

## Gender, Marriage, and Holiness in *Amb.Io.* 10 and 41

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In the last half a century or so, scholars like von Balthasar,<sup>1</sup> Thunberg,<sup>2</sup> and Cooper,<sup>3</sup> to name a few, have pointed out the presence of interesting insights into gender, marriage, and the holy life in the Maximian corpus, such as the Confessor's conviction that married couples can achieve perfection in the here and now, both sacramentally and ethically, a state fully experienced eschatologically. More has to be said. I recently contributed a study in this area,<sup>4</sup> which focused both on St Maximus' construal of perfection as living above gender and his reticence toward genderlessness. Herein I continue this work by pointing out that in the *Book of Difficulties* he offered a coherent, tripartite depiction of marriage as a pathway to holiness. More precisely, the texts studied below<sup>5</sup> illustrate a trajectory that begins by addressing the spiritual failure of a couple (*Amb.Io.* 10.28), continues by affirming married life as a pathway to holiness equal to the monastic way (*Amb.Io.* 10.31a.5), to end with an acknowledgment of holy couples as embodying monastic standards (*Amb.Io.* 41). This, precisely, is the order in which I shall discuss the relevant passages. Whilst my analysis refers primarily to the Maximian texts, it likewise addresses recent trends in scholarship and employs, in the final section, Evdokimov's category of "internalised monasticism" to determine the rapports between the relevant passages from *Amb.Io.* 10 and 41. My aim is to highlight the significance of the Confessor's construal of gender and marriage within his broader project of mapping holiness, and so to fill a gap within Byzantine research relevant to these questions. As to the latter, current studies both overlook his contributions<sup>6</sup> and are in dire need of further documentary evidence.<sup>7</sup>

### *Exploring Amb.Io. 10*

A veritable tract on holiness, *Amb.Io.* 10 includes two references to family as a framework of holy life. Before addressing the relevant details, an outline of its content is in order. *Amb.Io.* 10 is the lengthiest chapter in the entire Maximian corpus,<sup>8</sup> dealing with topics related to and scriptural illustrations of the experience of holiness, all these making difficult the task of

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, tr. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco, CA 2003) 196-205.

<sup>2</sup> Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Lund 1965) 157-159, 376-377.

<sup>3</sup> Adam G. Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Deified*, OECS (Oxford 2005) 213, 218-227.

<sup>4</sup> D. Costache, "Living above gender: Insights from Saint Maximus the Confessor", *JECS* 21.2 (2013) 261-290.

<sup>5</sup> Due to constraints of length, I could not include here *Amb.Io.* 67 (esp. PG 91,1401AB). On this passage, see Costache, "Living above gender", 268-272, 274-277.

<sup>6</sup> So Leslie Brubaker and Shaun Tougher (eds), *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies 14 (Farnham 2013); Alexander Kazhdan et al., *A History of Byzantine Literature (650-850)* (Athens 1999); Bronwen Neil and Lynda Garland (eds), *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society* (Farnham 2013).

<sup>7</sup> As pointed out by Bronwen Neil, "An introduction to questions of gender in Byzantium", in Neil and Garland, *Questions of Gender*, 1-10, esp. 3-7.

<sup>8</sup> PG 91,1105C-1205C.

summarising it.<sup>9</sup> In brief, it addresses the signification of the cloud and veil mentioned in the Gregorian passage serving as its pretext,<sup>10</sup> the activities of the soul in its aspiration to reach God,<sup>11</sup> the typological dimension pertaining to the deeds of Abraham,<sup>12</sup> Melchisedec,<sup>13</sup> Moses,<sup>14</sup> Joshua,<sup>15</sup> Samuel,<sup>16</sup> Elijah,<sup>17</sup> and Elisha,<sup>18</sup> and the consequences of Christ's transfiguration.<sup>19</sup> Transfiguration features prominently within the chapter, if not as the vantage point of the entire discourse. All these examples and themes orbit around the overarching topic, namely, the experiences and perceptions of the saints<sup>20</sup> who, by adopting a virtuous lifestyle, abandon the passionate life typified by Adam and Eve,<sup>21</sup> and advance to a mystical and unified comprehension of reality – scriptural and cosmic, visible and invisible, historical and eschatological – as divinely created and providentially led, to be finally deified in communion with God. Of all this wealth of ideas, below I shall address two passages that treat gender and the family life. The first text refers to Adam and Eve as a couple that failed in its journey to holiness, whereas the second focuses on the validity of married life, illustrated by Moses, as a saintly pathway. Let us turn now to the first text.

### 1. *The spouse of Adam*

When addressing the fall earlier on, in *Amb.Io.* 7,<sup>22</sup> St Maximus referred to Eve as a harlot, an offense (which I have discussed elsewhere)<sup>23</sup> meant as a rhetorical chastisement of Adam's choice to listen to his wife instead of God. In *Amb.Io.* 10.28, the Confessor returned to the paradise narrative in order to make plain for the reader the dramatic changes experienced by those who, after having seen God's glory, turn to a sensual lifestyle, characterised by an addiction to earthly things.<sup>24</sup> More precisely, in reiterating the theme of the passage in chapter seven,<sup>25</sup> *Amb.Io.* 10.28<sup>26</sup> discusses two possibilities at hand for Adam, namely, either of maintaining communion with God and being divinely enlightened, or of passionately embracing an earthbound existence and becoming ignorant.<sup>27</sup> Whilst the first possibility, typified by the eating from the tree of life, would have led to immortality,<sup>28</sup> the second,

<sup>9</sup> For summaries, see Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London 1996) 91-93; Polycarp Sherwood, *The Earlier Ambigua of Saint Maximus the Confessor and His Refutation of Origenism*, *Studia Anselmiana* 36 (Rome 1955) 30-40. Neither noticed that its aim is mapping the experience of holiness.

<sup>10</sup> PG 91,1112A-D.

<sup>11</sup> PG 91,1112D-1116D.

<sup>12</sup> PG 91,1145C-1148A, 1200AB.

<sup>13</sup> PG 91,1137C-1145B.

<sup>14</sup> PG 91,1116D-1117D, 1148A-1149C, 1200C-1201B.

<sup>15</sup> PG 91,1117D-1120D.

<sup>16</sup> PG 91,1124D-1125A.

<sup>17</sup> PG 91,1121C-1124B.

<sup>18</sup> PG 91,1124C, 1125BC.

<sup>19</sup> PG 91,1125D-1128D, 1160B-1169B.

<sup>20</sup> The chapter treats various facets of holiness. Cf. PG 91,1129A-1137C, 1149C-1156B, 1157B-1160B, 1172A-1197D.

<sup>21</sup> PG 91,1156C-1157A.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. PG 91,1092D.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Costache, "Living above gender", 264-267.

<sup>24</sup> PG 91,1156C. Cf. Jean-Claude Larchet, *La divinisation de l'homme selon saint Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris 1996) 178-186, 187-201.

<sup>25</sup> PG 91,1092CD.

<sup>26</sup> PG 91,1156C-1157A.

<sup>27</sup> PG 91,1156C.

<sup>28</sup> PG 91,1156D-1157A.

signified by the eating from the prohibited tree actually led him to making death permanent throughout the course of his life.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly to chapter seven, *Amb.Io.* 10.28 points to Adam's surrender to the advice of his "spouse" or "companion" (σύνουκος; lit. one inhabiting the same house) instead of obeying God,<sup>30</sup> as causing his wrong choice and the dramatic changes it entailed. Interestingly, it appears that since he already talked in *Amb.Io.* 7 about the role of Eve in the downfall of Adam, the Confessor felt no need to repeat here the invective mentioned above. Another, and more plausible, factor that must have determined his politeness here refers to the focus of the chapter, of exploring the ways of a sanctified life, which conditioned a whole new approach to the scriptural narrative. Yet another explanation, immediately relevant to my purposes, would be the fact that within this passage St Maximus was interested in the marital experience, which, very likely in the light of some saintly illustrations, he held in high esteem. Nevertheless, what matters is the significance of the term σύνουκος, "spouse", which translates the whole event in marital and domestic terms. For the Confessor, indeed, although this was reading between the lines of Genesis, Adam and Eve were married in paradise, inhabiting the same house, thus featuring not just as two human beings that God made. Without referring to the term σύνουκος, Larchet was right when noting that St Maximus considered the story of the ancestors from the viewpoint of the general human condition.<sup>31</sup> Holding to my third suggestion above, I shall add to his assessment that precisely the exposure to saintly families in his lifetime is what determined the Confessor's connubial reading of the paradisaical experience. We shall return to this topic.

The use of the term σύνουκος seems to indicate, therefore, that for St Maximus the ancestral failure amounted to the unwise approach to life pertaining to a certain couple, which, by invoking the argument from silence and the above note on the saintly families known to the Confessor, one could take to mean an understanding of the family as a place of spiritual tests. Given the scarce details provided by our passage, any further comments on this matter would be unwarranted. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Eve as a wife able to advise her husband demands a further refinement of the current opinion concerning the Byzantine portrayal of the woman mainly as a repentant prostitute, one who suffers abuse in marriage, or an ascetic virgin.<sup>32</sup> It likewise raises a question mark upon the conviction that for St Maximus and other Church Fathers gender and marriage pertained to the fall.<sup>33</sup>

Another interesting aspect in the passage under consideration refers to its concluding sentence, which states that what happened to the ancestors exemplified, corresponded to, and shaped the general experience of humankind. More precisely, the text refers to the experience of mortality. In the Confessor's words, "...death lives throughout the whole of this temporal span and we are the food eaten by him".<sup>34</sup> Assessed within the economy of the passage and in line with the term σύνουκος, the statement permits the inference that since the death of all

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<sup>29</sup> PG 91,1156D, 1157A.

<sup>30</sup> PG 91,1156D. Whilst the rendition of Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 126, ignores the word συνούικω, both the Romanian translation of Stăniloae (București 1983) 155, and the French version of Ponsoye (Paris-Suresnes 1994) 189, include it.

<sup>31</sup> Larchet, *La divinisation de l'homme*, 182.

<sup>32</sup> So Eamon H.R. Kelly, "From 'fallen woman' to *Theotokos*: Music, women's voices and Byzantine narratives of gender identity", in John Burke et al. (eds), *Byzantine Narrative: Papers in Honour of Roger Scott*, Byzantina Australiensia 16 (Melbourne 2006) 164-181, esp. 167-168. See also Stavroula Constantinou, "Virginity in danger: Holiness and sexuality in the *Life of Mary of Antioch*", in D. Searby, E.B. Witakowska, and J. Heldt (eds), *ΔΩΡΟΝ ΠΟΛΙΤΟΙΚΙΑΝ: Studies in Honour of Jan Olof Rosenqvist*, Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia 12 (Uppsala 2012) 123-132, esp. 126. In Late Antiquity, the portrayal of the Christian woman was not as simplistic as that. See e.g. Wendy Mayer, "Constantinopolitan women in Chrysostom's circle", *VC* 53.3 (1999) 265-288.

<sup>33</sup> Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor*, 214-215; Damien Casey, "The spiritual valency of gender in Byzantine society", in Neil and Garland, *Questions of Gender*, 167-181, esp. 168.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Amb.Io.* 10.28; PG 91,1157A.

human beings is the very death lived by the paradisaal couple then the experience of Adam and Eve as a whole remains typical for other couples in history. It unfolds that whilst dealing with the paradisaal ancestors as a family that was spiritually tested and failed, like the reverse of a coin St Maximus understood the same account as paradigmatic for the pursuit of holiness in general – a story meant to decipher the reader’s own circumstances.<sup>35</sup> In other words, he interpreted both the paradisaal experience in the light of known holy couples and the latter’s experience from the viewpoint of the scriptural narrative. This conclusion fits well in the schema of *Amb.Io.* 10, whose purpose, as we have seen, is to map holiness.

Let us turn now to another passage in *Amb.Io.* 10, which addresses the validity of marriage as a pathway to holiness.

## 2. *The connubial experience*

As already noted, within *Amb.Io.* 10 prominence is ascribed to Christ’s transfiguration on Mount Tabor. St Maximus contemplated the event twice in this same chapter, first with reference to Christ’s human nature and his garments, taken to signify the commonality of the natural and scriptural laws,<sup>36</sup> and second with reference to the two prophets who featured alongside the Lord, typifying a range of aspects.<sup>37</sup> In what follows I explore a small portion of the second context.

The relevant passage is found in *Amb.Io.* 10.31a.5,<sup>38</sup> focusing on Moses and Elijah as symbols of marriage and celibacy, or monasticism, respectively. This very brief text actually states that by the presence of both prophets the Lord reveals the “mysteries of marriage and celibacy” (τὰ κατὰ τὸν γάμον καὶ τὴν ἀγαμίαν μυστήρια). In taking as a pretext the fact that Moses was married whilst Elijah was not, St Maximus contemplated them as representing the potential of both marriage and celibacy as efficient spiritual pathways. In his own words, Moses was not “prevented by marriage (διὰ γάμον) from becoming someone who yearns for the divine glory” whilst Elijah “remained completely pure from any marital relationship (γαμικῆς συναφείας)”.<sup>39</sup> The two prophets attained the same perfection or communion with God, notwithstanding their different social circumstances. Given their successful undertakings in reaching the Lord, the Confessor concluded the passage by noting that Christ declared both ways, namely, marriage and celibacy, as valid paths that lead to perfection – or rather to be “mystically adopted” (μυστικῶς εἰσποιεῖσθαι) as God’s – all those who “reasonably” (λόγῳ) abide by the divinely set (θειωδῶς) laws (νόμους).<sup>40</sup> With this statement, we find ourselves at the very core of the Maximian notion of family life as a path to holiness. Several relevant aspects can be discerned.

Although the text merely alludes to the ethical or practical aspect, the latter still appears, like everywhere else in St Maximus,<sup>41</sup> as a prerequisite for the spiritual journey. The ethical dimension is signified, of course, by the reference to the divine commandments heeded through reason (λόγῳ), in which, given the Confessor’s conviction that virtue

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Costache, “Living above gender”, 282-283. This approach was common throughout Middle Byzantium. Cf. D. Costache, “Byzantine insights into Genesis 1-3: St Andrew of Crete’s Great Canon”, *Phronema* 24 (2009) 35-50, esp. 38-43.

<sup>36</sup> PG 91,1125D-1137C.

<sup>37</sup> PG 91,1160C-1169B.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. PG 91,1161D. The subdivisions are taken from Louth’s version. For notes on this passage, see Costache, “Living above gender”, 287-288.

<sup>39</sup> PG 91,1161D.

<sup>40</sup> PG 91,1161D.

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. Polycarp Sherwood, “Introduction” to St. Maximus the Confessor, *The Ascetic Life* [and] *The Four centuries on Charity* (Westminster, MD–London 1955) 3-102, esp. 83-86; Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 35-36.

amounts to living rationally,<sup>42</sup> we trace a reference to the ascetic or virtuous path. Thus, the reasonable or rational way to achieve perfection is virtue.<sup>43</sup> When experienced virtuously, in accordance with the wisdom fleshed out by the divine commandments, both existential states – marriage and celibacy – are conducive towards participation in Christ or to being “mystically adopted” (μυστικῶς εἰσποιεῖσθαι). Since virtue is in St Maximus a common ground for the experience of all Christians,<sup>44</sup> in taking it as a starting point for the journey toward sainthood our passage implicitly affirms the possibility of walking the spiritual path irrespective of gender and social circumstances. In so doing, the text shows the relevance of the Confessor’s spiritual teaching for broader milieus than his intended male and monastic readership, and reveals his conviction that married experience is as valid a path to holiness as any other.

Another and related aspect has to do with the proclamation of marriage as a sanctified lifestyle. Interestingly, this assessment does not seem to entail a suppression of the aspects pertaining to the gendered condition of their members.<sup>45</sup> Like in the experience of other saintly families, illustrated in Byzantine literature by, for example, the eighth-century *vita* of St Alexios<sup>46</sup> and the ninth-century *vita* of St Philaretos of Amnia,<sup>47</sup> Moses, the paragon of married life, gained offspring from his wife (cf. Exodus 2:21-22) and yet he was not precluded from attaining holiness. The passage introduces this nuance by contradistinguishing the ways in which the two prophets reached perfection. Thus, whereas Elijah attained holiness by remaining pure of nuptial intercourse (γαμικῆς συναφείας), Moses achieved perfection whilst enjoying the fullness of married life. It seems that for the Confessor what makes marriage sacred is not its being deprived of the pleasure experienced by a loving couple; it is the prioritisation of the spiritual pursuits. Moses illustrated this very understanding by “becoming a lover of divine glory” (τῆς θείας ἐραστοῦ γενέσθαι δόξης) alongside being married.<sup>48</sup> Albeit indirectly, these notes cast further clarifying light on the significance of σύννοκος in *Amb.Io.* 10.28, discussed earlier: deprived or not of offspring, Adam and Eve were supposed to become a holy couple, yet failed. What matters, again, is that St Maximus acknowledged married life as a pathway to holiness, with or without the couples involved reaching the end of the journey. By this positive appraisal, the Confessor was a precursor of the Byzantine interests in exploring family life, witnessed to mainly by the literature of the ninth century.<sup>49</sup> His contribution is yet to be generally acknowledged.

Nevertheless, the stand on marriage and celibacy that St Maximus took in our text seems to be somehow relativised in the economy of the Tabor contemplation as a whole. More precisely, when considered within the section dedicated to Moses and Elijah in *Amb.Io.* 10.31a,<sup>50</sup> the two paths of marriage and celibacy appear as neither positioned on par nor equally effective. Their inequality is suggested by the series of eight aspects associated with Elijah,<sup>51</sup> which were cherished both by the Confessor and his monastic milieu as superior to

<sup>42</sup> *Amb.Io.* 7; PG 91,1084B.

<sup>43</sup> For virtue as a “rational” lifestyle, see Larchet, *La divinisation de l’homme*, 466-476; Costache, “Living above gender”, 274-275.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 34-35; Costache, “Living above gender”, 275. On the unifying power of virtue, see *Amb.Io.* 67; PG 91,1397C.

<sup>45</sup> For more on the Maximian concept of marriage, see Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor*, 208-218; Costache, “Living above Gender”, 268-77, 281-86.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Stavroula Constantinou, “Family in the Byzantine Greek Legend of Saint Alexios, the Man of God”, in Brubaker and Tougher, *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, 273-284, esp. 274, 277.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Kazhdan et al., *A History of Byzantine Literature*, 288-290.

<sup>48</sup> PG 91,1161D.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Kelly, “From ‘fallen woman’ to *Theotokos*”, 171-172.

<sup>50</sup> PG 91,1160C-1165A.

<sup>51</sup> These are, the prophetic spirit, kindness, education, contemplation, celibacy, death, nature, and the noetic realities: PG 91,1161A-1165A.

the eight aspects represented by Moses<sup>52</sup> – an insight for which I am grateful to Cooper.<sup>53</sup> It is in the light of the Elijah series, which represents the monastic ideals, indeed, that a sense of the Confessor's preference for the celibate life to the married one transpires. Textually, however, this preference is stated only by the last aspect, which refers to the superiority of the noetic over the material reality.<sup>54</sup> The Confessor did not discard the eight aspects associated with Moses and in fact one can sense a positive appraisal, which emerges in the affirmation, discussed above, that those who are married reach Christ as much as those who choose celibacy. This understanding undoubtedly draws on a holistic, incarnational perception,<sup>55</sup> which made it impossible for St Maximus to reduce the complexities of reality to any of the two series. Despite the last pair treated in the passage – that is, the noetic realities signified by Elijah and the sensorial realities illustrated by Moses – entailing an imbalance caused by the prominence of the former, all the other pairs (the spirit of the law and the prophetic spirit, wisdom and kindness, knowledge and education, asceticism and contemplation etc) are referred to Christ/God in equal measure, in the same way in which the two prophets stand side by side with Christ on Mount Tabor. I discussed the issue of these two series elsewhere,<sup>56</sup> proposing that the eight pairs point to higher syntheses and that in the fifth pair, referring to marriage and celibacy, it is merely a matter of directness and indirectness in their respective pursuits of holiness. My conclusion finds confirmation within another Maximian writing of the same North African period (early 630s), *The Mystagogy*, whose fifth chapter lists five pairs that echo *Amb.Io.* 10.31a. The five pairs are as follows: mind and reason, wisdom and prudence, contemplation and asceticism, knowledge and virtue, and, finally, unwavering knowledge and faith. Three relevant passages within *Myst.* 5<sup>57</sup> concur in affirming the complementarity of the elements pertaining to the five pairs, the fact that none is inferior to its correspondent, and that they are reconciled in God. An identical symmetry of five polarities (created and uncreated, noetic and sensorial, sky and earth, paradise and inhabited land, and male and female), in which no component is seen as inferior to its correspondent, features in *Amb.Io.* 41,<sup>58</sup> analysed below.

In the light of the above, we can safely conclude that in spite of his understandable preference for the series associated with Elijah, and more specifically the celibate or monastic life, St Maximus displayed a balanced approach that made generous room for the experience of holiness within marriage. Let us turn now to *Amb.Io.* 41, in which the Confessor discussed the challenges experienced by saintly couples in their pursuit of holiness.

### *Exploring Amb.Io. 41*

<sup>52</sup> These are, the principle or spirit of the law, wisdom, knowledge, asceticism, marriage, life, time and the material realities: PG 91,1161A-1165A.

<sup>53</sup> Adam G. Cooper, "Saint Maximus on the mystery of marriage and the body: A reconsideration", in Bishop Maxim Vasiljević (ed), *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through the Resurrection*, Contemporary Christian Thought Series 20 (Alhambra, CA 2013) 195-221, esp. 204-207.

<sup>54</sup> PG 91,1164D-1165A.

<sup>55</sup> On the incarnational views of St Maximus, see Ian A. McFarland, "Fleshing out Christ: Maximus the Confessor's christology in anthropological perspective", *SVTQ* 49.4 (2005) 417-436; Fedor Stanjevskiy, "Une anthropologie à la base d'une pensée religieuse: L'unité de l'homme dans la théologie de Maxime le Confesseur", *Forum Philosophicum* 12 (2007) 409-428.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. D. Costache, "The transdisciplinary carats of Patristic Byzantine tradition", *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science* 4 (2013) 131-140, esp. 135-136.

<sup>57</sup> *Myst.* 5; CCSG 69,21.318-22.327, 22.337-23.346, 26.415-27.418.

<sup>58</sup> PG 91,1304D-1305A.

Within the majestic theory or narrative of everything presented in *Amb.Io.* 41,<sup>59</sup> which contemplates the heterogeneity of reality under five polarities and syntheses, St Maximus included important references to gender and marriage. The relevant paragraphs address the fifth polarity/division and the first union/synthesis. To understand the significance of these elaborations, an overview of the chapter is in order. The argument of *Amb.Io.* 41 develops in roughly five parts, namely, the prologue and the list of five divisions, which describe the whole of reality from the horizon of the created and the uncreated down to the human being;<sup>60</sup> the project of the five unions, beginning from the narrowest point represented by humankind to end with the culminating synthesis of the created and the uncreated;<sup>61</sup> the fall, its divisive nature and the five syntheses accomplished by Christ;<sup>62</sup> the factors that make unification possible;<sup>63</sup> and the interpretation of the initial Gregorian saying that serves as a pretext for the chapter.<sup>64</sup> Gender features as integral to the theory of everything – a construct that stems from the Gregorian saying, which refers to the “renewal of natures” in Christ – here intersecting with the tripartite schema of origins, fall and salvation, and the perspective of a theanthropocosmic union to be effectuated by the human agents via the five syntheses. For the Confessor, it seems, gender could not be considered outside this holistic framework as much as the whole could not be construed without human activity. It is undoubtedly for this reason that generous space is allocated to both virtue and the holy life, which represent the highest forms of human activity. Herein I am interested in what the chapter has to say about gender and marriage in the experience of holiness, topics to which we now turn.

### *Gender, marriage and the fullness of humanity*

As shown above, within the Maximian construct the fifth division and the first union are anthropological in nature. In both cases, instead of addressing the customary philosophical concerns referring to soul and body,<sup>65</sup> the Confessor chose to discuss the scriptural theme of male (ἄρσεν) and female (θῆλυ), drafted in the light of the canonical unity of Genesis 1-3.<sup>66</sup> Gendered humankind appears here as challenged by the five polarities. Indeed, due to the fact that it recapitulates within itself all the strands of being as a microcosm,<sup>67</sup> humankind is appointed the task to bring to higher coherence the various components of reality by approaching them rationally or virtuously – in accordance with the divine intention. The immediate test faced by humankind refers to its own gendered condition, the whole process of unification depending on the achievement of the first synthesis.<sup>68</sup> The expected result of this process is a fully unified reality, which, whilst reaching higher levels of organisation,<sup>69</sup> in its state of unification, complexly, preserves intact the distinctions that from the outset

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<sup>59</sup> PG 91,1304D-1316A. The standard interpretation is that of Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 373-427. See also McFarland, “Fleshing out Christ”, 427-433; Costache, “Living above gender”, 278-281; id., “Seeking out the antecedents of the Maximian theory of everything: St Gregory the Theologian’s *Oration* 38”, in D. Costache and P. Kariatlis (eds), *Cappadocian Legacy: A Critical Appraisal* (Sydney 2013) 225-241.

<sup>60</sup> PG 91,1304D-1305A.

<sup>61</sup> PG 91,1305A-1308C.

<sup>62</sup> PG 91,1308C-1312B.

<sup>63</sup> PG 91,1312B-1313B.

<sup>64</sup> PG 91,1313C-1316A.

<sup>65</sup> For a contrary opinion see Stanjevskiy, “Une anthropologie à la base d’une pensée religieuse”, 415-419.

<sup>66</sup> PG 91,1305AB.

<sup>67</sup> PG 91,1305A-C.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 199.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Costache, “The transdisciplinary carats”, 99, 100.

differentiated the various elements.<sup>70</sup> This union in distinction is obvious at least anthropologically, the Confessor pointing out that whilst Christ united us by removing from humankind “the difference between male and female” (τῆς κατά τό ἄρρεν καί τό θῆλυ διαφορᾶς), human beings remained so, that is, “human beings” (ἄνθρώπους),<sup>71</sup> without dissolving into an amorphous humankind.<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, St Maximus noted that humankind did not act upon the divine wisdom and, by adopting a lifestyle that was contrary to God’s intention – deprived of virtue and serenity – undermined its own existence and wasted the chances of the universe to reach unity.<sup>73</sup> It seems to me that for the Confessor, furthermore, and taking Thunberg as a guide,<sup>74</sup> the source of the general disarray seems to have been the failure of the human beings to address gender in a God-befitting fashion; a topic that St Maximus discussed more fully elsewhere.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, because of a misinterpretation of the human nature that led to the passionate misuse (cf. παραχρησάμενος, παράχρησιν)<sup>76</sup> of its potential, gender, sexuality and pleasure became chaotic and destructive beyond the ethical sphere, on an existential, ontological and cosmological scale.<sup>77</sup> The antidote for the resulting disunity was the undertaking by the Logos of God incarnate, Christ, of the task originally appointed to humankind. As a “human being” (ὡς ἄνθρωπος)<sup>78</sup> or a “perfect human being” (τέλειος ἄνθρωπος),<sup>79</sup> Christ healed and sanctified both the fallen human race and the suffering cosmos,<sup>80</sup> bringing humankind back on the unifying track. We now turn to the relevant passages within the chapter.

*Amb.Io.* 41 does not elaborate on the anthropological division.<sup>81</sup> It does point out, however, that “humankind is divided into male and female” (ἄνθρωπος διαιρεῖται εἰς ἄρσεν καί θῆλυ)<sup>82</sup> and that as such humanity lives within a polarised reality, yet the chapter makes no attempts to clarify the nature of the gender division. Nevertheless, given that the chapter maps reality as it is – there is no doubt for instance that the second polarity, which refers to the noetic and the material aspects of the creation, is inherent to the universe – we can surmise that at least within this context the Confessor saw the human beings as gendered by design or nature.<sup>83</sup> This interpretation is consistent with his ruminations, elsewhere in the *Book of Difficulties*, on gender as “embraced by God”,<sup>84</sup> thus providing a necessary counterbalance for the opinion that gender, marriage and human reproduction are outcomes

<sup>70</sup> See von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 56-80; Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 22-23, 49-51; Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor*, 9-13.

<sup>71</sup> PG 91,1309D-1312A.

<sup>72</sup> For a different perspective see Casey, “The spiritual valency of gender”, 171.

<sup>73</sup> PG 91,1308C. Cf. Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 402-403.

<sup>74</sup> For Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 377, in St Maximus pleasure was primarily sexual in nature.

<sup>75</sup> *To Thalassius*, prologue; CCSG 7,37.338-49.

<sup>76</sup> PG 91,1308C, 1309A.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Paul M. Blowers, “Bodily inequality, material chaos, and the ethics of equalization in Maximus the Confessor”, *StP* 42 (2006) 51-56.

<sup>78</sup> PG 91,1309D.

<sup>79</sup> PG 91,1309A. The phrase is further qualified in the same sentence: ἐξ ἡμῶν δι’ ἡμᾶς καθ’ ἡμᾶς, πάντα τὰ ἡμῶν ἀνελλιπῶς ἔχων, ἀμαρτίας χωρίς (“out of us, for us, and like us, possessing all our features exactly, yet without sin”).

<sup>80</sup> PG 91,1308D.

<sup>81</sup> PG 91,13905AB.

<sup>82</sup> PG 91,13905A.

<sup>83</sup> For contrary opinions, see Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 373, 381; McFarland, “Fleshing out Christ”, 427-428 (yet at 429 McFarland refers to the “distinctions” as natural).

<sup>84</sup> *Amb.Io.* 67; PG 91,1401AB.



of the fall, as is sometimes believed<sup>85</sup> in relation to a hypothetical assertion of the Confessor.<sup>86</sup> Here, therefore, as a natural feature gender has nothing tragic about it.<sup>87</sup> In depicting the unification project the Confessor actually presented the fifth division as a task to solve, like any other polarity, by a virtuous lifestyle (similar to *Amb.Io.* 10.31), which entails the transformation and not the obliteration of the unified elements.

Speaking of the unifying project, the Confessor presented it as an ascent of the human being toward God through all the layers of reality,<sup>88</sup> resulting in the strengthening of the consistency of these layers. Relevant here is the beginning of the process, which, along the lines of Genesis 2, refers to the overcoming of the human division into male and female. The suggestion that the first difficulty encountered by humankind has to do with the life of a couple, or marriage, is inescapable, which brings the discourse of *Amb.Io.* 41 in the vicinity of the topics addressed by *Amb.Io.* 10. The passage of interest, which further clarifies St Maximus' notion of humankind as naturally gendered, reads as follows.

The feature referring to male and female (κατά τό θήλυ καί τό ἄρσεν ιδιότητα), which was in no way attached by the divine purpose to the antecedent principle (προηγούμενον λόγον) referring to the creation of the human being, has to be wiped clean thoroughly from the [human] nature by way of a most dispassionate adherence to divine virtue (θείαν ἀρετήν). And so, in accordance with the divine purpose, it [i.e. the human being] should be shown as – and [truly] become – a human being exclusively (ἄνθρωπον μόνον), undivided because of the designation as male and female (τῇ κατά τό ἄρσεν καί τό θήλυ προσηγορίᾳ). In this way, the human being will no longer be divided, as it is now cut into pieces, instead reaching the perfect knowledge of its own principle, as I said, namely, the antecedent principle according to which it came into being.<sup>89</sup>

The ascent to God translates concretely into a virtuous lifestyle or, verbatim, a commitment to “divine virtue” (θείαν ἀρετήν). Interestingly, this commitment or adherence is said to be “most dispassionate” (ἀπαθεστάτη), which suggests that St Maximus has not envisaged here the desexualisation of the human being through an extreme asceticism. It is in this light that one should consider the statement concerning the “wiping clean thoroughly” (πάντη...ἐκτιναζάμενος) of the gender marks from human nature. This “wiping clean” or purification signifies precisely the achievement of virtue, which uplifts humankind to an existential state no longer characterised by gender. In turn, this state corresponds to humankind's “antecedent principle” (προηγούμενον λόγον) through which it is called to actualise its undivided potential “exclusively as a human being” (ἄνθρωπον μόνον). The constitutive principle and the virtuous life converge in the shaping of a unified and, why not, transformed humanity. Virtue, as we have seen above, does not display gender features. Likewise, the fundamental principle amounts to our being made in the image of God, as stated later in *Amb.Io.* 41,<sup>90</sup> and again this cannot be articulated in terms of gender. Therefore, the statement concerning the “wiping clean” does not refer to doing violence to the body in order to cancel out its gender features; instead, it points out that according to the constitutive λόγος or principle of the human nature, as willed by God, humankind is not called to define its destiny in terms of physiology and reproduction. The passage builds this

<sup>85</sup> So Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 373; Jean-Claude Larchet, “Ancestral guilt according to St Maximus the Confessor: A bridge between Eastern and Western conceptions”, *Sobornost* 20.1 (1998) 26-48, esp. 28, 38; Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor*, 208-215.

<sup>86</sup> *Amb.Io.* 41; PG 91,1309A.

<sup>87</sup> Pace von Balthasar. See *Cosmic Liturgy*, 294.

<sup>88</sup> PG 91,1305BC.

<sup>89</sup> PG 91,1305CD.

<sup>90</sup> PG 91,1312A.

contrast by highlighting the difference between the biological and limiting categories of male and female, and the higher or more general category of humanity (cf. ἄνθρωπον μόνον).<sup>91</sup> It seems that the Confessor attempted here an interpretation of both the experience of Adam and his companion, and that of the married Moses – to return to the examples given in *Amb.Io.* 10 – through the lens of Elijah’s type or the monastic paradigm. I shall return to this aspect.

One might wonder what prompted the Confessor’s insistence on the need to elevate human beings above the animal life signified by gender features. As we have seen, his insistence has nothing to do with nature as such. It rather is an outcome of his understanding of the fall in terms of a degradation of human nature – to the extent that the image of God in us was tarnished and corrupted<sup>92</sup> – which impacted gender and everything else. One should take his musings on the salvific ministry of Christ, further down in *Amb.Io.* 41, precisely in this sense. There, St Maximus pointed out that by way of the paradoxical circumstances of his conception and birth, above the fallen nature or, literally, free of “the natural order of marriage” (τῆς κατὰ φύσιν ἀκολουθίας γαμικῆς), Christ “forced out (ἐξωθούμενος) of nature the difference and division (διαφοράν τε καὶ διαίρεσιν) into male and female”.<sup>93</sup> The liberation of human nature from the gender marks – more precisely, their function within the fallen condition – corresponds to the above statement on the need of a “thorough wiping clean” of the same gender features through virtue; the use of the participle in both cases (ἐκτιναζόμενος, ἐξωθούμενος) suggests an intentional connection between the two passages. Of interest here, though, is that the result of freeing nature from the stains of sin is the upgrading of the human being to be simply human (ἄνθρωπος, ἀνθρώπους), unified through virtue, clear of the marks of division and fragmentation experienced in the sinful condition.<sup>94</sup> This new state, above gender, appears as an experience of the full or perfect humanity,<sup>95</sup> corresponding to Christ’s own humanity. We have seen above that the Lord was depicted as “a perfect human being (τέλειος ἄνθρωπος), out of us, for us, and like us, possessing all our features exactly, yet without sin”.<sup>96</sup> In other words, what we contemplate in Christ is the mystery of a completed humanity, raised above division and fragmentation, made whole. Not without reason, the passage ends by paraphrasing the celebrated Pauline saying, “for in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female” (ἐν γὰρ Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ...οὔτε ἄρρεν οὔτε θῆλυ),<sup>97</sup> to show that what was achieved in Christ was likewise gracefully bestowed on us. Christ’s earthly life<sup>98</sup> and the paradoxical condition of the Virgin–Mother<sup>99</sup> supremely illustrate this new status. And so humankind returned to its possibility to transcend biology – supposedly together with the complications, prejudices and discriminations entailed by the male and female division – by “putting on Christ” and the virtuous garment, without the abolishing of the gender traits on a physiological level.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>91</sup> PG 91,1305C. See also later (at 1312B-1313B) the rapports between particular and general categories. Cf. Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 379-381. These conclusions correspond to the findings of Susan Wessel in Letter 2; see her “The theology of *Agape* in Maximus the Confessor”, *SVTQ* 55.3 (2011) 319-42, esp. 332-34.

<sup>92</sup> PG 91,1312A.

<sup>93</sup> PG 91,1309A.

<sup>94</sup> PG 91,1309B, 1309D-1312A.

<sup>95</sup> See Costache, “Living above gender”, 278-286.

<sup>96</sup> PG 91,1309A.

<sup>97</sup> PG 91,1309AB.

<sup>98</sup> PG 91,1308D-1312B. Cf. Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 377-378.

<sup>99</sup> PG 91,1313C.

<sup>100</sup> For a range of opinions, see Larchet, *La divinisation de l’homme*, 589-608; Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor*, 221-222; Bernardo De Angelis, *Natura, persona, libertà: L’antropologia di Massimo il Confessore* (Roma 2002) 174-175.

Drawing this conclusion back to the topic of marriage, although *Amb.Io.* 41 does not address this aspect explicitly, given the above it unfolds that whilst no longer defined by the physiological traits pertaining to male and female, the anonymous couple contemplated by the Maximian discourse remained a family – yet comprising two full human beings (ἀνθρώπους),<sup>101</sup> two saints who up until a time lived in virtue, that is, above gender. We recognise in this conclusion elements pertaining to *Amb.Io.* 10.31, yet enriched with new connotations. With this, we move to the significance of virtue or holiness in *Amb.Io.* 10 and 41.

### *Marriage, monasticism and holy life*

So far we have seen that the state of wholeness, above gender, which Christ recuperated on behalf of humankind, refers to a virtuous or holy lifestyle. In the *Book of Difficulties*, we have discovered further, virtue represents a unifying principle and a common denominator for all, irrespective of social circumstances like marriage and celibacy. These very qualities made of virtue a useful tool in the Confessor’s hands towards the spiritual exploration of gender and the connubial life. In what follows I attempt to bring together the wisdom of *Amb.Io.* 10 and 41, proposing the Evdokimovian principle of “internalised monasticism” as a way to retrieve their coherence.

*Amb.Io.* 41 refers repeatedly and variously to virtue or holy life, which appears as the only way to make good use of things according to their constitutive principles. For instance, “divine virtue” is necessary towards accomplishing the first union in accordance with the “antecedent principle” of humankind, the outcome of which is the elevation of the human being above the gender division – since in Christ there is neither male nor female.<sup>102</sup> Virtue emerges again in the second synthesis as “fittingly leading a holy life” or “leading a life befitting the saints” (διὰ τῆς οἰκείας ἀγιοπρεποῦς ἀγωγῆς).<sup>103</sup> The text includes likewise the phrase, “in what concerns virtue” (κατ’ ἀρετήν), whilst speaking of an angelic-like (πρὸς ἀγγέλους) way of life (τῆς ζωῆς...τρόπῳ) reached by those who undertake the final stages of the unifying ascent.<sup>104</sup> Virtue leads human beings, furthermore, to an angelic-like “mystical perception” (γνωστική ἐπιστήμη) and “equality (ισότης) with the angels with reference to knowledge” (κατὰ τὴν γνῶσιν), through which those worthy (ἄξιοι) – the saints – reach a notion of God that is not based on understanding and interpretation.<sup>105</sup> Finally, virtue in its highest form, that is, love (ἀγάπη), is the means by which human beings commune with God.<sup>106</sup> The emphasis on virtue, mystical knowledge, and love, all pertaining to a “life befitting the saints” or the worthy ones, which is an existential mode that corresponds to the angelic life, points to the experience of holiness as the underlying factor of the narrative. It likewise reveals the Confessor’s monastic perception of holiness as achieved through the tripartite pattern of virtue/askesis, knowledge/contemplation, and love/union.<sup>107</sup> These aspects are highly relevant herein.

We have discovered that, through Adam and Eve, *Amb.Io.* 10.28 refers all couples to the spiritual journey, and that *Amb.Io.* 10.31 shows how all human beings can walk the path of holiness, as proven by the celibate Elijah and the married Moses. I propose that *Amb.Io.* 41

<sup>101</sup> PG 91,1312A.

<sup>102</sup> PG 91,1305CD, 1309B.

<sup>103</sup> PG 91,1305D.

<sup>104</sup> PG 91,1305D.

<sup>105</sup> PG 91,1308A,B.

<sup>106</sup> PG 91,1308B.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 332-68.

further our understanding on the matter. More precisely, whilst *Amb.Io.* 10.31 rests after affirming the spiritual equivalence of marriage and celibacy, chapter 41, despite remaining silent about matrimony on a literal level, appears to interpret the life of an unnamed married couple in the light of the “angelic” or, as we shall see, monastic experience. Connecting the two chapters is possible at least on the grounds of their common interest in approaching the virtuous journey through the metaphor of ascension. Indeed, whilst not mentioning a mountain the ascending experience of *Amb.Io.* 41 can be legitimately represented as mystical mountaineering. A symbolic link with the mountain of *Amb.Io.* 10.31 is thus established, making possible the import of imagery from one chapter to the other. Interestingly, by applying the paradigms of *Amb.Io.* 10.31 to chapter 41 it results that when beginning with the gender division and the virtuous life of a couple the latter chapter explains the excellence of Moses/marriage by having him/it interiorising the way of Elijah/monasticism. My proposition is based on the polysemy of the angelic imagery, since the repeated references to angels in *Amb.Io.* 41 can be taken both verbatim, as meaning the invisible powers, and as metaphors of the monastic life. Nevertheless, given that St Maximus was himself a monk, the prevalence of the second meaning in the narrative would come as no surprise. Significantly, the text alternates the vocabulary of holiness and angelic life in depicting the unifying ascent in terms of a pilgrimage that follows, as we have seen, the monastic pattern referring to ascetic virtue (the first two syntheses), knowledge (the third and fourth syntheses), and the unifying love (the fifth synthesis). Thus, it presents the spiritual journey in the light of the “angelic life” or rather the monastic experience signified by Elijah. Our next step is to explore the significance of the above findings for the understanding of marriage as a sanctified lifestyle.

Whilst *Amb.Io.* 41 considers explicitly the spiritual feats of a “human being” (ἄνθρωπος), in which, through the mediation of *Amb.Io.* 10.31, one could identify the monastic type of Elijah, implicitly it maps the journey of a couple – spoken of in the first synthesis – that lives above gender, according to the principles of monastic life. Throughout *Amb.Io.* 10 this couple is typified only to some extent by the paradisaic ancestors and fully by the married Moses, whose spiritual achievements were of no lesser worth than Elijah’s. In other words, whilst seemingly addressing the spiritual accomplishments of the Elijah category, *Amb.Io.* 41 can be legitimately interpreted as sketching the journey of a holy couple that – through virtue – experienced the fullness of humanity, above the fragmentation related to the passionate life; a couple that, like the family of Moses, adopted aspects pertaining to the monastic experience. It is possible that when building this complex interpretation, St Maximus bore in mind something like Evdokimov’s notion of “internalised monasticism”. Evdokimov himself was convinced that the Confessor “instituted the equivalent of the monastic life for laypeople living in the world”,<sup>108</sup> and that for him monasticism had “a normative value for every believer”.<sup>109</sup> Following St Maximus, Evdokimov proposed that the “undying values of monasticism...can be established as principles for every Christian life” by way of a “dialectic of interiorisation”,<sup>110</sup> a dialectic conducive to the implementation of monastic values without the deprivation of married couples of the physical aspects presupposed by love. Whereas this complexity is obvious in Evdokimov’s overall optimistic appraisal of marriage, given the above one can safely infer that the experience of “internalised monasticism” pertaining to holy couples – such as Moses and his spouse – does not necessarily do away with the natural course even in the views of St Maximus. For the latter the experience of “internalised monasticism” on the part of such couples entails the prioritisation of virtue, or the state above gender, over any other aspect of married life.

<sup>108</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition* (Crestwood, NY 2001) 82.

<sup>109</sup> *The Sacrament of Love*, 81.

<sup>110</sup> *The Sacrament of Love*, 83.

Nevertheless, when considered from the vantage point of the whole Maximian narrative, in prioritising virtue, such couples achieve more than borrowing from the monastic paradigm. Let me explain. According to *Amb.Io.* 41<sup>111</sup> Christ is both the source of all constitutive principles that are activated through virtue and the embodiment of the virtuous, or saintly, lifestyle. It follows that, by cultivating virtue, it is not only the married experience that internalises monastic values; in fact, both pathways internalise the same grace of Christ. After all, in *Amb.Io.* 10.31a.5,<sup>112</sup> Moses and Elijah alike enjoyed the presence of the one Lord.

All things considered, both at face value and through the lens of Evdokimov's thinking, by integrating monastic experience and conjugal life *Amb.Io.* 41 offers a solution that surpasses such extremes as construing marriage without holiness and saintly life as opposed to marriage. This solution dispels the contemporary worries<sup>113</sup> that when promoting high spiritual ideals the scriptural and patristic tradition relativise the value of gender and marriage.

### *Conclusion*

Perhaps surprising an interest on the part of a monastic writer, the three passages studied above, *Amb.Io.* 10.28, 10.31a.5, and 41, display a consistent concern of St Maximus for matters related to gender and the connubial life. We have seen that his interest emerges both in the analysis of such scriptural examples as that of Adam and Eve, and the married Moses, and in the cosmological schema of a multilayered reality that cannot reach further coherence without the virtuous activity of a holy couple. We have likewise discovered that in assessing the last two of these examples, the Confessor perceived them through a similar lens to Evdokimov's concept of "internalised monasticism" and that in so doing he managed to bridge the monastic and conjugal experiences. The result of this approach was the sketching of the human being as a saint endowed with Christ-like features, in whose physiological traits the divisive marks of sin were no longer visible. Interestingly, the Confessor depicted in this fashion both married couples, illustrated by Moses and his spouse, and the anonymous couple of *Amb.Io.* 41, as well as the celibate people represented by Elijah. This identical approach makes obvious that the Confessor did not share in the customary reticence of the monastic milieu of his time with reference to married life. In so doing, St Maximus' wisdom, yet unappreciated by the scholars of gender and marriage in Byzantium, casts a new light upon what is currently perceived as a unilateral obsession with monastic ideals. Likewise, it inspires the desire for holiness throughout the whole body of Christ, even though most aspirants might be at the stage illustrated by the Maximian depiction of the paradisaal ancestors.

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<sup>111</sup> PG 91,1308C-1309A.

<sup>112</sup> PG 91,1161D.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Casey, "The spiritual valency of gender", 174, 177-178.