance, through which God's closeness and care are manifested for those on the margins of society.

Jesus' concern for widows is evident in his pursuit of social justice, particularly by strongly criticizing the unjust behavior of religious leaders. In Luke 20:47 and Matthew 23:14, Jesus condemns the scribes who “devour widows houses”. The Greek verb *κατεσθίουσιν* (*katesthiousin*) used in the text, according to Evans N. Nwaomah, describes systematic looting and unlawful appropriation. This practice included charging interest, misuses in inheritance cases, and the misappropriation of temple funds intended for the poor.¹⁶ Drawing on Jay Patrick Green, E. N. Nwaomah asserts that the Pharisees and scribes deliberately created legal schemes that allowed them to exploit widows rather than protect them. Ellen G. White argues that religious leaders sought to gain the trust of widows and encouraged them to donate their wealth to “religious purposes”, while the collected funds were used for personal gain. In this way, the temple, which was supposed to be a place of refuge, became a space of exploitation.¹⁷ Jesus' rebukes to these leaders were an attempt to restore the concept of God's justice and defend the oppressed.

In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, the figure of the widow mentioned by Jesus takes on a vivid symbolic significance. Both Mark 12:41–44 and Luke 21:1–4 present the story of the widow's offering, illustrating an example of selfless generosity and genuine piety. Jesus contrasts the widow's behavior with that of those who give out of their abundance but essentially risk nothing. The widow, who gives her entire living to the temple treasury, demonstrates complete trust in God and His provision. The context of these stories intentionally creates a contrast between the outward religiosity of the religious

¹⁵ Abel Aor Inyaregh, “Raising of the Widow's Son at Nain (Luke 7:11–17): Exegetical Intertextual Study of Luke-Acts as a Typology of the Elijah-Elisha Narrative”, *Diligentia: Journal of Theology and Christian Education* 7 (3) (2025):177, <https://doi.org/10.19166/dil.v7i3.9559>.

¹⁶ Evans N. Nwaomah, “Apostolic Ministry to Widows in the New Testament: Implications for the Christian Church in Nigeria”, *Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* 24 (7) (2019): 19. See also, Jay Patrick Green, *The Interlinear Bible: Hebrew-Greek-English* (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005).

¹⁷ Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980).

leaders and the widow's sincere faith. According to E. N. Nwaomah, through this story Jesus seeks to reveal the difference between demonstrative piety and sincere devotion to God. This is clearly expressed in Jesus' words: "all these put in gifts for God from their abundance, but she, out of her poverty [Gk. ὑστερήματος], put in all that she had to live on" (Luke 21:4). The Greek term ὑστερήματος (*hysterēmatos*) denotes extreme poverty, emphasizing that the widow, by giving up everything necessary for her livelihood, demonstrated radical and unconditional trust in God. E. N. Nwaomah, commenting on this story, notes that Jesus, valuing the widow's offering as the greatest, emphasizes not its material size, but the intention of the giving and the inner disposition.¹⁸ Thus, the widow becomes an example of true devotion and authentic trust in God.

Finally, the significant episode is recorded in the Gospel of John (19:26–27). Hanging on the cross, Jesus entrusted his mother, who was already a widow at that time, to his beloved disciple. By this act, Jesus not only showed care for his mother's physical and social well-being but also affirmed the value of all widows in the eyes of God as well as their mission in the Church. As M. Cathleen Kaveny writes:

Christ's commendation of Mary and the beloved disciple to each other is the fulfillment of the biblical widow's hope in Yahweh for deliverance and vindication. Just as the cross, a sign of shame and death, becomes transformed in Christ into a symbol of divine glory and eternal life, so in Christ's mother widowhood becomes reconstituted from a sign of weakness and isolation into a symbol of strength and inclusion.¹⁹

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is considered a source of comfort for all widows because she experienced the profound pain of losing her husband Joseph and later sorrowfully witnessed the death of her Son. As a widow, she becomes an example of faith, perseverance, and complete trust in God, offering spiritual support to all women who experience loneliness and life changes after the loss of a spouse. The exaltation of Mary as the mother of the Church reveals that even a vulnerable and lonely widow can be an example of faith, trust in God, and spiritual strength. Jesus' care for his mother at the cross becomes a sign of hope for all widows and shows how God, through Christ, elevates the weak and vulnerable.

In summary, the figure of the widow in the gospels becomes not only a symbol of social and economic vulnerability but also the expression of faith, obedience, and openness to God's action. Texts analysis has shown that Jesus' ministry to widows is not limited to showing compassion but also involves an active intervention seeking to defend them affirming their dignity in a society where they often felt powerless and unnoticed. This approach not only reflects early Christianity's ethical orientation

¹⁸ Nwaomah, "Apostolic Ministry to Widows...", 20.

¹⁹ M. Cathleen Kaveny, "The Order of Widows: What the Early Church Can Teach Us about Older Women and Health Care", *Christian Bioethics* 11 (1) (2005): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13803600590926369>.

towards the vulnerable but also shapes a deeper theological understanding of God's closeness to those on the margins of society.

Widows' Ministry in the Early Church: Luke 2:36–31, Acts 6:1–7, 9:36–43 and 1 Tim 5:3–16

This chapter, drawing on specific New Testament testimonies, especially Luke 2:36–38 and 1 Timothy 5:3–16, aims to show that widows in the early Christian community were not only objects of the community's care but also active participants in the Church's ministry. These texts make it clear that 'true' widows or those enrolled in the community's list were associated with defined spiritual commitments – constant prayer, devotion, witness, and service to others. Therefore, the status of widows in the New Testament reveals a reciprocal relationship: the community takes responsibility for supporting them, and the widows actively participate in the life and mission of the Church.

Anna, a widow and prophetess in the Jerusalem temple, is presented in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2:36–38) as the ideal figure of a widow, revealing a new aspect of the concept of widowhood in early Christian tradition. The evangelist emphasizes that Anna was a virgin before marriage, lived in the union only briefly, and did not remarry after her husband's death. Instead, she devoted her entire life to being in the temple, worshiping God through fasting and prayer. In this way, Luke presents the widow not merely as a socially vulnerable person in need of the community support, but also as an active community member in bearing witness to God's plan. This biblical account suggests that in the early Christian community, widows were not merely passive recipients of charitable aid but could also carry out an active mission.²⁰ Mary Rose D'Angelo points out that Luke does not directly speak of "enrolled" widows or their participation in the apostles' ministry, yet Anna can be seen as a prototype of the 'consecrated widows'. Her ascetic way of life and complete devotion to God became an example for those widows who, in later Church practice, were 'enrolled' in the official list of widows.²¹

In the Acts of the Apostles, there are several important passages discussing the role of widows and their support within the Christian community (Acts 6:1–7; 9:36–43). The first text attests to a group of widows who apparently received systematic charitable assistance from the community, and the conflict over the distribution of this aid leads to the emergence of the ministry of deacons. The second account presents a different group of widows – those associated with the activities of Tabitha. It is

²⁰ Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 304.

²¹ Mary Rose D'Angelo, "(Re) Presentations of Women in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke-Acts", in Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women & Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 185.

evident that Tabitha played a significant role in the community, caring for the needy and widows. Bonnie Bowman Thurston argues that Tabitha, similarly to some women mentioned in Luke 8:1–3, could have been a widow, as her husband is not mentioned in the text.²² If this assumption is correct, in the Acts of the Apostles we can discern two different groups of widows. On the one hand, there are widows as a recognizable social group that receive community support. On the other hand, the figure of Tabitha reveals the widow as an active member of the community, who herself provides help to others and contributes to the mission of the Church. This distinction allows for discussing the differentiation of the role of widows in the early Christian community, where widowhood could be not only a form of social dependency but also a form of religious vocation.

One of the best-known New Testament texts addressing the issue of widows is 1 Timothy 5:3–16. As Linda L. Bellevill notes, “Women receive a great deal of attention in 1 Timothy. Indeed, there is no other New Testament letter in which they figure so prominently.”²³ This text defines three categories of widows: “true widows,” young widows, and widows enrolled on the official list. “True widows” are those who lack family or other means of livelihood, and therefore they fall under the care of the Church (vv. 3–8, 16). Paul emphasizes the responsibility of family – children or grandchildren are to care for their relatives – but if such support is absent, the responsibility shifts to the community. As the text indicates (v. 5), the “true widows” performed important spiritual service, “praying night and day”, and their way of life was meant to reflect the Christian ideal of faithfulness and devotion (v. 5). This service follows the examples of Jesus and Anna (Luke 2:36–38), where prayer and humility were for the good of the community.

It seems that young widows were viewed as a problem since Paul instructs Timothy not to include young widows on the list of widows (1 Timothy 5:11). Margaret Y. MacDonald gives some possible reasons for this: (1) as young widows have the possibility to remarry, they would eventually break their promise to remain unmarried; (2) they tend to be idle; (3) they run from house to house, acting as gossips and say things that they should not say.²⁴ The other authors relate young widows to the Church’s internal problems with false teaching. For instance, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza links the passage of 1 Timothy 4:2–4, in which the author of the letter urges his audience to reject teachings that follow ‘deceitful spirits and the doctrines of demons,’ with the story of the young widows (1 Tim 5:11–15).²⁵ To limit young widows’ negative activities, St. Paul instructs

²² Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The widows: A Women’s Ministry in the Early Church*, 32.

²³ Linda L. Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority: 1 Timothy 2:11–15”, in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, ed. by Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 206.

²⁴ Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Rereading Paul: Early Interpreters of Paul on Women and Gender”, in Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo, eds., *Women & Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 248.

²⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Word, Spirit, and Power: Women in Early Christian Communities”, in Rosemary R. Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, eds., *Women of Spirit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 47.

them to get married, bear children, and manage their households, that is, take up traditional wifely duties and become faithful representatives of the community's virtue.²⁶ In other words, the apostle seeks to ensure that the community would not be affected by "false teaching" or unbalanced behavior (see 1 Corinthians 7:9, 39–40).

The so-called "enrolled widows" held a special role and ministry in the early Church (1 Tim 5:9–10). Not only did they receive financial support, but they also actively served the community, forming a certain "order" of women who committed themselves to performing specific tasks.²⁷ B. B. Thurston points out that this practice could be considered the earliest Christian "order of widows", in which older women had an official ministry like the functions of deacons or bishops.²⁸ Strict criteria were set to be included on the list: a woman had to be over sixty years old, be the widow of only one husband, and have a good reputation for good deeds, hospitality, compassion, and faithfulness. The description of the widows included on the list is not merely a record of moral qualities, but an exemplary portrait of the widow engaged in the community service. Paul indicates not only what the widow is like, but also how her life was perceived within the community. As the text itself shows, the widow is described along two main lines: first, by her faithfulness, i.e., what kind of person she is, and second, by her fruitfulness, i.e., how her activity is witnessed by others. In other words, the list included not passive recipients of support, but women whose lives had already become a testimony to active, visible, and enduring service.

The criteria named by Paul for the widows included in the list were important to properly carry out the service entrusted to them in the community. The first criterion for the "enrolled widows" is the age limit ("no less than sixty years") and being "the wife of one man" indicates the widow's fidelity. This restriction can hardly be understood as a criterion for financial support, as it consciously excludes younger widows who may also have experienced material difficulties. On the contrary, it emphasizes stability and dedication: an older widow was less likely to enter a new marriage and therefore could fully devote herself to community service. Paul himself encourages young widows to remarry (1 Tim 5:14), and therefore it is clear that the "enrolled widows" are called to a long-term ministry rather than to short-term commitment, since continuous service requires their full attention and faithfulness. "The wife of one man" here serves a similar function as in the descriptions of bishops or deacons (1 Tim 3:2; 3:12), i. e., it is not only a marital fact, but a testimony to their lifestyle, reliability, and loyalty. For young widows, though, in Thomas C. Oden's view, it was difficult to remain faithful to the vow of living a celibate life and fully devoting themselves to service within the community. Furthermore, T. C. Oden notes that some young Christian widows would enter marriages with pagans and, as a result, abandon their faith. In such cases, they not only

²⁶ MacDonald, "Rereading Paul", 248.

²⁷ John Dölinger, *The First Age of Christianity in the Church* (London: Gibbings, 1906), 312.

²⁸ Thurston, *The Widows*, 44.

failed to fulfill the commitments they had undertaken in the community, but their behavior also became a destructive factor in the life of the Christian community.²⁹

The second criterion, “with a reputation (Gk. μαρτυρουμένη) for good deeds” (1 Timothy 5:10), focuses attention on the widow’s visible activity. The Greek term μαρτυρουμένη (*marturouméni*) is used in this sentence in the passive form, “be well attested”,³⁰ emphasizing not the widow’s self-description but testimony of others concerning her. This means that her service was public, recognizable, and well-known within the community. Moreover, the expression “good deeds” (Gk. καλὰ ἔργα) here is understood not as individual good acts, but as a consistent, lifelong pattern of action revealing her character and role within the community. Paul unfolds this “reputation for good deeds” through five specific characteristics, which essentially define the scope of activity of the enrolled widows.

The first characteristic indicates that the widow “has raised children” (1 Timothy 5:10). This does not merely refer to the fact of biological motherhood, but points to the experience of raising children – the ability to care for, teach, nurture, and guide others toward maturity. This experience was particularly significant in the community, where older widows were assigned to take care of orphans in the community or they were invited to teach younger women how to raise their children (cf. Titus 2:3–5).³¹ Thus, the widow’s motherhood becomes not a private but a pastoral qualification, enabling her to advise and support other women and families.

The second characteristic is associated with widows’ “practiced hospitality” (Gk. ἐξενοδόχησεν, 1 Timothy 5:10), the widows’ role in welcoming and supporting the people of the community. The Greek verb ἐξενοδόχησεν, literally meaning “to receive guests”, is composed of the word ξένος (“stranger”, “foreigner”) and the verb δέχομαι (“to receive”).³² This concept describes not merely formal hospitality but a conscious and responsible involvement in caring for those who were vulnerable or dependent on the support of the community. In the context of the first-century Church, hospitality was an essential condition for mission and communal life. Traveling preachers, missionaries, or believers affected by persecution often could not find other safe places of refuge, so the homes of widows could become important centers for spreading the faith and fostering community. Considering this, it can be stated that widows not only practiced personal virtue but also performed a meaningful service that strengthened the bonds of the Christian community and contributed to the continuity of the Church’s mission.

²⁹ Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus. Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 157–159.

³⁰ Nestle-Aland, *Greek-English New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1981), 547–548.

³¹ Millicent Yeboah Asumah, *Widowhood Care and Empowerment in 1 Timothy 1:3–16: A Case Study of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Christ as a Paradigm for African Instituted Churches*, MTH Theses (St. Paul, Minnesota, 2012), 52.

³² Max Zerwick S.J., Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990), 634.

Another important aspect is “washing the feet of the saints” (1 Timothy 5:10) that symbolizes humble and selfless service. This act, which in a social context was entrusted to the lowest-ranking servants, gains theological meaning in the example of Jesus (Jn 13). Paul, using this image, emphasizes that the “enrolled widows” were ready to take on even the lowest and most unnoticed tasks for the benefit of the community. It is not a symbolic metaphor, but a reference to real, everyday service that requires humility and practical involvement.

Furthermore, the text says that the one who is on the list of widows “helps those in need” (*θλιβομένοις ἐπήρκεσεν*) (1 Timothy 5:10). The Greek verb *ἐπαρκέω*, which can be translated as “to aid,” “to relieve,” “do service,” or “to render help,” points to an active social role, and the *θλιβομένοις* further broadens the scope of this assistance, encompassing all *those in distress*.³³ This shows that widows were not merely passive recipients of support – they themselves participated in the practice of care and aid. In this way, they became important members of the community, whose actions reinforced solidarity, encouraged mutual responsibility, and contributed to the creation of a network of support within the community.

Finally, the enrolled widow should “involve herself in every good work” (*παντὶ ἔργῳ ἀγαθῷ ἐπηκολούθησεν*) (1 Timothy 5:10). This wording describes not individual or occasional actions, but the overall direction of her life. The term *ἀγαθός* used here emphasizes the outward, community-visible result: the widow’s life is seen as continuously bearing fruits. This confirms that the “enrolled widows” were valued for the long-term impact of their service, rather than for their formal status.

Thus, the Apostle Paul, describing the requirements for the “enrolled widows”, essentially presents a model of active, mature, and manifold ministry. These women were faithful, reliable, experienced, and recognized by the community as servants, whose role encompassed spiritual, social, pastoral, and practical activities. Therefore, “enrolled widows” cannot be understood merely as recipients of support; they were an integral part of the early Church’s ministry, to which the community not only provided protection but also entrusted the responsibility to serve others.

Conclusions

Jesus’ teaching in the New Testament shows special concern for widows, taking into account their social vulnerability and marginalized position, which creates a theological basis for the Church’s approach to this group of women. Analysis of biblical texts shows that widows in the early Church not only played the role of recipients of care and support, but also actively participated in the spiritual and social life of communities – through prayer, witness, and acts of mercy (Luke 2:36–38; Acts 6:1–7; 9:36–43).

³³ Zerwick, Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis...*, 634.

1 Timothy 5:3–16 demonstrates a systematic approach to organizing the ministry of widows, emphasizing “true widows,” young widows, and those included in the official list, which ensured a structured and theologically grounded regulation of their status and ministry. Thus, the New Testament depiction of widows combines vulnerability with a call to spiritual activity, reflecting the principle that caring for the needy and their participation in the life of the Church is an integral part of God’s plan.

From the New Testament teaching about widows, we can learn several key lessons for the contemporary life of the Church and believers. First, the texts emphasize the need to carefully care for vulnerable and marginalized members of society, recognizing their dignity and worth in God’s eyes. Second, the example of widows shows that social vulnerability does not preclude spiritual activity and service: true faithfulness to God is revealed through prayer, witness, and acts of mercy, even with limited resources. Finally, the organization and support for widows in the early Church provide an example of how the community can combine caring for those in need with practically involving them in communal life and service, providing an ethical and theological guide for contemporary Christian communities that care for vulnerable groups.

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