Globethics Repository



Synodal Affirmations on Marriage, Family, Sexuality, and the Sanctity of Life

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Book
Authors	The Holy Synod of Bishops
Publisher	Orthodox Church in America
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-12 08:32:22
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/219169

Synodal Affirmations on Marriage, Family, Sexuality, and the Sanctity of Life

These affirmations on marriage, family, sexuality, and the sanctity of life are issued by the Holy Synod of Bishops on the occasion of the Tenth All-American Council of the Orthodox Church in America.

Miami, Florida, July, 1992

Contents

- Introduction
- The Mystery of Marriage
- Marriage and Sexuality
- Divorce, Widowhood, and Remarriage
- The Procreation of Children
- Abortion
- Celibacy and Virginity
- Parents and Children
- Single-Parent Families
- Adoption
- Abuse in Family and Society
- Homosexuality
- Sickness, Suffering, and Death

Introduction

The Orthodox Church in America, being, with all Orthodox Churches in the world, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ, acting upon her mandate to teach God's truth to all people, solemnly affirms that every human person is made in God's image and likeness for everlasting life in God's coming kingdom.

As the crown of God's good creation, redeemed by Christ and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, all men, women and children—young and old, sick and healthy, rich and poor, powerful and weak, educated and uneducated, born and unborn—are

eternally precious in God's sight.

All human beings will be raised from the dead on the last day. Those who seek the truth, do good and follow God's law written on their hearts and fully revealed to the world in Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Word, will inherit everlasting life. Those who persist in their evil ways, following their own will, will be forever lost (cf. Romans 2:14-16; John 1:1-18, 5:25-30).

The Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America, assembled in council with priests and elected parish lay delegates, is gravely concerned about the degradation of human life in our day. We are especially concerned about the desecration of marriage and family life, the vilification of celibacy and virginity, the perversion of human sexuality, the devaluation of human suffering, and the destruction of the natural environment. We therefore take this opportunity, being gathered at our Tenth All-American Church Council, to reaffirm the God-given vision of these elemental aspects of human being and life.

The Mystery of Marriage

God creates human beings in His own image and likeness, male and female. He declares human life, with all that He makes, to be "very good" (Genesis 1:27-31).

God wills that men and women marry, becoming husbands and wives. He commands them to increase and multiply in the procreation of children, being joined into "one flesh" by His divine grace and love. He wills that human beings live within families (Genesis 1:27; 2:21-24; Orthodox Marriage Service).

The Lord Jesus blessed marriage in which the "two become one flesh" when, by his presence with his mother Mary and his disciples at the marriage in Cana of Galilee, he revealed his messianic glory in his first public miracle, evoking for the first time the faith of his disciples (Genesis 2:24; John 2:1-11).

The Lord Jesus Christ abrogated the practice of divorce which was permitted in the old covenant due to the people's "hardness of heart," insisting that one unique marriage between man and woman was God's will from the beginning (Mark 10:2-9, Matthew 19:3-12). He stated clearly that "every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity [porneia, i.e. sexual immorality], makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Matthew 5:32).

The Lord went even further to declare that people who look at others in order to lust

after them in their hearts have "committed adultery" (cf. Matthew 5:27-30).

Christ's apostles repeat the teachings of their Master, likening the unique marriage between one man and one woman to the union between Christ and His Church which they experience as the Lord's very body and His bride (Ephesians 5:21-33; 2 Corinthians 11:2).

While condemning those who forbid marriage as an unholy institution, along with those who defile marriage through unchastity (1 Timothy 4:3, Hebrews 13:4), the apostles commend as "the will of God" that Christians, as examples for all human beings, "abstain from unchastity [porneia] and know how to marry "in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God." They insist that "whoever disregards this [teaching] disregards not man but God, who gives His Holy Spirit" to those who believe (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8).

Husbands are commanded to be the heads of their wives as Christ is the head of the Church. They are called to love their wives as their very selves, as Christ loves the Church, giving themselves in sacrifice to their brides as to their own bodies. And wives are called to respect and reverence their husbands as the Church devotes itself to Christ with whom she too, like the wife with her husband, is "one flesh" (Ephesians 5:21-33; Orthodox Marriage Service).

The "great mystery" of marriage (Ephesians 5:32) is the most used image and symbol in the Bible for God's relationship with His People in the old and new testaments where the Lord is the husband and His people are His wife—so often unfaithful and adulterous (cf. Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Song of Songs, Corinthians, Ephesians, et. al.). And the ultimate union between the Lord and those saved by Christ for eternal life in God's kingdom by the indwelling Holy Spirit is likened to the communion of marriage (Revelation 21-22).

Convinced of these God-revealed truths, we offer the following affirmations and admonitions for the guidance of the faithful:

Every human being of whatever religion, race, nationality or moral convictions is to be respected and valued as a creature of God with the potential for everlasting life in God's coming kingdom.

No human being, whatever his or her religion, race, nationality or moral convictions, is to be treated in a wicked, evil or unjust manner.

Orthodox Christians are to make supplications, prayers, intercessions and

thanksgivings (lit. eucharists) for all people. This, according to Christ and the saints, includes one's enemies, cursers and abusers, as well as persecutors of the Church, heathens and heretics (Luke 6:27-49; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; St. John Chrysostom, On First Timothy, Homilies 6 and 7; St. John of Kronstadt, My Life in Christ).

Marriage and Sexuality

Marriage and family life are to be defended and protected against every open and subtle attack and ridicule.

Sexual intercourse is to be protected as a sacred expression of love within the community of heterosexual monogamous marriage in which alone it can be that for which God has given it to human beings for their sanctification.

Sexual love in marriage is to be chaste and pure, devoid of lewdness, lechery, violence and self-gratification.

Couples planning to marry are to be properly counseled and prepared to confront the challenges of the married life, being guided in the ways to find within family life the way to spiritual fulfillment and sanctity.

Divorce, Widowhood, and Remarriage

Victims of broken marriages are to be counseled to repent of the evils which caused the failure their original marriages, and to seek God's mercy and guidance in transforming the defeat into spiritual victory.

Widows and widowers are to be counseled whenever possible, particularly in the absence of small children in need of care, to remain faithful to their departed spouses who are alive in the Lord, maintaining the nuptial unity of love to be fulfilled in the kingdom of God for which they were crowned as husband and wife.

Widowed and divorced persons who remarry do so not as their right but as recipients of a special gift of God's mercy to be accepted with repentance, gratitude and the firm intention faithfully to fulfill all that belongs to married life.

The Procreation of Children

The procreation of children in marriage is the "heritage" and "reward" of the Lord; a blessing of God (cf. Psalm 127:3). It is the natural result of the act of sexual

intercourse in marriage, which is a sacred union through which God Himself joins the two together into "one flesh" (Genesis 1-2, Matthew 19, Mark 10, Ephesians 5, et. al.).

The procreation of children is not in itself the sole purpose of marriage, but a marriage without the desire for children, and the prayer to God to bear and nurture them, is contrary to the "sacrament of love" (Orthodox Marriage Service; St. John Chrysostom, On Ephesians, Homily 20).

Married couples are encouraged to abstain from sexual union at times for the sake of devotion to prayer (as, for example, on the eves of the Eucharist, and during Lenten seasons). They are to do so, however, only "for a season by agreement" since their bodies are not their own but belong to each other; and they are to "come together again lest Satan tempt" them (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:2-7).

God himself "knits together" the child conceived in the mother's womb, beholding its "unformed substance" as it is being intricately wrought before his all-knowing eyes (Psalm 139:13-18). The Lord Jesus himself was first acknowledged on earth by John the Baptist when both the Lord and His Forerunner were still embryos within their mothers' wombs (Luke 1:39-45).

Orthodox Christians have always viewed the willful abortion of unborn children as a heinous act of evil. The Church's canonical tradition identifies any action intended to destroy a fetus as the crime of murder (Ancyra, Canon 21; Trullo, Canon 91; St. Basil, Canon 2).

Convinced of these God-revealed truths, we offer the following affirmations and admonitions for the guidance of the faithful:

The procreation of children is to take place in the context of marital union where the father and mother accept the care of the children whom they conceive.

Married couples may express their love in sexual union without always intending the conception of a child, but only those means of controlling conception within marriage are acceptable which do not harm a fetus already conceived.

Married couples may use medical means to enhance conception of their common children, but the use of semen or ova other than that of the married couple who both take responsibility for their offspring is forbidden.

Abortion

Abortion is an act of murder for which those involved, voluntarily and involuntarily, will answer to God.

Those finding themselves confronted with tragic circumstances where the lives of mothers and their unborn children are threatened, and where painful decisions of life and death have to be made—such as those involving rape, incest, and sickness—are to be counseled to take responsible action before God, who is both merciful and just, to whom they will give account for their actions.

Women and men, including family members and friends of pregnant women considering abortions, are to be encouraged to resist this evil act, and be assisted in bearing and raising their children in healthy physical and spiritual conditions.

Women who have had recourse to abortion, men who have fathered aborted children, and others involved in cases of abortion, are to be provided with pastoral care which includes recognition of the gravity of the act and assurance of the mercy of God upon those who repent of their sins.

Orthodox Christians are to contribute to legislative processes according to their knowledge, competence, ability and influence so that laws may be enacted and enforced which protect and defend the lives of unborn children while being sensitive to the complexities and tragedies of life in contemporary society.

Celibacy and Virginity

Together with the most positive affirmation of marriage and family life, the Orthodox Church also affirms that the Lord calls some men and women to a life of celibacy and virginity. The “angelic way” of monastic life is especially blessed for men and women “able to receive this” as those so “assigned” and “called” (cf. Matthew 19:10-12; 1 Corinthians 7).

The monastic vocation is identified in Orthodox tradition with the “good portion” of Mary who sat at Jesus’ feet, listening to his teaching and contemplating his truth in purity of heart. It is the calling to men and women to live in singleness, solitude, stillness and spiritual struggle in service to God; the way which the apostle Paul practically recommends as the “better” way, if God so wills, in this fallen world filled with temptations and trials.

Beginning with Mary the Virgin Mother of God and St. John the Forerunner and Baptist of the Lord—not to speak of the Lord Jesus Christ himself—the Orthodox

Church's liturgical calendar of saints is filled with righteous celibates, virgin martyrs, and men and women who followed the monastic way in purity and holiness of life.

Convinced of these God-revealed truths, we offer the following affirmations and admonitions for the guidance of the faithful:

Celibacy and virginity are also to be defended and protected from vilification and ridicule.

Monastic life is to be defended, protected and promoted in witness to life in God's coming kingdom where all holy men and women will be "like angels in heaven" (Matthew 22:30).

Parents and Children

Human beings are created and saved to be the children of God, sons of the Father in Christ the only Son, by the indwelling Holy Spirit (Luke 3:38, John 1:12, Romans 8:14-17, Galatians 4:1-7).

With God as our Father in Christ and the Spirit, the heavenly Jerusalem, already here present with us in the Church of Christ, "is our mother" (Galatians 4:26, Revelation 21:2-10). As St. Cyprian of Carthage has said, "A person cannot have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother." (On the Unity of the Church, 5)

Since every fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its name from the fatherhood of God (Ephesians 3:14), fathers in domestic, ecclesial and monastic families, together with holy mothers, are called to mediate God's presence and action to their children. The sacraments of marriage and ordination as well as the rites of monastic tonsure and the installation of abbots and abbesses testify to this spiritual calling.

Fathers are commanded not to provoke their children to anger, but to love them and "to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). And children are commanded to honor their father and mother, and to obey their parents in all things which are godly, realizing as they mature spiritually that they belong ultimately to God's household, receiving their identity not from their flesh and blood parents, but from God (Ephesians 6:1-4. Colossians 18-21, Matthew 10:34-39; 12:46-50; 23:9; Luke 15:26, John 1:12-13; et. al.).

Convinced of these God-revealed truths, we offer the following affirmations and

admonitions for the guidance of the faithful:

The family of father, mother and children, with the extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, is to be supported and protected as the basic condition of life for human beings in the this world.

Children are to be provided with the fullest and deepest possible experience of secure family life and activity.

The family is not to be idolized as an end in itself, thereby becoming an obstacle rather than a means to healthy and holy spiritual life in communion with God in the Church.

Single-Parent Families

Although normal family life consists of a father and a mother together with their children, the growing number of single parent families which exist due to death, divorce and desertion are to be supported and honored.

Attention is to be given to the special spiritual, social and economic needs of single parent families.

Provision is especially necessary for the presence of loving adults of the gender of the missing parent in the family's life and activities.

And special care and support is needed for the single parent to persevere in a life of sexual chastity and holiness.

Adoption

The adoption of children without families to care for them by married couples and single people capable of providing them with spiritual and material care is to be supported and honored.

The blessed action of providing foster care to needy children is also to be supported and praised.

Adoption, not abortion, is the answer to unwilled pregnancy. Unmarried mothers are to be encouraged and supported in bringing their conceived babies to term and offering them for adoption.

Not for any reason, however, and certainly not for making money, are children to be

conceived in order to be given up for adoption.

Adoption procedures involving large sums of money, profit motivation and coercion of families and mothers to give up their children is to be soundly rejected and condemned.

Abuse in Family and Society

All forms of physical, spiritual, psychological and emotional abuse of men, women and children are to be condemned.

Parents, and adults generally, are to be assisted in learning to treat children properly, avoiding abusive behavior because of the children's smallness, weakness and dependency.

Although women and children may be abusive in their own right, they are for many reasons more often the victims of abuse by men rather than men's abusers. Special attention is therefore to be given to the issue of "battered women and children" in our society.

The Christian teaching of the "headship" of the husband and father in the family is not to be interpreted as supportive in any way of abusive behavior; nor is the traditional teaching about the need to discipline children.

Positions of authority in family and society, as well as in churches, can be used in abusive ways. Some examples are the refusal of leaders to be available, to listen and to communicate respectfully and openly with subordinates, and even with peers in similar leadership positions; the use by those in authority of material and economic threats and punishments against those having legitimate disagreements and differences; the unsound and unwarranted appeals on the part of those in authority to the right for love, respect and obedience from their subordinates, and even peers, in order to shame or silence those who question their policies and actions. Every means is to be taken to be aware of the abuse of authority by those in leadership positions, and to expose and correct it.

Those in authority and positions of leadership may themselves be abused by peers and subordinates through unjust criticism, uninformed judgments, ungrounded accusations, careless talk, malicious gossip, disrespect, disdain and outright disobedience. These forms of abusive behavior must also be exposed and eliminated in human communities, including families and churches.

Efforts are also to be made to eliminate the sources of rage, discontent and depression which lead to abuse in families and social and religious groups. Some of these are racial, religious and ethnic hatreds and injustices; sexual and carnal titillation; the cultivation of unrealistic expectations and desires; the acceptance of false promises about possible possessions and achievements; and the misuse of drugs and alcohol.

Many of the causes of human abuse are found in television programs, films, music, advertising, and social, political, ethnic and religious demagoguery which, primarily to make money, cater to the baser and weaker aspects of human life in the fallen world. These also are to be identified, exposed and eliminated.

Homosexuality

Created to know God's divinity and power through creation, human beings have refused to acknowledge God, to honor and thank Him, and to obey his divine teachings. Through their rebellion "they became futile in their thinking and their senseless hearts were darkened" (Romans 1:21). Therefore, as the apostle Paul continues to teach, "God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves…their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (Romans 1:26-27).

Homosexual acts, like adulterous and incestuous behavior, are condemned in the law of Moses. Those who do these things, both men and women, are, according to God's law of the old covenant, to be put to death (Leviticus 18:6-23; 20:10-21).

According to the apostle Paul, those engaging in homosexual acts, with fornicators, adulterers, idolaters, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers and robbers, will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Christians come from all these categories of evil doers who have, voluntarily and involuntarily, been caught up in the sin of the world. They are those who through their personal repentance and faith in Christ, their baptism and chrismation, and their participation in Holy Communion, have been "washed…sanctified…and made righteous in the name of the Lord Jesus and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Orthodox Baptism and Chrismation Service).

Jesus teaches mercy and forgiveness for all sinners, but the Lord does not justify

sin. When the Son of God pronounces divine pardon to those caught in evil he always charges the forgiven sinner to "go and sin no more" (John 8:11).

Convinced of these God-revealed truths, we offer the following affirmations and admonitions for the guidance of the faithful:

Homosexuality is to be approached as the result of humanity's rebellion against God, and so against its own nature and well-being. It is not to be taken as a way of living and acting for men and women made in God's image and likeness.

Men and women with homosexual feelings and emotions are to be treated with the understanding, acceptance, love, justice and mercy due to all human beings.

People with homosexual tendencies are to be helped to admit these feelings to themselves and to others who will not reject or harm them. They are to seek assistance in discovering the specific causes of their homosexual orientation, and to work toward overcoming its harmful effects in their lives.

Persons struggling with homosexuality who accept the Orthodox faith and strive to fulfill the Orthodox way of life may be communicants of the Church with everyone else who believes and struggles. Those instructed and counseled in Orthodox Christian doctrine and ascetical life who still want to justify their behavior may not participate in the Church's sacramental mysteries, since to do so would not help, but harm them.

Assistance is to be given to those who deal with persons of homosexual orientation in order to help them with their thoughts, feelings and actions in regard to homosexuality. Such assistance is especially necessary for parents, relatives and friends of persons with homosexual tendencies and feelings. It is certainly necessary for pastors and church workers.

Sickness, Suffering, and Death

From the very beginning of human life on earth the rebellion of men and women against God has resulted in sickness, suffering and death. This is the meaning of the story of Adam and Eve, and their children and descendents, found in the first chapters of the Bible (Genesis 1-11).

Jesus Christ has come to save the world. He has come to free human beings from the tyranny of sickness, suffering and death through the forgiveness and expiation of their sins by his own sinless suffering and death.

Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes upon himself the sins of the world. He is the new and final Adam who comes from heaven to give human beings the opportunity to begin life over again by dying and rising in him, and being sanctified and sealed by his life-creating Spirit (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 15).

Jesus Christ shows us that human suffering has redeeming and sanctifying significance. It can be the means of finding God in the fallen world, the means of purification from carnal passions, the means of enlightenment and communion with God for everlasting life.

Through Christ's death, death itself is destroyed and transformed. Man's "final enemy," the "wages of sin," has become through Christ's crucifixion the way into paradise for those who fight it to the end, who refuse to surrender to its power, who destroy its very foundations by faith in God and love for Him and His good creation which has been corrupted and polluted by the evils of men (1 Corinthians 15, Romans 6).

The whole of creation—all the plants and animals, fish and birds, rocks and planets—is "groaning in travail" as it "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God;" for in the final coming of Christ all of creation "will be set free from the bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." (Romans 8:18-21)

The apostle Paul tells us that "the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Romans 8:18) He says that our earthly sufferings are but the "slight momentary affliction" which "is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." (2 Corinthians 4:17)

Christians are waiting for the salvation of the world in God's coming kingdom where the Lord "will render to everyone according to his works." (Romans 2:6) The apostle continues, "to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil…but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good…for God shows no partiality." (Romans 2:7-11)

Convinced of these God-revealed truths we offer the following affirmations and admonitions for the guidance of the faithful:

All efforts to heal physical and spiritual sickness, to alleviate physical and spiritual suffering, and to prevent physical and spiritual death are to be supported and defended.

Those who suffer, and those related to the suffering, are to be helped to find God in their affliction, and so to acquire the divine grace and power to transform their pain into a means of purification from evil, illumination from darkness and eternal salvation in the age to come.

Adequate health care is to be made available for all men, women and children regardless of their, race, religion, social status, or financial condition. Great care must be taken so that healing services are not restricted to the affluent or the apparently "deserving."

Extreme caution is to be exercised in decisions involving medical treatment, especially in the face of death. Extreme care is always in order to find the "royal path" between providing all necessary healing measures and merely prolonging the biological functioning of organs when human life is no longer possible, or even present.

Scientific research and experimentation are to be undertaken with extreme caution in order not to bring greater evils and sufferings to humankind in place of intended blessings.

The natural world is to be treated as the friend and servant of humanity. It is not to be raped, corrupted and polluted for purposes of power, pleasure or profit. It resources are to be used with respect and gratitude for the well-being of all people on the planet (see Message of the Primates of the Most Holy Orthodox Churches, 6. Phanar, March 15, 1992).

Human beings are to be reminded by every means that they are not isolated individuals but are members one of another who will give account to God and to their fellow creatures for their every thought, word and deed; and that their eternal destiny depends on what they have done with their lives on earth.

Copyright © 1996–2013. All rights reserved.