



# Handbook On Marriage

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# Homily on Marriage

By Saint John Chrysostom

*...let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife that she reverence her husband. (Eph. 5:33)*

A certain wise man, when enumerating which blessings are the most important included "a wife and husband who live in harmony (Sir. 25:1). In another place he emphasized this: "A friend or a companion never meets one amiss, but a wife with her husband is better than both." (Sir. 40:23). From the beginning God in His providence has planned this union of man and woman, and has spoken of the two as one: male and female He created them (Gen. 1:27), and there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). There is no relationship between human beings so close as that of husband and wife, if they are united as they ought to be. When blessed David was mourning for Jonathan, who was of one soul with him, what comparison did he use to describe the loftiness of their love? Your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women (II Sam. 1:26). The power of this love is truly stronger than any passion; other desires may be strong, but this one alone never fades. This love (eros) is deeply planted within our inmost being. Unnoticed by us, it attracts the bodies of men and women to each other, because in the beginning woman came forth from man, and from man and woman other men and women proceed. Can you see now how close this union is, and how God providentially created it from a single nature? He permitted Adam to marry Eve, who was more than sister or daughter; she was his own flesh! God caused the entire human race to proceed from this one point of origin. He did not, on the one hand, fashion woman independently from man, otherwise man would think of her as essentially different from himself. Nor did He enable woman to bear children without man; if this were the case she would be self-sufficient. Instead, just as the branches of a tree proceed from a single trunk, He made the one man Adam to be the origin of all mankind, both male and female, and made it impossible for men and women to be self-sufficient. Later, He forbade men to marry their sisters or daughters, so that our love would not be limited to members of our families, and withdrawn from the rest of the human race. All of this is implied in Christ's words: He who made them from the beginning made them male and female (Matt. 19:4).

The love of husband and wife is the force that welds society together. Men will take up arms and even sacrifice their lives for the sake of this love. St. Paul would not speak so earnestly about this subject without serious reason; why else would he say, Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord? Because when harmony prevails, the children are raised well, the household is kept in order, and neighbors, friends and relatives praise the result. Great benefits, both for families and states, are thus produced. When it is otherwise however, everything is thrown into confusion and turned upside down. When the generals of an army are at peace with each other, everything proceeds in an orderly fashion, and when they are not, everything is in disarray. It is the same here. For the sake of harmony, then, he said, Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord ....

Let us assume, then, that the husband is to occupy the place of the head, and the wife that of the body, and listen to what "headship" means: For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church: and He is the Saviour of the Body. Therefore as the Church is subject unto Christ, so let wives be subject to their own husbands in everything. Notice that after saying the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, he immediately says that the Church is His Body, and He is Himself its Saviour. It is the head that upholds the well-being of the body. In his other epistles Paul has already laid the foundations of marital love, and has assigned to husband and wife each his proper place: to the husband one of leader and provider, and to the wife one of submission. Therefore as the Church is subject to Christ--and the Church, remember, consists of both husbands and wives---so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands, as to God.

You have heard how important obedience is; you have praised and marveled at Paul, how he welds our whole life together, as we would expect from an admirable and spiritual man. You have done well. But now listen to what

else he requires from you; he has not finished with his example. Husbands, he says, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church. You have seen the amount of obedience necessary; now hear about the amount of love necessary. Do you want your wife to be obedient to you, as the Church is to Christ? Then be responsible for the same providential care of her, as Christ is for the Church. And even if it becomes necessary for you to give your life for her, yes, and even to endure and undergo suffering of any kind, do not refuse. Even though you undergo all this, you will never have done anything equal to what Christ has done. You are sacrificing yourself for someone to whom you are already joined, but He offered Himself up for one who turned her back on Him and hated Him. In the same way, then, as He honored her by putting at His feet one who turned her back on Him, who hated, rejected, and disdained Him as He accomplished this not with threats, or violence, or terror, or anything else like that, but through His untiring love; so also you should behave toward your wife. Even if you see her belittling you, or despising and mocking you, still you will be able to subject her to yourself, through affection, kindness, and your great regard for her. There is no influence more powerful than the bond of love, especially for husband and wife. A servant can be taught submission through fear; but even he, if provoked too much, will soon seek his escape. But one's partner for life, the mother of one's children, the source of one's every joy, should never be fettered with fear and threats, but with love and patience. What kind of marriage can there be when the wife is afraid of her husband? What sort of satisfaction could a husband himself have, if he lives with his wife as if she were a slave, and not with a woman by her own free will? Suffer anything for her sake, but never disgrace her, for Christ never did this with the Church.

Paul has precisely described for husband and wife what is fitting behavior for each: she should reverence him as the head and he should love her as his body. But how is this behavior achieved? That it must be is clear; now I will tell you how. It will be achieved if we are detached from money, if we strive above everything for virtue, if we keep the fear of God before our eyes. What Paul says to servants in the next chapter applies to us as well,

...knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same again from the Lord (Eph. 6:8). Love her not so much for her own sake, but for Christ's sake. That is why he says, be subject...as to the Lord. Do everything for the Lord's sake, in a spirit of obedience to Him. These words should be enough to convince us to avoid quarrels and disagreements. No husband should believe any accusation he hears from a third party about his wife, and vice versa; nor should a wife unreasonably monitor her husband's comings and going, provided that he has always shown himself to be above suspicion. And what if you devote the day to your work and your friends, and the evening to your wife; but she is still not satisfied, but is jealous for more of your time? Don't be annoyed by her complaints; she loves you, she is not behaving absurdly--her complaints come from her fervent affection for you, and from fear. Yes, she is afraid that her marriage bed will be stolen, that someone will deprive her of her greatest blessing, that someone will take from her him who is her head.

A wife should never nag her husband: "You lazy coward, you have no ambition! Look at our relatives and neighbors; they have plenty of money. Their wives have far more than I do." Let no wife say any such thing; she is her husband's body, and it is not for her to dictate to her head, but to submit and obey. "But why should she endure poverty?" some will ask. If she is poor, let her console herself by thinking of those who are much poorer still. If she really loved her husband, she would never speak to him like that, but would value having him close to her more than all the gold in the world...Furnish your house neatly and soberly. If the bridegroom shows his wife that he takes no pleasure in worldly excess, and will not stand for it, their marriage will remain free from the evil influences that are so popular these days. Let them shun the immodest music and dancing that are currently so fashionable.

I am aware that many people think me ridiculous for giving such advice; but if you listen to me, you will understand the advantages of a sober lifestyle more and more as time goes on. You will no longer laugh at me, but will laugh instead at the way people live now like silly children or drunken men. What is our duty, then? Remove from your lives shameful, immodest, and Satanic music, and don't associate with people who enjoy such profligate entertainment. When your bride sees your manner of life, she will say to herself, "Wonderful! What a wise man my husband is! He regards this passing life as nothing; he has married me to be a good mother for his children and a prudent manager of his household." Will this sort of life be distasteful for a young bride? Only perhaps for the

shortest time, and soon she will discover how delightful it is to live this way. She will retain her modesty if you retain yours. Don't engage in idle conversations; it never profits anyone to talk too much. Whenever you give your wife advice, always begin by telling her how much you love her. Nothing will persuade her so well to admit the wisdom of your words as her assurance that you are speaking to her with sincere affection. Tell her that you are convinced that money is not important, that only thieves thirst for it constantly, that you love her more than gold; and indeed an intelligent, discreet and pious young woman is worth more than all the money in the world. Show her that you value her company, and prefer being at home to being out. Esteem her in the presence of your friends and children. Pray together at home and go to Church; when you come back home, let each ask the other the meaning of the readings and the prayers. If you are overtaken by poverty, remember Peter and Paul, who were more honored than kings or rich men, though they spent their lives in hunger and thirst. Remind one another that nothing in life is to be feared, except offending God. If your marriage is like this, your perfection will rival the holiest of monks.

If we seek the things that are perfect, the secondary things will follow. The Lord says, Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you (Matt. 6:33). What sort of person do you think the children of such parents will be? What kind of person are all the others who associate with them? Will they not eventually be the recipients of countless blessings as well? For generally the children acquire the character of their parents, are formed in the mold of their parents' temperament, love the same things their parents love, talk in the same fashion, and work for the same ends. If we order our lives in this way and diligently study the Scriptures, we will find lessons to guide us in everything we need!

# Marriage: The Great Sacrament

*By Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra, Mount Athos*

Nobody would dispute that the most important day in a person's life, after his birth and baptism, is that of his marriage. It is no surprise, then, that the aim of contemporary worldly and institutional upheavals is precisely to crush the most honorable and sacred mystery of marriage. For many people, marriage is an opportunity for pleasures and amusements. Life, however, is a serious affair. It is a spiritual struggle, a progression toward a goal—heaven. The most crucial juncture, and the most important means, of this progression is marriage. It is not permissible for anyone to avoid the bonds of marriage, whether he concludes a mystical marriage by devoting himself to God, or whether he concludes a sacramental one with a spouse.

Today we will concern ourselves primarily with sacramental marriage. We will consider how marriage can contribute to our spiritual life, in order to continue the theme of our previous talk. We know that marriage is an institution established by God. It is "honorable" (Heb 13.4). It is a "great mystery" (Eph 5.32). An unmarried person passes through life and leaves it; but a married person lives and experiences life to the full.

One wonders what people today think about the sacred institution of marriage, this "great mystery", blessed by our Church. They marry, and it's as if two checking accounts or two business interests were being merged. Two people are united without ideals, two zeros, you could say. Because people without ideals, without quests, are nothing more than zeros. "I married in order to live my life", you hear people say, "and not to be shut inside four walls". "I married to enjoy my life", they say, and then they hand over their children—if they have children—to some strange woman so they can run off to the theater, the movies, or to some other worldly gathering. And so their houses become hotels to which they return in the evening, or, rather, after midnight, after they've had their fun and need to rest. Such people are empty inside, and so in their homes they feel a real void. They find no gratification there, and thus they rush and slide from here to there, in order to find their happiness.

They marry without knowledge, without a sense of responsibility, or simply because they wish to get married, or because they think they must in order to be good members of society. But what is the result? We see it every day. The shipwrecks of marriage are familiar to all of us. A worldly marriage, as it is understood today, can only have one characteristic—the murder of a person's spiritual life. Thus we must feel that, if we fail in our marriage, we have more or less failed in our spiritual life. If we succeed in our marriage, we have also succeeded in our spiritual life. Success or failure, progress or ruin, in our spiritual life, begins with our marriage. Because this is such a serious matter, let us consider some of the conditions necessary for a happy, truly Christian marriage.

In order to have a successful marriage, one must have the appropriate upbringing from an early age. Just as a child must study, just as he learns to think, and take an interest in his parents or his health, so too must he be prepared in order to be able to have a successful marriage. But in the age in which we live, no one is interested in preparing their children for this great mystery, a mystery which will play the foremost role in their lives. Parents are not interested, except in the dowry, or in other such financial matters, in which they are deeply interested.

The child, from an early age, must learn to love, to give, to suffer deprivation, to obey. He must learn to feel that the purity of his soul and body is a valuable treasure to be cherished as the apple of his eye. The character of the child must be shaped properly, so that he becomes an honest, brave, decisive, sincere, cheerful person, and not a half, self-pitying creature, who constantly bemoans his fate, a weak-willed thing without any power of thought or strength. From an early age, the child should learn to take an interest in a particular subject or occupation, so that tomorrow he will be in a position to support his family, or, in the case of a girl, also to help, if this is necessary. A woman must learn to be a housewife, even if she has an education. She should learn to cook, to sew, to embroider. But, my good Father, you may say, this is all self-evident.

Ask married couples, however, and you'll see how many women who are about to marry know nothing about running a household.

Once we reach a certain age, moreover, the choice of one's life partner is a matter which should not be put off. Neither should one be in a hurry, because, as the saying goes, "quick to marry, quick to despair". But one should not delay, because delay is a mortal danger to the soul. As a rule, the normal rhythm of the spiritual life begins with marriage. An unmarried person is like someone trying to live permanently in a hallway: he doesn't seem to know what the rooms are for. Parents should take an interest in the child's social life, but also in his prayer life, so that the blessed hour will come as a gift sent by God.

Naturally, when he comes to choose a partner, he will take to account his parents' opinion. How often have parents felt knives piercing their hearts when their children don't ask them about the person who will be their companion in life? A mother's heart is sensitive, and can't endure such a blow. The child should discuss matters with his parents, because they have a special intuition enabling them to be aware of the things which concern them. But this doesn't mean that the father and mother should pressure the child. Ultimately he should be free to make his own decision. If you pressure your child to marry, he will consider you responsible if things don't go well. Nothing good comes from pressure. You must help him, but you must also allow him to choose the person he prefers or loves—but not someone he pities or feels sorry for. If your child, after getting to know someone, tells you, "I feel sorry for the poor soul, I'll marry him", then you know that you're on the threshold of a failed marriage. Only a person whom he or she prefers or loves can stand by the side of your child. Both the man and the woman should be attracted to each other, and they should truly want to live together, in an inward way, unhurriedly. On this matter, however, it is not possible to pressure our children. Sometimes, out of our love, we feel that they are our possessions, that they are our property, and that we can do what we want with them. And thus our child becomes a creature incapable of living life either married or unmarried.

Of course, the process of getting acquainted, which is such a delicate issue—but of which we are often heedless—should take place before marriage. We should never be complacent about getting to know each other, especially if we're not sure of our feelings. Love shouldn't blind us. It should open our eyes, to see the other person as he is, with his faults. "Better to take a shoe from your own house, even if it's cobbled", says the folk proverb. That is, it's better to take someone you've gotten to know. And acquaintanceship must always be linked with engagement, which is an equally difficult matter.

When I suggested to a young woman that she should think seriously about whether she should continue her engagement she replied: "If I break it off, my mother will kill me". But what sort of engagement is it, if there's no possibility of breaking it off? To get engaged doesn't mean that I'll necessarily get married. It means that I'm testing to see whether I should marry the person I'm engaged to. If a woman isn't in a position to break off her engagement, she shouldn't get engaged, or, rather, she shouldn't go ahead with the marriage. During the engagement, we must be especially careful. If we are, we will have fewer problems and fewer disappointments after the wedding. Someone once said that, during the period of getting to know one another, you should hold on to your heart firmly with both hands, as if it were a wild animal. You know how dangerous the heart is: instead of leading you to marriage, it can lead you into sin. There is the possibility that the person you've chosen sees you as a mere toy, or a toothbrush to be tried out. Afterwards you'll be depressed and shed many tears. But then it will be too late, because your angel will have turned out to be made of clay.

Don't choose a person who wastes his time at clubs, having good time, and throwing away his money on traveling and luxuries. Neither should you choose someone who, as you'll find out, conceals his self-centeredness beneath words of love. Don't choose a woman as your wife who is like gun powder, so that as soon as you say something to her, she bursts to flames. She's no good as a wife.

Moreover, if you want to have a truly successful marriage, don't approach that young woman or man who is unable to leave his or her parents. The commandment of Christ is clear: man leaves his father and mother, and is united to his wife" (Mk 10.7). But when you see the other person tied to his mother or father, when you see that he obeys them with his mouth hanging open, and is prepared to do whatever they tell him, keep well away. He is emotionally sick, a psychologically immature person, and you won't be able to create a family with him. The man you will make your husband should be spirited. But how can he be spirited when he hasn't realized, hasn't understood, hasn't digested the fact that his parents' house is simply a flower-pot in which he was put, to be taken out later, and transplanted somewhere else?

Also, when you're going to choose a husband, make sure that he's not an uncommunicative type—in which case he'll have no friends. And if today he has no friends, tomorrow he'll find it difficult to have you as a friend and partner. Be on your guard against grumblers, moaners, and gloomy people who are like dejected birds. Be on your guard against those who complain all the time: "You don't love me, you don't understand me", and all that sort of thing. Something about these creatures of God isn't right. Also be on your guard against religious fanatics and the overly pious. Those, that is, who get upset over trivial things, who are critical of everything and hypersensitive. How are you going to live with such a person? It will be like sitting on thorns. Also look out for those who regard marriage as something bad, as a form of imprisonment. Those who say: But I've never in my whole life thought about getting married.

Watch out for certain pseudo-Christians, who see marriage as something sordid, as a sin, who immediately cast their eyes down when they hear anything said about it. If you marry someone like this, he will be a thorn in your flesh, and a burden for his monastery if he becomes a monk. Watch out for those who think that they're perfect, and find no defect in themselves, while constantly finding faults in others. Watch out for those who think they've been chosen by God to correct everyone else.

There is another serious matter to which you should also pay attention: heredity. Get to know well the father, the mother, the grandfather, the grandmother, the uncle. Also, the basic material prerequisites should be there. Above all, pay attention to the person's faith. Does he or she have faith? Has the person whom you're thinking of making the companion of your life have ideals? If Christ means nothing to him, how are you going to be able to enter his heart? If he has not been able to value Christ, do you think he will value you? Holy Scripture says to the husband that the wife should be "of your testament" (Mal 2.14), that is, of your faith, your religion, so that she can join you to God. It is only then that you can have, as the Church Fathers say, a marriage "with the consent of the bishop", that is, with the approval of the Church, and not simply a formal license.

Discuss things in advance with your spiritual father. Examine every detail with him, and he will stand by your side as a true friend, and, when you reach the desired goal, then your marriage will be a gift from God (cf. 1 Cor 7.7). God gives his own gift to each one of us. He leads one person to marriage and another to virginity. Not that God makes the choice by saying "you go here", and "you go there", but he gives us the nerve to choose what our heart desires, and the courage and the strength to carry it out.

If you choose your spouse in this way, then thank God. Bring him into touch with your spiritual father. If you don't have one, the two of you should choose a spiritual father together, who will be your Elder, your father, the one who will remind you of, and show you God.

You will have many difficulties in life. There will be a storm of issues. Worries will surround you, and maintaining your Christian life will not be easy. But don't worry. God will help you. Do what is within your power. Can you read a spiritual book for five minutes a day? Then read. Can you pray for five minutes a day? Pray. And if you can't manage five minutes, pray for two. The rest is God's affair.

When you see difficulties in your marriage, when you see that you're making no progress in your spiritual life, don't despair. But neither should you be content with whatever progress you may have already made. Lift up your heart to God. Imitate those who have given everything to God, and do what you can to be like them, even if all you can

do is to desire in your heart to be like them. Leave the action to Christ. And when you advance in this way, you will truly sense what is the purpose of marriage. Otherwise, as a blind person wanders about, so too will you wander in life.

What then is the purpose of marriage? I will tell you three of its main aims. First of all, marriage is a path of pain. The companionship of man and wife is called a "yoking together" (syzygia), that is, the two of them labor under a shared burden. Marriage is a journeying together, a shared portion of pain, and, of course, a joy. But usually it's six chords of our life which sound a sorrowful note, and only one which is joyous. Man and wife will drink from the same cup of upheaval, sadness, and failure. During the marriage ceremony, the priest gives the newly-weds to drink from the same cup, called the "common cup", because together they will bear the burdens of marriage. The cup is also called "union", because they are joined together to share life's joys and sorrows.

When two people get married, it's as if they're saying: Together we will go forward, hand in hand, through good times and bad. We will have dark hours, hours of sorrow filled with burdens, monotonous hours. But in the depths of the night, we continue to believe in the sun and the light. Oh, my dear friends, who can say that his life has not been marked by difficult moments? But it is no small thing to know that, in your difficult moments, in your worries, in your temptations, you will be holding in your hand the hand of your beloved. The New Testament says that every man will have pain, especially those who enter into marriage.

"Are you free from a wife?"—which means, are you unmarried?—asks the Apostle Paul. "Then do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you are not doing anything wrong, it is no sin. And if a girl marries, she does not sin, but those who marry will have hardships to endure, and my aim is to spare you" (1 Cor 7.27-28). Remember: from the moment you marry, he says, you will have much pain, you will suffer, and your life will be a cross, but a cross blossoming with flowers. Your marriage will have its joys, its smiles, and its beautiful things. But during the days of sunshine, remember that all the lovely flowers conceal a cross, which can emerge into your sunshine at any moment.

Life is not a party, as some people think, and after they get married take a fall from heaven to earth. Marriage is a vast ocean, and you don't know where it will wash you up. You take the person whom you've chosen with fear and trembling, and with great care, and after a year, two years, five years, you discover that he's fooled you.

It is an adulteration of marriage for us to think that it is a road to happiness, as if it were a denial of the cross. The joy of marriage is for husband and wife to put their shoulders to the wheel and together go forward on the uphill road of life. "You haven't suffered? Then you haven't loved", says a certain poet. Only those who suffer can really love. And that's why sadness is a necessary feature of marriage. "Marriage", in the words of an ancient philosopher, "is a world made beautiful by hope, and strengthened by misfortune". Just as steel is fashioned in a furnace, just so is a person proved in marriage, in the fire of difficulties. When you see your marriage from a distance, everything seems wonderful. But when you get closer, you'll see just how many difficult moments it has.

God says that "it is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2.18), and so he placed a companion at his side, someone to help him throughout his life, especially in his struggles of faith, because in order to keep your faith, you must suffer and endure much pain. God sends his grace to all of us. He sends it, however, when he sees that we are willing to suffer. Some people, as soon as they see obstacles, run away. They forget God and the Church. But faith, God, and the Church, are not a shirt that you take off as soon as you start to sweat.

Marriage, then, is a journey through sorrows and joys. When the sorrows seem overwhelming, then you should remember that God is with you. He will take up your cross. It was he who placed the crown of marriage on your head. But when we ask God about something, he doesn't always supply the solution right away. He leads us forward very slowly. Sometime[s] he takes years. We have to experience pain, otherwise life would have no meaning. But be of good cheer, for Christ is suffering with you, and the Holy Spirit, "through your groanings is



pleading on your behalf" (cf. Rom 8.26).

Second, marriage is a journey of love. It is the creation of a new human being, a new person, for, as the Gospel says, "the two will be as one flesh" (Mt 19.5; Mk 10.7). God unites two people, and makes them one. From this union of two people, who agree to synchronize their footsteps and harmonize the beating of their hearts, a new human being emerges. Through such profound and spontaneous love, the one becomes a presence, a living reality, in the heart of the other. "I am married" means that I cannot live a single day, even a few moments, without the companion of my life. My husband, my wife, is a part of my being, of my flesh, of my soul. He or she complements me. He or she is the thought of my mind. He or she is the reason for which my heart beats.

The couple exchanges rings to show that, in life's changes, they will remain united. Each wears a ring with the name of the other written on it, which is placed on the finger from which a vein runs directly to the heart. That is, the name of the other is written on his own heart. The one, we could say, gives the blood of his heart to the other. He or she encloses the other within the core of his being.

"What do you do?" a novelist was once asked. He was taken aback. "What do I do? What a strange question! I love Olga, my wife". The husband lives to love his wife, and the wife lives to love her husband.

The most fundamental thing in marriage is love, and love is about uniting two into one. God abhors separation and divorce. He wants unbroken unity (cf. Mt 19.3-9; Mk 10.2-12). The priest takes the rings off the left finger, puts them on the right, and then again on the left, and finally he puts them back on the right hand. He begins and ends with the right hand, because this is the hand with which we chiefly act. It also means that the other now has my hand. I don't do anything that my spouse doesn't want. I am bound up with the other. I live for the other, and for that reason I tolerate his faults. A person who can't put up with another can't marry.

What does my partner want? What interests him? What gives him pleasure? That should also interest and please me as well. I also look for opportunities to give him little delights. How will I please my husband today? How will I please my wife today? This is the question which a married person must ask every day. She is concerned about his worries, his interests, his job, his friends, so that they can have everything in common. He gladly gives way to her. Because he loves her, he goes to bed last and gets up first in the morning. He regards her parents as his own, and loves them and is devoted to them, because he knows that marriage is difficult for parents. It always makes them cry, because it separates them from their child.

The wife expresses love for her husband through obedience. She is obedient to him exactly as the Church is to Christ (Eph 5.22-24). It is her happiness to do the will of her husband. Attitude, obstinacy, and complaining are the axes which chop down the tree of conjugal happiness. The woman is the heart. The man is the head. The woman is the heart that loves. In her husband's moments of difficulty, she stands at his side, as the empress Theodora stood by the emperor Justinian. In his moments of joy, she tries to raise him up to even higher heights and ideals. In times of sorrow, she stands by him like a sublime and peaceful world offering him tranquility.

The husband should remember that his wife has been entrusted to him by God. His wife is a soul which God has given to him, and one day he must return it. He loves his wife as Christ loves the Church (Eph 5.25). He protects her, takes care of her, gives her security, particularly when she is distressed, or when she is ill. We know how sensitive a woman's soul can be, which is why the Apostle Peter urges husbands to honor their wives (cf. 1 Pet 3.7). A woman's soul gets wounded, is often petty, changeable, and can suddenly fall into despair. Thus the husband should be full of love and tenderness, and make himself her greatest treasure. Marriage, my dear friends, is a little boat which sails through waves and among rocks. If you lose your attention even for a moment, it will be wrecked.

As we have seen, marriage is first of all a journey of pain; second a journey of love; and, third, a journey to heaven, a call from God. It is, as Holy Scripture says, a "great mystery" (Eph 5.32). We often speak of seven "mysteries", or sacraments. In this regard, a "mystery" is the sign of the mystical presence of some true person or

event. An icon, for instance, is a mystery. When we venerate it, we are not venerating wood or paint, but Christ, or the Theotokos, or the saint who is mystically depicted. The Holy Cross is a symbol of Christ, containing his mystical presence. Marriage, too, is a mystery, a mystical presence, not unlike these. Christ says, "wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am among them" (Mt 18.20). And whenever two people are married in the name of Christ, they become the sign which contains and expresses Christ himself. When you see a couple who are conscious of this, it is as if you are seeing Christ. Together they are a theophany.

This is also why crowns are placed on their heads during the wedding ceremony, because the bride and groom are an image of Christ and the Church. And not just this, but everything in marriage is symbolic. The lit candles symbolize the wise virgins. When the priest places these candles into the hands of the newly-weds, it is as if he is saying to them: Wait for Christ like the wise virgins (Mt 25.1-11). Or they symbolize the tongues of fire which descended at Pentecost, and which were in essence the presence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.1-4). The wedding rings are kept on the altar, until they are taken from there by the priest, which shows that marriage has its beginning in Christ, and will end in Christ. The priest also joins their hands, in order to show that it is Christ himself who unites them. It is Christ who is at the heart of the mystery and at the center of their lives.

All the elements of the marriage ceremony are shadows and symbols which indicate the presence of Christ. When you're sitting somewhere and suddenly you see a shadow, you know that someone's coming. You don't see him, but you know he's there. You get up early in the morning, and you see the red horizon in the east. You know that, in a little while, the sun will come up. And indeed, there behind the mountain, the sun starts to appear.

When you see your marriage, your husband, your wife, your partner's body, when you see your troubles, everything in your home, know that they are all signs of Christ's presence. It is as if you're hearing Christ's footsteps, as if he was coming, as if you are now about to hear his voice. All these things are the shadows of Christ, revealing that he is together with us. It is true, though, that, because of our cares and worries, we feel that he is absent. But we can see him in the shadows, and we are sure that he is with us. This is why there was no separate marriage service in the early Church. The man and woman simply went to church and received Communion together. What does this mean? That henceforth their life is one life in Christ.

The wreaths, or wedding crowns, are also symbols of Christ's presence. More specifically, they are symbols of martyrdom. Husband and wife wear crowns to show that they are ready to become martyrs for Christ. To say that "I am married" means that I live and die for Christ. "I am married" means that I desire and thirst for Christ. Crowns are also signs of royalty, and thus husband and wife are king and queen, and their home is a kingdom, a kingdom of the Church, an extension of the Church.

When did marriage begin? When man sinned. Before that, there was no marriage, not in the present-day sense. It was only after the Fall, after Adam and Eve had been expelled from paradise, that Adam "knew" Eve (Gen 4.1) and thus marriage began. Why then? So that they might remember their fall and expulsion from paradise, and seek to return there. Marriage is thus a return to the spiritual paradise, the Church of Christ. "I am married" means, then, that I am a king, a true and faithful member of the Church.

The wreaths also symbolize the final victory which will be attained in the kingdom of heaven. When the priest takes the wreaths, he says to Christ: "take their crowns to your kingdom", take them to your kingdom, and keep them there, until the final victory. And so marriage is a road: it starts out from the earth and ends in heaven. It is a joining together, a bond with Christ, who assures us that he will lead us to heaven, to be with him always. Marriage is a bridge leading us from earth to heaven. It is as if the sacrament is saying: Above and beyond love, above and beyond your husband, your wife, above the everyday events, remember that you are destined for heaven, that you have set out on a road which will take you there without fail. The bride and the bridegroom give their hands to one another, and the priest takes hold of them both, and leads them round the table dancing and singing. Marriage is a movement, a progression, a journey which will end in heaven, in eternity.

In marriage, it seems that two people come together. However it's not two but three. The man marries the woman, and the woman marries the man, but the two together also marry Christ. So three take part in the mystery, and three remain together in life.

In the dance around the table, the couple are led by the priest, who is a type of Christ. This means that Christ has seized us, rescued us, redeemed us, and made us his. And this is the "great mystery" of marriage (cf. Gal 3.13). In Latin, the word "mystery" was rendered by the word sacramentum, which means an oath. And marriage is an oath, a pact, a joining together, a bond, as we have said. It is a permanent bond with Christ.

"I am married", then, means that I enslave my heart to Christ. If you wish, you can get married. If you wish, don't get married. But if you marry, this is the meaning that marriage has in the Orthodox Church, which brought you into being. "I am married" means I am the slave of Christ.

*From The Church at Prayer: The Mystical Liturgy of the Heart, by Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra (Ormylia, Greece: The Holy Convent of the Annunciation, 2005), pp. 111-125. This wonderful book was not well advertised, and thus many people do not know about it. The entire book is highly recommended.*

# Authority and Obedience in Marriage

by Fr. Alexey Young

*No connection on earth is greater than that between man and wife – Elder Macarius of Optina*

## The Church: a Model

The perfect model for husbands and wives is the Church, where all is and must be done according to good order and for the express purpose of saving souls, of quickly and efficiently "catching" as many souls as possible in the sea of life, bringing them into the Ark of Salvation--which is the Orthodox Church--and then sailing safely with them into the harbor of eternal paradise. In order that the Ship of the Church might reach its appointed destination without shipwreck, she has a skilled Pilot, Christ, and under Him the officers, who are the bishops and their assistants, the priests and deacons, all of whom have charge of the passengers. It is a clear and necessary chain of authority. Without this authority, and the obedience it implies, there will be chaos, rioting, and rebellion among the passengers; no one will heed the Pilot's voice; the rudder will be seized by the ignorant and the evil, and the ship's course will change; many will fall off the Ark and be forever lost.

A microcosm of this is the Orthodox monastery, where the chain of command flowing from the Abbot or Abbess is well understood and fully respected if the monastics are to accomplish their goal. A monastery is therefore a perfect mirror-image and also an extension of--authority in Christ's Church. It is not a frivolous authority, nor a mere cultural or historical phenomenon; it does not exist for the pleasure or whim of those who command, It is a serious authority, with grave repercussions for those who abuse it. It has one purpose and one purpose only: the expeditious salvation of those in obedience. Thus, St. John Chrysostom sees that an Orthodox family is amazingly akin to a monastery: both exist for the salvation of souls. Both may, of course, have secondary aims--the monastery may publish books or paint icons, the husband and wife may have children, pursue careers, etc.-but the primary aim of getting into the Kingdom of Heaven must never be forgotten or given a lesser place. For this reason, Fr. Konstantine stressed, every young couple in love should ask himself this question: will my beloved help me to save my soul, or hinder me?

## God Blesses Through Obedience

Just as God's grace flowed to the Hebrew people through the hierarchy of the Old Testament Church's high priests, prophets, patriarchs, etc., in the same way this grace comes to us in the New Testament Church through bishops (who are the "fountain of the sacraments") and priests. And linked to them are husbands, as heads of their families. The husband who stands before God and intercedes for his wife and children, as the parish priest intercedes for his flock, truly receives God's blessing upon his family and all "the work of his hands."

Furthermore, we can say that the husband who functions as the Orthodox spiritual leader in his family, praying for and instructing his wife and children, as well as showing them (by his example) the way--such a man is already satisfying his wife's deepest needs. Such a man is easily and willingly obeyed by his wife, just as Eve would have obeyed Adam had he acted as her loving head and leader, instead of her follower into sin.

Thus, the good order of the Church becomes also the good order of the family. And just as the monastery is a microcosm of the Church, so too is that family where God is rightly worshipped, and where His "chain of command" is upheld and respected.

Inferiority and Inequality

Does this mean that husbands are "superior" to their wives? Our society would see it as such, for the world today

promotes the idea of two heads in a family, both the husband and the wife (in spite of the fact that from a worldly standpoint no organization or institution can withstand two chiefs at the same time!). No, there is but one head, again following the divine pattern given by Christ to the Church, where we find but one ruling bishop in a diocese and one rector in each parish. And just as bishops and priests must obey the Lord, wives must obey their husbands:

*Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church. (Eph. 5:22-23)*

We know that in Christ "there is neither male nor female." Obviously, then, the husband is not superior to his wife. But just as the President of the United States has no innate worthiness not equally shared with all citizens, but is respected and obeyed only because of his office and calling so too a husband and wife are completely equal one to another in God's eyes (for which reason St. Paul even commands: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ"), but a husband is obeyed and respected because of his office and calling, which were bestowed upon him mystically in the Sacrament of Marriage.

If, then, they are both equal in God's eyes, why did God choose the man to be head of the wife, instead of the other way round? Because it was Eve that initiated the first sin. Thus, all her descendants must be in obedience to their husbands, giving them the initiative in all things; similarly all the sons of Adam are required to assume their original place as leaders in the marriage relationship, the place which Adam only too willingly abrogated to Eve, thus joining in her sin.

In St. Paul's instructions to husbands and wives there is a great mystery, and a seeming contradiction. A husband is appointed head of his wife, but he is also to be her servant. How can this be? "Husbands," says the Apostle, "love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify her..." In other words, a husband's authority is commensurate with his willingness to empty himself like a sacrificial lamb, in this way actually "sanctifying" his wife. It is a wonderful and worthy calling for a man, but one which too few husbands actually strive to attain.

### **The Wife's Role**

What happens if a husband doesn't take his responsibilities seriously, or makes mistakes as head of the wife? Must he still be obeyed? Yes, in all things not sinful, he must be obeyed. Of course, a wife's first obedience is always to God, but in all other things she must submit, just as the Church constantly--although sometimes with groaning--submits to the will of Christ. It is not easy, but if wives trust that God will not allow their husbands to mislead or mistreat them, or in any way endanger their salvation, there is already a firm spiritual foundation to the relationship. (Similarly we read of instances where a monk saved his soul by being in obedience to a bad, incompetent, or foolish abbot, so long as he sincerely obeyed him in all things not sinful.) If a wife is suffering because of her husband's unworthy leadership, and she accepts this as a cross sent by a loving God, then she begins to walk the soul-saving path of martyrdom, as Scripture says: "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first."

To be second in a marriage (in other words, to be the wife) is a positive good, not an evil, for God does not hold the wife free of the burden of responsibility--and it is a terrible burden--in a way that her husband can never be. Fr. Konstantine compared this to the parish priest, who carried the heavy burden of his spiritual children on his shoulders all through his life, never escaping it for one moment, and being accountable for the entire burden, whereas his deacon, or his reader, is relatively free of these responsibilities and therefore in a more enviable position. Wives, he said, often make the mistake--especially in today's society--of taking that responsibility away from their husbands (as Eve tried to do with to Adam), and this is what creates the famous "power struggle" that is so unedifying and unsatisfying in contemporary marriages.

All this, of course, makes sense only if both husband and wife are looking seriously at the purpose of life and marriage. If we understand that our first love must be not our spouse, but God and His Church, then everything falls into its proper place, all is in good order, and life is fruitful and meaningful. In such a context no wife will be afraid of being in obedience to her husband, just as the Church is in perfect obedience to Christ. To live under obedience is a safeguard against temptation and therefore a truly blessed role.

People in the world, filled with pride, seek authority and position; they seek to rule over others, believing that this brings happiness. But Christ has taught us that happiness comes only through self-sacrifice (the husband) and obedience (the wife). Obedience cannot be forced; it must come from the heart, voluntarily--this is true love. We are only pilgrims, preparing for the next world; therefore, how can we fail to rule wisely, lovingly, and givingly, if we are husbands'; And, if we are wives, how can we fail to be meek and humbly obedient supports to our husbands? In both of these consists true happiness, for in both is to be found the essence of man and woman, the undoing of the sin of Adam and Eve, and the path--through this world--to the Kingdom of Heaven.

## Choosing a Spouse

What a pleasure and a joy it is to see a family where love and peace prevail between husband and wife, where the husband and wife share each other's joys and sorrows, thus mutually lightening all life's difficulties. By contrast, how sad it is for a husband and wife when dissension exists between them - when no tender feelings attract them to each other.

Unfortunately, there are today not a few marriages where, instead of mutual respect and peace between husband and wife, there are quarrels and complaints about each other.

From what does this result? There are certainly many reasons, but the principal one is having chosen the wrong person to marry. Holy Scripture teaches us a beautiful lesson on this subject in the case of our forefather Abraham (Gen. 24). And so, let us Christians recall the marriage of the patriarch Isaac, Abraham's son.

When Abraham was a hundred and forty years old and his son was forty, Abraham called his faithful servant Eliezer to him and said:

*"I will make thee swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son Isaac of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell: But thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac."*

The servant swore to him concerning the matter and left without delay for Mesopotamia, where Abraham's brother Nahor lived. After reaching the city of Harran, Eliezer stopped by a well of water and began to say a prayer in his mind:

*"O Lord God of my master Abraham! ... Behold, I stand here by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water: And let it come to pass that to whom I shall say, 'Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink,' and she shall say, 'Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also': let the same be she that Thou hast appointed for Thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that Thou hast shewed kindness unto my master."*

Before he had done speaking, Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Nahor, came to the well. When Eliezer asked her for water to drink, she hastened to give him and the camels water.

And the man bowed down his head, and worshipped the Lord. And he said, "Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, Who hath not left destitute my master of His mercy and His truth: I being in the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master's brethren."

When Rebekah's family learnt about Eliezer, why he had come to Mesopotamia, and how the Lord had showed him a wife in Rebekah for his master's son, they did not begin to contradict him, but gave their full consent to the proposal presented by Abraham's servant.

They said, "Behold, Rebekah is before thee. Take her and go, and let her be thy master's son's wife, as the Lord hath spoken." They called Rebekah, and said to her, "Wilt thou go with this man?" And she said, "I will go." When the servant returned home, he told Isaac all the things that he had done. And Isaac brought Rebekah into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Saint Gregory the Theologian refers to Isaac's marriage with Rebekah as an example of Christian behavior before marriage and says, "When you mean to take a wife, don't go running to people, but to God. Tell God, 'Appoint for me the one whom You have prepared for me in Your Providence.' Entrust this matter to God, and He will reward you for granting such a great honor to Him."

And so, in wishing to enter into marriage, one should, above all else, pray diligently to the Lord, Who knows the human heart, that He Himself would arrange the marriage according to His will, pointing out the chosen person and blessing the marriage with His grace.

If Abraham's servant, acting merely as a middleman, thanked God for finding a bride for the bridegroom, should not the hearts of the bridegroom and bride be filled with far greater thankfulness?

Not only do the bride and bridegroom have to thank the Lord, Who brought them together and decreed them to walk the path of earthly life as one, but also to pray to Him to send down His mercy for their future.

Let them recognize that they cannot build their happiness and a well-ordered marriage only by their own strength, without God's blessing. Let them together pray to God to bless their union and to send down His grace so that they may live in love, single-mindedness and chastity, fulfilling God's commandments.

Yet, how many people are there among us who left their marriage to God's will and, when wishing to enter into marriage, thought first and foremost of receiving God's blessing for it? Is it not true that all of us are busy primarily with earthly cares and thoughts?

How many men, before choosing a life-long partner, try to become familiar, not with a maiden's manner and behavior, but with how much property and various possessions she owns, how noble a family she is descended from, and so on.

Young men and women! Remember that a marriage made by mercenary calculations is rarely happy. A marriage that is not concluded for sincerity, mutual trust and the joining of hearts degrades those who enter into it, and consequently it often brings much evil, creating possibilities for family dissension, reproaches and mutual insults.

Saint John Chrysostom told those under his obedience, "I entreat you not to look for money and riches in a maiden, but for good characteristics: modesty, piety and godliness; these are better than countless treasures. "Let us say someone grew rich by his wife. Isn't such an example shameful? I hear many people say things such as, 'I would rather bear extreme poverty than receive riches by a wife.'"

And indeed, one who chooses a rich wife chooses for himself a master rather than a wife and helper. On the other hand, one who marries someone of equal or lower position acquires a faithful helper for himself.

Poverty disposes a wife to save her husband, to listen to him in everything, to obey him, and to care assiduously about household work. A sensible, good and temperate wife, even if poor, also deals with poverty better than a peevish and evil wife with riches. And so, riches and money are useless if we cannot find goodness in our wives.

Strong mutual love between a husband and wife serves as a further foundation of a happy marriage. The same love must serve as an incentive for the bridegroom and his bride to get married.

Moreover, one must look not at physical beauty, but at the beauty of [the] beloved's heart. "Time washes away physical beauty, and sickness eats it up," says Saint John Chrysostom, "but beauty of the heart is beyond all changes. The former arouses anger and produces jealousy, but the latter is not susceptible to similar passions and knows no vainglory."

Nothing beautifies a person, or gains his or her favor, more than a good heart. Therefore, the Holy Father teaches each of us to try to know the inner appearance when we see someone attractive; and if this is not beautiful, to ignore the attractive looks.



Fathers of families! Imitate the solicitude of the forefather Abraham, who tried to find a godly wife for his son; for he did not seek for riches by her, nor fame of her family, but only nobility of heart.

And you, mothers of families, beautify your daughters not with gold or expensive clothes, but with modesty and meekness. A meek and decorous woman will encourage her husband to be a child-loving father and to take part himself in household work.

# Is the Husband Head of the Wife?

*by Metropolitan George (Khodr) of Mount Lebanon*

Under what category shall we summarize the relation between husband and wife? Is it a divine or a legalistic headship right for the man over the woman, as it appears for the first instance after reading St Paul's: "the husband is head of the wife" (Eph 5:23)?

What we really care for in this context is the Divine Word, therefore we will not go into the perplexity of differentiation between masculinity and femininity: This is all quicksand, and the decisions were never ratified in psychology. I am also afraid that, any discourse in this area is neither precise nor is backed with scientific methodology, but rather is solely based upon the personal experience of each one of us with the woman or based upon her personal experience with the man; an experience, which might be successful or failed and sympathetic or stressful. But the most what I fear, is that the people might embed these experiences within a discourse, which they might disguise under a scientific frame: like their saying that the woman is weaker. In what field is she weaker, since she lives between five to seven years more than the man? Is she less intelligent, despite the fact that in many post-secondary faculties in the world and in Lebanon, the women have outnumbered the men? It was proven to all the researchers that the woman is no less talented than the man in studying any of the pedagogic materials including mathematics. The feminist movement likes to relate the women's failure of excelling in certain domains, to the discrimination that have kept them away from those areas. But whatever the result of this psychological and historical discussion may lead to, I am bound — in this controversy — to what the apostle Paul had to say in his epistle to the Ephesians: that the husband is head of the wife.

The complete verse is: "For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body." Preceded by: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord." (Eph 5:21) but both verses ensue Paul's command for us all to submit to one another (Eph 5:21). This mutual exchange of obedience is the key in understanding the entire passage. The two can both be mutually obedient and obeyed at the same time. There is no distinction in this. The family, from this perspective, is not a patriarchal society. Any understanding of the woman's obedience must be understood within the frame of the man's love for her. The obedience is the answer to love.

Certainly, the context is centered on the obedience of wives, and does not imply the inferiority of the gender of women. Paul is exclusively discussing the inter-marital relationships and does not talk about any discrimination between male and female; and there is no sign that St Paul is suggesting a relationship bound by lawmaking, juridical authority or law-enforcement. The apostle is addressing the wives; they decide their position in the light of their freedom and maturity; they stand with their husbands at the same level.

"Submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord"- for all what we were given is the Face of Christ, and because we obey only Christ — according to what he expressed: "inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." (Matt 25:40) Every human is an icon — the wife's devotion to her husband does not end at this level — it ascends unto Him.

Back to the verse: "For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church;" — Christ's headship was manifested through His death. St Paul's teachings concerning the marital relationship are an echo to Christ's words: "love one another; as I have loved you" (John 13:34). St Paul is not comparing the love of the man for the woman, to the love of Christ for His Church; but rather, he is establishing the foundations of the marital-love upon the love of the Master towards His people, in a way that we can reread the verse in this manner: "the husband is head of the wife, because Christ is head of the Church." The man is no head by his nature, he becomes such if he loved to death — or demonstrated his willingness to die — for his wife.

One-question remains, given this mutual love, why then this persistence about the headship of the man? Did Paul owe this to Jewish or Greek cultures? After researching this topic, we discover that no one from the Hebrews, the

Greek philosophers or even the Romans ever said that the husband is head of the wife. Yes, Aristotle did compare the relation between the man and the woman to the relation between the soul and the body, and all the cultures of the Mediterranean Basin called the woman “Sayedah” (Mistress)-Lady. But the term “the husband is head of the wife” is exclusively a Pauline one. His [St Paul's] inspiration is merely biblical, connected to the Gospel according to St Mark: “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) The husband is primarily a servant. “The husband is head of the wife” is an invitation for the husband to be leading in the servitude.

We have then no indications for assuming that the husband has a tribute over his wife by nature or by creation, and that he is consequently, her protector. This might be the result of a “patriarchal” or masculine society. But in the origin, in the beginning, nothing of this was.

Who was this wife that the Apostle asked to be obedient? The answer lays in his verse: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Eph 5:25). Where is this wife who does not submit to the poured love? Outside the boundaries of love, Paul did not suggest obedience.

The women's submission “in all things” does not imply that the man is the lawmaker. The Word of God is the only Law. “In all things” is bound by the apostolic teaching that obedience is due God rather than men (Acts 5:29). There is no obedience for the sake of disposition, for an unstable temperament of a husband and especially no obedience in sin if requested by the husband or in what is against nature.

The atmosphere of Paul's passage is not that of a “defeated” or “capitulation” nature, because of the wife's awareness and responsibility. And if God said: “the two shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24/Matt 19:5) and St Paul repeated it in this epistle, then no man is obeyed if he was harming this unity of the body consisting of husband and wife together.

The root of the word “love” as it appeared in the Greek original assumes self-sacrificing according to the type revealed through the death of Christ; but in the same context it does not eliminate the character of “affection” or “adoration” — the Eros — that contributes in uniting the two spouses in one flesh. This last relation has neither meaning nor power if the “love in sacrifice” between one soul and the other was not pre-established. Starting from the second century, the Church Fathers talked about the Eros that connected Christ to His people. This is why St Ignatius of Antioch said about the Master: “My love (Eros in Greek) is crucified.” This is why the wife, who is sentimentally deserted or who is betrayed, cannot submit to her husband. In a healthy marriage the relationship is fully balanced between affection and love — in the meaning revealed by Jesus.

Therefore, all what has been said here demonstrates that the relationship between husband and wife cannot be summarized under a “legalistic” category, but must be summarized under the “devoir” category, provided we understood this obligation as an expression of love. Love abides in daily tasks, in the details.

The humiliation of the wife, the humiliation of the husband, the domestic violence, the lack of care to the spouse, neglecting the mutual servitude, and extinguishing the warmth of the common living are all destructive measures against the communal life. Yes the flesh is important, but there is no healthy relation in the flesh if the husband and his wife could not say: “we are two souls in one flesh, if you've seen one you've seen the other.”

In the depth of the marital journey — and which requires a great deal of practice, after the descending of the Divine Love upon both spouses — the “duality” turns towards the union of the one-being, in the same manner the Church ascends towards the unity with her Redeemer and in the same way the Redeemer demonstrated His adjunction to His Church. Outside this vision and outside this context merely remains a wreckage of flesh, bank accounts, realties and “cease-fire” agreements in fear of the scandal or the detonation of the family.

Upon the death of the hearts no discourse can exist about the Marriage as being a great Sacrament and being only reproachable by the Mystery of God's Love to the universe He created.

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# The Orthodox Christian Marriage

*by Hieromonk Ambrose Young*

Orthodox Christianity is a way of life, not merely something we do on Sunday mornings and quickly forget when we leave church. A way of life is a whole coming together of habits and attitudes, ideas and actions: a style of life, a way to live. For us Orthodox, Christianity is our daily bread. Like a fish in water, we must swim in our Faith. As followers of Christ, we take our whole direction from Christ and His Church, and not from the standards of today's world. This seems clearest when we visit a monastery, where the environment, the atmosphere, the focus of life—everything is clearly and deliberately Orthodox.

Most of us Orthodox Christians do not live in monasteries; we are married; we have homes, children, jobs. Among many married Orthodox there exists the mistaken idea that their following Christ does not require the same dedication required of the Orthodox monastic. But of course all Christians, whether monastic or not, are equally called by Christ to repentance and eternal salvation. There are no "classes" of Orthodox Christians—all are equal and all are expected to be followers of Christ, regardless of their position in the Church.

It is, however, very difficult for us non-monastic Christians to live an Orthodox life-style from day to day and year to year because we are constantly exposed to and live within a society that is not only not Christian but even at times, and increasingly, hostile to Orthodox Christian beliefs. But this should not discourage us, for Christ Himself understood this situation when He said: Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matt. 10:16).

A tremendous bastion of strength for Orthodox lay people in our circumstances is marriage and family life, a state that has been blessed by God for the salvation of each individual member of the family. In order fully to understand this, we must look at the doctrinal foundations of marriage found in Scripture and Sacred Tradition—which are the on-going conscience of the Church.

## The Old Testament and the New Testament Views of Marriage

When we look at the practice of marriage, family life, and multiplication of the human race as described in the Old Testament, we are immediately aware of the fact that great emphasis was placed on the continuation of the Hebrew race. We have endless family trees given to us in the Old Testament. But marriage was not the only way by which the race was continued at that time. Children were also begotten through the custom of concubinage and the practice of having a man marry the widow of his brother, even though he might already have a wife. We read that Solomon, for example, "had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines," and the Old Testament records that King David "took more concubines and wives from Jerusalem after he came from Hebron; and more sons and daughters were born to him." Many of the great personages of the Old Testament had multiple wives and concubines. This emphasis on perpetuating the race seems to us extreme, and the methods of doing so seem almost bizarre. However, the primary reason for all of this mating was not the gratification of lust, but the desire for descendants. Sexual promiscuity was in no wise condoned by God in Old Testament times any more than He condones it in our own times. But during Old Testament times, God began to reveal to man what His expectations were. Gradually we see that God condemned polygamous marriages, concubines, and the practice of marrying one's brother's widow. He began to shift the focus of marriage from procreation to a higher, spiritual level. Finally, God made His intentions very clear by the way He dealt with people who were involved in illicit sex. To us, who consider ourselves so "cultured" and "educated," and "sophisticated," God's actions might seem to be very harsh. But He was trying to make plain that He was the ultimate source of life, not the physical union of a man and a woman. And where God is, there can be only holiness, and mystery. What procreates and perpetuates life cannot be anything but a mystery. And holiness and mystery must be protected, guarded, and preserved against blasphemy, uncleanness, and irreverence. The way in which God dealt with sexual transgressions and perversions

in the Old Testament makes it very clear that marriage is an extremely wonderful and holy mystery—so holy and mysterious, that any kind of sexual transgressions is an abomination in God's sight, and to be avoided at all costs. But the sexual aspects of marriage will be considered later.

With the coming of Christ, marriage no longer had as its primary goal the reproduction of human beings and the perpetuation of a family line, although procreation was still regarded as an important part of marriage. But Christ had come to the world and brought with Him the proof and guarantee of the resurrection of the dead, therefore giving to Christian marriage a new primary goal—the attainment of eternal life by husband, wife, and all children.

The marriage service in the Orthodox Church begins with the words, "Blessed is the Kingdom, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen." This exclamation emphasizes the seriousness of marriage, and also the goal of marriage. According to the church canons, those Orthodox Christians who marry outside the Church are deprived of the sacraments of the Church. Some people find this shocking; they feel the Church is being too harsh. But the question is: What gives validity to marriage? From a spiritual standpoint, what gives meaning to a marriage? Unlike the wedding ceremonies in most non-Orthodox churches, marriage in the Orthodox Church is not a contract—a legal agreement with the exchange of vows or promises—between two people. Rather, marriage is the setting up, by two people, of a miniature church, a family church, wherein people may worship the true God and struggle to save their souls. It is also a family church that is in obedience to Christ's Church. As Saint Basil the Great says, it is natural to marry, but it must be more than natural; it must be a yoke, borne by two people under the Church.

Thus we see that in New Testament times the focus of marriage was switched from a primary purpose of producing children, to a primary purpose of providing a way for human beings to save their souls. The wedding ceremony itself is filled with rich symbolism that makes this whole aspect of marriage very clear.

### **The Husband's Responsibilities**

*The husband is the head of the wife...*

We know that every organization, every institution—whether it be the Church, a parish, a monastery, or, in the world, a bank, a corporation, a school—must have a head, a leader. The same is true of a successful marriage, for the family is also a unit, a spiritual and physical organization. According to Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition, the leader in a marriage is the husband. Again, the words of Saint Paul: The husband is the head of the wife... He is the leader. He represents the principle of authority in the family. Just as the priest is the spiritual leader of the parish, and responsible to God for the parishioners, and thus the spiritual authority in the parish, so too the husband is the priest in his family, responsible for setting the tone of family life.

This does not mean that he is superior to his wife. In Christ's sight, all are equal; there is neither male nor female. In fact, marriage is a partnership of equals. Let there be no mistake: there is no room for chauvinism of any kind in Orthodoxy. Nor does being the head give a husband any kind of dictatorial, tyrannical, arbitrary, or absolute authority over his wife and children. But, as with every position of importance, certain responsibilities go with this one, and they are very heavy, very difficult, but also very challenging and potentially creative responsibilities. Scripture tells us that the husband must love his wife even as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it (Eph. 5:25). Most Christian husbands have little idea of what this kind of love means. In the world, "love" usually refers to physical love or sentimental, romantic love. This has nothing to do with the Christian concept of love. Just recall Christ's words to His followers: Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friend. Love, then, from the Christian standpoint, means sacrifice, and self-denial. A husband must take as much care, concern, thoughtfulness, attention, regard and precautions for his wife as Christ takes for the Church. The husband's attentiveness might even have to extend to death itself. For just as Christ was put to death for His love of the Church, so too the Orthodox Christian husband must yield all things—even his life, if necessary—for his wife. Again, Saint Paul says, The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church... We know

what kind of head Christ was: He washed the feet of His disciples. According to our Saviour, to be head, to be first, means to serve—to be the first in giving love, in giving understanding, in giving patience, in providing his family with protection. This is the kind of leader, or head, that the husband is called to be. And when he is this kind of leader, he is a real man, a true man, faithful to his divinely ordained nature.

A wise wife will encourage her husband to be this kind of man; she will not try to take on the position of authority herself. Psychologists tell us that the anger a woman feels towards a man who has allowed her to take over the leadership of the family is the deepest anger of all. And we are now discovering that many cases of delinquency and even mental illness come from homes where the father has ceased to be the leader, the source of compassion, love, and protection.

A husband's duty to give love to his wife and family does not allow him to intimidate his wife. He must not treat his wife as a hired servant—which many men do. Here is what Saint John Chrysostom has to say about this:

*"A servant, indeed, one will be able perhaps to bind down by fear; nay, not even for him, for he will soon leave you. But the partner of one's life, the mother of one's children, the foundation of one's every joy, one ought never to chain down by fear and threats, but with love and good temper. For what sort of union is that, where the wife trembles at her husband? And what sort of pleasure will the husband have if he dwells with his wife as with a slave? Yea, even though you suffer everything on her account, do not scold her; for neither did Christ do this to the Church."*

Men, husbands, true love for us begins when we give of ourselves to others. We first really begin to love—in a Christian sense—when we first give. A husband once complained to Saint John Chrysostom that his wife did not love him. The Saint replied; "Go home, and love her." "But you don't understand," said the husband. "How can I love her when she doesn't love me?" "Go home and love her," the Saint repeated. And he was right. Where there is no love, we must put some love, and we will find it.

Often husbands complain to a priest that their wife doesn't love them. Then the priest discovers that the husband isn't going out of his way at all to give love; he's merely sitting back and waiting to be loved, like some kind of idol, waiting to be served and worshiped. Such a husband needs to discover that the only way to receive lasting love in a marriage is to give it, for in life we usually receive what we give: if we give hatred, we receive hatred; but if we give love, we receive it back in return.

The Fathers of the Church tell us that Christian husbands must love their wives more than their secular jobs, for there is no success greater than a happy home, and no other success that we men achieve in life will have meaning if we fail at home. Our families deserve the best. There are altogether too many of us men today who are at our best out in the world, and at our worst at home. For this reason, the Church Fathers tell us to set the highest possible value on the company of our wives, and be more desirous of being at home with them than being in the market place. Husbands, and future husbands, let us take to heart these words by the twentieth-century Frenchman, André Maurois: "I bind myself for life; I have chosen; from now on my aim will be not to search for someone who will please me, but to please the one I have chosen..."

### **The Responsibilities of the Wife**

Saint Paul says, Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord ... As the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be subject to their own husbands in everything. (Eph. 5:22, 24)

Today's society, especially here in America, and particularly in public media—movies, television, magazines, books—despises the spirit of obedience. We are instead exhorted at every turn to "do our own thing," to look after "number one," to satisfy our every whim and desire. But an Orthodox Christian marriage, as we have said, is not part of secular or worldly society. Its goals and the goals of society are not merely at variance; they are

diametrically opposed. The aim of Christian marriage is eternal life in Heaven with Jesus Christ; the aim of worldly society is pleasure, enjoyment of the here and now, and, especially, self-indulgence and self-will.

But it has been revealed through Scripture and Tradition, that obedience is actually a catalyst for Christian perfection—that is, obedience, submission, actually helps to speed the process of the struggle to acquire virtue in our lives. On the other hand, self-will greatly increases the passion of pride and eventually alienates an individual from a Christian way of thinking and living. Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky writes:

*"If you wish to be a good, intelligent person and not a stupid sheep, just another member of the herd, then do not agree with your contemporaries who are perishing spiritually and physically; do not go by the path of self-will, but by the path of obedience. Only then will you be a person. Then, perhaps ... you alone ... will preserve your faith and your heart uncoarsened, an honorable soul, you will not be battered and storm-beaten like a weathercock, as are the majority of our contemporaries."*

Christ Himself is the most perfect example of obedience, for it was through His obedience to the will of His Father that He went unto suffering and death for our sakes, and led us from sin to freedom and salvation.

We have all, at one time or another, seen examples of families where the wife "wears the pants." And what do we usually mean by that crude expression? We mean that the wife has taken over the position of leadership in the family and has tried to become the head of the husband. This may happen because the husband is very weak—or perhaps too selfish and preoccupied to assume his proper responsibilities; or it may be because the wife herself has a spiritual or emotional problem that causes her to desire authority and power. In such cases the woman often has a pushy and aggressive personality that manifests itself in her relationships outside the family as well. Such a wife lacks the most basic qualities of womanhood—gentleness, modesty of mind, and kindness. In such a situation there are only feelings of despair, frustration, discontent and even anger among family members. One of the first things a priest must do when he is counseling a husband and wife who are in such a situation is to try and persuade the husband to begin assuming a true leadership role in his family, and he must also somehow persuade the wife to relinquish some of the authority that is not hers by right.

It should be said that these roles are not exclusive: there are times when it is appropriate for a wife to show strength, or for a husband to be obedient to his wife. In the most mature, highly developed and spiritual marriages, the relationship of a man and woman evolve into one of mutual obedience.

### **Characteristics of a Successful Marriage**

Experience tells us that two people get married and immediately begin to discover how very different they are. The fact is, we don't really even begin to know ourselves until we are married. We live too close to ourselves. It really does take someone else to help us to see ourselves as we really are. One of the fringe benefits of a good marriage is that one acquires a built-in psychiatrist: a good spouse who cares enough to listen without having to be paid for it! We know that many emotional illnesses are a result of a person having some inner burden weighing on him which he had never been able to really share with someone else. In a good marriage, husband and wife share their burdens with one another, and this sharing is without reservation, without having to worry about how the other person will react, without having to keep up a front.

A marriage is not a missionary enterprise! It has enough problems and difficulties of its own without each partner trying to thoroughly change and remake the other. One of the most common and most serious illusions young marrieds have is that of marrying someone in the hope and expectation of changing that person.

True love does not force itself on anyone, and it does not force change; it evokes growth. How? First, by accepting one's spouse as he or she is. When we marry, we do not sign up to change the other person; we just agree to love



him as he is. The best thing a husband can do to change his wife, or vice-versa, is to change himself, to correct his own faults—in keeping with Christ's instructions to His followers.

We think of disloyalty in a marriage as being when one spouse commits adultery. The fact is, we can be disloyal and unfaithful just as thoroughly by putting business, or parents, or hobbies, or someone else before our spouse. That, too, is disloyalty. And anyone who is not ready to place his spouse ahead of career, ahead of parents, ahead of friends, ahead of recreation, is not ready for marriage—and such a marriage will fail. Marriage is for adults, not for children.

If you fit the first button into the first hole of your suit, all the other buttons will fall in their proper place. But if the first button is placed in the second hole, nothing will come out right. It's a matter of putting first things in first place, of keeping priorities straight. Likewise in marriage. Husbands, if you put your wives first—and wives, if you put your husbands first—everything else will fall into its proper place in the marriage relationship.

There are many characteristics that a successful marriage has, but in my view the three most important are these:

1. Praise. No marriage can prosper if there is no praise. Everyone in life needs to feel appreciated at some point by someone. And nothing can kill love faster than continual criticism. When we husbands and wives praise each other—in small ways as well as in big ways—we are also saying to one another: I love you; I value you. Praise nurtures a good marriage. And it is the one characteristic that is most lacking in modern marriages.
2. Forgiveness. Forgiveness is essential for a happy marriage. When couples ask me, "Do you think our marriage can survive?" my answer is always, "Yes, providing you are willing to forgive each other." And this forgiveness should not be just after a major crisis in a family. It should be every single day. In a successful marriage, a husband and wife are constantly asking forgiveness of each other. When we don't do this, wounds don't get healed. We grow apart from each other. We grow cold towards one another, and we don't obtain the blessings that God sends down on husbands and wives that mutually forgive one another.
3. Time. A successful marriage takes time. It does not happen overnight. It must grow. It is a long and difficult process; like all good things in life, it comes through considerable effort and struggle. Those of you not yet married, or on the verge of marriage, should remember this: we live in a society of instantaneous gratification—we want what we want, when we want it, and that when is now. And this impatience on our part has had a very destructive effect on marriages, even in the Orthodox Church. If we have no patience with each other, and are not willing to give many years to working out a successful marriage, then our marriage is doomed.

No marriage is so good that it cannot be better, and no marriage is so bad that it cannot be improved—provided that the persons involved are willing to grow together by God's grace toward the maturity of Christ, Who came "not to be served but to serve."

An absolute essential requirement for a good marriage is the capacity to grow up. Emotional immaturity is one of the greatest causes of failure in marriage. Of course, we all come to marriage with our private assortment of immaturities and hangups. But we have to learn to outgrow them. When I was a child, observed Saint Paul, I thought as a child. I spoke as a child, I understood as a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things. How essential it is to a happy marriage to put away childish things: irresponsibility, insisting on getting one's own way, egotism, lack of empathy, temper tantrums, jealousy. How important it is to pray every day: "O God, help me to grow up... to look beyond myself... to realize the needs and feelings of my wife/husband, and accept the responsibility God has laid upon me."

## The Orthodox Christian Home

What is an Orthodox Christian home? To answer this question we must go back to square one and talk about the three main ingredients of true love. Our Faith teaches us that love is composed of three parts—not all of them of equal importance:

- the physical
- the mental
- the spiritual

The physical is obvious: a boy is naturally attracted to a girl physically. This is the part of love which is usually very dominant early in a relationship. But there must also be a mental attraction between a man and a woman if they are going to have a successful marriage: by that I mean that they should have many interesting things to talk about, and genuinely enjoy each other's company, being interested in each other's total personality. This is an aspect of love that must last for the duration of the marriage, until death. Sadly, it is often the first part of love that dies; and it dies simply because it has not been nurtured by both spouses. Thirdly, love consists of spiritual attraction. When two young people can talk about God and agree. They must be able to talk about the goals of life and agree; no wall should exist between them when they talk about the purpose of life. In other words, they have common goals. If they do not have common goals, if they believe differently about God, how can they seriously travel the path of life together? So, the most important ingredient of true love is this spiritual oneness. What most often happens, however, is this: the spiritual attraction of love is completely overlooked or ignored by two people contemplating marriage. They experience a physical and mental attraction and they get married. They have never really dealt with the spiritual aspect, so that does not exist in their marriage, and soon, because of a lack of hard work and nurturing, the mental attraction that had originally existed begins to fade and finally dies. Then they are left with the physical attraction. And if there is nothing more substantial to base a marriage on than a physical attraction, then the first time a third person comes along to whom one of the partners is more strongly attracted, the marriage dissolves, and we have the tragedy of adultery being committed by one of both spouses and, ultimately, divorce.

Our society completely ignores the spiritual side of love, and is hostile even to the importance of a mental compatibility between a man and a woman; but the physical, the sexual—that's another matter: that is one aspect of love that our society exalts above all others. You have only to walk into a bookstore and count the number of sex manuals to get the point.

Orthodoxy, on the other hand, seeks to keep all three ingredients in a state of harmony, but the spiritual aspect governing the other two. If we remember that the primary purpose of a marriage is the same as that of the Church: the attainment of eternal salvation, then we can see why the spiritual part of a marriage must not only govern the physical and mental, but must be nurtured and encouraged to grow.

## Sex, Children, Birth Control, Divorce

Now we come to a delicate issue: sex. It must be stated at the outset that the commandments and prohibitions concerning illicit sex in the Old Testament do not mean that there is something sinful about sex in itself. These commandments are like a fence that God has built around sex in order to protect it, because it is something sacred, something reserved by God for a special relationship—the marriage relationship—within which He gives the gift of life to our race. And there is something else: we know from revelation that our first parents in the Garden of Eden did not have sex. The sexual relationship between a man and a woman came into existence when Adam and Eve fell; for when they fell, their bodies took on the curse of suffering, sickness and, ultimately death, and it became necessary to reproduce their kind so that the race would continue until the time that God would send the Messiah. Sex, then, is a function of our fallen human nature, just as hunger is a function of fallen human

nature. Neither the appetite for sex nor the appetite for food are in themselves sinful, but both can be abused and even perverted, and so God gave laws for us to use in governing these appetites (and others), so that they would not get out of order and cause harm. The sexual function of our nature, then, is something that dies when our bodies die—and that is why the New Testament says that there will be no marriage or giving in marriage in the Kingdom of Heaven. Our sexual nature is not eternal, and ceases when we die. In the same way, in Eden Adam and Eve did not hunger for food, nor were they sexually attracted to one another.

This is important to remember, because we have all grown up in a society which exalts sex and the sexual side of our nature to a very high degree, making sexual fulfillment the sign of the "good life," and despising celibacy or a controlled sexual appetite as being somehow Victorian, puritanical, or even mentally and emotionally unbalanced and unhealthy. Furthermore, we know that at the time woman was created, God said: It is not good that the man should be alone, let us make for him a help suitable to him (Gen. 2:18, LXX). This "suitable helper," woman, is of course much more than a helper; she is also bone of man's bone, and flesh of his flesh, and when a husband and wife come together in sexual intercourse, there is the coming together—the fulfillment and consummation—of two halves of a human person, two, which become one; as Scripture says, "and they shall be one flesh. This is the mystical side of our sexual nature. And this is why adultery is such a serious sin.

Just as we cannot give free rein to our appetite for food without doing severe damage to ourselves, undermining our health, and eventually even killing ourselves, so the sexual appetite must also be subject to control. Thus, even in the Old Testament we learn that married couples underwent times of abstinence from each other—usually during fast times, or before going to the Temple in Jerusalem. And this practice was affirmed in the New Testament. Saint Paul speaks of it in his first epistle to the Corinthians (7:5), when he recommends that man and wife abstain from each other at certain times of prayer and preparation. Consequently, to this day in the Orthodox Church, fast days and fast periods—such as Great Lent—are times not only of abstinence from certain foods, but of abstinence from each other as man and wife. Unfortunately, this ancient practice of our Faith is being neglected by more and more people today, who seem to think that the rules having to do with sexual activity are simply quaint old-world customs that have nothing to do with spiritual laws. Furthermore, it is the consistent teaching of the Church from the time of the Apostles, that a man and a wife abstain from one another on the evening before receiving Holy Communion and the evening after. Why? So that each individual can give himself over to prayer and preparation on the night before, and prayer and thanksgiving on the evening after Communion. This is a standard that we should be striving to attain; those of you who are not yet married should be aware of this now, and understand why the Church has these rules—not in order to be stuffy and puritanical, but in order to show us how to control and properly use our appetites and maintain harmony between the body and the soul in the marriage relationship.

We see, therefore, that just as the Church prescribes rules of fasting to keep in check our appetite for food, it similarly imposes restraints upon our sexual appetites, so that we do not ruin the delicate balance between soul and body.

This brings me to the most difficult and controversial question of all—what everyone wants to know about and no one wants to ask about: birth control.

Frankly, it is difficult to know where to start because the subject has many ramifications. Perhaps I might begin by mentioning how other churches tend to view this question. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, artificial birth control is forbidden under any circumstances. The reason is because the Roman Catholic Church officially teaches that the primary purpose and function of marriage is to have children; thus, procreation is the primary reason for sexual intercourse. This teaching is rooted in the Augustinian tradition, which treats sexuality, even within marriage, as basically sinful, and therefore procreation is held to be a necessary justification for the marriage act, as it serves to fulfill God's command to be fruitful and multiply. In Old Testament times there was a

legitimate concern to perpetuate the human race. Today, however, that argument is unpersuasive, and many Roman Catholics feel justified in disregarding it.

Protestants, on the other hand, had never developed a clear teaching on marriage and sex. Nowhere was birth control explicitly mentioned in the Bible, so when the Pill became available in the early '60s, they welcomed it and other reproductive technologies as milestones in the march of human progress. Very soon these came a proliferation of sex manuals, all developed on the notion that God had given man sexuality for pleasure. The primary purpose of the marriage act became not procreation but recreation, an attitude which simply fortified the Protestant teaching that God wants man to be personally fulfilled and happy, and therefore sexually gratified.

Even abortion was accepted. It was only in the mid '70s, when the Roe v. Wade debate heated up, and it became increasingly evident that abortion was murder that evangelical Protestants began to rethink their position. In the late '70s they came aboard the pro-life cause, where they remain in the forefront today. It was the issue of abortion that made them realize that human life must be protected from the moment of conception, and that contraception by means of abortifacients was impermissible. Meanwhile, liberal Protestant mainline churches remain committed to the pro-abortion position, and have no restrictions on birth control.

It is important for us to be aware of the teachings of these other churches on the subject of sexuality, for they can unconsciously affect our own views. We must be aware, furthermore, of the pervasive influence on our society of the sexual revolution unleashed by the availability of the Pill. The promiscuous attitude that it fostered still prevails today. Because of our culture's obsession with sex and sexual gratification, it is essential that we have a clear understanding of our Church's teaching concerning sexuality. This teaching is found in Scripture, in the canons of various Ecumenical and Local Councils, in the writings and commentaries of various Holy Fathers of the Church, who far from avoiding or tiptoeing around this issue, write about it very frankly and at length; and, finally, this teaching is mirrored in the lives of many of the saints (the parents of Saint Sergius of Radonezh come to mind). The specific subject of birth control is less readily accessible; one cannot simply look it up in a concordance or index. It can, however, be extrapolated from the very clear teachings of the Church on abortion, on marriage, and on asceticism. Before plunging into a discussion on the subject, we should point out that the Orthodox Church is not as dogmatic here as the Roman Catholic Church, and it is very much a pastoral issue where there may be multiple considerations. Nevertheless, liberty should not be used for license, and we would all do well to keep before us the age-old standard given us by the Church.

Having said all this, what exactly is the Church's teaching concerning birth control?

The practice of artificial birth control—by which is meant "the pill," condoms, or any other kind of device—is actually condemned by the Orthodox Church. The Church of Greece, for example, in 1937 issued a special encyclical just for this purpose, to condemn birth control.

Likewise, the Romanian and Russian Churches, to name just two others among many—have more than once, in former times, spoken out against this practice. It is only in recent times, only in the generation since World War II, that some local Churches (the Greek Archdiocese in this country, for example) have begun to teach that it "might" be all right to practice birth control in certain circumstances, as long as this is discussed with the priest beforehand and has his agreement.

This teaching of our Church, however, should not be construed as being the same kind of teaching as is found in the Roman Catholic Church. The consistent teaching of the Church of Rome has been and is that having children is the primary function of marriage. This is not the teaching of the Orthodox Church. Orthodoxy, by contrast, gives the first place to the spiritual purpose of marriage—which is the mutual salvation of the husband and wife. Each is

to help and encourage the other in save his or her soul. Each exists for the other, as a companion, a helper, a friend.

But secondarily, children are the natural result of a marriage, and, until relatively recent times, they were the expected and much-desired result of a marriage. Children were sought as a fruit of the marriage union, a proof that a man and a woman had become one flesh, and this was always seen as a very great blessing on a marriage. It was considered a great tragedy, a great sorrow, if the marriage was childless; so much so that, although the Church always permitted a childless couple to continue to live together as man and wife, if a wife was barren or a husband was impotent, it was accepted by the Church as grounds for divorce, so that either would be free to enter into a marriage relationship with another, in the hope of having children.

Nowadays, of course, our society considers children more of a nuisance than a blessing, and many couples wait one, two, three, or even more years before they have a child. Indeed, some decide never to have children. And so, although in the Orthodox Church the first purpose of marriage is not merely to have children, the desire of most young marrieds today to wait before having children is considered sinful. As a priest, I must say to any couple that approaches me for marriage that, if they are not prepared and willing to conceive and bear a child, without interfering with the will of God by means of artificial birth control, then they are not ready to be married. If they are not prepared to accept the natural and blessed fruit of their union—that is, a child—then it is clear that their primary purpose in marrying is to have legalized fornication. This is a very serious problem today, possibly the most serious and the most difficult a priest has to deal with when counseling a young couple.

I've used the term "artificial" birth control because I want to point out that the Church does permit the use of certain natural methods for avoiding conception, but these methods may not be used without the knowledge and blessing of the priest, and only if the physical and moral well-being of the family demands it. These methods are acceptable to the Church under the right circumstances and can be used by a couple without burdening their consciences, because they are "ascetical" methods; that is, they have to do with self-denial, self-control. Those methods are three:

1. Total abstinence. In very pious families this is not at all as uncommon, either today or yesterday, as one might think. It often happens that after an Orthodox husband and wife have brought a number of children into this world, they agree to abstain from one another, both for spiritual and worldly reasons, living the rest of their lives in peace and harmony as brother and sister. This has happened in the lives of saints—most notably in the life of Saint John of Kronstadt. As a Church which very much cherishes and protects monastic life, we Orthodox have no fear of celibacy, and no silly ideas about how we will not be fulfilled or happy if we cease to have sexual activity with our spouse.
2. A limitation on sexual relations. This of course already happens with the Orthodox couple that sincerely tries to observe fully all of the fast days and fasting periods of the year.
3. Finally, the Church allows the use of the so-called "rhythm" or the more recently developed Natural Family Planning method, about which ample information is available today.

In former times, when poor parents knew nothing about contraceptives, they relied exclusively on God's will—and this should in fact be an example for us today. Children were born and they accepted the last one just as they had the first, saying, "God gave the child; He will also give what we need for the child." Such was their faith, and it often happened that the last child proved to be the greatest blessing of all.

Now, what about the size of a family? Well, one thing that has a tremendous affect on how we view this is the fact that over the last one hundred years we have changed from a mostly agrarian or agricultural society, to a mostly urban and industrial society. This means that whereas in previous times large families were actually needed in order to run the farm or ranch—and there was always enough food and work to go around—today we have the opposite problem, and it is sometimes very difficult to support a very large family, although there are people who manage to do it. From a strictly spiritual point of view, one should try to have a large family so that the family will

be strong and durable and full of love, with all of its members bearing the burdens of life together. A large family accustoms children to being concerned about others, makes them more sensitive, etc. And while a small family might be able to provide more of this world's goods for each child, a small family does not at all guarantee a good upbringing. Single children are sometimes the most difficult of all, for they often grow up spoiled and self-centered. No general rule can be given about this here, but we should be prepared and expect to have as many children as God will send and the moral and physical health of the mother and the family as a whole will allow, always staying in close touch with one's priest on these matters.

We must be careful, however, not to over-emphasize this whole business of having children, having a certain number, etc. Saint John Chrysostom says, "Giving birth to children is a matter of nature. Far more important is the parents' task of educating their children's hearts in virtue and piety." Indeed, this puts the emphasis back where it belongs, rather than on negative things about birth control and family size. For what the Church wants us to understand and remember is that the children we bring into the world do not belong to us; they belong to God. We did not give them life; rather, God, using us as His instruments, called them into existence. In a certain way, we parents are really only babysitters for God's children. And so our greatest responsibility as parents is to bring up our children "in the Lord," so that they come to know, love, and serve their Heavenly Father.

Eternal salvation is the whole goal of our earthly life. It is a goal that requires a constant striving, for it is not easy to be a Christian. The influence of our society make it extremely hard. The parish church and the home are the only bastions where God can be praised in spirit and in truth. Our lives, our marriages, and our homes will remain as inferior, poor wine, however, like the wine that was served first at the wedding feast at Cana, if we do not actively seek to be mature men and women, mature husbands and wives, and mature Orthodox Christians, willing to accept the responsibilities of the position in life to which we have been called. And it is only after we work—hard—at preparing ourselves, as individuals, and our families and home in order to receive Christ, that our lives, our marriages, and our homes will become like the good wine which Christ miraculously made from water at that joyous wedding. Amen.

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# Sexual Relations

*by Fr. Josiah Trenham*

American Orthodox Christians find themselves at the beginning of the 21st century encompassed by a cultural milieu that is post-Christian, secular, and foreign to the mind of the Church. Nowhere is this reality more evident than in the area of human sexuality. Sex has been violently torn from its proper context, and, isolated from the wisdom and blessing of the Church, contemporary man is adrift in sexual confusion. On the one hand we know more about the practice and mechanics of sex than ever before, yet on the other hand we know very little about the purpose, meaning, and control of sex in God's grand design.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s is the mother of much contemporary thinking about sexual relations. From it have arisen the following erroneous ideas. Sex is absolutely vital to full human development and happiness. Virginity is an unfortunate and incomplete condition. The sexual needs and drives of men and women are the same. All sex is good, as long as it involves love or at least refrains from "injuring" someone else. Traditional Christian notions of sexuality are repressive and incongruous with personal freedom.

Thinking like this has led to immense sorrow, and the bad fruit of the sexual revolution over the last thirty years are obvious: the exponential proliferation of domestic violence, adultery, venereal disease, unwed pregnancy, abortion and divorce. Living according to the mores of the sexual revolution neither glorifies the Holy Trinity nor promotes the dignity and salvation of men and women.

We Orthodox Christians must know more than what we are against. We must know what we are for. What exactly does the Orthodox Church teach about sexual relations?

First, sex is not essential to full human development and happiness. Mankind was not created for sex. Sexual relations as we know them today did not exist in Paradise. Adam and Eve lived without sex, and did so in unutterable bliss. Sexual relations began only after mankind fell into sin, and was stripped of its pristine glory and the Holy Spirit. This is the teaching of the Book of Genesis, "Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden...And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived" (3:22-4:1).

The Holy Scriptures also teach that when mankind is resurrected into the Kingdom of God there will be no sex in the new heavens and new earth. Answering an objection from the Sadducees, whose argument implied that the earthly norms of marriage and sex would continue in heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ taught, "For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven."

That sex is not essential to a healthy and full life is also evident by the example of the life of our sweet Savior Jesus Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect human being, and yet He never had sex. He denied Himself the blessing of earthly marriage, and successfully trampled upon all sexual temptations in order to ceaselessly do His Father's will, which was His very food and drink. Far from being essential to human life sex is a reminder of the loss of our spiritual refinement and dignity due to our fall into sin. Sex is designed for good in this fallen world, but it is in no way at the core of human development and happiness.

Second, consecrated virginity is the highest way of life. Far from being an unfortunate and incomplete way of life, chastity is the highest expression of love and devotion to God. Such a life has only been made possible by the ennobling of human nature by the Incarnation, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on human flesh on the Holy Day of Pentecost.

Since that time humanity has been radically changed, altered, and unshackled from earthly attachments. The Church's virgins, most typically our monks and nuns, are the very proof of the presence of the Kingdom of God on

earth and a sign of contradiction and hope in this fallen world. When St. Athanasius the Great was asked by a skeptic to prove that Jesus had brought the Kingdom of God to earth, he answered by pointing to the virgins of the Church as the irrefutable proof of the presence of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Prior to the Incarnation of our Master Jesus Christ, life long virginity as we have it today in the Church was unheard of. Our Lord Jesus Christ recommended and modeled such a life, as did the Great Apostle Paul. Our greatest saints, the Most Pure Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary and the Holy Forerunner and Baptist John, while honoring the noble estate of marriage and its sexual components, renounced sexual relations and consecrated their chastity to God's service.

Since that time until today an innumerable multitude of virginal saints have filled our One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Anyone who can successfully embrace such a beautiful way of life should, and in so doing wed not an earthly bride or bridegroom, but Jesus Christ Himself. Even for those with the gift of marriage virginity is a precious treasure to be guarded and bestowed in tact as a love offering to one's spouse, with whom one is first joined in the Mystery of Christian marriage.

Third, sexual relations are good only when used according to God's design. God has designed sexual relations for three basic reasons: to avoid fornication, to unite the husband and wife as a powerful adhesive, and to bring forth children to be raised to worship God and for the upbuilding of the Church. St. Paul wrote, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband."

Since our fall from grace our passions have been disordered. For most people this disorder is particularly noticeable in powerful sexual drives.

Sexual relations in marriage provide a safe and calm harbor to tame and redirect these unruly passions and desires. Sexual relations are also designed to serve as marital glue. "For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and the two shall become one flesh." The physical union of intercourse is designed to strengthen the marital bond by both enacting a very real physical unity and by producing a child, who is a creation not from only husband or wife alone, but from both the husband and wife together.

For this reason this powerful sexual relation is not to be accomplished with anyone but one's God-given spouse. Sexual relations are also designed to bring forth children. For the married sexual relations are not only an unspeakable blessing but one of the main ways to fulfill God's commandment to "be fruitful and multiply." The procreation of children is the duty of Christian spouses, and can no more be avoided or tampered with than can the other purposes of sexual relations.

Those not prepared to assume the responsibility of sexual relations ought not engage in them. The intense pleasure of sexual relations are designed by God to promote the procreation of children, since the difficulties inherent in childbearing and Christian parenting might otherwise tempt spouses to avoid this solemn responsibility.

Today's contraception culture strikes at the heart of the God-designed unity of pleasure and responsibility, opting to embrace pleasure while avoiding the responsibility of childbearing and calling it "family planning." Such planned parenthood and family planning is in reality planned barrenness and family banning, and as such has been vigorously forbidden by the Holy Fathers throughout the history of the Church. St. Paul teaches that married women find their salvation in and through childbearing.

Having documented what the Church says is the God designed purpose of sexual relations let us conclude by noting what sexual practices are clearly outside that purpose, and thus are sinful.

Homosexual relations are forbidden as a perversion of the created order, and as an assault upon God-ordained heterosexual marriage. Persons with strong homosexual dispositions, that have proved resistant to reorientation,



are urged by Christ to struggle against this passion in the embrace of chastity, and, if at all possible, to enter the monastic vocation where life can be lived in a community of persons.

Masturbation is censured as self-abuse, the waste of seed and its procreative intent, and an improper turning inward and rejection of the marital context of sexuality. It is always sinful.

Sexual relations prior to marriage are strongly condemned as fornication, a sacrilegious defilement of the Temple of the Holy Spirit, a defrauding of one's future spouse, and are detrimental to the development of a stable future marriage. It is no coincidence that the rise in pre-marital sex has been paralleled by the rise in divorce and marital unhappiness. To take the very sublime things of marriage out of their context of grace, perpetual commitment, and the Church's blessings is a recipe for disaster.

Marriage itself does not make legitimate all forms of sexuality. The sexual intercourse of the married is to be modest, and within its proper limits. Moderation is determined both by regulation of time and method of sexual relations. Relations on fast days, on the eve prior to one's reception of Holy Communion, and on days on which one receives the Holy Gifts are forbidden as an illegitimate indulgence to the flesh. Anal and oral intercourse, as well as the use of pornography and sexual toys, are sexual perversions and are always sinful, even for married Christians. The unnatural prolongation of sexual desire, through the use of drugs such as viagra, is forbidden. On the contrary, such decline in sexual desire is warmly welcomed by aging Orthodox Christians as a divine help in one's life long preparation for departure from this life.