



## St. Kassiani

September 7th

Oftentimes, the voices of women go unnoticed or unheard. In a positive sense, their voices join together in a communal unison which vocalizes Holy Wisdom in a soft undercurrent, flowing within and without humble families. Not bombastically obvious, but subtly effective. In a negative sense, chauvinism suffocates what murmurs women have left, leaving vessels of wisdom mute and neglected. Then there are those who fit into neither of those

categories — the Theotokos, Ruth, St. Helen, Deborah, etc; their voices neither subtle or restrained. They become examples of those who wish to join them and encouragement to those who wish to remain faithfully silent. Among these women is Kassiani, known for her hymnographic “voice” within the Orthodox Church.

Born at the beginning of the 9th century, Kassiani grew up in an affluent family of Constantinople and, as a young woman, attended the royal court of Emperor Theophilos. Her sharp intellect and elegant beauty mesmerized the young bachelor, thus placing her as one of the two final contestants in his bridal contest. Between her and Theodora — both equally “fit for the job” — Theophilos decided he would wed the girl who did not exceed his intellect.

According to tradition, a golden apple would be presented to the future empress. Theophilos stood in front of the girls and then walked over to Kassiani. Holding out the fruit, he said, “from woman came the worst in the world,” alluding to Eve and her sin. Kassiani did not waste a moment and calmly responded that “from woman also came the best,” alluding to the Theotokos. The irony of this situation is that Theophilos offered her a golden fruit of wealth, fame, and power, while referring to Eve, who also offered a golden fruit of knowledge to Adam. He snubs the first Eve — the one who brought death into the world. While not denying this truth, Kassiani reminds him that he must also rejoice in the second Eve — the one who bore Life itself into the world. Needless to say, Theodora received the golden apple and it she who is remembered as empress. However, that was not the end of Kassiani’s story.

Perhaps her voice would not be used to command, to advise and to encourage a nation, but her voice would be used in an equally important way — to declare the wisdom of the Church through poetry and hymnography. She became a nun and founded a monastery in western Constantinople. Although some say that this was a reaction to Theophilos’ rejection, Theodore the Studite confirms that her motivations were of a much purer nature. She only wished to devote her time, talent, and energy toward asceticism and studying the music of the Church. At a time when men dominated the field of liturgical music, Kassiani was certainly an anomaly. Yet, her hymnographic work caught the eyes — or rather, ears — of the Church Fathers due to its blossoming beauty and depth, produced from the roots monastic humility and diligence. Out of an estimated 23 surviving hymns, the well-known “Hymn of Kassiani,” which is sung on Holy Tuesday evening, became a hallmark of Eastern Orthodox hymnography.

The importance of the hymn lies not in its popularity or in its author, but in its subject. For in it, Kasiani gives a “voice” to the repentant woman weeping at Christ’s feet (see Matthew 26:6-16). Not only this, but she gives a “voice” or more precisely, a prayer, to all who also wish to come in repentance to the Lord. It is not a voice of individualism, feminism, or of carnal pride and power, but a voice and prayer which calls people together in communal repentance. And, this is the most meaningful voice anyone, especially any woman, can have — one that unites others in a common and holy purpose.

*Hymn of the Fallen Woman, Mode Pl. 4*

*The woman who had fallen into many sins recognizes Thy Godhead, O Lord. She takes upon herself the duty of a myrrh-bearer and makes ready the myrrh of mourning, before Thy entombment. Woe to me! saith she, for my night is an ecstasy of excess, gloomy and moonless, and full of sinful desire. Receive the sources of my tears, O Thou Who dost gather into clouds the water of the sea; in Thine ineffable condescension, deign to bend down Thyself to me and to the lamentations of my heart, O Thou Who didst spread out the Heavens. I will fervently embrace Thy sacred feet, and wipe them again with the tresses of the hair of my head, Thy feet at whose sound Eve hid herself for fear when she heard Thee walking in Paradise in the cool of the day. O my Savior and soul-Saver who can trace out the multitude of my sins, and the abysses of Thy judgement? Do not disregard me Thy servant, O Thou Whose mercy is boundless.*