

Marriage and Communion

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Nowadays psychologists and sociologists are analyzing the joyless family life we are witnessing, and are troubled about the instability of marriage and about the pain this instability causes both to spouses and children. Analyzing this situation leads us to the conclusion that the original meaning of marriage has proved incomprehensible to modern man. Many people see marriage either as the marital institution, or simply as a private contract, giving it a utilitarian character. Others look at marriage from a purely social and state viewpoint, which turns the family into a small particle, a cell from the state organism bearing a heavy burden, often beyond its strength.^[1]

However, proceeding from their fields of study, which are limited by their treatment of problems, psychology and sociology cannot reach to the fullness of marriage and its destination as revealed in the experience of the Church.

Led by its salvific mission in the world, the Church assigns marriage a special place. It provides the man and woman entering into holy matrimony with a special blessing called "sacrament", and sacrament in St Nicholas Cabasilas' words is the *door* through which Christ comes back in order to dwell in His Church. Proceeding from this, *sacrament* is not a religious form of "registration", but a living communion with Christ.

The meaning of marriage as a sacrament is in the glorification of the newly-wed couple and their children in the Kingdom of God. The Church blesses the bridal couple for giving birth to children and multiplying the human race, which is a commandment given in the beginning to our ancestors, but the Church also sees them as glorification before God: "*and the two shall become one flesh.*" *This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church* (Eph. 5:20-33). It is for this reason that Apostle Paul calls marriage *a mystery*, meaning that marriage is preserved in the Kingdom of God and in communion with the Giver of Life.

Therefore, what comes first in the holy sacrament of Matrimony is the experience of the reality of the Kingdom of God in the communion of the Holy Eucharist, and second come the biological relations which are built as a result of the love between the man and the woman in the family, and which lead and accompany them in the present life towards the future life.

The Church intervenes in these biological relations in order to give sexual love its true dimensions, to release the power of love in man from its submission to natural necessity, and to reveal the image of the Church and the gift of the new life in the unity of communion between the man and the woman. This is only made possible through the gift

of God's grace, but in order for this grace to be effective, human cooperation is required (συνεργία).[2]

Orthodoxy teaches us that the only way in which the physical consummation of sexual relations can be directed towards good and can have purpose, is the monogamous (μονογαμία), heterosexual, blessed and marital life. Marriage, therefore, requires exclusive and complete dedication to each other. That is, the two to become one flesh (Mat. 19:5).

Marriage is *heterosexual* because of the fact that God *created them male and female* with the clear purpose of having children, *being fruitful and multiply* (Gen. 1:28), that is, continuing His creative work through joining two lives in one loving unity, a union which is a new creation making the two "one flesh". Therefore, from erotic and passionate, love should be transformed into αγάπη (selfless, self-giving love) which is a love that unites and brings the soul into eternal communion with one's fellowman and God. By mutual denial of the individual, egoistic will and acceptance of the will of the other, the communion of the man and the woman starts building up not on the natural basis of sex drive, but on the foundations of church communion which presuppose self-overcoming and self-offering.

Marriage receives its identity not from the natural relations, but from the relations in the Heavenly Kingdom. Thus the Christian family becomes a "small church".[3] Sexual relations outside marriage cannot achieve their original purpose, and today's cohabitation – *concubinage*[4] corrupts marriage and is not even "the beginning of marriage".[5]

In order for the man and woman to become one flesh, in the sense given by God, they need to accept into their relations towards each other the same kind and quality of the faithfulness and self-sacrifice which Christ accepted for His people, that is, in the likeness of the crucified and salvific love of Christ. Marital life is the image, icon of the union between Christ and the Church.[6] It is in marriage that relations of love between the man and the woman in the family, which lead and accompany them from the present life towards the future life, are built.

In the Orthodox Christian understanding, the purpose of marriage is marriage itself. Children are its component, and not a purpose. It is possible that for some reason the married couple may not have children, or may lose them, therefore, people should enter into marriage in order to live their lives in mutual love, that is, in overcoming their individualism and egoism, in extending the boundaries of their personality, and in preparation for life eternal.

Marriage is a dynamic phenomenon whose whole power is in movement, purposefulness, in its universal dimension. Marriage is also a symbol of martyrdom, and martyr is the one who bears witness to a certain value before the whole world. It is for this reason that the Church calls on every bridegroom and bride to believe in love, to believe in each other with such firmness that they bear witness – whatever that may cost them – to

love, to unity, to the fact that true love can conquer all.

Today, however, it is universally acknowledged that modern man is highly secularized, and in contemporary West-European and American society even the notion of post-Christian culture has surfaced, traditional values are being replaced with new ones, while the man of today strives to produce more and consume more both material and *spiritual* products.

This situation inevitably affects the relations between the man and the woman, affects marriage, and children.

The last few decades have seen a dramatic increase in the divorce rate in the Western world. Trafficking of human beings and children for sexual exploitation has reached epidemic proportions, and the production of pornographic material earns billions of dollars of annual income. The easy access to this material via the Internet is further contributing to shaping a consumer attitude towards the man and the woman, and to losing the personal attitude towards them. Unfaithfulness (adultery) is regarded as normal, and divorce because of egoism is becoming a fact which has devastating consequences predominantly for children and their psyche. Communion in marriage increasingly proves to be at a psychological level, and can always be broken off. The roots of all this, however, are very ancient, they go back to the very Fall of Man. It is precisely estrangement, the severing of the existential relation and communion with God, that makes Adam and Eve adopt an autonomous existence, only drawing strength from their created nature. What is more, communion between them themselves is also destroyed. Our hiding from the other's presence, our hiding from God's presence, the feeling of nakedness and shame which accompanies sin is the expression of our awareness of the fact that the other now only regards us as an object of their desire, we are objectified, being stripped of our most profound uniqueness, and through shame we try to preserve our own personality.[\[7\]](#)

These problems underlie our relations. Yet, how can we overcome this tragedy?

The only answer is that it is only in the Church, in the Holy Eucharist, that we can restore the lost communion between God and man, and return to the roots of the authentic prelapsarian relations.

This transfiguration of human nature and will demonstrates that we are created to be in communion. This is the main purpose implanted in man, which is reflected in marriage, children, and our attitude towards the other person in society. This communion should also continue beyond death.

This is the reason why we believe that the indissolubility of marriage is one of its essential characteristics: "what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt. 19.6). To the question why then today the Orthodox Church dissolves marriage, we can answer that the Church does not dissolve marriage, but only legally acknowledges that the basis

of marriage – communion in *love* – has been destroyed between the spouses.^[8]

Divorce is one of the greatest and most widespread tragedies that can strike modern man. It is not only the end of the loving communion which marriage has established, but also the end of the hope of a life in its entirety, full of joy, profound and meaningful.

Why it is that two people who have loved each other until recently suddenly find out that the love between them has gone, and the only thing left to them is to part? The reason is found in the fact that too many marriages are entered into by people who are not mature enough, who neither protect their marriage nor take care of it. In such a marriage we found the spirit of individualism. That is why, we, Orthodox Christians, taking into consideration the *hardness* (Matt. 19:8), severity and unstableness of human heart, consider divorce possible, although we regard it as one of the greatest tragedies in our contemporary life. What is more, we take it upon ourselves because the responsibility for divorces is shared by the whole Church, which means that we, Christians, have to educate people, and not by words and sermons only, but first of all by example.

Regarding the contemporary view of the acceptability of abortion, it speaks in itself of crass insensitivity towards man, and towards society in general – towards the life of the individual person. Abortion is a denial of communion ending in the death of the most vulnerable.

It is wild and inhuman to think, to speak of the sanctity of human life, while allowing and giving legal status to the murder called *abortion*. Indeed, in a country where abortion has been legalized, no one – from the government to the ordinary citizen – has the right to assert that human life is holy precisely because abortion is murder.^[9]

A marriage in which children are unwanted is based on a damaged, egoistic and lustful love. Giving life to another person man imitates the creative act of God, while refusing to do so he not only rejects his Creator, but also distorts his own nature, since without the desire to imitate the Creator of life and Father in every possible way man ceases to be “the image and likeness of God”.

Abortion – whether had by a couple or a woman who has got pregnant with an unwanted child and now wants to get rid of that child – is nothing else but a crime – a murder. Besides, women having an abortion cannot know what the consequences will be – both psychological and physiological.

Abortion deprives the family of the greatest joy of giving birth to children and bringing them up, which is a blessing from God. There is no Christian marriage without the pure and ardent desire of the two parents to have this joy and share it between them.

Mentioning all this, we – who have been called to be *the light of the world* (Matt. 5:14) and bear the name Christians – face a huge number of challenges, to which we should

respond with the catholic voice of the Church. Through our way of life, we should make society aware of the absolute uniqueness of marriage. With our families, we should take part in the Holy Eucharist without fail because in it, through communion and love, our marriage is fully realized in the eternal Kingdom of God.

This is to say that we, the Orthodox Christians, cannot agree that marriage only exists “till death do us part”, but believe in its eternity because it is crowning with glory and honour in the Resurrected Christ – the true God and true Man.

We have to bear witness to the fact that in the sacrament of marriage, without losing its fullness, human nature participates in the higher reality of the Holy Spirit. This is the communion to which we are called, a communion of love, which has to come out of the family and leaven the world. In this way, we will be able to fulfil our unique destination to be a nation of priests (1 Peter 2:9) and mediators between God and creation. This is the gift of the new life which is realized in the unity and communion with God, between the man and the woman and every fellowman.

[1] See Sourozhki, mitr. Antony, *Brak i podvizhnichestvo*, Sofia, 2001, 14-15.

[2] Meyendorff, J. *Vizantiisko bogoslovie*, Sofia, 1995, 247.

[3] St John Chrysostom, *Homily 20* on Ephesians 5:22-24.

[4] Concubinage in Roman law was a lasting relationship between a man and a woman living together without the intention of entering into marriage because of legal impediments or social status. The marriage between them was undesired and unsuitable. Nowadays a lot of couples not having these impediments maintain the same kind of relationship.

[5] St Basil the Great states in his 26th canon that “fornication is neither marriage, nor the beginning of marriage. If it may be, it is better that they who have committed fornication together be parted; but if they be stubborn in their cohabitation, let them [be punished with a penance for fornication and] not separate, [but be joined in marriage] for fear of what is worse.”

[6] The perfect image of this fullness is given in the so-called Marriage of the Lamb which *represents* the Church as the Lamb’s Bride (Rev. 21:9), and the Lamb is Christ who has given his life for her. Both images of the Lamb and the Bride speak of love: perfect, sacrificial to the end, triumphant.

[7] See Yannaras, Chr. ‘Grehopadenieto’, *Mirna* 13/2001, Sofia, 14.

[8] Milash, Bishop Nik. *Pravoslavno crkveno pravo*, Beograd-Shibenik, 2004, 669.

[9] See Sourozhki, mitr. Antony, *ibid*, 54.