

# Christian Widowhood

Elizabeth Rees

Ours is a culture which, by and large, does not talk about death. We prefer to focus on life. Widowhood too is something we tend to ignore. Yet widows have a unique experience of death and resurrection to share with us. As they grapple day by day with death and suffering, they more than others can teach the Church about the mystery of Easter. What follows is an exploration of widowhood in the Christian tradition.

First century Christians inherited a rich theology of widowhood from their Jewish past. Luke makes this clear in his stories and parables about widows. He portrays Jesus teaching us about giving God all we possess in the story of the widow's mite (Luke 21:1-4). His hearers would recall the ancient (8th cent B.C.) story of the widow who shared her last scrap of food with Elijah, instead of hoarding it for herself and her starving son. She gave life while staring death in the face, and her love was rewarded by an unfailing supply of flour and oil throughout the drought (1 Kings 17: 7-16).

When Jesus entered the village of Naim and brought resurrection to a near-dead family by raising a widow's son to life (Luke 7:11-16), onlookers would have recalled how Elijah, who worked in the same area of Galilee, raised a widow's son to life in similar fashion: "Elijah stretched himself on the child three times and cried out to the Lord, Lord my God, may the soul of this child, I beg you, come into him again!" The Lord heard the prayer of Elijah and the soul of the child returned to him again and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper room into the house, and gave him to his mother. 'Look', Elijah said, 'your son is alive.'" This death and resurrection story ends in awe and joy as the widow replies, "Now I know you are a man of God, and the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth itself" (1 Kings 17:17-24). Early Christians learnt from their Jewish tradition to value the widow's poverty and pain, for through her suffering she learns to let God hold her close:

*"It is he who gives bread to the hungry...  
who raises up those who are bowed down,  
the Lord who protects the stranger  
and upholds the widow and orphan" (Psalm 145:7-9).*

Old Testament widows are portrayed as women who knew bitterness and death and so learnt the secret of new life. The Book of Ruth, written in the 4th century B.C., portrays Naomi (whose name means "Fair One") returning widowed to her home town of Bethlehem. She tells the women: "Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara (or "Bitterness"), for God has marred me bitterly. Filled full I departed; the Lord brings me back empty. Why call me Naomi, then, since the Lord has given witness against me and God has afflicted me?" (Ruth 1:20–21).

But the story ends in blessing when her daughter-in-law, Ruth, gives birth to a son. The women say to Naomi "Blessed be the Lord! The child will be a comfort to you and the prop of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you and is more to you than seven sons has given him birth'. And Naomi took the child to her own bosom and she became his nurse. And the women of the neighbourhood gave him a name. 'A son has been born for Naomi', they said" (Ruth 4:14–17).

The Book of Judith, written in the first century B.C., reveals a well-developed theology of widowhood. It presents the widow Judith as a woman of prayer and courage. She lives a simple life in the midst of her possessions and is a charming woman, loved by those around her: "As a widow Judith stayed inside her house for three years and four months. She had had an upper room built for herself on the roof (in which to pray). She wore sackcloth round her waist and dressed in widow's weeds, She fasted every day of her widowhood except for the festival days of the House of Israel. Now she was very beautiful, charming to see. Her husband Manassch had left her gold and silver, men-servants and maid-servants, cattle and lands, and she lived among all her possessions without anyone finding a word to say against her, so devoutly did she fear God" (Judith 8:4–8). Through the sorrow of bereavement, her wisdom and courage deepened, She came to know God as her refuge and saviour in her lowliness and despair. A hundred or so years later, Mary's Magnificat is couched in the same language. Judith's task is to kill Holofernes, the commander of Nebuchadnezzar's army, and so free her country from oppression, She prays:

"God, my God, now hear this widow;  
Observe their arrogance, send your fury on their heads.  
Give the needful courage to this widow's hand...  
Break their pride by a woman's hand.  
Your strength does not lie in numbers,  
nor your might in violent men,  
since you are the God of the humble,  
the help of the oppressed, the support of the weak,  
the refuge of the forsaken, the saviour of the despairing".

(Judith 9:4, 9–11)

St. Luke's gospel might be considered the widow's gospel. Already in chapter 2 we meet Anna the prophetess, an elderly widow who lived out her days in the temple, serving God day and night with prayer and fasting. God gave her the gift of knowing that the child in Mary's arms was the Son of God, and Anna became his first witness, for "she spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:36–38). For Luke, widows are available for God; they pray day and night. And so in the comical parable of the importunate widow and the unjust judge, Jesus tells his hearers how singleminded and relentless our prayer must be (Luke 18:1–5). We have already noted that it is Luke who tells the story of the widow's mite and how the widow of Naim's son was restored to life.

Widows like Judith and Anna formed an important element in early Christian communities. They were women of prayer, often with the time and the means to care for others. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke portrays widows in this role. He talks of Tabitha "who never tired of doing good or giving in charity". She died, and her friends sent for Peter to pray with them. "On his arrival they took him to the upstairs room, where all the widows stood around him in tears, showing him tunics and other clothes Tabitha had made when she was with them. Peter sent them all out of the room and knelt down and prayed. Then he turned to the dead woman and said, 'Tabitha, stand up'. She opened her eyes, looked at Peter and sat up. Peter helped her to her feet, then he called in the saints and widows and showed them she was alive" (Acts 9:36–42).

By A.D. 65, St Paul describes widows as a formal Church group, alongside deacons and elders. Women may be enrolled as widows if they are known in the community for the goodness of their life: "No one may be enrolled as a widow unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds" (1 Tim. 5:9–10). The Church fathers of the next few centuries continue to describe the Order of Widows alongside the Order of Virgins as a major grouping of women in the Church. Sometimes groups of virgins were entrusted to the care of these older women. St. Monica (332–387) was a widow whose fervent prayer led to the conversion of her son, Augustine.

In the next generation, St. Jerome directed several widows including St. Marcella (d. 410), a Roman noblewoman who was widowed soon after marriage, and established several communities for other Roman women. St. Paula (d.404) was a noble Roman widow who travelled with her daughter to Bethlehem and established a monastery for men and another for women with a guest house for pilgrims under Jerome's

direction. St. Melanie (383–439) divided her estates among the poor and when the Goths invaded Europe she moved with her husband first to Africa and then to Palestine, where she too became a friend of Jerome. On her husband's death she became superior of a convent on the Mount of Olives.

In the early Middle Ages women increasingly banded together in monasteries for safety and for mutual support. The Order of Widows died out, though widows often became abbesses because of their age, their wisdom and their experience in managing property and estates. St. Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–31) and St. Bridget of Sweden (1303–73) were royal widows. Elizabeth founded hospitals and supported the poor, the elderly and orphans. She made vows as a Franciscan tertiary before dying young at 24. Bridget established a double monastery, and spent the rest of her life as a pilgrim.

St. Frances of Rome (1384–1440) was a gentle, idealistic widow who cared for the needy and for other widows. She founded a society in which women followed the Rule of St. Benedict, the Oblates of Mary, which she entered when her husband died. St. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572–1641) was a French widow who made a vow of chastity and, together with her friend Francis de Sales, established the Visitation Order to care for the sick and poor outside the cloister. It is interesting that most of the widows described in the last few paragraphs felt the necessity of vowing their celibacy to God. By making a vow, they expressed to the Church and to themselves their desire to offer their lives completely to God.

The impetus for renewal which led to Vatican II came in large measure from France. Men and women of vision began to explore the riches of their spiritual and liturgical past, yet with an eye to the future. In France three significant groupings of widows have emerged this century. The earliest of these was the St. Frances of Rome Secular Institute, which was founded in Lyons in 1934 and became a recognised diocesan institute in 1969. It grew out of a group of widows who chose Frances of Rome as their patron. Frances, like them, experienced life as a wife and mother, and later as a widow. St. Frances Groups have spread to other areas, to the Paris region and to Belgium.

These women chose the framework of a secular institute to ensure their quality of commitment, training and support; it also enabled them to vow their lives to God, as did early Christian widows. In their profile they explain: "We are all widows as Frances was, and we have decided, like her, to 'prefer nothing to the love of Christ'. We welcome all who seek the support of our friendship and seek to deepen their life of faith in our St. Frances Groups. We commit ourselves to live a consecrated

life on our own in the world. Since most of us have children, our vows of poverty, chastity and obedience apply only to our own lives. We live as simply as possible. We try to allow God to take possession of us more and more completely and to use us more fully. We are particularly aware of the needs of other widows, since we experience the same trial as they do”.

The St. Frances Groups live out of a deep theology of widowhood: “It would be impossible for us to live our consecration on our own, but God who came to wed humanity gives us his strength and his love. Following the example of the Church who lives in expectation of the bridegroom’s return, we try to be fully united with Christ, until the day when he will return to fetch us and reunite us for ever with those whom we love in the life of the Trinity. St. Frances Groups are for widows who want to fully explore the human and Christian dimension of the trial which has afflicted them, following their model, St. Frances of Rome, who knew how to make the pain of widowhood bear fruit. Widowhood is also a new state of life with new horizons, a new viewpoint and new graces. Widowhood lived in hope is a symbol of the Church on earth living in the hope that Christ her bridegroom will come in glory.”

The next group to emerge in France was a sisterhood of younger widows who called themselves “The Sisterhood of Our Lady of the Resurrection”, for Our Lady knew widowhood, and through her Son’s crucifixion and resurrection she learnt to live by faith which transcends death. They began in Le Pecq and describe themselves as “sisters who have heard the same call to live out Christ’s command of sisterly love, and who form a community of love and intercession.” They were founded by a Fr. Caffarel and only accept women below the age of fifty. In May 1983 they drew up a Rite of Blessing for widows which Rome has approved.

The Rite of Blessing takes place during Mass. The liturgy of the Word uses appropriate scripture readings, and is followed by a homily on the meaning of widowhood. The candidate is examined, and the saints are invoked in a solemn litany which includes two married couples, Joachim and Anne and Zachary and Elizabeth, and various widowed saints. The widow then professes her vow in the following words: “In the presence of the holy Trinity and for the glory of God, today I make the vow of chastity for ever. May the Lord Jesus receive this gift of myself: all that I am and all I possess. May he accept this offering for the good of the Church, for my family, for widows and for families throughout the world. May my husband N . . . . watch over my promise, and may our union which this vow renews for ever glorify

God.” The celebrant blesses her wedding ring and blesses a cross for her to wear. Mass continues with special intercessions, and her husband and children are mentioned at the mementos of the living and the dead.

This rite expresses for the first time in the Church’s liturgy a deep awareness of the value of widowhood. The suggested homily begins:

“Dear Sister,

God created man and woman in his own image. He wanted their union to be a sign of his love. However God permits some of those who were joined in the sacrament of marriage to be separated prematurely. You are here to ask the Church to invoke God’s blessing on your widowhood, in response to the invitation of the One who first loved you. Your life has already been consecrated to him through baptism and confirmation. Today your consecration takes a new form. In your love you freely undertake to live in praise of God’s glory, to experience a new fruitfulness and to become a sign to the world of the resurrection.

“You have experienced the tenderness of God our Father, and you now commit yourself to share this tenderness with all those around you. The Virgin Mary will always be with you on your journey. She lived to the full the mystery of faith; she allowed herself to be completely invaded by love, and never stopped hoping against hope. Like her, you will become a living symbol of the Church, always ready to go and meet the bridegroom when he comes.”

After the litany, the celebrant continues to describe the implications of widowhood. He prays for the candidate: “Lord our God, you manifest your strength through the weakness of those who hope in you. You desired your Son to accomplish your work of salvation through his suffering and resurrection. Look on our sister who has experienced prematurely the loneliness and humiliation of widowhood. Help her to know that Jesus continues to suffer in her in order to lead her into his resurrection. Send your Spirit upon her, so she may receive the power of the resurrection, and enable her to serve the Church with faith and courage, in hope and joy.” At the end of the intercessions he concludes: “May our sister share with those around her your love for each person and your victory over death. On the day when you call her to meet you with joy, may she gaze on her husband’s face for ever.”

A group of older widows in Dijon asked to join the Sisterhood of the Resurrection, but since they were over fifty, it was suggested that they establish a new group. Accordingly, in 1981 they founded the Community of Anna the Prophetess, taking as their model Anna in the temple, the first witness to the child Jesus. The bishop of Dijon, Mgr. Balland, knows and appreciates this new, loose-knit community.

Madame François de Broissia describes their vision, emphasising that their consecration takes place within the context of their marriage: "We consecrate ourselves as widows as a continuation of the sacrament of marriage; we remain united in faith with our husbands. We could consecrate ourselves secretly in our own hearts, but we prefer the support of a community. Consecration can be lived out within the framework of normal life, whatever our family responsibilities or professional commitments. If the Lord calls us to this, our task is to give him first place in our lives. This consecration of our widowhood is not an optional extra but the centre of our life."

François continues to explore the role of widows and the ways in which her community witness to their faith as Anna did: "Widows held an important position in the early Church, but their role diminished over the centuries. We believe it is good to restore meaning to widowhood. We wish to be women of the Church; as such, we are open to all older widows who would like to join us. We believe the Lord asks us to live compassionate lives, to be deeply present to those who suffer. People of all ages come to us. When they ask our advice, we try to be channels for the Lord, allowing him to put into our mouths the words the Lord wants them to hear. We all meet together in Dijon at least three times a year. We search for the Lord in order to give him to others. This is how we try to live out the consecration of our widowhood. We do so in union with our husbands, as we look forward to our reunion in heaven."

Meanwhile, what has been happening in Britain? In 1958 Cardinal Godfrey of Westminster formed a "Catholic Association of Widows". Groups in London died out, but in 1970 Mrs Frances Poole established the first group in Birmingham archdiocese, in St. Elizabeth's parish, Coventry, with the approval of Archbishop George Patrick Dwyer. Groups formed in other parishes in the diocese, and since 1981 they meet for an annual autumn Mass at St. Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham. They also gather for a Spring day of recollection and for an annual "Monica Weekend" in the summer.

Parish groups of the Association of Catholic Widows meet monthly. Frances writes: "Ours is a very modest association: there is no formal structure; it is a support group. We have a chaplain to whom we can turn for advice. The primary purpose of the association is to make better known 'the greatness of Christian widowhood' (Pope Pius XII) and to encourage widows to use their state of life to the best advantage both of themselves and the Church. Its secondary purpose is to help its members in the various social problems resulting from their widowhood."

What is there for widows who feel called to vow celibacy rather than join a support group? Britain lags behind in this, but French women

are doing so. Madame Georgette Blaquièrre of Caylus wrote in February of this year: "There are a few widows like myself who are consecrated by their bishops, as are consecrated virgins, not belonging to religious congregations. In fact they receive not a consecration but a blessing, because they are already consecrated through the sacrament of marriage. They adapt the rite which Rome has approved for use by sisterhoods. They can choose whether to have a private ceremony or a public one. I made my vow to Cardinal Coffy. Some French bishops are very favourable to this, and the Pope supports them, but Rome has made no official statement about widows."

Georgette reflects on the meaning of her vows: "The blessing of widows has a long history. Very early in the Church, the Order of Widows existed alongside the Order of Virgins. Later, widows living alone at home gradually entered monasteries for greater safety during times of invasion. Thus they gradually became assimilated with consecrated virgins, which caused a regrettable confusion between the two groups and what they symbolise in the Church. When a widow asks for a blessing of her state, she reveals something of her personal journey under God's grace through the trial of bereavement. In response to this new situation she offers herself to God; she promises or vows to remain celibate. She seeks God's blessing on a state of life which she neither sought nor wanted, and she now accepts a new call to offer herself to God. Jesus blesses her self-gift as he blessed the widow in the gospel who gave 'all she had to live on'. Through her gift of all to God, a widow celebrates her radical poverty, her experience of being humbled and stripped of everything."

Widowhood is an aspect of marriage. Georgette explains: "Marriage is a consecration. A living out of the union of Christ with his bride, the Church. The widow lives out a new aspect of this union: when she asks for a blessing, she asks God for the strength to respond to the grace of marriage to its bitter end. She shows how faith is stronger than death. In their suffering, through God's gift, women can join their lives with that of the widowed mother of Jesus as a sign to the Church and, in the wider world, as a sign of the Church."

The Church on earth will always be a widow, her heart pierced with sorrow. The consecration of virgins, recently reinstated with honour by the Church, tells us that God's kingdom is already here. Widows are called to live in hope, to show that the kingdom is not yet fully here. Like Mary on Holy Saturday, the widow lives in the belief that Christ has conquered death. There are widows today who wish to vow celibacy as they seek the Church's blessing on their widowhood. Are priests and bishops brave enough to receive their vows?