

MARRIAGE IN THE GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH

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The best way to understand the Orthodox Church's position on marriage is to study and reflect on its service of matrimony. In the first prayer, after a series of petitions, we read that it is God's will that man and woman should be legally married; that marriage should serve as a source of a life that is happy, peaceful, and blessed with longevity, mutual love, and offspring, culminating here on earth with a crown of glory. In the third prayer of the service, the celebrant, standing before the bride and groom, adds: "O Sovereign Lord . . . join together this your servant [man's name] and this your servant [woman's name] for by you is a wife joined to her husband. Unite them in oneness of mind; crown them with wedlock into one flesh; grant to them through physical union the gain of well-favored children."¹

There are three important theological elements in the prayers cited here, revealing both doctrinal teaching and the place of marriage in the life of the church. First, God's presence in a marriage ceremony indicates that the Orthodox Church accepts marriage as a mystery. The sacramental aspect of marriage is emphasized throughout the service. To view marriage as a sacrament is to accept God as the originator of marriage and as the invisible but real power that unites two heterosexual beings into one unit. Second, marriage is perceived as a union of two minds aiming at the same goal of spiritual perfection. Third, marriage is understood as the physical union of two heterosexual human beings for procreative purposes and emotional fulfillment.

Even though the doctrinal foundations of matrimony are found in Holy Scripture, the church did not always define marriage as a sacrament. As in the case of other doctrines, marriage was defined as a sacrament in the later middle ages. For several centuries "legally married" meant married either according to civil law or according to church canons. Eventually, only marriage according to church law was perceived as legal. There is little doubt about the sacramental character of marriage in the Orthodox Church today.²

¹Any edition of the Orthodox Service Book, or *Euchologion*, includes the sacrament of matrimony. I have used N. M. Vaporis, ed., *An Orthodox Prayer Book*, tr. John von Holzhausen and Michael Gelsinger (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1977), pp. 74-96.

²For a more detailed treatment of the subject, see Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Marriage*,

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Marriage includes three basic interrelated elements: the natural element, which leads a man and a woman into a physical union; the moral element, which guarantees their full and perpetual cohabitation until death parts them; and the religious element, which makes marriage a communion of faith and a communion of two souls who decide to follow a common road in life, a road that leads to virtue and eternal salvation. This definition of marriage corresponds to the psychosomatic nature of the human being. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Eph. 5:31). Thus, "they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man [sic] put asunder" (Mt. 19:6).

The sacramental character of matrimony is based, of course, on other biblical testimony, explicit or implicit. The Bible states that God made the human being (the *anthropos*) as a two-component being—male and female. Through their union they continue the work of God through procreation. Matrimony, which perpetuates the work of the Creator, is accepted as a mystery or sacrament. The intimate relationship of the male and female components of the human being expresses God's continuous creative work. The human shares in the creativity and omnipotence of the Creator. Marriage is not a contract between two individuals, but a sacred and creative union, the consummation of two human beings into one twofold being—a new "Adam-Eve" person.

Since the origin of matrimony is divine, its purpose is also sacred. Both Holy Scripture and sacred tradition reveal a threefold purpose: The first is to continue the creative work that God inaugurated with the creation of the first man and woman, thus propagating the human species. The second is to provide physical and moral assistance to two individuals who have placed themselves willingly under the same yoke. It is significant that in the Orthodox Church marriage is described as *syzygia*—partnership under a common yoke—implying equal rights and responsibilities in the household. The third purpose of marriage is based on what St. Paul advised:

Because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. (1 Cor. 7:2-4)

Sexual fulfillment in marriage is considered one of its major purposes, a fulfillment that results from the union of two halves of the human person into one being. To paraphrase St. John Chrysostom: The whole has no need to unite with

Sexuality, and Celibacy: A Greek Orthodox Perspective (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing Co., 1975); John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1970); and George Nicozisin, *Your Marriage in the Orthodox Church* (St. Louis: Ologos, 1982).

anything, because it is complete, but two halves seek to unite with each other in order to become a whole. "Each half separately is imperfect."³

Sexual intercourse is described in the Scripture as "knowing." This means that conjugal union is more than a selfish, momentary union for hedonistic purposes; it is the result of a thorough commitment to each other, an overflowing of deep love, and the identification of the two loves with one another: they become one life in two persons. Marital sexuality has been elevated to a physical fulfillment, and it is treated as a God-given gift, as a reward to two heterosexual beings who place themselves under God's law in order to procreate and continue God's creative concern. The relationship between husband and wife must not remain simply a state of knowing or being, but one of continuous becoming. Their ultimate goal is to achieve together the state of deification, for they are under the grace of God in a dynamic sense, in a constant *gignesthai*, or becoming. In the Orthodox Church, sexual intercourse is described as *synousia*, which means community of essence, consubstantiality, a community of essence in spiritual as well as in physical terms.⁴

While marriage is considered a sacrament (*mysterium*), clerical celibacy, though greatly honored, is not a sacrament. Celibacy and abstention from sexual intercourse, especially for religious purposes, can be found in the religious practices of the Greek, Roman, Semitic, and other peoples of antiquity.⁵ The demand for celibacy in the Christian church arose for several reasons. The enthusiastic and eschatological expectations of the early church and prevailing notions about sexuality in Greco-Roman and Jewish society influenced Christian thought. For example, the believers known as "enthusiasts" insisted that marriage was contrary to the teaching and, especially, the example of Jesus. Some of them even went so far as to insist on celibacy as a prerequisite for the baptism of adults. The eschatological teachings of the early church stressed that Christians are "strangers" and "pilgrims" on earth (1 Pet. 2:11; cf. Heb. 11:13) and encouraged the idea of celibacy. The expectation of the Lord's return made the creation of a family and family concerns unnecessary.⁶

Against these views there arose many church Fathers, from as early as the apostolic age, who saw the married state as normal for all Christians, lay and

³For references and documentation, see Constantelos, *Marriage*. See also Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Understanding the Greek Orthodox Church* (New York: Seabury, 1982), from which the present position article draws extensively.

⁴Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* (Miscellanies), Bk. 3, ch. 6; See also P. N. Trembelas, *Dogmatike tes Orthodoxou Katholikes Ekklesias* (Dogmatics of the Orthodox Catholic Church), 3 vols. (Athens, 1959-1961), vol. 3, pp. 320-325; cf. J. Karmiris, *A Synopsis of the Dogmatic Theology of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, tr. G. Dimopoulos (Scranton, PA, 1973), p. 109.

⁵Arthur D. Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 17-20.

⁶See Charles A. Frazee, "The Origins of Clerical Celibacy in the Western Church," *Church History* 41 (June, 1972): 149-167, especially pp. 150-151.

clergy alike. Religious celibacy is holy, but Christian marriage is equally sacred. The fact that the Orthodox Church has not made an official pronouncement placing celibacy above marriage indicates that the conscience of the Church has accepted marriage as a more creative state of being. Parents are co-creators with the great Creator. Celibacy is justified only if it implies a total commitment to God's gospel.⁷

The Orthodox tradition has accepted both marriage and celibacy under God as holy states, as long as members honor the rights and restrictions of their own state. For example, in the early church, Clement of Alexandria, writing about 194 c.e., stressed that to abstain from sexual intercourse is not virtuous in itself unless it is done for the sake of God, as St. Paul had advised. He rebuked a group of heretics who described conjugal relations as unclean, and he dissolved the arguments of another group of heretics who boasted that they believed in celibacy because Jesus Christ was celibate indeed, but his celibacy corresponded to the nature of Christ the God-human. Jesus Christ, according to Clement, taught the sanctity and blessedness of celibacy, perceived as a vocation from God for a particular ministry. But, in marriage, the whole human personality has been sanctified, "not only the spirit, but the ways and means, the body and its total life."⁸

Patristic thought recognized that it is possible for married Christians to live a sexual life and at the same time pursue a life of prayer and spirituality. They saw no contradiction between the life of the spirit and the needs of the body. It should not surprise us, therefore, to find that many of the Orthodox Church's saints, both male and female, were married: St. Anastasia, St. Spyridon, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. John Eleemon, St. Sophia, St. Eudocia, and married couples such as Timotheos and Maura and Andronikos and Athanasia.

From the fourth century on, the Eastern church demanded that the two partners in a marriage should both be of the Christian Orthodox faith. Marriage with a non-Christian was forbidden; if contracted, it was declared illegal. The Church was tolerant of a marriage with schismatics, but it did not permit marriage with heretics. While in theory mixed marriages with non-Christians or heretics were forbidden,⁹ in practice there were many mixed marriages between Orthodox and heretics as well as between Orthodox and non-Christians, especially among members of the imperial families and the upper classes. Mixed marriages multiplied after the eleventh century and were rather common after the thirteenth. The Orthodox Church has applied the principle of *oikonomia* (a judg-

⁷P. Demetropoulos, *Orthodoxos Christianike Ethike* (Orthodox Christian Ethics) (Athens, 1970), pp. 291-294.

⁸Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, Bk. 3, ch. 6.

⁹Fourteenth Canon of the Fourth Ecumenical Council; the twenty-sixth and seventy-second canons of the Council in Trullo edited by C. A. Rhallis and M. Potles, *Syntagma ton Theion kai Hieron Kanonon* (Constitution of the Sacred and Holy Canons), 6 vols. (Athens, 1852-1859), vol. 4, pp. 251-252, 361-362, 471-472.

ment according to circumstances and needs) to holy matrimony more frequently than to any other sacrament.¹⁰

As late as the second half of the nineteenth century the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople (Istanbul), which set the pace for all autocephalous churches and Orthodox patriarchates to follow, forbade mixed marriages on the basis of the canons of the ecumenical synods. An Orthodox person who married a non-Orthodox person outside the rules of the Church was denied the sacrament of Holy Communion, but a priest might be permitted to administer the sacrament in time of emergency. Despite the earlier opposition of the Orthodox Church, mixed marriages are allowed today between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians. Nevertheless, certain conditions must be borne in mind. The non-Orthodox member must agree both to be married according to the practices of the Orthodox Church and to have his or her children baptized and nurtured in the Orthodox faith.

While an Orthodox Christian may marry a non-Orthodox Christian who has been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity (One God-in-essence-in-three persons), provided the marriage is solemnized by an Orthodox bishop or priest, marriages between Orthodox Christians and members of non-Christian religions are not permitted. Current practice follows restrictions introduced by canons of ancient local and ecumenical councils prohibiting marriages of orthodox-catholic Christians with heretics, pagans, and non-Christians in general. For example, the fourteenth canon of the great Synod of Chalcedon (451) states that “the holy Council has made it a rule that none . . . shall be allowed to take a wife that is of a different faith . . . , to contract a marriage with a heretic, or a Jew, or a pagan (Hellene).”¹¹ The sacramental aspect of marriage presupposes a conviction and a baptismal confession of a faith in God, who is One in essence, but Three in persons (Holy Trinity); and in Jesus Christ as “very God of very God, begotten not made, of one essence with the Father.”¹²

In the eyes of the Orthodox Church today, an Orthodox Christian who contracts an interreligious marriage, whether with an atheist or a member of the Jewish, Muslim, or any other religious faith, commits self-excommunication. He or she is not allowed to remain in sacramental union with the Church, is deprived of the eucharist, and is prohibited from serving as a sponsor at baptisms and weddings.

The Orthodox Church opposes the dissolution of marriage save “for the cause of fornication” (Mt. 5:32), because the two partners have become one flesh. This is the ideal, which is not always observed. In the course of centuries, the Church has modified its teachings, and divorce is granted today on several

¹⁰H. S. Alivizatos, *E Oikonomia kata to Kanonikon dikaion tes Orthodoxou Ekklesias* (Oeconomy according to Canon Law of the Orthodox Church) (Athens, 1949), pp. 91-94; I. Kotsonis, *E Kanonike Apopsis peri tes Epikoinonias meta ton Eterodoxon* (The Canonical Aspect of Intercommunion with Heterodox) (Athens, 1957), pp. 206-236.

¹¹Rhalls and Potles, *Syntagma*, vol. 4, pp. 251-252.

¹²Second article of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. See the *Euchologion*, p. 53.

other grounds, such as desertion, extreme cruelty, incompatibility, impotence, or incurable mental illness.

Like divorce, birth control has also been a controversial subject, and opinions differ among Orthodox theologians. No decision on birth control has been made by the ecumenical Orthodox Church. There are certain independent Orthodox jurisdictions or autocephalous churches that have taken a definite stand, condemning all methods of contraception, but their views have not been codified and are not binding upon all Orthodox. Theological opinions expressed by societies, individual bishops, or scholars are not rare. Both the Church of Greece and the Romanian Church have issued special encyclicals condemning birth control, but the Church of Russia differs. V. Palachkovsky, speaking on behalf of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Moscow, has said that "the whole domain of the relations between husband and wife . . . is too intimate to provoke the investigations of the priests," who serve as confessors and represent the Church.¹³ The Ecumenical Patriarchate has left the matter to the discretion of husbands and wives in consultation with their priests. The late Patriarch Athenagoras is reported to have said: "Our Church has granted full authority to the spiritual father. It is for him, conscious of his responsibility and his mission, to give the advice and the direction that are appropriate."¹⁴

It seems that the majority of the Orthodox faithful practice some form of birth control. In the past the matter was left to the responsibility of the father confessor, who advised his flock, but, with the decline of the practice of confession and spiritual direction, the matter has largely been left to each married couple. Even in circumstances allowing more open communication between couples and their priests, the priest seldom asks about this delicate matter. Thus, the ultimate decision rests with the faithful rather than with the clergy. Since there is no specific doctrine, canon, or consensus of teaching in the Orthodox Church at large against birth control, a couple's attitude toward birth control is determined by personal conscience, medical advice, and spiritual guidance.

While the Orthodox Church is rather lenient, humanitarian, considerate, and practical with regard to divorce and birth control, it is unanimous and definite in the matter of abortion. Once life is conceived, a couple has no right to destroy it. On the contrary, the partners must rejoice and see it as a divine gift. Canon law has equated abortion with murder: "Those who give drugs for procuring abortion and those who receive poisons to kill the fetus are subject to the penalty of murder."¹⁵ Respect and love for life underlie the whole concept of the teaching against abortion. Whether life is kept in a body ninety years old or developed in a fetus, it is life—the spirit of God and the dynamics of creation. However, when the survival of the mother is in question, the Orthodox believe that primary consideration should be given to her. The spouses are bound to

¹³See Constantelos, *Marriage*, pp. 64-65.

¹⁴As reported in *Eastern Churches Review* 2 (Fall, 1968): 69-70.

¹⁵Rhallis and Potles, *Syntagma*, vol. 4, pp. 518-519.

follow their doctor's advice as to whether abortion is necessary; yet, even under unavoidable circumstances, in theory at least the Church imposes certain disabilities upon the mother for a certain period of time: she may not receive Holy Communion, for example, for a few months or even years. Again, however, it depends on the relationship between the spouses and their spiritual father, who is there to pray, advise, console, and guide the faithful. Since not all Orthodox families are close to a spiritual father, many of them follow the dictates of their consciences.

Are Orthodox Christians satisfied with their theology of marriage in this current practice? Admittedly there are anxieties and expectations of changes, especially among many Orthodox Christians living in pluralistic societies such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. Individuals question the Church's attitude toward interreligious marriages, especially those between Orthodox Christians and Jews, Unitarians, Muslims, and members of the nontrinitarian "Christian" creeds.

It is undeniable, of course, that the Orthodox Church's attitude is rooted in Scripture and based on long-standing ecclesiastical tradition, but both Scripture and tradition provide much ground for reconsideration and change. There are contradictions and inconsistencies in both theory and practice. While the Scripture forbids Christians "to yoke with unbelievers" (1 Cor. 6:14), the same Scripture reveals that in the early church a believer married to a nonbeliever was instructed not to seek a divorce. It was held that, "If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband" (1 Cor. 7:13-14a).

A return to the practice of the early church is expected not only because of the many interreligious marriages in the United States today, but also because of the realities in communist-dominated countries where marriages between Orthodox Christians and atheists are common. To be sure, interreligious marriage is one of the most perplexing issues facing worldwide Orthodoxy today. It is expected that the forthcoming Pan-Orthodox "Great and Holy Council" will address the issue, but it is difficult to predict whether it will relax the present practice which insists that a non-Christian spouse embrace Christianity before a marriage can be solemnized.



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