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Marriage responsibilities : an Orthodox view from the Middle East

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MARRIAGE RESPONSIBILITIES. AN ORTHODOX VIEW FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

Sleiman Gebran, Lebanon

‘Husband and wife are one body in the same way as Christ and the Father are one.’

‘If we regulate our households by seeking the things that please God, we will also be fit to oversee the Church, for indeed the household is a little church. Therefore it is possible for us to surpass all others in virtue by becoming good husbands and wives.’

‘Whenever you give your wife advice, always begin by telling how much you love her.’

St. John Chrysostom

‘Just as God blessed the first family, commanding Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, so the Church today gives its blessings to the union of man and woman. Marriage is not only a state of nature but a state of grace. Married life, no less than the life of a monk, is a special vocation, requiring a particular gift of the Holy Spirit; and this gift is conferred in the sacrament of the Holy Matrimony.’

Bishop Kallistos Ware

‘The very notion of marriage as sacrament presupposes that man is not only being with physiological and social functions, but that he is a citizen of God’s Kingdom, i.e. that his entire life and especially his most decisive moments involve eternal values and God Himself.’

Fr. John Meyendorff

Introduction

Orthodox Christianity is a way of life that is a whole coming together of habits and attitudes, ideas and actions: a lifestyle. Many Orthodox Christians do not live in monasteries: they are married; they have homes, children, and jobs. But all Christians, whether monastic or not, are equally called by Christ to repentance and eternal salvation.

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There are no classes of Orthodox Christians; all are equal and all are expected to be followers of Christ, regardless of their position in the church. However, it is very difficult for Christians to live an Orthodox lifestyle. 'Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.' (Matt 10:16)

Marriage and family life are a tremendous bastion of strength for Orthodox lay people, a state that has been blessed by God for the salvation of each individual member of the family. In order to fully understand this, we must look at the doctrinal foundations of marriage found in the Scripture (God's Holy Word) and the Sacred Tradition (the wisdom of the church through the ages).

1. The Biblical View: Marriage as Covenant

When we look at the practice of marriage, family life, and the multiplication of the human race as described in the Old Testament, we immediately see the great emphasis placed on the continuation of the Hebrew race. Marriage was not the only way by which the race was continued at that time. Children were also begotten through the custom of concubinage and of one's marriage to his brother's widow, even though he might have already a wife. Many of the great personages of the Old Testament had multiple wives and concubines. The primary reason for this mating was not the gratification of lust, but the desire for descendants.

But during Old Testament times, God began to reveal His expectations to man. Gradually we see that God condemned polygamous marriages, concubines, and the practice of marrying one's brother's widow. He began to shift the focus of marriage from procreation to a higher, spiritual level. God emphasised that He, not the physical union of a man and a woman, was the ultimate source of life. And where God is, there can be only holiness, and mystery. And holiness and mystery must be protected, guarded, and preserved.

With the coming of Christ, marriage's primary goal was no longer the reproduction of human beings and the perpetuation of a family line, although procreation was still regarded as an important part of marriage. But Christ had come to the world and brought with Him the proof and guarantee of the resurrection of the dead, therefore giving to Christian marriage a new primary goal: the attainment of eternal life by husband, wife, and all children.

What gives meaning to a marriage from a spiritual standpoint? Marriage is the setting up, by two people, of a miniature church, a family church, wherein people may worship the true God and struggle to save their souls. It is also a family church that is in obedience to

Christ's church. Thus we see that in New Testament times the focus of marriage was switched from the primary purpose of producing children to the primary purpose of providing a way for human beings to save their souls. The wedding ceremony itself is filled with rich symbolism that makes this whole aspect of marriage very clear.

The Covenant that the Lord God seals with Israel engages each party in mutual responsibility and mutual commitment. God commissions the first man and woman to 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it,' thereby granting them dominion over God's own creation. This commission confers blessing and responsibility, the basic component of a 'covenant'. Throughout Israel's history the Lord establishes various covenantal relationships with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. Each involves unconditional commitment to fulfil a promise or an obligation that has enduring value.

Finally, the church, as the true 'Israel of God' that unites Jew and Gentile into the one Body of Christ, is the inheritor of 'a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit.' This is the new covenant or 'New Testament' in the blood of Christ, which is poured out for the life of the world. In each case, the two parties of the covenantal bond commit themselves to unconditional faithfulness toward the fulfilment of a pledge or promise that will last forever.

Thus the Covenant that the Lord establishes with Israel and with the church engages each party in mutual responsibility and mutual commitment. To be chosen by God involves both God and ourselves in an eternal commitment, one in which God remains unconditionally faithful. While we can betray that commitment through acts of sinful rebellion or wanton negligence, and the covenant bond can be broken, it is nonetheless intended by God to endure into eternity.

The sacrament of marriage is the clearest and fullest expression of what covenantal commitment is. The very purpose of the marriage is to provide between two parties – two persons – a bond of covenant responsibility and faithfulness that represents and re-actualises the eternal bond established by God with his chosen people. The covenantal bond within which God works out our salvation is in essence a nuptial bond. Conversely, the nuptial relationship achieves its true purpose and attains to its true fullness only insofar as it is based upon an eternal covenantal commitment.

Christ's love for the members of his Body has both a sacramental and an eschatological dimension. This sacred intention serves as a model for conjugal love. For man and woman become 'one flesh' in the sense intended by God, they need to assume toward one another the same kind and quality of faithfulness and self-sacrifice that Christ assumed and continues to assume on behalf of his people. The telos, or ultimate end of conjugal union, is then salvation of the other, the

beloved, with whom one is eternally united in a covenant bond of faithfulness and self-giving. This teaching about the marriage needs to be affirmed in churches.

2. The Symbolism of the Eastern Orthodox Marriage Service

The marriage ceremony in the Orthodox Church is steeped in symbolism which proclaims that a husband and wife are crowned to each other, and that the two become one flesh. Physical actions and images are signs of the spiritual realities of marriage. The rite of marriage contains two parts: the 'betrothal', and the 'crowning'. These two rites are celebrated together as one whole rite of matrimony which strengthens the mutual responsibility of the couple.

The rings: from ancient times, rings have been a symbol of betrothal, agreement, authority, and stewardship. They are sign of wealth and bounty. The bride and groom exchange the rings three times, in honour of the Holy Trinity, to symbolise that in marriage their gifts, talents, and bounties are shared between each other. The exchange of the rings gives expression to the fact that in marriage the spouses will constantly be complementing each other. Each will be enriched by the union.

The procession: after the exchange of the rings the priest leads the couple in procession into the middle of the church. The priest chants Psalm 128, one of the 'Psalms of Ascent' sung by Jewish pilgrims on the way to the Jerusalem Temple. This point in the service most clearly reveals the action of the sacrament. The couple brings themselves, each other, their lives, and all that fills their lives, to the altar as an offering to God.

The candles: the bride and groom are then handed candles which are held throughout the service. The candles symbolise the light of hope and vigilance. They represent the couple's constant readiness to accept Christ into their home and their marital relationship.

The white running cloth: the couple stands on a white cloth throughout the rite of crowning. This cloth represents the road of life, which, from this day forward, they will walk as one.

The crowning: the crowning is the central act of the Orthodox wedding service. The bride and groom are crowned king and queen of their family which is viewed in Orthodoxy as a micro Kingdom of God. They are expected to rule over their kingdom with wisdom, justice, integrity, and, above all else, selfless love. The crowns have two meanings. First, they reveal that the man and woman, in their union with Christ, participate in His Kingship. Second, as in the ancient Church, crowns are a symbol of martyrdom. The word martyr means witness. The common life of the bride and groom is to bear witness

to the presence of Christ in their lives and in the world. Martyrdom is usually associated with death. So the reality of God's Kingdom in the life of the husband and wife will necessarily take the form of dying to one's self, to one's will, and of giving one's life totally to the other, and through the other, to Christ.

The Scripture readings: a) the Epistle: Ephesians 5:20-33. In his letter to the Church in Ephesus, Saint Paul describes the marital relationship as being symbolic of the relationship between Christ and the church. It represents the cornerstone of the Christian vision of marriage; b) the Gospel: John 2:1-11. It is understood that Jesus blesses the matrimonial relationship through performing the first of his miracles at the wedding banquet. Marriage becomes more than a mere human institution, existing for whatever purpose a society assigns it. It becomes, like the Church herself, a sign that God's Kingdom has already begun in our midst.

The common cup: the drinking of wine from the common cup serves to impress upon the couple that from this day on they will share everything in life, both the bitter and the sweet, joys and sorrows, successes and failures, hopes and fears.

The dance of Isaiah or the triumphant procession: it is the triple procession around the central table: the dance of Isaiah. The priest leads the couple in a procession around the table, on which the Gospel (containing the word of God), and the Cross (the symbol of redemption through Jesus Christ) have been placed. Husband and wife take their first steps as a married couple, and the Church in the person of the priest leads them in the way they should walk. Their life will be a journey in which Jesus Christ, His Word and His Salvation, is at the centre. The hymns return once more to the theme of martyrdom and union with Christ. Since ancient times, the Church has used these hymns to emphasise God's blessings. They are also sung at ordinations into clergy orders, and signify that this couple has been set apart from the mundane world to live a life in Christ.

Removal of the crowns: at the end of the service, the crowns are removed and the priest prays that God will receive these crowns into His Kingdom. The reality of the Kingdom into which the bride and groom have entered is not completely fulfilled, but has only begun. Completion and fulfilment will come when Christ returns in power and glory to complete the establishment of His Kingdom in this world by filling all things with Him.

The greetings of the couple: at the end of the service, the couple stands at the foot of the altar. Only the eternal Kingdom of Jesus Christ, as signified by the altar, remains ahead of them. Their final act is to turn and face the assembled Church. Through this sacrament, they have become an icon of the Church and icon of Christ and the assembly comes up to congratulate them and share in their joy.

3. The Responsibility of the Husband

The husband is the head of the wife (Saint Paul). This does not mean that he is superior to his wife. In Christ's sight, all are equal. Saint Paul's declaration, 'in Christ there is neither male nor female,' means that the socially and culturally conditioned inequality between the sexes is abolished; it does not exist in the mind of God and has no place within the church communities.

It also means that in Christ men and women bear equal responsibility for upholding a moral ethos conducive to preserving the integrity of family life.

In fact, marriage is a partnership of equals. Let there be no misunderstanding: there is no room for chauvinism of any kind in Orthodoxy. Nor does a husband's position as head give him any kind of dictatorial, tyrannical, arbitrary or absolute authority over his wife and children. But as with every position of importance, responsibilities go with this one, and they are very heavy and difficult, but also very challenging and potentially creative responsibilities.

The Scripture tells us that a husband must love his wife even as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it; 'Greater love hath no man than he lay down his life for his friend.' (Eph 5:25) Love, then, from the Christian standpoint, means sacrifice and self-denial. A husband must take as much care, concern, thoughtfulness, attention, regard and precautions for his wife as Christ takes for the Church. The husband's attentiveness might even have to extend to death itself.

Again Saint Paul says the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. We know what kind of head Christ was: He washed the feet of His disciples. According to our Saviour, to be head, to be first, means to serve, to be the first in giving love, in giving understanding, in giving patience, in providing his family with protection.

Consequently, the husband is no less responsible than his wife for preserving the familial structure, stability and nurture necessary for the proper raising of their children. A husband is also as responsible as his wife for fulfilling the prescriptions of Ephesians 5. The key to this mutual relationship is provided in Ephesians 5:21, which introduces the entire passage: 'Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ.' The submission is reciprocal. This is the kind of head the husband is called to be. And when he is this kind of head, he is a real man, a true man, faithful to his divinely ordained nature. A husband's duty to give love to his wife and family does not allow him to intimidate his wife. He then cannot treat his wife as a hired servant. And remember that love is not only a noun, but also a verb.

4. The Responsibility of the Wife

Saint Paul says: 'Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord... As the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be subject to their own husbands in everything.' (Eph 5:22, 24).

Within the church, hierarchical relations are established both by origin (divinely conferred baptism and ordination) and by function (the specific ministry to be assumed by the fourfold hierarchy of bishop, priest, deacon and layperson). Hierarchy presupposes, and in fact requires, the essential equality of its constituent members, and equality that derives from the fact that each member is created in the image of God and that each one is called in equal density to attain to the divine likeness. The same is true within the family for the specific roles of father, mother and offspring. As the 'house tables' in Eph 5:21-6:4 and Col 3:18-22 indicate, those roles concern duties and responsibilities of those who share equally the new life in Jesus Christ. They in no way suggest that any one role is ontologically or spiritually superior to any other.

5. The Characteristics of a Successful Marriage

The aim of Christian marriage is eternal life in Heaven with Jesus Christ. The obedience is actually a catalyst for Christian perfection. Christ Himself is the most perfect example of obedience, for it was through His obedience to the will of His Father that He went unto suffering and death for our sakes, and led us from sin to freedom and salvation. In the most mature, highly developed and spiritual marriages, the relationship of a man and a woman evolves into one of mutual obedience.

Experience tells us that two people get married and immediately begin to discover how very different they are. We do not really even begin to know ourselves until we are married. We live too close to ourselves. It really takes someone else to help us to see ourselves what we really are.

In a good marriage, husband and wife share their burdens with one another without reservation, without having to worry about how the other person will react, and without having to keep up a front. True love does not force itself on anyone, and it does not force change; it evokes growth. How? By accepting one's spouse as he or she is. When we marry, we do not sign up to change the other person; we just agree to love him as he is. The best thing a husband can do to change his wife, or vice-versa, is to change himself, to correct his own faults, in keeping with Christ's instructions to His followers. Anyone who is not ready to place his spouse ahead is not ready for marriage.

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If you fit the first button into the first hole of your suit, all the other buttons will fall in their proper place. But if the first button is placed in the second hole, nothing will come out right. It is a matter of putting first thing in first place, of keeping priorities straight. Husbands, if you put your wives first, everything else will fall into its proper place in the marriage relationship. Wives, if you put your husbands first, everything else will fall into its proper place in the marriage relationship.

A successful marriage has many characteristics. The three most important are these:

Praise: no marriage can be proper if there is no praise. Everyone in life needs to feel appreciated at some point by someone. And nothing can kill love faster than continual criticism.

Forgiveness: forgiveness is essential for a happy marriage. It should be there every single day.

Time: a successful marriage takes time. It does not happen overnight. It must grow. It comes through considerable effort and struggle.

No marriage is so good that it cannot be better, and no marriage is so bad that it cannot be improved, provided that the persons involved are willing to grow together by God's grace toward the maturity of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve.

An absolutely essential requirement for a good marriage is the capacity to grow up. When I was a child, observed Saint Paul, I thought as a child. I spoke as a child, I understood as a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things. How essential it is to a happy marriage to put away childish things. How important it is to pray every day: 'O God, help me to grow up, to look beyond myself, to realise the needs and feelings of my wife/husband and to accept the responsibility God has laid upon me.'