



The Sacredness of Marriage: The Path Towards Holiness

Having briefly established the sacramental dimension of marriage and further presented some implications of this vision, it remains to highlight how this understanding of marriage might be concretely realised in the everyday life of a couple so that it may truly become a path towards holiness for them.

Commemoration - Celebration

First and foremost it is imperative for a couple to affirm and be reminded - on a daily basis, 'again and again [ἔτι καὶ ἔτι]' - of the miracle of marriage as envisioned by the Church - namely a blessed and divine gift opening up a pathway towards God's kingdom - and to interpret all that they do in light of this goal. Put another way, it is important for a couple to remember the infinite blessings that they received on the day of their wedding. Put simply, the daily prayer of husband and wife should be - amongst other things - one which invites Christ to remain amongst them and to continue to bestow his grace upon them as He did on the day of their wedding. In so doing, the couple will immediately be reminded of the innumerable blessings bestowed upon them during the marriage service, seeking to keep alive this gift throughout their entire life together. On this, Fr Alexander Elchaninov, for example, writes:

in marriage the festive joy of the first day, should last for the whole of life: every day should be a feast day; every day husband and wife should appear to each other as new, extraordinary beings. The only way of achieving this: let both deepen their spiritual life, and strive hard in the task of self-development¹.

Accordingly, the joy of marriage can only be preserved to the extent that the couple strives towards perfection - a life where Christ will be the centre of all things - in their unconditional forgiving love towards each other. Indeed, in their endeavour of self-development, husband and wife will need to realise that it is only through the other person that each will gain greater insight of their true self since the other person is the fulfilment of themselves and thus the most precious part of their life.

Cross - Challenges

Precisely because the joy of the kingdom of heaven

is the goal of marriage, this inevitably will involve difficulties. Christ himself says: "For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life" (Mt 7:14). If true happiness in marriage is found in reflecting the love of our True Lover then surely the sacredness of marriage lies in this: that two people decide to live the fullness of this life by rejecting their egocentric existence, foregoing their will, and instead choosing to place primary importance to their beloved other - but this will require decisive action and sacrifice. In the same way that Christ's victory over death was preceded by the cross, a couple's journey towards the kingdom will be marked by challenges, suffering and the pain of the cross. On the need for sacrifice, Ford writes the following:

a good marriage does take a lot of hard work with a great deal of self-sacrificial, self-denying, ascetically effort in many ways. But again, there is a certain glory in every act of self-sacrificial servanthood for one's spouse... just as in an infinitely greater way, it was glorious for Christ to sacrifice himself on the cross for the sake of all of humanity.²

Perhaps one of the reasons as to why many marriages dissolve today at a greater rate than in the past is the failure by couples to accept the reality of the numerous 'crosses' that will come their way in marriage, opting instead to identify marriage with self-gratification. In Orthodox worship we are reminded of the paradox that "joy entered into the world through the cross [ἰδοὺ γὰρ ἦλθε διὰ τοῦ Σταυροῦ χαρὰ ἐν ὄλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ]."³ It is true that marriage is a cross since the will of each spouse will need to be sacrificed so as to embrace the will of their beloved other. Yet, through this, they will be able to experience the gift of resurrection in which mundane acts will be transformed into events of togetherness - namely, true moments of eternity and communion with heaven, right down here within the temporal world. In this way, happy marriages are those in which husband and wife are willing to confront challenges, embrace their crosses, knowing that God will never permit crosses greater than what the couple are able to carry.

(To be continued in the next issue)

1. Fr Alexander Elchaninov, *The Diary of a Russian Priest* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 91.

2. David C. Ford, "The Glory of Marriage" in *Glory and Honour*, 24. Prayer beginning with "Having beheld the resurrection of Christ... [Ἀνάστασιν Χριστοῦ θεασάμενοι]" recited during the Sunday.

3. Orthros service immediately after the Gospel reading and before the singing of the 50th psalm.