

THERE IS NO SEX IN THE CHURCH

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Arguably one of the most difficult topics to approach within the framework of modern Russian Orthodoxy² is that of marital sex. Attitudes appear to be much more pronounced with respect to premarital sex: just don't do it. There are efforts by parish priests, Sunday school teachers, various youth group leaders, and the like to raise the issue of premarital sex with young adults and thus offer a forum for discussion. Understandably these discussions have severe limitations due to the fact that the position of the Church toward premarital sex is overwhelmingly negative; most adults possess healthy inhibitions when speaking with teenagers about matters of sexuality in any detail. There are exceptions, but for the most part, adults hesitate to discuss some of the taboo topics with teenagers because the latter are so impressionable and can be easily guided by things they see or hear. A confessing priest would be worried about suggesting or describing sins of which young people might be unaware. As Archpriest Afanasii Belyaev wrote after hearing the confessions of Tsar Nicholas II's children, "... I was decidedly unsure whether I as a confessor should remind them of sins which may be unknown to them..."³

A priest, however, is usually not a young person's primary source of information about sin. Matters of morality and propriety are most often dealt with on a family level and among peers. And it may be that patterns of sexual behavior are discovered and formed primarily in peer groups. Perhaps an interesting illustration of the thought process of a typical modern young Orthodox person dealing with issues of premarital sex can be found in an essay by Laryssa Grinenko titled "Trials of Dating in College"⁴:

... In college, guys are not just content with a completely platonic relationship. If you are in a relationship, sex is expected. Not just vaginal sex, but other forms of stimulation are expected. This was something I was definitely NOT okay with. ... In the first couple weeks of school, I met a guy that I really enjoyed spending time with. Almost every night we hung out, did something around campus, or just sat and talked. From my perspective, I thought I was meeting a genuinely nice guy with whom maybe I could pursue a relationship with (*sic*). ... Then he laid (*sic*) down on the bed next to me and after a few moments proceeded to make some advances, ones that I, as an Orthodox Christian, did not want, nor did I see, coming...

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² Due to the vast variety of ethnic Orthodox traditions, I shall limit the scope of this paper to specifically the Russian tradition.

³ Qtd. in *Сборник документов и материалов юбилейного Архиерейского Собора Русской православной церкви, Москва, 13-16 августа 2000 г.* Изд-во Братства во имя св. князя Александра Невского, 2001, p. 100. Translation from Russian here *et passim* is mine—S.S.

⁴ Grinenko wrote the essay in 2002 for the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America website (<http://www.antiochian.org/1203>), but as her name suggests, these "trials" affect not only ethnic Antiochians.

Quite aside from the obvious problems that Grinenko has in relating to the opposite sex,⁵ which are at the forefront of her writings,⁶ three things in the selection above deserve our attention: 1) the young woman identifies herself as an Orthodox Christian; 2) she wants only a completely platonic relationship with a man before marriage; 3) she is “definitely NOT okay with” forms of stimulation other than vaginal sex.⁷ While Grinenko does not specifically state that only vaginal sex—by which term she undoubtedly means vaginal penetration or intercourse—is approved by the Orthodox Church, the context of this comment leads me to believe that in Grinenko’s view, “other forms of stimulation” are contrary to her status as an Orthodox Christian, or, perhaps more properly, to her view of what is appropriate for a Christian.⁸

Apparently Grinenko’s article is meant to provide some food for thought to other young unmarried adults. As people mature and get married, venues for talking about sex and Orthodoxy become virtually non-existent. Some couples may discover that sex is not allowed during Lent; others may not realize this for many years until they accidentally stumble upon this information. Some may ask their confessor whether a particular technique is allowed, others will not ask for reasons ranging from being ashamed to not having any idea that God or the Church would care what they do in their bedroom. Thus, the sense of what is appropriate in the bedroom and what is not develops largely on the foundation of bits and pieces of information from various sources: one’s parents, societal norms, correct or erroneous comments by other Christians or clergy, whether understood clearly or misinterpreted, etc. The problem with this hodgepodge is that most modern Russian Orthodox Christians are disconnected from the tradition of the Church: our parents grew up in a godless society whose norms were formed by an atheist ideology. Even modern Russian Orthodox clergy, according to Archpriest Georgii Mitrofanov of the St. Peterburg Theological Academy, are most often “self-taught neophytes who do not know the traditions of the Church, and whose spiritual formation was at best based on samizdat⁹ books.”¹⁰ This remark accurately describes the state of many Western converts to Orthodoxy.

This break between the modern Russian Orthodox Christian and the tradition of the Church leaves vast areas of this tradition to be rediscovered or reinvented (this would include the traditional views on matters of marital sex). Unlike other areas of the Orthodox

⁵ An analysis of Grinenko’s writings is most certainly outside the scope of this paper. It suffices only to note that she appears to present a very shallow, one-sided, and crudely-stereotypical view of men.

⁶ See, for example, “What are the top three things you don’t understand about the opposite sex?” <<http://www.antiocian.org/SOYO?q=book/export/html/1240>>.

⁷ This is not to say that Grinenko is “okay” with vaginal sex before marriage, but she appears to be making a separate point about “other forms of stimulation.”

⁸ Grinenko does not explain why she thought it appropriate to “pursue a relationship with” a young man who apparently was not an Orthodox Christian, or what the desired result of such a relationship may be. Just as is the case with premarital sex, marriage of an Orthodox Christian to a heterodox or a non-Christian is forbidden by canon law (see, for example, canon 72 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council).

⁹ *Samizdat* (English: *self-publishing*) is a practice of producing hand-written copies of writings that could not be officially published in the Soviet Union.

¹⁰ Interview with Elena Kudryavtseva. *Конкурс на свято место*. Огонёк, no. 15 (5125), 19 Apr. 2010.

Christian heritage, however, the sex lives of the faithful are much more difficult to rediscover or even reinvent. It seems easy enough to organize a seminar on liturgical, historical, or canonical topics, but few scholars appear willing to address the topic of “approved” sex techniques. As will be discussed below, the general attitude of the Church seems to follow close to the “ideal” once infamously vocalized by a respectable Soviet woman: “There is no sex in the USSR.”¹¹ Most priests are not likely to mention sex in their sermons even before Great Lent, and they would think twice before asking people about the details of their sex lives during confession. Even here in the U.S., where societal attitudes toward sex have been much more relaxed for decades, asking a young man or a young woman questions that are too specific may get the curious confessor in trouble.

A survey of collections of letters to spiritual children by various elders also reveals an absence of any meaningful discussion of marital sex. This is, perhaps, not surprising, since the elders are monks, and discussing sex with a monk is just as inconceivable as discussing monastic virtues with a layman. In recognition of this inherent contradiction, canon law prohibits a monk from blessing marriages (and even from becoming a godfather to a child),¹² and, likewise, a “secular priest” is forbidden from tonsuring a monk: “How can he give to another what he himself does not have?”¹³ Yet it has always been the monastics whose lives and examples the lay faithful try to emulate, and whose teachings—from the sayings of the desert fathers to *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, and from the collections of letters by elders to the tireless wandering from one monastery to the next in search of clairvoyant (or, at least, exotic-looking) old monks. These phenomena may be especially peculiar to post-Soviet neophytes, but they certainly find their roots in the collective Orthodox psyche which has held since the Apostle Paul wrote that virginity (thus, monasticism) is a higher calling than marriage, which results in “worldly troubles.”¹⁴ Such ideals, coupled with every healthy monk’s struggle against the “flames of passion,”¹⁵ and the married adults’ desire to protect their favorite elder and not add more fuel to the fire by graphic depictions of their sex lives, can certainly contribute to the atmosphere of “pious silence” on the subject of marital sex in the Church.

Even though this essay tries to address issues exclusively within the Russian Orthodox Church, the very problematic relationship between traditional Christianity and sex is perhaps even more strained in the West. As Bertrand Russell so famously pointed out,

The worst feature of the Christian religion ... is its attitude toward sex—an attitude so morbid and so unnatural that it can be understood only when taken in relation to the sickness of the civilized world at the time the Roman Empire was decaying. ... Every person who has taken the trouble to study the question in an unbiased spirit knows that the artificial ignorance on sex which the orthodox Christians attempt to enforce upon the young ... causes in those who pick up their knowledge by the way

¹¹ A comment made during a U.S.—Soviet Space Bridge produced by Unison Corporation and Gosteleradio and hosted by Vladimir Posner and Phil Donahue, *Women speak to women*, 28 June 1986.

¹² See Nomocanon 84; *Требник*. Киев, 1895, лист 447 на об.

¹³ See *Ibid.* 82 with a reference to the First Ecumenical Council.

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 7:28; RSV here *et passim*. See also 7:1, 37, 38

¹⁵ *cf.* 1 Cor. 7:9

of “improper” talk, as most children do, an attitude that sex is in itself indecent and ridiculous.¹⁶

Likewise, our contemporary Russian Orthodox Priest Lev Shikhlyarov, also citing the corruption of Roman nobility, asserts that “the negative attitude toward sexual life became prevalent in the Western Church thought” and that “this tendency reached the East.”¹⁷ Commenting on the issue of “oral-genital and other kinds of sexual relations” in an apparent bid to correct the situation, Shikhlyarov argues that “those forms of [sexual] relations which help the spouses to better express their mutual help in the sphere of intimate love and do not offend mutual feelings are allowed.” In other words, Shikhlyarov attempts to place the principles of mutual love and respect, rather than those of canonical legislature, as the cornerstone of marital intimacy. As for the prohibitions contained in the ancient confessional rites which we will discuss in due course, Shikhlyarov calls them “superstitions” created by “certain Church writers of the past who clearly went beyond the limits of their competence.” Contextually, Shikhlyarov alludes to monks as the likely source of confessional rites and of the “superstitions” about sex contained in those rites.

O tempora, o mores!

Most faithful Christians who are familiar with only the modern confessional may not realize that confession in the Russian Church used to be, at least for a few hundred years, primarily about one’s sexual life. In a brief survey of Russian confessional practices related to the sex lives of the faithful, Dmitrii Zankov notes that one 15th-century standard rite of confession was almost wholly (95%) devoted to questions about sexual acts.¹⁸ Whether or not the exact percentage is correct, it is indeed close to the mark, and most (almost all) confessional questionnaires began thus: “Tell me, child, how you have first corrupted your virginity...”¹⁹ In fact, according to Almazov, beginning a confession with the statement of faith as is currently recommended,²⁰ prior to the 17th century could be found in only one document of “extremely generic character.”²¹ The initial inquiry about one’s virginity—or, rather, the details of how one’s virginity was corrupted—is in direct correlation to the confessional questionnaire of Saint John the Faster, the Patriarch of Constantinople from 582 to 595.²² It is unlikely that this initial inquiry was repeated by a confessor time after time, since once it is disclosed, the information would remain the same. Nonetheless, this initial question and ones that follow provide a framework for a very detailed discussion of every thinkable (and unthinkable) sexual act. Presuming that due prudence was exercised by priests

¹⁶ “Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?” (1930).

¹⁷ Шихляров, свящ. Лев. “Христианство и проблемы половых отношений” (1994). Unpublished paper, Moscow Theological Academy.

¹⁸ “Блуд бывает всякий...” *Родина* no. 12, 2004.

¹⁹ Алмазов, А. *Тайная исповедь в Православной Восточной Церкви: опыт внешней истории*. Одесса, 1894, 1:323.

²⁰ See “Чин исповедания”, *Требник*. Киев, 1895, лист 32 и на об.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² The Greek text of the questionnaire can be found in Алмазов 3:1; the Slavonic translation of the text is in the same volume, p. 91.

when dealing with very young people,²³ such detailed discussions were aimed at sexually active adults.

The particulars of private confession in the Greek Church from the time that the role of public confession began to diminish in the 4-5th centuries and until the time that Orthodoxy was officially brought to Rus in the 10th century is, perhaps, of little significance to the limited scope of this paper. But the first Greek-language written record of the rite of confession, along with the confessional questionnaire, can be found in a 10th-century manuscript and its contents are attributed to Saint John the Faster.²⁴ Almazov proposes that this rite was also the one used by the Slavs when they accepted Orthodoxy, although its earliest extant Slavonic translation dates back to the 13th century.²⁵ Beginning in the 14th century, however, the rite of confession in the Slavic Church changed and the questions became more detailed compared to the ones originally attributed to Saint John. Whatever the particulars, private confession in Rus and later in Russia provided both the time and place for married adults to learn which sexual practices were acceptable in the eyes of the Church and which were not. This was achieved through the use of lists of questions that priests asked penitents, inquiring whether a certain sin had been committed, thus identifying the specific acts as sins.

I shall not quote here all the confessional questions that deal with sexual behaviors, both because some of these behaviors are quite bizarre and also because many of them do not directly relate to the matters of marital sex. It suffices to note that for the purposes of this study, any sexual activity of any nature outside of marriage was viewed by confessional manuals as sinful. But not all sexual activity within marriage was viewed as acceptable. In fact, the lists of things which were not allowed grew steadily for a few hundred years. To illustrate, let us begin with a just few questions which follow the initial question about the loss of one's virginity from a 13th century abridged Serbian translation of Saint John's confessional²⁶:

- Have you fallen into masturbation,²⁷ how, when, and how much?
- Have you raped any woman or your own wife?
- Have you lain with a woman inside a holy temple?

²³ It necessary to remember, however, that Church canons allowed marriage at a much younger age than what is currently acceptable in Western societies. A 1895 Russian edition of the Nomocanon (Greek: *Νομοκανών*), with a reference to Saint John the Faster, considers girls over twelve years old to be of age (Номоканон 39; *Требник*. Киев, 1895, лист 444 на об.). Although, it must be noted that Russian civil law set the age of marriage for girls at sixteen and for boys—at eighteen (see Булагов, С.В. *Настольная книга для священно-церковно-служителей*. Москва, 1913, 2:1166-7).

²⁴ See АЛМАЗОВ, 1:67.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 1:203

²⁶ *Ibid.* 3:91-2

²⁷ In a later document, masturbation was defined as not only as an self-stimulation, but also as something that a husband can do to his wife and wife to her husband, and both kinds of behavior were viewed as sinful.

- A 15th-century Russian confessional²⁸ also asks whether one had sex “from behind”²⁹ (40 day-penance), “stepped on [someone’s] foot with lust”³⁰ (6 days), or “committed a sodomite fornication”³¹ (3 days).
- A 16th-century confessional³² adds the sins of having sex on Saturday night and on a holiday. Having anal sex with one’s wife and allowing the wife to be on top are some of the sins that are mentioned in the confessional. Also added is a sin of having sex before and after³³ Communion.
- Another 16th-century confessional³⁴ lists having sex on Saturday, Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday as sins. The rest of the list is rather explicit if not grotesque: having lustful thoughts while lying down, exhibitionism, passionate kissing, putting one’s tongue in another one’s mouth or in a woman’s vagina, giving one’s penis to a woman to kiss, holding another woman by the vagina while lying with one’s wife, winking in lust, and holding hands in lust.
- Finally, a third confessional³⁵ from the same time period adds putting one’s finger in a woman’s vagina, drinking a woman’s milk,³⁶ and having sex with a menstruating woman.

It remains unclear whether our ancestors truly had real problems with some of the behavior described in the confessionals, or whether these problems were plaguing the authors who composed the documents. It also seems unlikely that all of these questions were asked all the time by every priest to their penitents. One of the reasons for having detailed lists contained in the confessionals could be to provide priests with penitential guidelines, but not necessarily to instruct them to simply read the entire list at every confession. Finally, it is hardly possible that any campaign—even one backed by the full authority of the Church—could be very successful at eradicating such behaviors as winking, holding hands, and playing footsies. One would hope that for the survival of the nation the faithful would continue to be ignorant of some of the prohibitions or resilient to them.

²⁸ Ibid. 3:144-5.

²⁹ This particular phrase could mean both—anal sex and vaginal sex “from behind.”

³⁰ Playing footsies comes to mind, but actually stepping on someone’s foot with lust?!—O tempora, o mores!

³¹ It is not clear from the document what precisely is meant by “sodomite fornication.” Most typically, this term would probably refer to any “unnatural” sexual act, such as oral or anal sex. One 15th-century confessional interprets sodomy to be anal sex by two men (АЛМАЗОВ 3:149). However, the Biblical account in Genesis 19:4-11, should be properly viewed in a religious, rather than sexopathological context. The confessional, however, clearly refers to matters of sex, not religion, and thus assigns a very light penance.

³² АЛМАЗОВ 3:145-7

³³ Ibid. 3:154

³⁴ Ibid. 3:151

³⁵ Ibid. 3:153

³⁶ This, of course, may or may not be sexual behavior—depending on exactly why our ancestors did it. Other reasons, for example, may include various folk or pagan beliefs about health or, perhaps, magical benefits of ingesting human milk. Compare this with St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s vision of himself ingesting milk from the breasts of the Virgin Mary—the symbolic significance of which cannot be divorced from St. Bernard’s theological beliefs on Mary as the Mediatrix.

Some behaviors which I have not mentioned, but which are found in the confessional questionnaires continue to be not only religiously and socially unacceptable, but indeed criminal. Such actions as rape or pedophilia, for example, have not only become cemented as sins in the confessional practice of the Church, but also as crimes in the legal codes of countries of Christian heritage. Another category of sins may have connotations that have been lost in the modern context but were still prominent in societies that had only recently become Christian. Bestiality, for example, may point to remnants of totemism and animism, whereby the act of an intimate union with an animal had pagan religious significance, rather than merely indications of deviance or sexual desperation.³⁷ It is easy to see why Christianity would have objections to such practices beyond those dictated purely by a modern sense of what is normative or socially acceptable.³⁸

Leaving these questions aside and focusing solely on marital sex, that is to say, only on sexual relations between a lawful husband and his lawful wife, we can say with certainty that during the Late Middle Ages in Russia, the Church approved of only one form of sexual behavior—vaginal intercourse in the “missionary” position.³⁹ All other forms of intimacy, including flirting and foreplay, were viewed as fornication⁴⁰ and carried penances which varied in their severity from century to century and from one confessional to another. Some prohibitions appear to have at least some explanation, while others do not. A. I. Filyushkin, for example, notes that in medieval Russian Orthodox ethics, the position “from behind” was indicative of falling into paganism because it copied animal behavior, and “woman on top” violated the world order in which the woman must occupy a subordinate position.⁴¹ Arguably, these assertions do not apply to most moderns—men or women. It seems that hardly any Christian couple, connects any sexual position to pagan beliefs or hopes to overthrow the established world order through intercourse. Furthermore, it hardly seems to violate any modern sensibilities if a husband and wife “lustfully” hold hands or even wink at each other.

³⁷ Compare this also to the midrashic texts in which Eve’s sin is that of having sex with the snake, rather than of eating a stolen apple. For a more detailed discussion see Boyarin, Daniel. *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 82. Also in *Babylonian Talmud Yevamot* 103. It is interesting that according to this tradition, the fall (Original Sin) consisted of the defilement of the human race through Eve’s intercourse with the snake. The cleansing came to those who stood at Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Torah (see 103b), and only to them and their descendants—that is to say, only to the Jews.

³⁸ In general, as will be discussed further in this study, the Bible views intercourse as having religious significance of a spiritual union. Thus, biblical views on bestiality (Lev. 18:23; 20:15-16) must be examined through the additional lens of theology, rather than be attributed simply to the Jews’ cultural rejection of zoophilia.

³⁹ Alfred Kinsey in his *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, described this position as the “English-American position.”

⁴⁰ Slavonic: “блуд”

⁴¹ Филоюшкин, А.И. “Православие и этические нормы русского средневековья (по законодательным памятникам).” *Макс Вебер, веберовская традиция и современные подходы к изучению религиозных факторов в истории Европы*. Moscow State University, <http://www.hist.msu.ru/Labs/UkrBel/fil_ethics.doc>. See also Zankov with reference to Пущкарева, Н.А. “Сексуальная этика в частной жизни древних руссов и москвитов (X-XVII вв.).” *Секс и эротика в русской традиционной культуре*. Составитель А.А. Топорков. М.: Ладомир, 1996, с. 44-91.

Already in the 17th-century, at least one confessional⁴² proposes that a penitent who is intelligent should confess his or her own sins without the use of lists read by the priest—a practice suggested for an “ignoramus.”⁴³ A 19th-century confessional, while also containing a list of questions, is far less graphic than its 16th-century predecessors. It asks about masturbation, homosexuality, extramarital sex, incest, and bestiality, but limits its inquiry about marital sex to a generic understanding: “Have you fallen with your wife not according to nature?”⁴⁴ A 20th-century edition⁴⁵ eliminates all sexual questions from the general confessional questionnaire,⁴⁶ and mentions fornication only in a brief instruction to the confessing priest, exhorting the priest to “test” the penitent “with all reasoning, paying attention to differences between persons, and testing them accordingly: clergy differently, laity differently, monastics differently, seculars differently, the young differently, the old differently”⁴⁷—a healthy advice indeed, but one which most probably illustrates and reaffirms an age-old practice, rather than some 20th-century revelation. The minimization of the role of confessional questionnaires, however, leads to the closing-off of a discourse on marital sex, which, having lost its place within private confession, is not likely to easily find a suitable venue in the public life of the Church.

Some have argued that it is “important for there to be a sort of veil around the marriage chamber. It is hard enough for a husband and wife to strive for salvation, intimacy, and everyday kindness...”⁴⁸ This is not only a valid point, but one that is perhaps most prevalent among Western Christians, and, by extension, Orthodox Christians living in the West. But herein lies the dilemma: the art of Orthodox living pays very careful attention to the forces that are at work in our lives—mental, emotional, and physical. We learn to examine and control our thoughts and emotions, and have detailed ecclesiastical instructions on, for example, what to eat, when, and how much. In many ways, marital sex is treated in Orthodox asceticism similarly to food. It is not allowed during Great Lent, and if one happens to succumb to desire, the penance is the same as for eating fish during Lent on a day other than the feast of Annunciation and Palm Sunday—the person is not allowed to partake of Holy Communion on Pascha, “because he has dishonored the entire Lent.”⁴⁹ Sexual desire is arguably one of the most powerful forces in the life of any healthy human—layman or monastic, yet we prefer to cover the elephant in the room with a veil.

If Shikhlyarov’s assertion is correct, then under the guise of faux piety, the Church unwittingly (or even purposefully) fosters the atmosphere of “artificial ignorance on sex ... [and] an attitude that sex is in itself indecent” (Russell). This attitude is by no means novel, but merely a reflection of the current swing of the pendulum of the general attitudes toward

⁴² *Требник* митрополита Петра Могилы. Киев, 1646, 1:347.

⁴³ Slavonic: “невежда”.

⁴⁴ “Чин исповедания”, *Требник*. Киев, 1895, folio 32 on rev. and 33.

⁴⁵ “Чин исповедания”, *Требник*. Москва, 1995, 77.

⁴⁶ A special questionnaire for women retains masturbation and sex with their husbands “not according to nature” as sins—Ibid. 95

⁴⁷ Ibid. 87

⁴⁸ Nadeszda Kizenko from the State University of New York at Albany, private correspondence with the author, 30 April 2010. Dr. Kizenko’s comments and suggestions provided invaluable insight and perspective in the writing of this paper.

⁴⁹ For the prohibition of sex during Lent see Nomocanon 40 (*Требник*. Киев, 1895, folio 444 on reverse); for the prohibition of fish see Typikon 32 (*Типикон*. Киев, 1997, folio 38 on rev.).

sexual and other bodily activities within the context of Christian spirituality. This “swinging” can be traced to the very origins of Christianity and to Platonic and Neo-Platonic influence on the formation of Christian thought, corresponding to similar currents within first-century Hellenistic Judaism. Echoes of misogamy, abhorrence of flesh, and fear of sexuality can be identified in the writings of both the Apostle Paul and Philo of Alexandria,⁵⁰ but also in the writings of such Church Fathers as Gregory of Nyssa, John of Damascus, Maximus the Confessor, and others. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, for example, believed that “married intercourse had been the ‘last outward stopping place’ of Adam and Eve in their sad exile from Paradise,”⁵¹ and the early Chrysostom saw no other purpose for marriage than to control sexual desire and avoid adultery.^{52, 53}

But the opposite trend also exists both in Church Fathers and rabbinical Judaism which, to some extent, can be seen as a reaction against Hellenistic Judaism⁵⁴ and Hellenism in general. Blessed Augustine of Hippo called it an absurdity to say that copulation was a result of sin as implying that “man’s sin was necessary to complete the number of saints,”⁵⁵ and Saint Caesarius of Nazianzus taught that “copulation is ... free from all sin and blame.”⁵⁶ These two competing traditions manifest themselves in the two teachings on sexual pleasure: one arguing that sex is a by-product of sin, that pleasure associated with it is sinful, and that only as much sex and only of the kind absolutely necessary for procreation is begrudgingly tolerated; and the second teaching which states that sex and sexual pleasure are within the divinely established order of human nature, and are integrally connected to the profound sacrament of marriage, which, according to the Apostle Paul, is the sacrament of Christ and the Church.^{57, 58} Thus, the vision and teaching of the Church on marital sex can indeed be reexamined not through the eyes of modern relativism or pseudo-religious affectations, but through pastoral work within the established tradition of Orthodox theological thought.

⁵⁰ See, for example, *De opificio mundi*, LIII (151-2) *et passim*.

⁵¹ Gregory of Nyssa. *De virginiate*, 14.

⁵² John Chrysostom. *De virginiate*, 50:19 *et passim*.

⁵³ In this context, some of the prohibitions against “unnatural” sex may be seen as indicative of a general prohibition against any sexual act that does not have procreation as its goal. However, the confessional manuals do not explicitly connect “unnatural” sexual acts to contraception. Additionally, vaginal intercourse “from behind,” which is proclaimed by the confessionals to be “unnatural,” is most certainly a viable way to procreate.

⁵⁴ See, for example, *Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara* 5a.

⁵⁵ Augustine of Hippo. *De civitate Dei*, XIV, 23.

⁵⁶ Caesarius of Nazianzus. *Dialogue* III, 151 (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, XXXVIII).

⁵⁷ Eph. 5:32

⁵⁸ Both teachings have their theological and soteriological dimensions. For example, if sexual desire is a product of sin, then Christ was not subject to it, and, having not taken it upon Himself, He has not redeemed it. Therefore, we also must fight it just as we must fight every other sin. On the other hand, if sexual desire is a God-given part of human nature, then Christ, being fully-human, also experienced it. Furthermore, not only would He have experienced it, but did so necessarily—in order to restore it and cleanse it from the stain of sin, just as He restored and cleansed the human body, mind, will, etc. Consider, for example, the following statement: “... sex is given to man not by some dark power, not by an evil force in the world, but by the Creator Himself, and it was given for some purpose...” — Керн, Кирилан. *Православное пастырское служение*. Париж, 1957, 221.

After all, our artificial ignorance on sex is hardly an indication of our advanced sanctity or heightened spirituality, nor does it point to the absence of sex-related sins in our lives. Orthodox Christians do not seem to be in any significant way different in this respect from other Christians in the United States. Crystal Renaud, who heads the Victory Over Porn Addiction group at Westside Family Church in Lenexa, Kansas, in a recent interview for *The New York Times* said that, “In the Christian culture, women are supposed to be the nonsexual ones. It’s an injustice that the church is not more open about physical sexuality. God created sex. But the enemy has twisted it.”⁵⁹ If we could agree with Renaud in at least the last two of her assertions, then, would it not be foolish to “piously” ignore the problem?

But is there really a problem? Is it not clear that pornography and infidelity are bad, but whatever happens between a lawful husband and wife in their bedroom is good? Obviously, some of the questions addressed to 16th-century penitents may be irrelevant in the 21st century, but are they all irrelevant? Should pastors insist that married couples abstain from sex on Saturdays, Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, as the old penitentiaries indicate? Perhaps also on Mondays in honor of the bodiless hosts commemorated on this day?—such a practice would be in harmony with the monastic practice of fasting on Mondays in imitation of the angels.⁶⁰ Should the Church concern itself with whether the faithful engage in intercourse “from behind” or in a “woman-on-top” manner? And what about other, perhaps, more controversial positions and techniques? Should pastors guide their parishioners according to their personal sense of propriety, or should the Church exert theological effort to provide guidance to the pastors? There cannot and should not be a singlehanded answer to these questions. But neither can there be a *status quo* in matters that involve life. Even inanimate nature abhors a vacuum,⁶¹ and this principle is no less true for human nature. If the Church lacks an affirmative position, one will be supplied by society, and the Church will be forced to either accept it or react to it. And if the Church wished to reestablish a clear position on matters of marital sex—whether in an effort to provide historical continuity for its own medieval tradition or as a reaction to the ethical challenges of modern ethical relativism—a Scriptural foundation would need to be found for this position.

Sex By the Bible

Most texts in the Bible that speak about sex are laconic. Most often the term that is used to indicate that intercourse took place is “to know”—“Adam knew Eve his wife”⁶² (*ἀδὰμ ὄξει ἔγνωσαν τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ*).^{63, 64} Another term used in many places is “to go in to”—“Jacob

⁵⁹ Leland, John. “Church Counsels Women Addicted to Pornography,” *The New York Times* 2 May 2010.

⁶⁰ This approach to controlling marital sex can quickly lead to either frustration or to very low birth rates. Tuesdays, for example, are devoted to St. John the Baptist who was a strict ascetic, which leaves only Thursdays. Thursdays, in turn, are dedicated to St. Nicholas the Wonderworker; so, given a particular devotion to the memory of this great saint, coupled with other feasts and fasts of the Church throughout the year, marital sex can become an extremely rare occasion, if not a total impossibility.

⁶¹ Spinoza, Baruch. *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (1677), part I, prop. 15: note; but this principle was first formulated by Aristotle.

⁶² The Revised Standard Version of the Bible is used here *et passim*.

⁶³ Here *et passim*: Rahlfs, A., ed. *Septuaginta*. Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1935.

went in to her” (εἰσῆλθεν πρὸς αὐτήν ἰακωβ).⁶⁵ Certainly, no details of any kind—who was “on top,” for example—can be gleaned from these brief mentions. However, the story of Jacob seems to imply that the ancients, or at least Jacob, preferred total darkness and complete silence, at least on the part of the woman: “But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her... And in the morning, behold, it was Leah; and Jacob said to Laban, ‘What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?’”⁶⁶

There could be many reasons for the lack of detail and description. Clearly the Bible treats a variety of other subjects with equal brevity. We know, for example, that “God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it,”⁶⁷ but we are not told how this tilling was supposed to be accomplished or what tools needed to be used. We know that a calf was killed when the prodigal son returned to his father,⁶⁸ but the Scripture is silent about the kind of bread, drink and vegetables that were served. The Bible is not a popular novel and does not concern itself with “juicy” descriptions—it has a goal quite different from that of making its way onto a bestseller list. The exact methodology Adam used to know Eve may simply be unimportant within Sacred Scripture.

Another important reason for the silence could be the taboo status of the topic. We can hardly speak of an emotional aversion of the Jews toward any mention of sex-related acts or body parts. Consider, for example, the following verses:

- ...for in her youth men had lain with her and handled her virgin bosom and poured out their lust upon her...⁶⁹
- Yet she increased her harlotry, remembering the days of her youth, when she played the harlot in the land of Egypt and doted upon her paramours there, whose members were like those of asses, and whose issue was like that of horses. Thus you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when the Egyptians handled your bosom and pressed your young breasts.⁷⁰
- Yea, upon every high hill and under every green tree you bowed down as a harlot... Look at your way in the valley; know what you have done -- a restive young camel interlacing her tracks, a wild ass used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind! Who can restrain her lust? None who seek her need weary themselves; in her month they will find her.⁷¹

Of course, these are prophetic texts, and as such they can be well outside of social norm, just as the prophets themselves may violate certain norms for the purpose of conveying their message. But here is another verse from a legislative text: “He whose testicles are crushed or

⁶⁴ Gen. 4:1

⁶⁵ Gen. 29:23

⁶⁶ Gen. 29:23, 25

⁶⁷ Gen. 2:15

⁶⁸ Luke 15:23

⁶⁹ Ezek. 23:8

⁷⁰ Ezek. 23:19-21

⁷¹ Jer. 2:20, 23-4

whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord⁷²; and another from a historical text: "...and they knew her, and abused her all night until the morning..."⁷³ The Bible does not appear particularly squeamish about mentioning certain sexually-explicit details. Yet, in speaking about marital sex, Scripture seems to use taboo deformations. This taboo is most certainly religious in nature, considering the context in which it is placed. The religious denotation is not that marital sex is shameful or inappropriate—an abomination before the Lord—but that it is sacred in the highest degree.

Note that the first few selections quoted above are not speaking about sex at all. They are the words that God said about Israel and her religious practices. The Bible uses very strong sexual language to convey the nature of God's relationship to His people; or, as is the case with the quoted examples, the nature of the people's relationship to God. While nowadays we typically refer to God as the Father, the Bible often refers to Him as the Bridegroom and Husband, and His people—Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New—as the bride. Thus, the union of God and His bride is described in the terms that we usually associate with marriage—love, wedding feasts, and bridal chambers; or, in the case of Israel: adultery, unfaithfulness, and defilement. In the collective consciousness of the Church, Christ is certainly the Traveler who returns from the faraway land⁷⁴ or the Sower who went out to sow,⁷⁵ and the Church is the rising dough,⁷⁶ but perhaps most prominently, Christ is the Groom and the Church is His Bride.⁷⁷

The very sacrament of our salvation can be and has been envisioned in terms of God's marriage to humanity. And while most often Orthodoxy places the wedding feast at the eschatological end within our temporal dimension, the words that the two shall become one flesh⁷⁸ appear to have come to pass already in the incarnation of Jesus Christ: "And the Word became flesh..."⁷⁹—human flesh, one flesh with us (*cf.*: "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"⁸⁰; "Now you are the body of Christ"⁸¹). The Apostle Paul says that the mystery which we usually refer to a husband and wife—"the two shall become one flesh"⁸²—refers to Christ and the Church.⁸³ Commenting on Genesis 1:27, St. Clement of Rome wrote: "God made man, male and female." He then applied this verse directly to Christ and His Church: "the male is Christ, and the female is the Church."⁸⁴

⁷² Deut. 23:1

⁷³ Judg. 19:25

⁷⁴ Matt. 25:14-30

⁷⁵ Matt. 13:3-9

⁷⁶ Matt. 13:33

⁷⁷ Matt. 9:15; 25:1; John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 18:23, *et passim*

⁷⁸ Gen. 2:24; *cf.* Eph. 5:31

⁷⁹ John 1:14

⁸⁰ Gal. 2:20

⁸¹ 1 Cor. 12:27

⁸² Eph. 5:31

⁸³ Eph. 5:32

⁸⁴ *The Second Epistle of Clement* 14. Authenticity of Saint Clement's authorship is in this case of little consequence.

With a mystery so profound,⁸⁵ taboo deformation in the biblical language about sex may be seen as a parallel to the mystery of the name of God—the actual word is hidden, but the qualities are revealed through euphemisms. The sacred tetragrammaton is not pronounceable, or, more correctly, its pronunciation is veiled from the profane, and it is instead replaced by “my Lords” (*adonai*).⁸⁶ Similarly, the mystery of Christ and the Church is veiled by the euphemism “to know.” And just as “*adonai*” hides the essence while revealing a relational action,⁸⁷ “to know” does the same. In religious context, to know is not to dissect or to study, but to form a union. In other words, to know is not to learn, but to become. Saint John Klimakos once wrote that the perfection of purity is the beginning of theology.⁸⁸ If by purity we are to understand an essential quality of God or an attribute of His likeness, and by theology—the knowledge of God, then it is by *becoming* the likeness of God that we enter into the knowledge of God or a union with God—as opposed to the knowledge *about* God or an objectification of Him.

The notion that an act now commonly viewed as not too much more than a human physiological necessity could be viewed as a sacrament in the context of the biblical narrative is not unique to sexual intercourse. Eating, for example, can also be seen as a sacred act, at least when Scripture speaks of it. There are the obvious examples, such as Abraham’s offering of bread and a sacrificial calf⁸⁹ to *Adonai* Who “appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre,”⁹⁰ and the father’s sacrifice of a calf at the return of his son.⁹¹ According to Leviticus 9:2, a calf is sacrificed for a sin offering. The sin of the prodigal son had to be “washed away” by the blood of the sacrificial calf; and even though the story with Abraham and Sarah is less clear, in the Old-Testament worldview, their lack of children could be seen as a punishment for sin—thus, it would not be far-fetched that Abraham and Sarah thought it appropriate to offer a calf as a sacrifice.⁹²

If we closely examine the brief account in Genesis of the first humans’ stay in the Garden of Eden and their expulsion from it, we can notice three divine ordinations: “be fruitful and multiply” (1:28), “I have given you... food” (29), “the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (2:15). The same three acts—procreation (marriage), eating, and labor⁹³—were corrupted by the original sin and became curses: “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth

⁸⁵ Eph. 5:31

⁸⁶ Contrary to the common English translation of “*adonai*” (Hebrew: אֲדֹנָי) as “Lord,” the word is plural in form (“Lords”); the singular version is “*adoni*.” Additionally, it is in the vocative case, which is lacking in the English language.

⁸⁷ Consider in this context the Palomite theology of God Whose essence is hidden, but Whose uncreated energies are revealed.

⁸⁸ “Τελος δε αγνειας υποθεσις θεολογιας” (*Scala Paradisi* 30:20)

⁸⁹ According to Gen. 18:8, Abraham offered to the three divine visitors milk along with the calf, and “they ate.” But, of course, this would not be Kosher.

⁹⁰ Gen. 18:6, 7

⁹¹ Luke 15:23

⁹² Certainly, we must keep in mind that at the time that Abraham and Sarah hosted their guests, Leviticus had not yet been written. However, both written accounts do come from the same religious, cultural, and traditional source, although not necessarily from the same pen.

⁹³ The work that meant here is probably not the plowing of fields or pounding of nails, although both are also important in this context, but rather the internal work of achieving the likeness of God.

children” (3:16), “cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” (17-19). In the context of the story of the original sin, we may suspect that the Scripture would not be preoccupied with common human physiological necessities or matters that lack religious significance. The very fact that procreation (marriage), eating, and labor are mentioned, points to their sacramental value. Indeed, one of the most profound mysteries of Christianity is that of Christ and the Church—“the two shall become one flesh,” we refer to its highest form of worship as *λειτουργία*, or “*work* of the people,”^{94, 95} and the highest sacrament is a *meal* at which the Body and Blood of God are consumed.

Of course, we have been speaking about procreation or the conception of children, and some have tried to divorce it from the act of sexual intercourse. Saint Methodius of Olympus, for example, commenting on the way that the devil had beguiled the first humans, wrote: “the devil... led [the man] captive, persuading him to conceal the nakedness of his body by fig-leaves; that is, by their friction he excited him to sexual pleasure.”⁹⁶ Should this be taken to mean that in the absence of this trickery of the devil, the man (and woman) would never have known sexual pleasure and instead conceived children by some remote means?⁹⁷ This seems to be implied in the works of many Christian thinkers.⁹⁸ But is this a viable concept, or are Methodius and others trying to put asunder that which God has joined together? Is there any Scriptural support or logic for a proposition that some unknown-to-us way of remote procreation was established for us by God before the fall of the first humans, and that what we have now in no way relates to that which was preordained? It seems that at least three principal objections could be raised to such an argument.

First, if a completely different way of procreation had been established, and that which we now have in no way resembles the original divine creation, from whence, then, would this new and unique way have come? Methodius himself in the above-cited discourse (n. 95), quite correctly argues that the devil is only an imitator, not a creator. He is only able to corrupt that which was created by God. And if God did not create sexual intercourse with its pleasures, neither did the devil; how, then, did it come to be? Would it not be much more appropriate to say that the whole of creation—with mountains and valleys, bees and flowers, men and women, and their genitals—is the wonderful work of the Creator? We must acknowledge that sin corrupts that which God has created, but can it be that the corrupted

⁹⁴ From *λαός*—“people” and *-ουργός* < *ἔργον*—“work”; could be translated as either “work of the people” or “work for the people,” and in the most profane sense, “public works.”

⁹⁵ This is but one example of the sacramental status of labor. A more interesting case for study, in my opinion, is the third chapter of 2 Thess. The Apostle Paul entreats the faithful to work; and “if anyone will not work, let him not eat” (10). Considering that much of eating in the early Christian community was the form of agape meals (see, for example, *The Letters of Pliny the Younger*, book 10, letter 97), there can be envisioned a clear liturgical connection between work and the sacrament of the Eucharist.

⁹⁶ Methodius of Olympus. *Concerning Chastity*, discourse 10, ch. 5.

⁹⁷ For a very meaningful discussion on the relationship between procreation and sexual love see Solovyov, Vladimir Sergeyevich, “Beauty, Sexuality, and Love,” *Ultimate Questions*, ed. By Alexander Schmemmann, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965, pp. 73-134.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Justin Martyr, *Fragments*, ch. 3; Origen, *Against Celsus*, preface, ch. 37; and others.

world bears no resemblance to the original whatsoever? What would be the basis and benefit of thinking that God did not create our arms, legs, heads, or any other body part? Would it not be a completely unnecessary leap of faith which defies the framework of Christian theology to propose that Adam and Eve's genitals and the nerve endings which produce very specific sensations somehow spontaneously developed through the act of donning fig-leaves? It seems more profitable to suppose that both the genitals and the nerve endings in them were created by the same Creator Who fashioned our hands and the nerve endings in them: "Now the flesh, too, had its existence from the Word of God, because of the principle, that here should be nothing without that Word."⁹⁹ To abhor our flesh and to propose that "it is unclean from its first formation... [and] is even more unclean afterwards from the mire of its own seminal transmission... [and that] it is worthless, weak, covered with guilt, laden with misery, full of trouble"¹⁰⁰—is the doctrine of the Gnostics to which the Fathers of the Church objected as a false teaching.

Second, what is really so morbid about the feeling of pleasure usually associated with procreation? Would it not be sickening to envision a human who feels no pleasure, or worse—feels displeasure? Would this not be commonly viewed as a symptom of some emotional trauma or psychological disorder? Do we jerk away when a cat's soft fur is pleasant to the touch? Do we plug our ears when a lark's song or a child's laughter pleases our ear? Do we gouge out our eyes when a sunset or a beautiful flower is a pleasure to look at? Most healthy Christians faced with such pleasures are more likely to praise and thank God for giving these gifts to us, than to shut themselves away in a cold, dark, silent, and lonely place in order that they might not experience pleasure. In the instructions for the *sacramentum sacramentorum*, the Eucharist, it is stated that the bread must be "pleasant ... for eating,"¹⁰¹ and likewise the "wine must have its proper taste and aroma, must be pleasant for drinking."¹⁰² We do not choose the worst-tasting bread and wine for the sake of avoiding pleasure. Why, then, should Christians be offended by sexual pleasure? Is it not plausible that the One Who gave song to the larks; and pours out the warm spring rain in which children play and laugh; and makes the sunset glow red, and orange, and a cool breeze come from the sea on a on a summer night—also gave to a husband and wife the gift of finding pleasure in each other?

Finally, if genitals were a purely superficial part of our bodies, or worse, a sinful one—one that somehow had sprung into being due to the fall and was not God's original creation—should we use it as a chief factor in determining who can be a priest in the Church and who cannot? Suppose a man and a woman of equally-godly lives, superior intellects and stature among their peers, both learned in matters of faith, were considered for priesthood. One would be elevated to the office, while the other would not—based solely on the nature of their genitals. Suppose now, that the man is of lesser learning, his life somewhat less admirable, and his faith somewhat weaker than the woman's—will it not again be the man who is elevated to the holy priesthood, and again solely on the nature of his genitals, for he has no other notable advantage over the woman? Of course, men and women are different

⁹⁹ Tertullian. *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, ch. 5.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 4.

¹⁰¹ "Instructional Information." *Service Book: The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*. Jordanville: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1999, p. 37.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 39

not only in the shape of their genitals; most correctly, the difference is hypostatic. But in practice, no hypostatic test or inquiry is necessary for ordination. Similarly, a man's "manhood," level of testosterone, or any psychological or other quality is never questioned. No special "manly" personality is required, and a feminine man will still be ordained over a masculine woman. If the genitals matter so much, would it not be wise to consider them and the way they function?

In "theologese," one and the same human nature is shared by all human hypostases, male or female, or as Tertullian wrote: "the souls of everyone are all of one nature."¹⁰³ Yet this nature becomes incarnate differently, following the hypostatic distinction between men and women. And although some have argued that flesh is previous to soul,^{104, 105} it is the divine purpose pronounced by the Word of God that is both previous to and a guiding principle for the formation of both flesh and soul. Thus, our flesh with its gender distinctions which are most notable in things other than a deep voice or facial hair (or the lack of both), is not only a direct result of God's creative purpose, preordained and predestined by His Word, but also is the most suitable companion for the soul; both must be restored in order for the whole person to become a partaker in the resurrection into the eternal life with God. Mechanically, when we speak of the general resurrection into the eternal life with God, we are not speaking of the resurrection of souls, for they neither die nor are in need of resurrection. Rather, we speak of the restoration and resurrection of bodies, and the return of souls to their bodies, so that the whole person may enter into life. In the words of Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, "All await the same salvation of the complete man, that is, the soul and body."¹⁰⁶

The exact nature of these resurrected bodies is unknown to us. This, however, does not mean that our bodies will be androgynous or asexual. Such a proposal would also mean that Christ's resurrected Body is androgynous or asexual. Yet there is nothing in the Scripture or the Fathers to support this view. While some of Christ's disciples failed to recognize Him after the resurrection,¹⁰⁷ this was not due to Christ's asexuality. On the contrary, all of the post-resurrection accounts suggest that it was Christ's divinity which was hidden from the disciples, not His humanity. According to His humanity, Christ appeared to His disciples as an average man. On the other hand, Christ's command to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side,"¹⁰⁸ and His exhibition meal before the disciples,¹⁰⁹ seem to be instrumental in confronting their disbelief in His humanity. Thus, first, the disciples needed to be convinced that a human body could be joined to divinity, then—that divinity could have a human body. But in both cases, the body was in all respects human: it walked, its hands and side could be touched, it ate (presumably,

¹⁰³ Tertullian. *A Treatise On the Soul*, ch. 41.

¹⁰⁴ —. *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, ch. 5.

¹⁰⁵ The teaching our bodies are previous to our souls, and that God creates souls to "fill" the bodies was an argument against the doctrine of reincarnation, in which the soul is previous to the body, or the many bodies, which it changes like gloves.

¹⁰⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons. *Against Heresies* 4:20.

¹⁰⁷ John 20:15; Luke 24:16

¹⁰⁸ Luke 20:27

¹⁰⁹ Luke 24:41-3

with teeth, tongue, esophagus, etc.)... Of course, it also went through walls,¹¹⁰ but this “feature” adds to Christ’s humanity, not detracts from it. Perhaps, the strongest language concerning Christ’s full humanity can be found in the *Divine Hymns* of Saint Symeon the New Theologian:

In this manner, all members of each one of us individually become the members of Christ, and all unsightly members He will make pleasing to sight, adorning them with beauty and glory of His Divinity. ... you are not afraid or ashamed to acknowledge that [both] my finger is Christ, and [so is] my sexual member? But God was not ashamed to become like you...¹¹¹

Christ said that in the resurrection, people neither marry nor are given in marriage,¹¹² but these words can hardly be seen as a condemnation of marriage or gender or a denigration of them as temporal. Perhaps the best indication that marriage is not just a condition of the fallen man but belongs to the kingdom not of this world is the fact that the Church considers marriage to be a sacrament just like baptism, ordination, and communion. In another biblical passage, we read about the miracle in Cana in Galilee where Christ turned water into wine.¹¹³ Some have noted that this miracle indicates God’s blessing on our normal human pleasures—after all Christ turned water into wine and not the other way around, and He did this for people who were already “under the influence.”¹¹⁴ Others see this as God’s blessing of marriage: “The Son of God went to the wedding so that marriage, which had been instituted by His own authority, might be sanctified by His blessed presence.”¹¹⁵ Both are most certainly correct, but there is another theme to which we continue to return in our discussion of marriage—the mystical vision of human marriage as an icon of its prototype, the eschatological marriage of Christ and His Church.

Saint Theodore Stratelates draws a direct parallel between the mystical wedding of the Word of God and the feast in Cana in Galilee:

[Christ] convened the wedding [of the Word of God and His bride] on the third day [after His baptism], that is, the last times of the age. For He struck the transgression that was in Adam and again bandaged us on the third day, that is, in the last times when, becoming human for us He took on the whole fleshly nature that He resurrected in Himself from the dead. Therefore, because of this [John] mentions the third day as the day when He consecrated the wedding.¹¹⁶

This mystical connection between a neighborhood wedding and the age to come appears to be at the forefront of the Gospel account. If we once again remind ourselves of the fact that the Gospels (especially the Gospel of John), are not biographies of a famous person or a collection of short stories, but a sacred, mystical, and liturgical text of the Church, we may treat the account of Christ’s first miracle as an icon or window, through which spiritual light

¹¹⁰ John 20:26

¹¹¹ Преп СИМЕОН НОВЫЙ БОГОСЛОВ. *Божественные гимны*. Сергиев Посад, 1917, pp. 261-2.

¹¹² Mark 12:25; Matt. 22:30; Luke 20:35

¹¹³ John 2:1-11

¹¹⁴ This thought was once voiced by Protodeacon Andrei Kuraev.

¹¹⁵ Maximus of Turin, *Sermon 23*.

¹¹⁶ Theodore Stratelates. *Fragment on John 12*.

can enter our human world. Considering that the images of a wedding feast and wine are among the most heavily-loaded with New-Testament sacramental symbolism, it is most probable that Christ's presence at the wedding and His miracle convey much more than a blessing of a couple or even all couples. Saint Romanus Melodus, for example, places the wedding at Cana directly into the liturgical context:

When Christ, as a sign of His power, clearly changed the water into wine all the crowd rejoiced, for they considered the taste marvelous. Now we all partake at the banquet in the church for Christ's blood is changed into wine and we drink it with holy joy, praising the great Bridegroom, for He is the true Bridegroom, the Son of Mary, the Word before all time who took the form of a servant, He who has in wisdom created all things.¹¹⁷

Similarly, Saint Theodore of Mopsuestia appears to imply that the wine was not merely a festive drink, but also a spiritual one: "According to the will of the one who gave the command, the water was changed into wine, slaking the thirst of those who drank but also providing wine more abundantly for the couple's future."¹¹⁸ Perhaps, it would be a stretch to assume that Saint Theodore is speaking about the future in the eternal sense of the word as it is used in Christian eschatology, but there is certainly nothing which would preclude us from arguing that love and marriage possess those eternal values.

This is not to suggest that sexual intercourse is an eternal part of marriage and it also possesses eternal properties. It is intimately tied to the task of procreation, and if God willed for the procreation of the human race to be completed in this age, then the conceptual need for sex in the age to come would cease to exist much as it does for humans of advanced biological age. But such thinking should not result in a conclusion that we must already fly about in white robes, go through walls, and reject all food unless it is leaves from the tree of life¹¹⁹—"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."¹²⁰

The Apostle Paul writes that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."¹²¹ This, however, does not mean that the Apostle Paul was not a free male Jew, but some transnational, transgender being of uncertain social status. I shall not bore the reader with testimony to the contrary found in the same Apostle's epistles. In the same vein, the Church insists that there are males and females. The Church does not bless marriages of two individuals who are neither sex, but only those marriages where one spouse is decidedly male and the other is decidedly female. The tradition of the Church makes clear distinctions between males and females in matters that pertain to our Christian lives in this world, while treating both as equal before God. Indeed, the fact that we are one in Christ does not in itself imply that we are all the same, that being in Christ means losing our unique personality, experience, character, way of being human, including our gender. Such a view would be more descriptive

¹¹⁷ Romanus Melodus. *Kontakion on the Marriage at Cana* 7:20.

¹¹⁸ Theodore of Mopsuestia. *Commentary on John* 1.2.6-7.

¹¹⁹ See Rev. 22:2

¹²⁰ Qoh. 3:1

¹²¹ Gal. 3:28

of a life in a Borg Collective¹²² than of that in Christ. But most importantly, life in Christ does not begin at some future time, it begins here and now. Life in Christ includes not only the eternal bliss of Paradise, but equally a child playing “pooh sticks,”¹²³ a first love, a wedding, children sitting on their father’s lap and listening to fairytales, the blessing of the fruit of our labors on the Feast of Transfiguration, and memorial services for those who lived and labored before us—all is to be sanctified. To be sure, in the Second Coming we will not be concerned with either “pooh sticks,” or wedding cakes, or fairytales. But in the unwaning day of God’s kingdom, even Holy Communion is said to be “more perfect” than it is now.¹²⁴ This, however, is certainly no reason to reject the Gifts that Christ gave to us here and now, and which are not only beneficial to us in our temporal state, but lead us to the eternal life with God.

Why Does God Care?

If sexual relations between husband and wife were a “by-product” of the original sin or were exclusive to our fallen nature and had no connection to reality beyond our temporal world, then it would be understandable why the Church should regulate such relations, limit them, or forbid them altogether, even at the expense of limiting or eliminating population growth. After all, can anyone really argue that any individual man or woman is obliged to produce offspring, Genesis 1:28 notwithstanding? On the other hand, if sexual relations between husband and wife are natural or even have a certain spiritual dimension, why then should God care how precisely we do it?

Of course, it would be presumptuous to try to answer the question of why God cares, but we can try to address the question of why the Church cares, that is to say, why the faithful should care. And in this, the answer could be quite simple: the Church regulates sacraments. In fact, regulation of sacraments can be seen as one of the functions of the Church. Of the many views on what a sacrament is, St. Augustine’s of Hippo seems to best capture the most important aspect of it: “a visible sign of an invisible reality.” This definition establishes a clear connection between our actions within the temporal, physical world and their implications in the spiritual, “invisible” reality; conversely, this connection denotes the relationship of the invisible reality to the temporal physical reality through actions that are visible and tangible.

Earlier in this paper we discussed three primary commandments that could be seen as the primary sacraments: marriage, eating, and labor. Labor can undoubtedly be understood as the work of tilling the garden of one’s soul, as fighting against the “thorns and thistles” of sins that it produces¹²⁵—the labor of repentance necessary for becoming the likeness of God, the highest fruit of which—the mystical union with God—is represented in the Liturgy:

¹²² The Borg are a fictional pseudo-race from the television series *Star Trek*. They lack individuality and instead make up a “hive mind” or a superorganism.

¹²³ See Milne, A.A. *The House At Pooh Corner*, Chapter VI “In Which Pooh Invents a New Game and Everyone Joins In”

¹²⁴ From the Resurrection Hymns after the communion of clergy in the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom.

¹²⁵ cf. Gen. 3:18

The purpose of this [God's withholding His likeness from man—see Gen. 1:27] was that man should acquire it [God's likeness] for himself by his own earnest efforts...¹²⁶

But it is proper that one part [God's image] is given to you, while the other [God's likeness] has been left incomplete: this is so that you might complete it yourself...¹²⁷

Eating is one of the most sacramental acts that humans perform. Even when taken outside of any religious context, eating sustains life, provides for growth, and gives us the most intimate connection to the physical world—we literally devour it. In the religious context, Christ Himself became “the food of the whole world”¹²⁸ and is consumed in the *sacramentum sacramentorum*—Communion.¹²⁹ Some find *theophagy* in many ancient religious systems that predate the birth of Christ,¹³⁰ yet Christian thinkers place *theophagy* at the very creation of the first man. Saint Jerome, for example, alluded to the Tree's of Life being Christ,¹³¹ and rightfully so—it gave eternal life to those who partook of it.

Finally, the union of man and wife—similarly to labor and eating—can be seen as having both the natural side and its mystical, sacramental, “invisible reality”:

Even in the beginning, when woman was made from a rib in the side of the sleeping man, that had no less a purpose than to symbolize prophetically the union of Christ and His Church.¹³²

If the union of Adam and Eve is a great mystery in Christ and in the Church, it is certain that as Eve was bone of the bones of her husband and flesh of his flesh, we also are members of Christ's body, bones of His bones and flesh of His flesh.¹³³

Thus, all three sacraments work together to achieve the same goal—the union of God and man—which can be identified as the true goal of any “official” sacrament, however many of them one chooses to count. Of course, the quotes above do not specifically refer to sex, but Saint Augustine postulates that it also was a natural and divinely ordained part of the union of man and wife in paradise:

...I do not see what could have prohibited them [Adam and Eve] from honorable nuptial union and “the bed undefiled” even in paradise. God could have granted them this if they had lived in a faithful and just manner...¹³⁴

All three of these primary sacraments—labor, eating, and marriage—are guarded by the Church precisely because they are sacraments and as such fall under the jurisdiction of the Church. They are the commandments of paradise, and the medicine given to us by our

¹²⁶ Origen. *On First Principles* 3.6.1.

¹²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa. *On the Origin of Man*.

¹²⁸ From the Prayer or Oblation at the service of prothesis (the *proskomedè*). *The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*. Jordanville: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1999, p. 23.

¹²⁹ It must be noted that the words *sacramentum sacramentorum* are referred to the Eucharist within which Communion takes place.

¹³⁰ See Frazer, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890)

¹³¹ Jerome. *Homilies* I.

¹³² Augustine of Hippo. *City of God* 22:17.

¹³³ Ambrose of Milan. *Letters to Laymen* 85.

¹³⁴ Augustine of Hippo. *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 9:3:5-6.

Creator after we became infected with sin. They are also the areas of our lives that can get corrupted—either by the devil or by our own volition. Our eating can become gluttony, as we turn into slaves of our flesh; our marriage can become fertile ground for lust, pride, and other passions; and our labor can turn into the pursuit of earthly rather than heavenly treasures.¹³⁵ Traditionally, the Church guards our labors through liturgical rites, our eating—through the Eucharist and in the fasts and blessed feasts, and our marriage in all its aspects—through the rite of Christian wedding and continually through spousal fasting and the rite of confession.¹³⁶ Another indicator of the sacramental nature of spousal relations is the Church’s insistence on their exclusivity. The Church, for example, does not regulate with whom or when we shake hands, but it tells us exactly with whom to enter into the labor of the Liturgy, precisely of what to partake in the Eucharist, and exclusively with whom to enter into sexual intercourse. Until relatively recently, the Church also appeared to regulate the specifics of the marital sexual relationship.

In modern times, however, the situation has changed and the Church remains mostly silent on the matter of marital sex (although all other spousal relationship issues are featured prominently both in confession and counseling). As one parish priest wrote to me, “I would characterize the contemporary situation in Confession among traditional Orthodox as ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’—we don’t ask, and they don’t tell.”¹³⁷ Perhaps it is too early to tell which approach is more productive, as the “don’t ask, don’t tell” principle appears to still be a work-in-progress. Marital sex is not the only area that is a work-in-progress in Russian Orthodoxy. Ancient strict fasting rules, for example, are being replaced by an individualist approach: “A fast must be kept, but according to one’s own strength [measure].”¹³⁸ It is most often emphasized that the ancient fasting rules are monastic in origin, and that a variety of indulgences from the rules are allowable to people who work, have children, suffer from an illness, etc.—which includes virtually every layman.

Strangely enough, no indulgence is usually offered in fasting from marital sex. As much is attested by the head of the Catechetical Department of the Dnepropetrovsk Diocese, Archpriest Alexander Nemchinov, who writes: “As for intimate relations [during Lent], I have not heard of any indulgences.”¹³⁹ Others, however, have heard of some indulgences. The oldest-serving pastor of the Western American Diocese, Archpriest Alexander Lebedev, implies that the rules may not be so strict not only for laymen, but even for clergy:

The scriptural admonition is for married couples *not* to deny each other sexual relations, except by mutual consent for the purpose of prayer and fasting. Abstinence from sexual relations (by mutual consent) is certainly appropriate the evening before receiving the Holy Sacraments, and during the day that one receives them. It is

¹³⁵ See Matt. 6:19-21

¹³⁶ Even though some are accustomed to referring to “wedding” (“crowning”) and “confession” as sacraments, methinks, more properly, they are rites, whereas marriage and repentance respectively are indeed sacraments.

¹³⁷ Fr. James Baglien of St. Martin the Merciful Russian Orthodox Church in Corvallis, OR, private correspondence with author, 24 May 2010.

¹³⁸ Гумеров, свящ. Афанасий. *Вопросы священнику*. <<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/answers/6360.htm>>.

¹³⁹ Немчинов, прот. Александр. “В пост главным должны стать наши отношения с Богом”. <<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/guest/4792.htm>>.

certainly *not* an absolute “requirement” of the Church to abstain on all fast days (and on the eves of fast days), or during the 11 days after the Nativity when marriages are not permitted. The Russian Church in the 13th century issued guidelines for married clergy on these issues, and they included as days of mandatory abstinence only the first and last week of Great Lent, the two weeks of Dormition Lent, and Wednesdays and Fridays during Nativity Lent and the Lent of the Holy Apostles. The married state is blessed and the marriage bed is undefiled. The Holy Church in protecting the sanctity of marriage and the well-being of the spouses, as well as encouraging procreation and the raising of “fair children” has no interest in creating artificial impediments to preclude spouses from “rejoicing in one another.”¹⁴⁰

This does not seem to be the official majority opinion within the Russian Church, although if I were to guess, this may be very close to the common practice, at least among many laymen.

This short study does not pretend to draw any definitive conclusions on which tradition of spousal fasting is correct, and certainly not on which specific sexual positions or techniques are allowed or appropriate. My hope was to raise questions, not to settle them. The task of proposing answers to these questions, however, promises to be a unique one. Most often, saintly monastics act as the experts in any matter pertaining to Christian asceticism. The logic is simple: the monks and nuns know from first-hand experience what effect ascetic praxis has on our souls and what specific practices are beneficial and in what measure. The problem is that in the case of marital sex, the monastics are not qualified to offer their advice for reasons that are quite obvious—they do not (or should not) have any first-hand experience. Even in the case of those saintly elders who were once married, their decision to follow a path of celibacy puts them in a dubious position for guiding married couples in matters of sexuality. The resulting attitude seems to follow in the way of a common misunderstanding of the words, “man shall not live by bread alone.”¹⁴¹ In popular consciousness, these words often get interpreted through Christ’s refusal to turn stones into bread. But Christ did not say that man shall not live by bread; He said by bread, just not bread alone—the exchange between Christ and His tempter is infinitely more complex than a simple rejection of bread. Consider, for example, God’s saying, “it is not good that the man should be alone.”¹⁴² God is not saying that it is not good for the man to be; on the contrary: he should be, and he should not be alone.

One interesting example of the clash between the married state and monasticism may be observed in the evening prayer rule that the Russian Orthodox faithful are encouraged to observe.¹⁴³ All of the evening prayers are either directly attributed to monks of great ascetic lives or appear to be monastic in origin. As such, they are concerned with matters specific to monastic nocturnal struggles and do not take into account the way that married people deal

¹⁴⁰ Archpriest Alexander Lebedev, a post to the Western American Diocese clergy discussion group, 21 February 2001.

¹⁴¹ Matt. 4:4

¹⁴² Gen. 2:18

¹⁴³ For a detailed discussion on prayer rules, see Sveshnikov, Sergei, “Morning and Evening Prayer Rules in the Russian Orthodox Tradition,” <<http://frsergei.wordpress.com/2009/12/22/morning-and-evening-prayer-rules-in-the-russian-orthodox-tradition/>>.

with their temptations. Not a single prayer in the evening rule asks for a blessing of the spousal union, a sanctification of the couple's love for each other, or even for a healthy and God-pleasing conception of a child! If we did not take into account that these prayers were written by monks for monks, it may appear that the Church simply ignores the reality of the lives of the overwhelming majority of the faithful.

The monastic attitudes toward the married state are perhaps best summarized by Abbot Sergii (Rybko): "...I am a maximalist. A short while after my coming to Church, I understood that something was lacking for me in secular, married Christianity. And when monasticism was opened to me, I realized that it was something for which it was worth living, to which it was worth devoting, myself because it is the whole fullness of life. To live to the maximum, to take from life everything—this is monasticism."¹⁴⁴ As laudable as this position is for one who has devoted his life to the path of monasticism, it also implies that, due to their married state, an overwhelming majority of Christians, including Abbot Sergii's own parents and the parents of every saint and hierarch of the Christian Church, are cut off from the fullness of life in God, and that their lives are somehow not "worth living," not "worth devoting" oneself to. Clearly this view must be treated as some individual calling, since, if taken generally, it would contradict not only the basic beliefs of the Christian faith, but also the corpus of Orthodox liturgical theology, which "witnesses as nowhere else to the goodness, the glory, and the excellence of marriage."¹⁴⁵

Thus, the task of developing the Church's position on marital sex—if such a task were to be undertaken—would fall on married clergy and their wives, who are uniquely qualified to both have first-hand experience with the topic and to offer pastoral guidance to the faithful. Ironically, however, any such efforts may need to receive hierarchal approbations, and Orthodox hierarchy is comprised exclusively of monks. Of course, what happens in a private confession could be a uniquely privileged experience mostly outside of hierarchal control, but any consorted efforts to develop an official position would necessarily fall under the guidance of a bishop. How these efforts unfold or whether they even begin, depends on the intricate interplay between the monastic tradition of the Church and its married clergy and the lay faithful. Between the two competing views—that marital sex is begrudgingly allowed only on certain days, only in the missionary position, and only for the purpose of procreation (oh, and don't even think about playing footsies), and the "don't ask, don't tell" approach, in which anything goes as long as nobody knows—can there be found a middle ground consistent with both the sacramental significance of marriage and the Church's role in protecting sacraments? Can the Church offer any guidance to a young married couple without forcing them to look at their relationship from the point of view of a monastic struggle—a path they have not chosen for themselves? Or, to use the sacrament of Communion as an analogy, can the Church protect the sanctity of the use of sacramental wine without on the one hand implying that grape juice or even water would be much better, or on the other hand hesitating to address the issue even if whiskey is being used? It appears

¹⁴⁴ Рыбко, иг. Сергий. "Неформалы и монах, или Евангелие на рок-концерте", интервью с Валерией Посашко. *Православие и мир*. <<http://www.pravmir.ru/neformaly-i-monax-ili-evangelie-na-rok-koncerte/>>.

¹⁴⁵ Zion, William Basil. *Eros and Transformation: Sexuality and Marriage: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1992, p. 121.

that in its fullness, the Church possesses both the theological workup and the practical expertise necessary for answering these and similar questions.

A contemporary Russian theologian, when asked why parents should baptize their child and raise him in the Orthodox faith instead of waiting for the boy to grow up and make up his own mind, said that the parents could indeed wait, but who gave them a guarantee that the devil would also wait and not attack this child until he is baptized? Could a similar argument be made with respect to the Church's involvement in marital guidance? We can pretend that an official position is unnecessary because there is no sex in the Church and even have ascetic hagiography to prove it, but who can give us a guarantee that the devil will also play pretend with us?



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