

# Historical Account of Women Leadership in the Post New Testament Church Till Constantine: A Model of Practising social Justice in a Gender-Biased Society

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## ABSTRACT

Christianity was introduced to this world as a revolutionary movement. There are several evidences to confirm that the idea of women in leadership in the Church continued in the second and third centuries. Several writings of the second and third centuries reveal that women held an important role at least in some of the Christian sects of the second and third centuries. There are several sources in the form of writings and inscriptions that the second and third centuries witnessed a large number of women ministers, evangelists, prophets, teachers, widows in the ministry, writers, et cetera. There are archaeological evidences such as tombstone inscriptions and frescoes to prove the existence of women leadership and ordination in the early church.

**KEY WORDS:** Leadership, Pre- Constantine Church, Ordination, Women, Equality, Ministry Roles, archaeology.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is foremost a matter of social justice. The objective of this paper is to bring out a historical model for social justice in the area of gender justice in a gender-biased society. A historical study on the leadership role of women in the post-New Testament and Pre- Constantine Church can play a vital role in avoiding stereotype practices in our society. In this paper, the author explains the features of the post-New Testament and Pre-Constantine Christianity and the role of women in the ministry of the Church in a gender-biased society.

## II. POST NEW TESTAMENT AND PRE-CONSTANTINE CHRISTIANITY

This period covers roughly two hundred years (100-313) of the history of Christianity. By the end of the third century, Christianity had become numerically significant. Christianity in the Roman Empire comprised some sixty million persons at that time. That comes to nearly five percentage of the total population.<sup>1</sup>

According to Philip Schaff:

The Church of this period appears poor in earthly possessions and honors, but rich in heavenly grace, in world-conquering faith, love and hope; unpopular, even outlawed, hated, and persecuted, yet far more vigorous and expansive than the philosophies of Greece or the empire of Rome; composed chiefly of persons of the lower social ranks, yet attracting the noblest and deepest minds of the age, and bearing, in her bosom the hope of the world; "as unknown, yet well-known, as dying, and behold it lives;" conquering by apparent defeat, and growing on the blood of her martyrs; great in deeds, greater in sufferings, greatest in death for the honor of Christ and the benefit of generations to come . . .<sup>2</sup>.

The condition and manners of the Christians prior to Constantine are most beautifully described by the unknown author of the *Epistle to Diognetus*<sup>3</sup> in the early part of the second century. <sup>4</sup> Chapter five of *The Epistle to Diognetus* explains that,

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<sup>1</sup>Bart D. Ehrman, *After The New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8.

<sup>2</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* Vol 2 (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 8, 9.

<sup>3</sup> According to Lightfoot Harmer Holmes, the author is anonymous, the identity of the recipient is uncertain, the date is unknown and the ending is missing. Numerous suggestions have been made on the authorship of this Epistle. Hippolytus of Rome, Theophilus of Antioch, and Pantaenus of Alexandria are among the less improbable of those proposed. Many suggest that it is the writing of Quadratus.

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity, language, or custom. For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric life-style. This teaching of theirs has not been discovered by the thought and reflection of ingenious men, or do they promote any human doctrine, as some do. But while they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one's lot was cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship . . .<sup>5</sup>

Most of our evidences for the second, third, and fourth centuries of Christianity consist of literary texts produced by Christians themselves. A notable source to know about this period is the famous writings of Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea. His *Ecclesiastical History*<sup>6</sup> is one of the major primary documents for the study of early Christianity. Eusebius is commonly known as "the Father of Church History"<sup>7</sup> According to Hung, the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea shed much light on the active participation of women in the Church during the early centuries though they are not directly mentioned.<sup>8</sup> Anne Jensen noted that the second line church historians after Eusebius mentioned women less than what he did.<sup>9</sup>

### III. ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE POST-NEW TESTAMENT AND PRE-CONSTANTINE CHURCH

The materials of the second and third century confirm the essential idea of women ministers conveyed by the New Testament Church. These writings reveal that women held an important role at least in some of the Christian sects of the second and third centuries.<sup>10</sup>

#### Women Missionaries

The second century writing *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is devoted entirely to the story of a woman missionary. In many regions, this book was regarded as canonical in the first three centuries. It mentions a great number of women, besides the apostle Thecla. Thecla was converted by Paul and it is believed that Paul commissioned Thecla to "go and teach the word of God".<sup>11</sup> Some of the words in the writing *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* explain how much committed she was in the ministry partnership with Paul.

And Thecla said to Paul, "I will cut my hair off and I shall follow you wherever you go." But he said, "Times are evil and you are beautiful. I am afraid lest another temptation comes upon you worse than the first and that you do not withstand it but become mad after men." And Thecla said, "Only give me the seal in Christ, and no temptation shall touch me," And Paul said, "Thecla, be patient; you shall receive the water".<sup>12</sup>

Women in Carthage at the beginning of the third century could appeal to the apostle Thecla for women's authority to teach and to baptize.<sup>13</sup>

#### Women Teachers

One of the examples for the profound women teachers of the second century Church was Marcellina. The group to which she belonged was called Carpocratians. They got this name after the name of its founding teacher Carpocrates<sup>14</sup> who was active during the reign of the emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD). Marcellina and those with whom she was associated apparently taught a form of Christianity that emphasized equality among

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<sup>4</sup> John Hunt, *Concise Church History* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers 2008), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Lightfoot Harmer Holmes, Ed. *The Apostolic Fathers, Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings* (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 1992), 541.

<sup>6</sup> *Ecclesiastical History (Historia Ecclesiastica)* is a survey of the history of the church from apostolic times until 324.

<sup>7</sup> Ehrman, *After The New Testament*, 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Kung, *Women in Christianity* (London, New York: Continuum 2005), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters* (Westminster: John Knox Press 1996), 6-9

<sup>10</sup> Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press 1980), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, *Women of Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 38.

<sup>12</sup> Ehrman, *After The New Testament*, 482.

<sup>13</sup> Ruether and McLaughlin, *Women of Spirit*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Carpocrates of Alexandria was the founder of Carpocratians, which was an early Gnostic sect of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century. We know about this group mainly through the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons, Origen and Clement of Alexandria.

men and women and rejected the idea of private property and other conventional arrangements such as marriage because they thought that marriage relationships were restrictive in many ways.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Women Writers**

Most of the early Christian texts were written by men, and even when they claim to represent women's voice, they are women's voices as spoken by the voice of men. As for hearing women's voices themselves from the first three centuries, the first was *The Diary of Perpetua*. We see other women's voices in the oracles preserved from the women Montanist prophets. We do not have any extensive writings from any of their leaders, but we have oracles in written form cited by later Church Fathers. However, these fragments of writings are certainly from the mouths of real Christian women.<sup>16</sup>

Another notable person as writer in the early Church was Proba, the date of her writings was around the beginning of the fourth century. Her work is known as a cento which is a literary composition that is composed of sections of other works. It is a wonderful writing especially for one who is familiar with ancient Latin literature to see how she brought secular and pagan vocabulary into the service of Christianity. She had an educated and keen mind.<sup>17</sup> She probably became a convert to Christianity sometime in her adult life. Her cento was probably written sometime in the early fourth century.<sup>18</sup> Her cento was faithful to the orthodox views on God and Jesus though she omits large portions of the Gospel story in her effort to patch Virgil together and ends up with an adaptation that many scholars see as strange and forced.<sup>19</sup> To write such a magnificent cento like hers, one required an exceptional memory and literary skill. Proba drew on the famous first century BC poet Virgil to write a vivid description of Creation.<sup>20</sup>

Another great mind among the women of this period was Marcella. She was also a contemporary of Proba and was highly esteemed by Jerome. He portrayed Marcella not only as a remarkable woman, but also described how a woman in that day could effectively teach God's truth.<sup>21</sup>

#### **Women Deacons (Deaconesses)**

The internal (evidences from the church writings) evidence for the existence of female deacons in the first century congregations is vague.<sup>22</sup> However, there are some outside evidences to prove the existence and prominence of women deacons in the second century (Tucker 94). One of such evidences is found in the correspondence between Pliny, the governor of Bithynia, and Emperor Trajan in the year AD 111. Pliny wrote about two *deaconesses* whom he arrested because they were Christians.

By the end of the third century, female deacons, or *deaconesses* attained a special role in many places in the early Christian world, a role dramatically different from the one they may have occupied earlier. Both manuscript evidences and inscriptions coming from the Eastern churches in places like Jerusalem, Syria, Greece and Asia Minor give a clear record of the existence and nature of this ministry. At first, women were appointed as deacons by the bishops from the entire congregation. Although as time passed, they were required to be virgins or widows.<sup>23</sup> Clement of Alexandria, describes the role of deaconess as,

"First of all, when women descend into water for baptism, it is necessary that those who thus descend should be anointed with the oil of unction by the Deaconess..." The minister normally only anoints the head where women are concerned; it is the customary role of the Deaconess to anoint the body. When she who is baptized comes out of the water, the Deaconess shall receive her, instruct her, and look after her, to the end that the unbreakable seal of baptism may be impressed on her with purity and holiness.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Patricia Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press 2005), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Ehrman, *After The New Testament*, 503.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth A Tucker, *Daughters of the Church* (Secunderabad: OM 2006), 117.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara J Machaffie, *Her Story* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 29.

<sup>19</sup> R. P.H. Green, "Proba's Cento: Its Date, Purpose, and Reception" in *The Classical Quarterly* Vol.45, No2 (1995): 551- 563, 152.

<sup>20</sup> Patricia Wilson Kastner, *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of the Early Church* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1981), 49.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Ann Clerk, *Women in the Early Church* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 107,108.

<sup>22</sup> Machaffie, *Her Story*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Machaffie, *Her Story*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Joanne Turpin, *Women in Church History, 21 Stories for 21 Centuries* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press 2007), 30.

In many places deacons were regarded as part of the clergy, and they were ordained to their office. The procedure for this ritual in the church orders follows that for the male deacons.<sup>25</sup> The *Apostolic Constitution* contains the following prayer for the ordination of a woman to the office of deacon:

O Eternal God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the creator of man and woman, who didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna and Huldah; who didst not disdain that Thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, didst ordain women to be keepers of Thy holy gates,- do Thou now also look down upon this Thy servant, who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her Thy Holy Spirit, and "cleanse her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit," that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to Thy glory, and the praise of Thy Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to Thee and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.<sup>26</sup>

It is mentioned in the *Apostolic Constitution* that St. Bartholomew made the constitution for the ordination of *Deaconess*. He writes, "Concerning a deaconess, I Bartholomew make this constitution: O Bishop, thou shalt lay thy hands upon her in the presence of the presbytery, and of the deacons and deaconesses".<sup>27</sup> From the prayer at the time of the ordination of *deaconesses*, it is clear that they were ordained to a clerical office.

### Ministry of Widows

In the second century, the ministry of widows was increasingly seen as having a role of prayer and charitable deeds. There are clear evidences for the continuance of the ministry of widows in the post-New Testament church. Polycarp, the disciple of the Apostle John, in his *Epistle to the Philippians*, recognized the ministry of widows as a separate ministry of the Church. He stated:

And the widows should be discreet in their faith pledged to the Lord, praying unceasingly on behalf of all, refraining from all slander, gossip, false witness, love of money - in fact, from evil of many kind - knowing that they are God's altar, that everything is examined for blemishes, and nothing escapes him whether of thoughts or sentiments, or any of "the secrets of the hearts"<sup>28</sup>

Ignatius of the second century mentioned in his letter to the Smyrneans 13:1 "Greetings to the families of my brothers, alongwith their wives and children, and to the virgins enrolled as the widows"<sup>29</sup>. He used the word *tas parthevous tas legomenas keras*(Greek)meaning the virgins with the designation of Widows<sup>30</sup> (Lightfoot 323-324). Clement of Alexandria wrote: *Innumerable commands such as these are written in the holy Bible and directed to chosen persons, some to bishops, some to deacons, and others to widows.* (Clement of Alexandria, *Pedagogue*).<sup>31</sup>

There is confusion whether the widows were part of the clergy in the early Church. According to Tertullian they were viewed as being in the order (*ordo*) of clergy (*Exhortation to Chastity* 13:4).<sup>32</sup> By the end of the third century, when *Didascalia Apostolorum* from Syria was composed, the office of widow was a fully developed ecclesiastical institution. And it was incorporated into the *Apostolic Constitution* of the fourth century.

Appoint as a widow one who is not under fifty years old, who in some way, by reason of her years, shall be remote from the suspicion of taking a second husband. But if you appoint one who is young to the widows' order, and she cannot endure widowhood because of her youth, and marries, she will bring upon the glory of widowhood; and she shall render an account to God. (*Apostolic Constitution* 3:1)<sup>33</sup> (Miller 52)

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<sup>25</sup> Machaffie, *Her Story*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Eds. *Ante- Nicene Fathers Vol 7* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 492.

<sup>27</sup> Roberts and Donaldson. Eds. *Ante- Nicene Fathers Vol 7*, 492

<sup>28</sup> Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, 50.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, 50.

<sup>30</sup> Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 323, 324.

<sup>31</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante- Nicene Fathers Vol 2*, 211.

<sup>32</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante- Nicene Fathers Vol 4*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Patricia Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press 2005), 52.

### Order of Virgins

By the end of the first century, women were being set apart as virgins. They stayed in their own homes and were governed by a spirit of prayer, work, and self-denial.<sup>34</sup> Celibacy was honoured in the early Church during the time of Ignatius of Antioch. He says in his *letter to Polycarp* that those who continue in celibacy out of spiritual devotion should do so without boasting.<sup>35</sup> In the second century, Christian apologist Athenagoras, wrote similarly in *A Plea for the Christians: You would find among us, both men and women, growing old unmarried, in the hope of living in closer communion with God. For remaining in virginity and in the state of a eunuch brings one nearer to God.*<sup>36</sup>

In the early days, there was no sharp distinction between virgins and widows. That is evident in the writing of Ignatius to *Smyrna (13.1)*, "I salute the families of my brethren with the wives and the children, and the virgins who are called widows". The virgins appear to have emerged as a distinct rank only in the late third century. It is evident if we compare *Didascalia Apostolorum* with *Apostolic Constitution*.<sup>37</sup>

### Women Clergy

Early Christian generations met in house churches where a man or woman has been the leading figure in the church which met at his or her house. They were normally addressed as *episkopos* (Bishop) meaning administrator and *Presbyteros* (Presbyter) meaning elder. In the second century, Ignatius extended his greetings to a woman named Gavia who was the leader of a Church met at her home in his *Letter to the Smyrneans*.<sup>38</sup> Ammion was a third-century woman presbyter from Phrygia who was part of Montanism. Her gravestone was found in an area where Montanism was widespread. Montanism had women clergy in the grades of presbyter and bishops.<sup>39</sup> The Synod of Laodicea (431-381) banned the ordination of women presbyters (*Presbytides*) from being installed in churches in Asia Minor. This indicates that there was a practice of admitting women into the order of presbyters in that part of the Christian world.<sup>40</sup>

## IV. ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCES FOR WOMEN LEADERSHIP

Over the past century and a half, archaeological discoveries have played a magnificent role in our understanding of early Christianity.<sup>41</sup> The major archaeological materials to prove the existence of women leadership and ordination in the early church are inscriptions and frescoes. Written texts give more information than pictures and short tombstone or votive inscriptions do. However, they have one significant advantage over the manuscripts. They reflect the actual practice of the early Christian community.<sup>42</sup> There are archeological evidences of some ongoing public ministry roles for women. The official church voice came consistently to emphasis that such things should not occur, but archaeology indicates that such things did occur, at least sometimes in the past<sup>43</sup>

Catacomb Inscriptions attesting to the titles of women as leaders in church or synagogue begin in the last pre-Christian centuries. Whether the inscriptions originate in a Jewish or a Christian community is not known for sure because the word 'synagogue' in this period can refer equally well to a Jewish or Christian gathering. It is generally acknowledged that women did not have the same access to study and to become a leader in the Jewish community. According to the *Oxford Handbook for Early Christian Archaeology*, the origins of the catacombs can be dated between the second and third centuries. Therefore, it is assumed that these inscriptions point to the church leadership of the early centuries. Synagogue leaders were known by the titles

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<sup>34</sup> Laurie Guy, "Women in the Early Church," in *Issues in the History of Christianity*. Compendium. SAIACS, Bangalore, (2010): 1-8, 7

<sup>35</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol 1, 95.

<sup>36</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol 2, 146

<sup>37</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum* is a Christian treatise which belongs to the genre of the Church orders composed around AD 230. However, *Apostolic Constitution* is a Christian collection of eight treatises on Church orders composed between 375-380 AD.

<sup>38</sup> Lightfoot Harmer Holmes, Ed, *The Apostolic Fathers, Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings* (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 1992), 194.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Mckechnie, *The First Christian Centuries* (UK: Apollos 2001), 207.

<sup>40</sup> Mckechnie, *The First Christian Centuries*, 207.

<sup>41</sup> Ehrman, *After The New Testament*, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Dorothy Irvin's, "The Ministry of Women in the Early Church: The Archaeological Evidences." *Duke Divinity School Reviews* 45/2. (1980), 76-85. 76.

<sup>43</sup> Guy, "Women in the Early Church", 6.

*presbyteros, Pater synagogues* or *archi synagogos*. A number of inscriptions from East and West refer to women who bore these titles.<sup>44</sup>

### Synagogue Chief

A Catacomb inscription in a Marble Plaque found from Smyrna dated probably second century reads like this. "Rufina, a Jewess, head of the synagogue (*archisynagogos*) built this tomb for her freed slaves and the slaves raised in her house. No one else has the right to bury anyone (here). If someone should dare to do, he or she will pay 1500 denars to the sacred treasury and 1000 denars to the Jewish people"<sup>45</sup>

The inscription shows that Rufina was a Jew but there is a possibility for her to be a Jewish Christian because women were not permitted to occupy such positions of leadership in the Jewish culture.

A stele of the early centuries was found at Myndos in the Aegean, in the excavated ruins of a building which started out as a synagogue but later became a church. The inscription had been set up just like plaques in churches today. The Myndos stele had the names of those who contributed to the construction or expansion or repair of the building. The Myndos stele attests the donation of "Theopempta, *archisynagogos*, and her son Eusebius."<sup>46</sup> The name Theopempta<sup>47</sup> is a woman's name, and the pronoun "her" likewise shows that there were women who bore the title *archisynagogos* meaning "leader of the synagogue".

### Head of the Synagogue (*Pater synagoes*)

There are several tombstones found with *pater synagoes* or other similar inscriptions. According to the tombstone of Veturia Paucula, who died at the age of around 86, had been a proselyte for 16 years and was the master of two synagogues.<sup>48</sup> Another white marble sepulchral plaque found from Crete reads like this, "Sophia of Gortyn, elder and head of the synagogue of Kisamos, lies here. The memory of the righteous one forever, Amen". Some archaeologists dated this tomb to the late first or second century, but some suggest third or fourth century<sup>49</sup>.

### Women Presbyter (*presbytera*)

An important archaeological evidence for the existence of women ordination during the second and third centuries is the Greek language tombstones discovered by the archaeologists. Both had the title *presbytera*. The first one reads: "The tomb of Veronica the *presbytera* (feminine genitive of Presbyter) and daughter of Joses". The second one reads: "The tomb of Faustina the *presbytera* (feminine genitive of Presbyter), Shalom"<sup>50</sup>. A gravestone probably of the second century with the inscription *presbytera* the feminine form of presbyter found from Italy was also a clear evidence for women clergy in the Early Church. The names mentioned in the inscription are Kale from Sicily and of Leta from Bruttium.<sup>51</sup>

### Women Bishops

A mosaic was found with the inscription *Theodora Episcopa* above the east doorway of zeno chapel in the Basilica of St Praxedis in Rome. The mosaic portrays four female heads. Three on the right are the Virgin Mary between St Pudentiana and St Praxedis, daughters of a Roman family who endowed the first church on this site. The figure on the left, wearing the square halo, is identified by a mosaic title "Theodora" with the last two letters broken away at some time in the past. The title across the top is *episcopa*, the grammatically feminine form of bishop.<sup>52</sup>

### Women Celebrating Eucharist

There are some archaeological findings which point to women performing the duties of ordained ministries like conducting Eucharist. One of such is *Fractio Panis*<sup>53</sup>, one of the Priscilla frescoes<sup>54</sup>. In that a

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<sup>44</sup> Irvin's, "The Ministry of Women in the Early Church: The Archaeological Evidences.", 76.

<sup>45</sup> Bernadette J Brooten, *Women Leaders in The Ancient Synagogue* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press 1982), 5.

<sup>46</sup> Irvin's, "The Ministry of Women in the Early Church: The Archaeological Evidences.", 77.

<sup>47</sup> Feminine form of *Theopemptas*

<sup>48</sup> Irvin's, "The Ministry of Women in the Early Church: The Archaeological Evidences.", 78.

<sup>49</sup> Brooten, *Women Leaders in The Ancient Synagogue*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Irvin's, "The Ministry of Women in the Early Church: The Archaeological Evidences.", 79.

<sup>51</sup> Mckechnie, *The First Christian Centuries*, 207.

<sup>52</sup> Irvin's, "The Ministry of Women in the Early Church: The Archaeological Evidences.", 79.

<sup>53</sup> *Fractio Panis* means "Breaking of Bread" is the name of a fresco in the Greek Chapel in the Catacomb of Priscilla situated on the *Via Salaria Nova* in Rome. The fresco depicts seven persons at a table and the woman sitting in the middle breaking the bread.

woman reclines with her right hand outstretched over the Eucharistic elements. Most of the figures in this fresco are female. One wears a veil and they are all characterized by up-swept hair, slender neck with sloping shoulders, and a hint of earrings. This picture is dated to early second century. The figure at the left end of the elbow cushions is shown sitting up rather than reclining like the other six people. Both her hands are outstretched and it seems to have been painted at the very moment of the breaking of the bread.<sup>55</sup> The arrangement of the hair seems to be the same as that of the other definitely female figures. However, the length of the skirt determines whether the person who conducting the Eucharist was a male or a female. Skirt length for men at this period, especially for the working class, was top of kneecap. That is evident in some other catacombs and Pompeiian frescoes<sup>56</sup>. The skirt length of the person who conducts the Eucharist in this painting was below the knee, to the top of the calf. Therefore, it is clear that the artist intended to paint here a woman as conducting the Eucharist.

## V. CONCLUSION

A study of Church history will help us remain open to new things. One of the obsolete stereotype practices of some societies in the world, including many in India, is the exclusion of women from its leadership positions. A major reason for continuing this obsolete practice is to the cultural and traditional sentiments carried down from older generations. The historical study of women leadership in the second, third and fourth century Church is a model for practising social justice in a gender-biased society.

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<sup>54</sup> Priscilla Panis or Catacomb of Priscilla is an archaeological site on the Via Salaria in Rome, Italy. This place was used for Christian burials from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century through the 4<sup>th</sup> century. According to tradition, the name Priscilla Panis is named after the wife of a Roman senator.

<sup>55</sup> Irvin's, "The Ministry of Women in the Early Church: The Archaeological Evidences.", 79.

<sup>56</sup> Pompeiian Frescoe is an erotic art discovered by the archaeologists from the ancient cities around the Bay of Naples.