



The Sacredness of Marriage: God's Life-Long School of Love

Dr Philip Kariatlis
Academic Director and Senior Lecturer in Theology
St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College



Throughout the centuries, the institution of marriage has been challenged, either more openly, as is the case today in secular and increasingly consumer-driven societies, or somewhat more tacitly, as was the case, for example, in traditionally Christian societies, especially in the Middle Ages and for the most part in the West which saw marriage in a rather negative or at best reductionist way.¹ These societies, for example, understood marriage in an ultimately negative light - namely, only in terms of a necessary reality brought about by the fallen state of humanity and unavoidable for the propagation of the human race.² Further confusion relating to the institution of marriage has abounded throughout the ages precisely because of the fact that marriage is a universal societal phenomenon common to all people whose understanding of its structure, function and purpose invariably differs. It follows, therefore - and indeed it ought not be surprising - that the understanding of marriage today will differ amongst different groups of people in societies with different religious or ideological outlooks and agendas.

Coupled with the diverse approaches to the meaning of marriage amongst different groups of people, differences can also be discerned today amongst the numerous academic disciplines or the sciences. The understanding of marriage, for example, from within the discipline of medicine may very well differ from that of the social sciences - sociology, anthropology, psychology - let alone the different philosophical approaches to this social institution. Indeed, precisely because of the fact that marriage per se is not the exclusive domain of

Christian theology, it is of no surprise that different understandings of marriage will exist within different academic disciplines. In light of all this confusion relating to marriage in all spheres of human engagement with it, and even what societies around the world are witnessing today with regards to the desacralisation of marriage,³ it becomes all the more important for the faithful to become better acquainted with their Church's teaching on the sacredness of marriage, doing so, however, in such a way which is not restricted, intolerant and authoritarian. Indeed, within the context of often impassioned debates witnessed today on the issue of marriage, it is important for the Orthodox Church, to make known its understanding of the meaning and purpose of marriage within society. A question, however, which might justifiably arise is what indeed is the unique position of the Eastern Orthodox tradition on this issue, and it is to this that our attention is now turned.

3. There are various attempts to redefine the traditional meaning of marriage as a union of a man and woman. From an Orthodox perspective these are based on certain misunderstandings of the human person that have existed throughout time. Already in the 2nd century, Gnosticism downplayed the importance of the body - and therefore by extension gender distinction - giving permanent validity to the soul. Today, we can see a tendency which wants to downplay if not totally reject the importance of gender differentiation. Such a tendency, referred to as 'unisexism', is the new Gnosticism of our time. In the same way that Gnosticism in the early Church saw the 'body' merely as an insignificant 'receptacle' for the soul, today the embodied distinction and complementarity between man and woman are seen to be essentially incidental and hardly relevant to one's personal existence. This understanding, coupled with the individualist mindset of many within society today, who tend to validate whatever desires are 'felt' to be true to their identity, thus endorsing pansexual attitudes, come to disregard the complementarity of gender as a necessary component of man and woman's quest for wholeness, sanctity and ultimately eternity. When sanctioned by governments as a whole, this pansexual mindset which claims that sexual choice need not necessarily be limited to biological sex, gender or gender identity is introduced into schools, curricula, media etc thus resulting in its normalisation within society. A recent study on marriage described unisexism as "an anthropological heresy involving great confusion about what it means to be human - a confusion that negatively impacts both individuals and society as a whole. It includes all claims and practices that would attempt to eliminate, or at least substantially minimize, the clearly distinguishable biological/physical, emotional, and psychological differences between male and female human beings, with the result that men and women, and boys and girls are considered to be not simply equal in nature, dignity and honour, but also essentially interchangeable." *Glory and Honor: Orthodox Christian Resources on Marriage*, ed. David C. Ford, Mary S. Ford and Alfred Kentigern Siewers (Yonkers NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016), 12.

1. Right from the outset, it needs to be noted that no where in the marriage service is marriage presented as a remedy against sin, namely as a way of controlling unruly passions. On the contrary, marriage is seen in an extremely positive light in the context of human nature as created by God.

2. The late Fr John Meyendorff summarised this reductionist understanding of marriage seen merely for the propagation of children well. He noted that the Eastern understanding of marriage was "in the Latin West, the dominant position was the old Roman idea, that marriage is a contract between two consenting partners... that the contract is indissoluble, except by the death of one of the partners, and that sexual activity (in itself a consequence of original sin), becomes acceptable in marriage only for the sake of childbirth." John Meyendorff, "Christian Marriage in Byzantium: The Canonical and Liturgical Tradition", *Dumbarton Oaks* 44 (1990): 101.

Marriage as Sacrament

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, marriage is first and foremost considered a sacrament of the Church. It is regarded so, because through marriage, it is believed, God opens up a pathway for two specific persons - husband and wife - to enter into his eternal kingdom. More so, as a sacrament of the Church, marriage is not only regarded as a sign of God's kingdom - or a pathway towards it - but more than that, the very revelation of God's heavenly kingdom in the world, a theophany in the real sense of the word. Indeed, in the New Testament, the marriage feast and the coming Kingdom of God are juxtaposed: "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to the wedding banquet" (Mt 22:2), namely, an understanding of marriage which is nothing less than a couple's entrance into the realm of the miraculous and not the mundane. A couple - man and woman - entering into the sacrament of marriage is bestowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit to embark upon a common life together towards God's glorious kingdom, experiencing its first fruits even in the here and now, and then giving witness to this loving mode of communal existence to those around them. In this sense, when approached from the perspective of sacrament, marriage signifies something infinitely more than the mere cohabitation of two people for their own individual fulfilment or gratification. Indeed, as will be shown, when blessed by the Church, the natural bond has the potential of becoming an eternal one reflecting the loving fellowship of the divine Persons of the Holy Trinity.

It is this sacramental dimension of marriage which distinguishes the Eastern Orthodox vision of marriage from all other understandings. Understood in terms of a commitment between a husband and wife - which has been blessed at the same time with the gift of the Holy Spirit - marriage is a holy vocation drawing husband and wife closer to one another as they journey together towards the liberating gift of God's eternal kingdom. Accordingly, marriage cannot be seen merely as a human or legally binding institution⁴ which holds only to the extent that there is personal and interpersonal fulfilment. Furthermore, as "a sacrament of the kingdom," this marital bond cannot therefore be reduced simply to a sanctioned means for procreation⁵ since its primary purpose is for husband and wife to assist each other towards the attain-

ment of God's kingdom in their life-long dedication and love for one another. In 1 Jn 3:14 we are assured that: "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love." Moreover, as a sacrament of love, marriage has the potential of bringing a couple nearer to God. In reflecting on married life as a means for a couple's encounter with God, St Gregory the Theologian wrote: "for marriage does not remove us from God, God brings us all the more closer to him, for it is God himself who draws us to it."⁶ According to St Gregory, within the context of marriage, it could very simply be put in the following way: "I love God by loving my spouse." In this way, God becomes known - and indeed encountered - through the other.⁷ In uniting with God's love in their love for one another, the couple is given the opportunity to become 'god-like' - namely, by grace, enabled to experience in this life, by way of foretaste, the life-giving fellowship and unitive love existing between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is in this sense that many Orthodox theologians have referred to the love experienced within the sacrament of marriage as something no less than a reflection of divine love, and therefore salvific.

Seen from within this salvific perspective, marriage ought not to be seen as being a restriction or loss of freedom as is often stated rather flippantly, but rather a unique potential for a couple, through the "sending down... of love perfect" - as is said in the marriage service - to unite themselves to God who himself is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8) in their love for one another and in so doing to experience the freedom that God is (2 Cor 3:17). Indeed, with the gift of God's liberating love, a couple is enabled to be freed from the constraints of isolationist and individualist tendencies - prominent characteristics of many 'developed' societies today - which lead to nothing other than a miserable existence, loneliness and ultimately death. Accordingly, the sacramental dimension of marriage signifies the Church's understanding that marriage is an essential way of salvation, a consecration of two people equipped with the love of God so that, in freely striving together throughout life, they may make the eternal and liberating joy of God's loving and communal mode of existence - and indeed his kingdom - a living presence in their life.

Understood as a divine gift or sacrament drawing a couple to one another, to God and his kingdom, the other-

4. It was Roman law which saw marriage in terms of an agreement between two freely consenting people. According to Roman law "marriage is not in the intercourse but in the consent [nuptias non concubitus, sed consensus facit]." Cited in John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 16.

5. Marriage understood in terms of procreation was Old Testament Judaic understanding where the continuation and posterity of the Jewish race was seen as confirmation of God's blessing. Cf. Gen 2:17-18: "I will in-

deed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

6. St Gregory the Theologian, *Poem in Praise of Virginité*, cited in Glory and Honor, 30.

7. Cf. Archbishop Stylianos (Harkianakis) of Australia in a poem entitled *The Other*:

wise natural bond - between two people freely and willingly coming together - is sanctified and uplifted. This richer and deeper dimension of marriage is clearly seen in the Orthodox marriage service. The Church blesses, for example, the commitment of the couple to stay and travel together in life by crowning them with “glory and honour.” During the marriage service, the following hymn is sung three times: “O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honour [Κύριε ὁ Θεός ἡμῶν δόξῃ καὶ τιμῇ στεφάνωσον αὐτούς].” The action of crowning implies the conferral of royal status upon the couple. In a real sense, therefore, the Church celebrates God’s joining of two people⁸ to each other as ‘king’ and ‘queen’ of their own kingdom - a household church [κατ’ οἶκον ... ἐκκλησίαν] (Rom 16:5) - and therefore a way towards God’s kingdom.⁹ To the extent that the Church, doctrinally speaking, is the miraculous presence of God within the world - God’s fellowship with the world - this implies that, for the couple, their gift of God’s presence becomes tangibly actualised within their marital relationship since it is to the Church that they have come to be blessed for this journey together. The ‘gift’ of crowns, however, bestowed upon the couple at the beginning of their journey is at the same time a ‘task’ - namely, a call to the couple to become a ‘united kingdom’, namely a striving to nurture their unity, on a daily basis, throughout the many challenges that life will pose, so that in their end, when all words have been spoken, the couple may stand together present and ready for eternity, for God’s eternal kingdom. It is for this reason that the priest says: “Receive their crowns into your kingdom [ἀνάλαβε τούς στεφάνους αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ σου].” Marriage, therefore, understood as a sacrament, is a gift and calling at the same time, for a couple, in their unitive love for one another, to work hard with God’s grace, so as to anticipate, in their life together, God’s future kingdom for them.

Christ-centred aspect of Marriage

This sacramental and salvific dimension of marriage has its roots in Christ - indeed, it is Christ who becomes the marital bond between husband and wife resulting in a profound unity, so much so that the two are considered ‘one flesh’. During the marriage service the Gospel reading (from the Gospel according to St John - Jn 2:1-11) refers to Christ’s first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee where Jesus changed water into wine. The presence of Christ at this wedding signifies by extension his blessing upon every couple leading them to his Father’s kingdom. It is in this

8. Cf. for example, the third prayer of marriage in which the priest prays: “Holy God, who fashioned man from the dust, and from his rib fashioned woman... Do You yourself, o sovereign Lord, stretch forth your hand from your holy dwelling place and join this your servant (name) and your servant (name), for by you is a wife joined to her husband. Join them together in oneness of mind; crown them with wedlock into one flesh...”

9. For Clement of Alexandria (2nd century) marriage is seen from within the context of a “house of God” (Stromata 3, PG 8:1169), namely the presence of God in the couple’s household.

sense that marriage has often been referred to as a union of three persons - Christ united to the husband and wife and in this way transforming their unity into an unbreakable bond. Fr Alexander Schmemmann describes this in the following way:

In a Christian marriage, in fact, three are married: and the united loyalty of the two towards the third, who is God, keeps the two in an active unity with each other as well as with God.¹⁰

Indeed, the miracle of the change of water into wine is a symbol of the transformative power of Christ in the life of each couple. As a symbol of every day life, water signifies the daily and even mundane tasks which will need to be performed by the couple. Wine, on the hand, is a symbol of joy, creativity and fulfilment. Accordingly, through the grace of the sacrament of marriage, the presence of Christ in the life of every couple will be able to transform the habitual tasks of everyday life into a new life, one filled with meaning and permanence - ultimately filled with glimpses of eternity.¹¹ And all this will be made possible by the presence of Christ in the everyday life of the couple, which they, however, will need to nurture constantly.

Upon further reflection on the story of the wedding in Cana of Galilee, the words of the stewards, “you have kept the good wine until now” (Jn 2:10) are highly instructive for the way that husband and wife ought to relate to each other throughout their life together. Whereas most relationships tend to make a real effort to present a ‘good’ self in the initial stages, the reality, more often than not, is that as relationships proceed so do the temptations to take the other person for granted, thereby becoming not only a little too familiar, but also, more often than not, less ready to serve the other. And this reduction invariably puts stress on the marital bond. The steward’s words, however, regarding leaving the best wine until the end can serve as a reminder for couples to strive to nurture their love on a daily basis so that the ‘good’ self may become even better in the end. Indeed, in the same way that as a good wine ages it becomes all the better and richer in taste, so too in the case of a couple - the best self will only become manifest in the end. The couple’s constant invitation for Christ to remain amongst them will make this possible so that each partner might be able to say that the other has “kept the good wine until now”.

to be continued

10. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 90.

11. Cf. Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: The Sanctifying Mysteries*, vol. 5, trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), 173: “Christ strengthens anew the bond of marriage... His participation in the wedding at Cana, He enshrouds marriage in that atmosphere of grace that pours forth from His Person. By performing this first miracle at Can through His supernatural power and by giving the newly marriage couple to drink the wine of exhilarating love that He offers through His grace, Jesus wishes to show that, beginning from the strengthening and ennobling of marriage, He has begun to raise up human life into the order of grace.”