

Between Heaven and Earth:

Pastoral Reflections on the Psychodynamics of the Clergy Family

Our family is a special gift of God in our lives. It is through our family that we struggle for salvation, for personal integration, for well-being.

The apostolic tradition of a married priesthood should be considered an invaluable blessing of God in our lives. A married priesthood displays the consistency between heaven and earth, manifests the cooperation between nature and grace and reinforces the spiritual meaning of marriage. Any underestimation of or contempt for married clergy, as is unfortunately the case sometimes among monastics and even married laity, is a serious divergence from ecclesiastical truth and was condemned synodically quite early in the Church's history.

The clergy couple is the touch-stone of the quality of our pastoral ministry. The clergy couple is a peculiar couple. The two spouses' calling is to live in the world and simultaneously bear witness for what lies beyond this world. They are asked to function in the middle of the ecclesiastical community without losing their privacy. They have to experience spiritual fatherhood without betraying their natural parenthood. They are invited not to allow pastoral confidentiality divide them but instead unite them in love for the flock. They are assigned the task of spiritual leadership while at the same time they find themselves in the middle of their own dilemmas and inner immaturities. They are united in both their conjugal bed and in the Holy Eucharist. How are they to cope with all these acrobatic combinations without losing their balance?

Let us start with a basic assumption: we offer to God what we are. With an arm broken we cannot serve in the Liturgy. Natural gifts serve the spiritual ones because natural gifts precede the spiritual ones. We minister to the Lord and His people through health and integrity; practically, this means that we are first human beings, then husbands, and after that priests. Thus marriage becomes the first matter of priesthood.

I am not sure how many in our Church share this scale of priorities. What I am totally persuaded of, though, is that the quality of our marriage definitely marks and affects the quality of our pastoral ministry. Another analogue is that natural fatherhood may predict spiritual fatherhood, too. (Let us not forget that for celibates their priestly identity reasonably follows from the quality of their own "marriage", namely of their own monastic vocation.)

Another basic assumption is that our capacity to relate tends to run across all our emotional bonds and ties, thus flavoring all our important relationships with the same virtues and defects. No matter if we relate to God, our wife, our children, or our parishioners, we usually repeat the same patterns of attitude and behavior. A lot of examples could be mentioned here: an authoritarian clergyman finds it difficult to be a tender husband; a compulsive, perfectionist pastor may find himself unable to relax when at home; a moralistic and judgmental priest is rather improbable to radiate the love of God to his family; a possessive spiritual father tends not to respect the freedom of his growing natural children, etc. If we score poorly in pastoral

listening, we may have trouble in building an affectionate and loving relationship with our wife because any such relationship requires attentive listening. If in our public life as pastors we pursue self-justification, then we might find it difficult to admit our mistakes in the context of our family. In other words, our basic paths of involvement in the context of our pastoral ministry extend into our relationships with our family, and vice versa. Next to these two basic psychological presuppositions we need an axiomatic theological principle. After the incarnation of our Lord everything in our Church is theanthropinon, divine and human at the same time. According to the powerful statement of Saint Maximos the Confessor: "The Word of God (Christ) wishes that the mystery of His incarnation be realized in everything and always". After all, if dogmas are not to be lived in our souls and lives what are they good for? I would suggest that we not assume that all heresies have surrendered once and for all, even within the Church. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem warns us that there are many latent heretics even inside the Church. Although most heresies have been historically defeated, they are often still active on an existential level. To denounce them rationally is not a guarantee that the human soul has abandoned them emotionally.

2Something that I have noticed is that many of the troubles of our ecclesiastical life stem from a certain loss of that divine-human harmony. Every time we experience, for example, an imbalance between our pastoral work and our family (which admittedly often becomes the main obsession of our wives and children, not to mention some of our parishioners as well), it would be a good idea to frankly and carefully assess our private theology, in order to discern whether it reflects the true Theology of the Church.

How and why may we lose the balance? Let me describe two basic ways of what I call "psychological heresy":

If the fire of love is not the main motivation in our love for people, how is it possible to love God Who abides in human persons?

Psychological Nestorianism:

Here the clergy couple organizes its life around the basic motivation of financial security. The care for its children's future may lead to neglect of pastoral mission or to a cold, distant professional ministry. In many such cases, presbyteras may even approve and encourage such an attitude.

In this case, the clergyman gets trapped within his own family which develops a kind of collective egocentricity. He is unable to make the critical step of transcendence, to proceed from natural parental love to the spaciousness of the Body of Christ. If the fire of love is not the main motivation in our love for people, how is it possible to love God Who abides in human persons?

What about the couple's bond here? I am afraid the best we can expect is a peaceful relationship – yet without inspiration, because love for God is what feeds love between husband and wife. But in these cases the majority of the problems are about their children who easily recognize the hypocrisy of their parents and thus – sooner or later – abandon the Church.

Psychological Monophysitism:

Here we have just the opposite imbalance: a neglect of the family in favor of the Church. The priest tends to pursue the so-thought divine realities of the Church

and ignore the human ones of his family. He does not see it as a priority that he should be giving time and energy for personal communication with his wife and children. Instead, he assiduously devotes himself to pastoral activities, thus being physically absent from home and mentally and emotionally absent when he is there. Sometimes his wife imitates him in this imbalance to the degree she gets involved in parish activities.

An unconscious feeling of omnipotence is usually present here: the priest feels invulnerable to fatigue and beyond emotional needs. Probably, he felt so long before he was ordained, by giving first priority to priesthood instead of marriage. There is no need to wonder why: priesthood often provides us with a sense of power whereas being a member of a couple may remind us of our vulnerability and weakness. In pastoral involvement the priest feels influential; in everyday conjugal closeness his wife becomes influential on him. That is the reason many of us prefer spending our time at the Church rather than at home; the former favors a respectful façade, the latter leads to our disclosure.

Motivation for work-aholism may be guilt.

The fact that we often host grandiose fantasies is a painful reality to discover. But, there is no other option but to stare truth in the face, if the priest is to progress towards self-knowledge, and by doing so, to become a better pastor. Yesterday, in a pastoral context, we dealt with our parishioners as real people; now we have to face the fact that we are real people too. Family seems the best place to grow in awareness of this. The light of intra-familial relationships is too strong to allow us hide.

In addition to feelings of omnipotence, another motivation for work-aholism may be guilt. This is the case of a person with a strict superego that guilt aspires to appease. This superego can be satisfied with nothing less than perfection, so the priest keeps running until he falls down exhausted. Symptoms of exhaustion might be a somatic illness or a burnout or an impressive failure in his pastoral life that forces him to change route. (I can recall the case of a very conscientious priest who spent most of his time working in the parish and his family protested. What his

3

family did not know was that he had been sexually molested by another priest during his adolescence. He could never forgive himself for this and was unable to find peace in his soul, so his guilt resulted in compulsive work for the Church in the hope of finding forgiveness by God). What is interesting here is that our sermons and pastoral guidance may remain unaffected by our strict superego; nevertheless, in numerous cases, they both may follow this general unconscious distortion, thus expressing a wrong theology.

The temptation of “psychological Monophysitism” usually offends the so-called “good” priest, the conscientious priest, who really cares for the Body of Christ. Besides, it seems that the more vulnerable to this psychological heresy are the

relatively capable clergy, who fall into the trap of their own talents and gifts. In other words, they keep adding more and more activities and tasks, encouraged by their real (or fantasized) success. His parishioners' approval and admiration contribute to this illusion. As if this was not enough, a priest with grandiose fantasies may come to believe that he is indeed as pious as his parishioners think, thus forgetting that he is merely finding himself endowed with the incredible gift described by the verse: "He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of His people" (Psalms 113: 7- 8).

If someone is unable to protect his own personal life and normal development, no one else can do it for him. If the priest himself fails to build healthy boundaries between his marriage and family and the Church, what bishop can refuse to take advantage of this willingness to violate those boundaries? To my knowledge, most bishops in Greece do not seem to care for leaving a certain time between marriage and ordination, or for assigning reasonable duties to the priest, or for having a genuine concern about the clergy family. Obviously this is due not to bad intentions but to a lack of empathy, since they do not have similar experiences of family life and the needs of the Church are so many.

The final result of this situation is that the wife starves emotionally, which may manifest itself like any other emotional starvation: through addictions to food, alcohol, television, or one of her children. Actually, the priest himself starves too, but he has invented various substitutes that look more acceptable socially, or more dangerously, even appear more holy. His problem cannot be identified until the time comes that the substitute becomes unacceptable.

What I have just mentioned gives me an opportunity to comment on a difficult topic that is rarely discussed publicly. It is about the emotional risks to which the clergy couple is exposed when the spouses' relationship is dysfunctional. I have to state beforehand that I would not like to leave any space for blaming or criticizing someone; no priest and no presvytera are immune to this danger. An emotional affair may threaten even a functional couple, and Saint Paul warns us: "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall" (1 Corinthians 10: 12).

We witness a remarkable increase in the numbers of women who go to the priest for confession

It is more than obvious that the problem of extramarital affairs among clergy is growing nowadays for a number of reasons. First, for several decades, the clergy couple has lived in an open society, and not in a traditional context. Other Christian communities have already experienced a growing rate of clergy divorces, too.

We also witness a remarkable increase in the numbers of women who go to the priest for confession and counseling. As the prevailing mentalities tend towards "liberation" today, the clergyman is exposed to

4

a) more intimate hearings; b) more radiating femininity;

c) more disappointments of women with their husbands and thus more inclinations for dependence on the spiritual father;

d) a perverse nature of sexuality prevalent in the society of spectacle.

For all these reasons the priest nowadays comes much closer to women than in the past and this makes him more vulnerable, unless he possesses a strong spiritual and psychological resilience.

Women, much more than men, gather in the services, cluster around the priest, help in various parish and philanthropic activities, come to confess. Here we have to admit a kind of embarrassment and inconsistency on our part. Sometimes we allow them to control everything and become omnipotent, thus preparing our congregation to react in competition and jealousy. On the other hand, there are moments in which we treat them with contempt and aggressiveness, or even with ungratefulness. The former seems to stem from the fascination and attraction that women exert; the latter might be the other side of the coin, the only “preventive” way we know not to find ourselves entrapped inside their charm.

Our spiritual warfare against our temptations relevant to women should not turn into a war against women. Asceticism is one thing and its motivation is another. Asceticism without love is rejected by our theology and, practically speaking, fails at its aims. Some spiritual fathers cannot undertake a theological and psychological acceptance of love between the two genders without putting their own chastity into risk. In order to successfully cope with this, some spiritual fathers eventually coin their own private theology. It is obvious that couples may suffer in this climate to the degree that their spiritual fathers try to persuade them to adopt their private theology as if it was the theology of the Church. Spiritual fathers who tend to fear female erotic desire often suppress the desire of the couple for each other and destroy their bond; or the couple decides to abandon the spiritual father in order to save their marriage. This makes for a tragic and unfair dilemma, needless to say.

Some priests tend to form a kind of home monasticism.

Under the aforementioned defensive conditions, clergy eventually become vulnerable to women. Ironically, what happens here is exactly what they wished to avoid. That is why some clergy become anxious in face of an essentially creative female presence; they prefer to cooperate with submissive women, or with women lacking femininity. Where this is impossible they usually assign women to merely execute some menial tasks, in order to avoid a creative unfolding of their personality.

Some priests with undoubtedly good intentions, aiming to protect themselves from these dangers, tend to form a kind of home monasticism. Obviously such a condition does not promote psychological warmth and connectedness; rather it makes him more aloof (or this was chosen because he was already aloof). Simultaneously it establishes a sort of “angelism”; the priest pretends that he does not care for psychological realities, that he has overcome them. He tends to speak only in “spiritual” terminology and does not

understand – or gets distressed with – the vocabulary of interpersonal relationships.

These phenomena become more probable and more intense when the priest had thought of becoming a monk when he was young, even if many years before his marriage. The guilt that he eventually betrayed a “higher” calling leads him to compulsively imitate monastic habits inside the family. (What I find interesting here is that such a priest always prefers to exercise his monastic calling from within the role of a self-ordained abbot, who has decided to lead the other members of the family autocratically and takes their monastic calling and total obedience to him as a given. One wonders what kind of monks such priests would have made, had they done so.)

In my opinion, all of these defensive methods to preserve chastity and asceticism are not effective. The only protective path against risks with women is a combination of watchfulness, prayer, and a healthy and ever-deepening relationship with our wives. It is really a pity if this is the road less traveled. An essential bond of love and true unity is not an endowment we automatically possess from the beginning of our marriage. It has continuously to be achieved, to endlessly be cultivated. Therefore, the Church has to

5

acknowledge this reality by helping the clergy couple find their own common path before and after ordination. For such a high aim good intentions are not enough; we need personal time and space. Because nature dislikes gaps, if this work is not done by the couple, other persons will grasp the opportunity to fill the gap.

I could add here that those of us who have yet to experience an emotional attraction toward a woman should not sleep carelessly; sometimes special bonds are formed between the priest and a woman, without any hint of overt eroticism. It may be the case of a very cooperative and confident woman with whom we may have developed a co-dependence. Our presvytera may feel jealous but she does not know why; she has nothing to blame us for. But her unconscious knows well; what is happening in this situation is a so-called unconscious eroticized relationship. Looking for a warning sign of kind of problem, we could think of a priest being happy when that particular woman comes to confess or discovering how quickly the time passes when with her! There are times that a presvytera feels jealous of the parish. (I yield to the temptation here to remind you that in Greek the Church and the parish are of female gender). The reason might be that her husband communicates to her that the priesthood counts much more than her. I find this a version of priesthood more prevalent in traditional societies, when a presvytera’s mission was considered as “giving the fighter a rest”. Perhaps this worked in certain eras, but in this post-modern era we have to frankly give priority to our marriage; this is our first job. Otherwise the priest will find it difficult to understand other couples in his pastoral work; and the presvytera

will remain the most honored and most appreciated single mother in our society.

We face a major problem

in finding young women who will accept marriage to a future priest.

In Greece we face a major problem in finding young women who will accept marriage to a future priest. Women tend to fear that by ordination they will be marginalized both in their husband's lives and in society generally; worse, they feel that the candidate for ordination who desperately seeks a wife does not actually put emphasis on the person but on the role of being a presvytera. And because they reasonably wish to be treated like unique persons, they refuse.

Faithful young people who are candidates for the priesthood are still young people. They belong to their era no less than their peers; they just try not to imitate them in sins. Thus, in developing a perspective on priestly vocations, we have to take this reality under consideration in order to be able to plan. In other words, the youth of today give priority to intimacy and healthy relationships. It seems paradoxical that by doing so they are closer to the spirit of the Service of Matrimony than their grandparents. The latter for some centuries tended to consider having children as the main purpose of marriage; but young people today are concerned about the affectional bond of the couple. Well, in the Service of Matrimony you will find many more prayers about the bond of the couple and much less about the children to come. Its Byzantine authors seem much more modern than we could imagine.

By saying all this, I hope I made obvious my conviction that the priority given to the couple is a good development of modern times. The Church, having passed through a variety of cultural influences on her mentality, now stands in front of her sources and faces the challenge to rediscover them. One could erroneously consider this shift to be more "secular" and less "pious", and so it could be asked: "Will not the giving of priority to the couple decrease priestly vocations or their productivity as clergymen?" My answer is no. I would predict they will become healthier in the short term and that priestly vocations will increase in number over the long term. To add a few words about the children in clergy families, I would pose the question: Is anything special required for a priest to be a good father? Some of you may be astonished when you hear that I will again answer no. A priest should qualify for being a good father just as everybody else does. The problem is that sometimes we are unable to respond to the wonderful calling of fatherhood, not because we lack the appropriate abilities, but to the degree we undermine them by a so-called "professional perversion".

What is a professional perversion? Well, this is a chronic "medical" condition, prevalent especially among clergy, policemen, judges, and teachers. The children have their own private pastor but simply lack a father.

6

Perhaps someone is wondering about the symptoms of this disorder? The symptoms of this disorder are made up of a consistent constellation of behaviors indicating that priestly life has invaded family life and abuses it, behaviors such as coercion, delivering a number of sermons daily to his family, a compulsive urge to assist people uninvited, the habit of preaching what he has never tried to accomplish, an inability to relax and laugh, a moralistic odor in each of his answers, or mere neglect. As for the aetiology of this disorder:

- a) although sometimes it runs in families, a hereditary factor has not been affirmed;
- b) it is strongly infectious: the prolonged influence of a priest or spiritual father who

suffer from professional perversion contaminates other candidates for the priesthood and their families;

c) a self-immune factor, namely the development of antibodies for inner states and a tendency to reject them as alien while focusing on externals.

The treatment for professional perversion should include prayer, reading, struggle for self-knowledge, moments of intimacy with our wife, the effort to understand each one of our children as the unique persons God has created them to be and to interact with them consistently and lovingly so that we can be grateful to God for them.

Our children are exposed to the priestly aspects of our life while they have the exclusive privilege of knowing us as we really are in everyday life. So comparisons between our high verbal proclamations and our more or less lower practical performance of

the virtues may create confusion or disappointment in their minds. This gap cannot be amended by either pretentious behavior at home or by abandoning the mission of working for the Gospel; that would be a pseudo-dilemma. My proposal is that we should try to live both the joy of natural family life and the blissful foretaste of the Kingdom to come. They not only can coexist, but our mission is to convince people that they can coexist and become mutual prerequisites in the truly sacramental life. So far we have dealt with diagnoses. What would I recommend as some preventive and therapeutic measures? I will briefly epitomize some:

1) That the bishop leaves adequate time for the marriage relationship to adequately develop before ordination. In addition, we need a good relationship between the bishop and the priestly candidate couple, actually an affectionate caring pastoral relationship.

2) That the couple, after ordination, protects its privacy by finding time for themselves, both indoors and outdoors. By this I mean that assignments on the priest should be reasonable, depending not only on his age and experience, but on the life-cycle of his family too.

3) That all bishops and spiritual fathers, are very, very careful when we meet married candidates who had thought of becoming monks or celibates previously.

4) That clergy families cultivate friendship and mutual support with other clergy families.

5) That we all stress the importance of the couple in the Church and disseminate a correct theology on marriage. Maybe we could try catechesis with a couple of young catechists.

6) That we keep in mind that the most successful promotion of priesthood among young people is a happy clergy couple that practices and exemplifies a real and living relationship with God. Additionally, that we apply a more daring and inventive pastoral approach to priestly vocations, including an approach to healthy married couples.

7) That we create structures in which clergy families in crisis could find a shelter, relief and renewal.

And as I have spoken out today against perfectionism, let us remember how Saint Maximos the Confessor concludes the preface of his Mystagogy by considering his work rather trivial: "Even the smallest thing we offer according to our ability is acceptable by God who did not reject the coin of the widow. It shares with the gold offerings of the rich the royal sign of the King on it and the wholehearted intention".

Beloved brothers,

Only in Orthodoxy do we live the blessing of combining priesthood and marriage. We have been endowed with an amazing privilege that waits for enactment. In other words, the challenge for the clergy couple is to live in such a way that its psychological truth

coincides with its proclaimed theological truth.

—Rev. Vasileios Thermos, M.D., Ph.D. A paper given at the National Clergy Retreat,
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7

Father Demetrios Nicoloudakis leading a Trisagion prayed for the victims of terrorism at the crash site of Flight 93.