



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)

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.

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



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Communication - Communion

There can be no successful marriage without genuine communication. Communication within the context of marriage essentially means a daily striving on the part of the couple - indeed an ascetical struggle - to share their respective worlds so that they may grow together to such an extent that what results is a profound harmonious unity, unanimous desire and unbreakable solidarity. Standing in the presence of each other, and sharing - indeed laying bare - their mind, soul, feelings, desires and dreams, husband and wife discover life in all its abundance, the way that God is - namely a communion of three Persons, or in the words of Archbishop Stylianos, "an ineffable and captivating reciprocal embrace of infinite love [ένα ἄρρηκτο καὶ ἀλλήκτο ἀλληλοεγκαλιασμό ἀπειρίου ἀγάπης].¹ In the art of communication, life, for each spouse, will begin to be realised as communion and not as autonomous self-existence which inevitably leads to alienation, loneliness and ultimately death. In taking the initiative not only to share their respective worlds, but also equally, if not more, intensely interested in the world of the other, a couple will be enabled to discover the fullness of life in the other. Commitment to genuine and effective communication, evidenced when each spouse strives to communicate on a daily basis, will inevitably result in deeper expressions of communication beyond words. A study on marriage, instructs couples to:

Listen with your eyes. Look at me; watch me; My actions may be saying more than my words. You must listen with your eyes because I speak with my eyes. My eyes are the mouthpiece of my inner self, and the inner me is the real me, the me I need you to know.²

Accordingly, if the sacrament of marriage brings two people together in unity then it is only through daily attentiveness to such fellowship through communication that this can take place. A necessary ingredient to true communication and fellowship, beyond the human element, is the gift of God's communication given by the Church - namely Holy Communion - which in uniting husband and wife with Christ unites them deeper to one another as well. It is for this reason, that participation in the Eucharist - and indeed all sacraments - is pivotal for couples.

Regular participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion will have the transformative effect of sealing a couple's union. In the early Church, marriages were considered consummated when the couple partook of Holy Communion for the first time together as husband and wife. In the eighth century, St Theodore the Studite wrote:

"The culmination and goal of marriage is the holy and unique body and blood of Christ."³ Moreover, throughout the writings of the Fathers, there are constant references to the Eucharist highlighting the intense fellowship that this sacrament actualises. Beyond being attributed with titles such as "the medicine of immortality"⁴ or the "antidote for not dying"⁵, the Fathers also refer to Holy Communion as "the cup of synthesis"⁶ and "the recapitulation of the whole economy of salvation"⁷ - namely our unity with Christ. In the eighth century, St John of Damascus wrote more explicitly:

We say communion [κοινωνία] and so it is for through it we have communion with Christ and partake of his flesh and deity, but through it we also have communion amongst ourselves and we are united with one another. Since we receive of one bread we all become the one body of Christ.⁸

In uniting themselves to Christ by partaking of the sacrament of the Eucharist, the couple become united to another as well. It must be remembered, however, that the fullness of such communion does not magically take place but requires the couple's readiness to maintain this most perfect expression of unity that has been realised with Christ and amongst themselves. In examining the connection between the sacraments of marriage and the Eucharist, Fr John Chrysavgis explains how this intense communion might be preserved within the couple.⁸ He suggests that in the same way that within the Eucharist there are the acts of offering, remembrance, epiklesis before there can be communion, so too is the same needed within marriage. Accordingly, the couple will need to offer themselves to the other; they will need to take time to remember saintly couples as they are enumerated in the Marriage Service, and to become familiar with their life stories so that they might be inspired to follow their example in a creative way;¹⁰ thirdly, the Holy Spirit will

3. St Theodore the Studite, Epistle I, 50 to Naucratis. PG 99: 1096A.

4. St Ignatius of Antioch, To the Ephesian, 19-20.

5. Cited in Christos Androustos, Dogmatics of the Eastern Orthodox Church [in Greek] (Athens: Astir, 1992), 362.

6. St Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. III, 16, 7.

7. St Theodore the Studite, Antirr. 8. PG 99 340C.

8. *Dr Fide Orth.* IV, 13. PG 94: 1153A

9. The analogy presented in this paragraph has been taken from Fr John Chrysavgis in his book titled *Love Sexuality and the Sacrament of Marriage* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1996), 24.

10. The first prayer within the Service of Marriage reads as follows: "You blessed your servant Abraham and gave Sarah a child, and made him the father of many nations; you gave Isaac to Rebecca and blessed her offspring Jacob; you joined Jacob with Rachel and brought forth from him the twelve Patriarchs; you united Joseph and Asenath and granted them Ephraim and Manasseh as the fruit of their union; you received the prayer of Zachariah and Elizabeth and declared their child the Forerunner; you brought forth in the flesh the Ever-Virgin from the root of Jesse, and from her you were incarnate and were born for the salvation of the human race; you came, in your inexpressible bounty and great goodness, to Cana in Galilee and blessed the marriage there, to show that lawful wedlock and the begetting of children are according to your will." translation and Greek taken from *Marriage Service*, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia (Sydney: St Andrew's Orthodox Press, 2014), 28.

1. Archbishop Stylianos of Australia, *In the Margins of Dialogue*, [in Greek] (Athens: Domos, 1991), 116.

2. Peter Kallelis, *Holy Matrimony: Marriage in the Orthodox Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Ecumenical Publications, 1984), 22.

needs to be invoked throughout the couple's journey through life; in so doing, they will truly be able to make Christ present in their life who will not only preserve their communion but forever intensify and deepen it.

Concluding Remarks

In the marriage service, husband and wife, led by the priest holding the Gospel, walk hand in hand around a table containing a cross. This is a reminder that marriage is a journey, difficult on the one hand yet one full of joy when its significance - as a sacrament of the kingdom - is lived on a daily basis by the couple. That the destination of such a journey has any hope of being reached is when the couple place Christ at the forefront of their lives. It is for this reason that the couple processes around the table led by the priest holding the Gospel, namely the Word of God will have to be at front and centre of their life. The three hymns which are sung during this procession are highly instructive in that they provide a blueprint for this journey: the first hymn, known as the dance of Isaiah, celebrates the birth of Christ within the world, and by extension the birth of Christ within the couple where each will be "the life-giving personal revelation of Christ"¹¹ or

"the way into eternity"¹² for the other. In this way, the couple are invited to place Christ at the forefront of all their ventures throughout their life together. The second hymn, a reference to the "holy martyrs who have contested well and have been crowned" signifies the daily struggle that marriage will involve for each spouse to overcome their egocentric mode of existence, dying on a daily basis to their own self since they have found life in the other. The third and final hymn, one of glory and joyous proclamation is a reminder of the ultimate joy of God's heavenly kingdom, destined for the couple, filled with the potential of bringing them also into the company of the saints whose joy is the immeasurable and unfathomable love of Father Son and Holy Spirit "Trinity of one essence".

Glory to you, Christ our God,
the boast of the Apostles
the gladness of the Martyrs,
whose proclamation is:
Trinity of one essence.¹³

12. Ibid, 24.

13. In Greek: "Δόξα σοι, Χριστέ ὁ Θεός, Ἀποστόλων καύχημα, Μαρτύρων ἀγαλλίαμα, ὧν τό κύρηγμα Τριάς ἡ ὁμοούσιος" translation and Greek taken from Marriage Service, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia (Sydney: St Andrew's Orthodox Press, 2014), 60-61.

11. John Chryssavgis, *Love Sexuality and the Sacrament of Marriage* (Brookline, 17).