

**The Glory of Christ-Centered Marriage**  
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***Introduction***

With the basic understanding of marriage under so much attack and plunged into so much confusion in our own day – and increasingly so, it seems, day by day – a reaffirmation of the traditional Orthodox understanding of marriage would seem to be of utmost timeliness and importance. As we try to probe deeply into what marriage means in Holy Orthodoxy, may we be blessed by our LORD to gain a more profound, more solid, more sublime, and richer understanding of marriage. Indeed, may we come to be in awe of and exult in *the glory of marriage* – and especially Christ-centered marriage – more than ever before.

***The Origins of Marriage***

Marriage began when the LORD GOD Himself, after having formed Adam, the first man, from the dust of the earth and having breathed into him the breath of life, saw that something was not right – something very crucial was lacking. And so the LORD said, “It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make a helpmeet (*ezer k-neged-u*) comparable to him” (Gen. 2:18). Then, as we recall, the LORD brought all the animals before Adam, to see if any of them might be the suitable missing partner. But they all were too different; and so the Genesis account then says, “But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him” (2:20). So then the LORD “brought a trance upon Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and filled up the flesh in its place. Then the LORD GOD built the rib He took from Adam into a woman, and brought her to him” (2:21-22). Upon awaking and seeing this beautiful creature so like him and yet also so intriguingly different, Adam cried out joyously, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh” (2:23-24). Adam spontaneously knew that *this one* was the helpmeet<sup>1</sup> especially made for him by His own Creator – the one he was meant to be joined with in ineffable unity.

St. Tikhon of Moscow, in a sermon he preached at a wedding in San Francisco in

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<sup>1</sup> This word “helpmeet” - or “helpmate” - has a stronger meaning in the original Hebrew (*ezer k-neged-u*) – something more like “rescuer,” for Eve *rescued* Adam from his loneliness. I'm quite sure that most of us husbands can attest that our wives have literally rescued us from disaster of one kind or another probably more than once!

1902, while he was the bishop of the Russian Missionary Diocese of North America, retold with great feeling the account of Eve's creation in this way:

“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helpmeet for him” (Gen. 2:18), said God Himself when our forefather Adam was still in Paradise. Without a helpmate, the very bliss of Paradise was not complete for Adam. Endowed with the ability to think, speak, and love, the first man in his thoughts is seeking another being who is able to think. His speech sounds sorrowfully in the air, and only a lifeless echo serves as an answer to him. And his heart, full of love, is looking for another heart that is close and equal to his.

His entire being desires another being similar to him, but there is no such being. The creatures of the visible world around him are lower than he is and cannot be a helpmate appropriate for him; and the beings of the invisible, spiritual world are higher than he is.

Then the All-Merciful God, who cares about the bliss of man, fulfills his need and creates for him a helpmate appropriate for him – a wife!” (quoted in *Marriage as a Path to Holiness: Lives of Married Saints*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p. xx; my emphasis).

St. John Chrysostom marvels about the wondrous creation of Eve in this way:

How great the power of God, the Master Craftsman (aristotechnou), making a likeness of those limbs from that tiny part, creating such wonderful senses, and preparing a creature complete, entire and perfect, capable of both conversing and of providing much comfort to man by a sharing of her being (te tes ousias koinonia). For it was for the consolation (paraklesin) of this man that this woman was created (Homily XV on Genesis; PG 53.122A; *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 74, p. 200).

It is worth noting here that, just as the Genesis account of Eve's creation does not mention her being made in order to bear children, but only to be Adam's helper and partner, so also Chrysostom in this passage only mentions Eve as providing consolation for Adam. In other passages, of course, Chrysostom does emphasize the importance of marriage as being the GOD-given context for the conceiving, bearing, and raising of children – and elsewhere he talks about other blessings of marriage as well, as we will see.

In concluding our brief discussion on the origins of marriage, it is crucially important to emphasize that the LORD GOD Himself is the Author, the Creator, of marriage. It is, therefore, *His institution*, which He offers to mankind as a gift from Himself. And so, it must be received and lived out *on His terms*; for instance, the LORD created *a woman* to be Adam's spouse, not another man! (So, by the way, we can legitimately ask how anyone has the right to redefine marriage as possibly the mating of two men or two women.) And, of course, the male-female complementarity is

replicated throughout all of Nature, as we see in all the species of animals entering Noah's Ark two by two – male and female.

### ***Marriage Outside the Church***

Ideally, every marriage would be performed, blessed, and sanctified in the Church, Christ's Body on this earth. But even marriages that are formed and exist apart from His Church still retain something of the divine nature of marriage as the LORD's creation and gift to mankind. Such marriages still bear the imprint of the divine glory of the Author and Creator of marriage. St. John Chrysostom marvels, for instance, at the way two people who previously did not even know each other now leave the families in which they were given birth and sustenance for so many years, in order to marry and live with each other, forming a brand new family, and becoming united with each other in ineffable intimacy, entrusting each other totally into the hands of this newcomer:

Did you see the goodness of the Master? It was not then in vain nor without reason that at the beginning of my discourse, I called what takes place here [at baptism] a spiritual *marriage*. For in the case of that marriage which can be seen with bodily eyes, it is altogether impossible that the bride be united to a husband unless she has forgotten her parents and those who reared her, and unless she has given over her will, whole and entire, to him who will be joined to her as her bridegroom. Hence, the blessed Paul, in treating of marriage, called it a *mystery*. For after he had said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh,” he pondered on the strength of this bond, and cried out in amazement, “This is a *great* mystery” [Eph. 5:31-32; my emphasis].”

Chrysostom goes on to say here – admittedly with exaggeration, and with arranged marriages in mind that were typical in his day,

Yes, for it is truly great. What human reckoning will be able to grasp the nature of what takes place in marriage, when one considers that the young wife, who has been nourished with her mother's milk, and kept at home, and judged worthy of such careful upbringing, suddenly, in a single moment, when she comes to the hour of marriage, forgets her mother's labor pains and all her other care, forgets her family life, the bonds of love, and, in a word, forgets everything, and gives over her whole will to that man whom she never saw before that night? . . . No longer does she remember those who took care of her for so many years. So intimate is the union of these two that thereafter they are not two but one. Adam, the first-formed man, with prophetic eyes foresaw this very thing and said, “She shall be called woman, because she was taken out of her man. Wherefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh” [Gen. 2:23-24; my emphasis].

The same thing could be said of the husband, because he too has forgotten his parents and his father's house to unite himself and cleave to the wife who on that night is joined to him. Furthermore, to point out the closeness of this union, the Holy Scripture did not say, "He shall be united to a wife," but, "He shall *cleave to his wife.*" Nor was Holy Writ content with that, but added, "And they shall be *two in one flesh.*" For this reason Christ too has brought forward this testimony and said, "Therefore, now they are no longer two, but one flesh" [Matthew 19:6]. So intimate is this union and adherence that *the two of them are one flesh.* Tell me, what reckoning will be able to discover this, what power of reason will be able to understand what takes place? Was not that blessed teacher of the whole world correct in saying that it is a mystery? And he did not simply say a mystery, but, "This is *a great mystery*" [Eph. 5:32] (*Baptismal Instructions* I.11-14; *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 31, pp. 26-28; my emphasis).

Elsewhere St. John Chrysostom speaks further about the oneness that husband and wife share, beginning with the first married couple, Adam and Eve:

Can you see now *how close this union is*, and how God providentially created it from a single nature? He permitted Adam to marry Eve, who was more than sister or daughter; she was his own flesh! (Homily 20 on Ephesians, Roth and Anderson, *St. John Chrysostom: On Marriage and Family Life*, p. 44; quoted in Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Full Views of St. John Chrysostom*, p. 54; my emphasis).

In this same homily – his famous homily 20 on Ephesians – Chrysostom observes that of all possible human relationships, it is marriage that provides the opportunity for two human beings to attain the most profound unity that is possible in this life:

There is never such intimacy between a man and a man (*andros pros andra*) as there is between husband and wife, if they are united (*synezeugmenos*) as they ought to be (Hom. XX on Eph., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, vol. XIII, p. 143; *Women and Men*, p. 46).

A verse in the Old Testament book the Wisdom of Sirach says something quite similar: "A friend and companion meet at an appointed time, but a wife meeting with her husband is better than both" (40:23).

In another place Chrysostom speaks in even stronger terms of the reality of the union that is formed in marriage between husband and wife:

The other party thereafter is yourself, when you love: since this is friendship (*philia*), that *the lover and the beloved should no longer be two persons divided, but in a manner one single person* (*hena tina anthropon*), something which can never happen except from love (*agape*). Therefore, seek not your own, that you may find your own (Hom. 33 on I Cor., NPNF 1, XII, p. 197; W&M, p. 65; my emphasis).

Chrysostom feels and believes so strongly about this unity that in three other passages he seems to be speaking of the married couple as being forged into a new, ontological being!:

The laws which He appoints are in every case common [to men and women], although He seems to address Himself to men only. For in discoursing with the head, He makes His admonition common to the whole body also. For the woman and man He knows as *one living creature* (*zoon*) (Hom. XVII on St. Matthew, NPNF 1, X, p. 117; W&M, p. 139; my emphasis).

“The husband is the head of the wife” [Eph. 5:23]. The wife is the aide of the husband. Therefore, do not let the head be allowed to set foot in this sacred place [the church] without its body, and let not the body be seen without its head, but let *whole human beings* come in (*On the Incomprehensibility of God*.XI.39, FC 72, p. 284; W&M, p. 140, n. 7; my emphasis).

A man should love his spouse as much as he loves himself, not merely because they share the same nature; no, the obligation is far greater, because *they are no longer two bodies, but one . . . husband and wife are one body in the same way as Christ and the Father are one* (Hom. 20 on Eph., Roth, p. 52; W&M, p. 54; my emphasis).

Of course, this tremendous unity of husband and wife, ontologically *equal in their human nature*, and forged together with such a profound degree of unity that *in some sense* we can speak of their now being *one body*, does not imply that *the unique personhood (hypostasis)* of the husband and the wife is somehow diminished or obscured. Certainly Chrysostom, who perhaps in these three passages was using some rhetorical exaggeration as he rhapsodized on the sublime unity of husband and wife, would never say that the separate ontological reality of the man and woman somehow gets eliminated, or even blurred, when they get married – or that their individual free will somehow gets impinged, or that the *roles* of the husband and wife are identical because their unity is so great. If these things were so, why would our LORD have

made men and women to be so different physically and emotionally in many ways?

So, while the human nature of the husband and the wife is absolutely identical, it still remains true that they have different roles to live out in marriage. The husband, as the “head” of the wife (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23; and as seen in the quotation above from *On the Incomprehensibility of God*), is given the ultimate responsibility to provide for her materially and to provide spiritual leadership for her and the whole family. But becoming more aware of the depths of the unity that the husband and wife are meant to share and participate in should inspire husbands to strive all the more to fulfill their GOD-given responsibilities as head of the wife through self-sacrificial *servanthood* – paying more and more attention to his wife’s needs and seeking to meet them with joy.

It is in such a spirit that St. John can advise the married people in his flock,

Let husbands heed this, let wives heed it: wives, so as to give evidence of such great affection for their husbands, and to put nothing ahead of their own welfare; and husbands, that they might show their wives great regard and *do everything as though having one soul and being one body*. This, after all, is true wedlock, when such harmony operates between them, when there is such close relationship, when they are bound together *in such love* (Hom. 45 on Genesis.9; FC 82, p. 474; W&M, p. 55; my emphasis).

Chrysostom so clearly sees the glory of marriage that he can say that marital love is “a thing that no possession can equal; for nothing, nothing whatever, is more precious than to be thus loved by a wife and to love her” (Homily XLIX on Acts; NPNF 1, XI, p. 296; W&M, p. 65). Here he seems to be echoing similar words from the Wisdom of Sirach:

A wife's grace will delight her husband, and her skill will put fat on his bones. . . . A modest wife is blessing upon blessing, and there is no scale adequate to weigh a self-controlled soul. Like the sun rising in the Lord's heaven is the beauty of a good wife in the ordering of her house. Like a lamp shining on the holy lampstand is the beauty of a countenance in the prime of life. Beautiful feet with a steady heart are like golden pillars on a silver base. . . . A beautiful woman gladdens a man's face and surpasses his every desire. If there is mercy and gentleness on her tongue, her husband is not like other men. *He who gains a wife gets his best possession*, a helper like himself and a pillar of support (26:13, 15-18; 36:22-24; my emphasis).

St. Gregory the Theologian, one of the three great Cappadocian Fathers of the later 4<sup>th</sup> century, expresses something of the glory of marriage, filled as it can be with such wonderful benefits for both the husband and the wife, with these words:

In our living together we are one another's hands, ears, and feet. Marriage redoubles our strength, rejoices our friends, causes grief to our enemies. A common concern makes trials bearable. Common joys are all the happier, and accord makes riches more pleasant; it is even more delightful than riches for those without wealth. Marriage is the key of moderation and the harmony of the desires, the seal of a deep friendship, . . . the unique drink from a fountain enclosed, inaccessible to those outside. United in the flesh, one in spirit, they urge each other on by the goad of their mutual love. For marriage does not remove us from God, but brings us all the closer to Him, for *it is God Himself who draws us to it* (*Poem in Praise of Virginity*; my emphasis).

In a similar vein, St. John Chrysostom says, “You have a wife, you have children; what is equal to this pleasure (*hedones*)? Besides chastity (*sophrosynes*), great are the advantages which marriage bestows. For what, I ask you, is sweeter than children? What is sweeter than a wife, to him who desires to be chaste in mind? (Homily XXXVIII on St. Matthew; PG 57:428A; NPNF 1, X, p. 250; W&M, p. 66).

This quotation leads us to two other major reasons for marriage according to St. John Chrysostom, besides the ineffable oneness in love shared by the husband and the wife. These reasons are that marriage is the GOD-given context for the expression and containment of sexual desire, and hence it is the GOD-given context for the conceiving, bearing, and raising of children. Concerning the first of these reasons, St. John says,

I do not of course count marriage among evil things, but rather I praise it exceedingly. For it is the harbor of chastity (*sophrosynes*) for those who desire to use it well, and it renders one's nature not to be wild. For like a dam, marriage gives us an opportunity for legitimate intercourse and in this way contains the waves of sexual desire. It places us in a great calm and watches over us” (*On Virginity*.IX.1; *Sources chretiennes*, vol. 125, p. 120; W&M, p. 58).

The innate goodness of sexual desire (to be expressed genitally only in marriage<sup>2</sup>),

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<sup>2</sup> This stipulation by our Church does not reflect anything like prudery, or any sense that sexual intercourse is somehow inevitably tainted with sin. Rather, the Orthodox Church limits the genital expression of sexuality to the sacred confines of marriage because it is so physically and emotionally powerful in helping to unite two human beings in the closest possible relationship – since it is the act par excellence whereby the two become *one flesh*. St. Paul even says that in sexual intercourse with a prostitute the two become “one body” (1 Cor. 6:16). How much more so does this happen through ongoing marital relations! And because sexual intercourse is the means whereby new human beings are conceived, the Church fully understands that the woman needs the protection and stability of the marriage bond which does so much to ensure that her husband will stay around to help raise and provide for the children whom he begets.

In contrast, the greatly influential western saint, St. Augustine, did teach that sexual intercourse is inescapably tainted with the sin of lustfulness (concupiscence) – even for married Christians who only have the procreation of children in mind. This false opinion has darkened the western view of human sexuality to this day. One striking way this negative view of sexual relations has been expressed in the West is the Roman Catholic practice of mandatory clerical celibacy.

as hinted at in this passage, is strongly affirmed by St. Athanasius the Great, writing in Egypt in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. As Fr. Matthias F. Wahba writes in his important work, *Honorable Marriage according to St. Athanasius* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1996),

This intimate union is God's design from the beginning. It is God Himself who made them male and female and joined them together to “become one flesh” [*Against the Arians* 6; *Hon. Marr.*, p. 186]. God is not only the witness or guarantor, but also the ultimate author of sexuality. In another place, Athanasius proves that the relation of both different sexes is a revelation of God's wisdom. He states that God made things of opposite nature, but combined them in concordant harmony. The example of sexual relations is as follows: “Male and female are not the same, while yet they unite in one, and the result is the generation [of a child] from both” [*Against the Gentiles* 36.1-3; *Hon. Marr.*, p. 186]. Athanasius acknowledges sexual relations as an order of God implanted in the nature of living creatures as a sign of God's wisdom and goodness (*Hon. Marr.*, p. 186).

We may add here that St. John Chrysostom says that one reason God granted sexual desire to Adam and Eve was so that Adam would be drawn to Eve instead of spurning her due to her deceiving him when she offered him the forbidden fruit (Homily XXVI on 1 Cor.; NPNF I, XII, p. 151; W&M, p. 80, n. 21).

Fr. Matthias continues,

Accordingly, God as the Creator of sexuality is concerned to keep this relation in purity and holiness. For example, God “corrected Abimelek because of Sarah” (Gen. 20:1-13) (*De Dec.* 7). Thinking that Sarah was Abraham's sister, Abimelek sent and took her as a wife; but God appeared to Abimelek and said to him, “Indeed you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife” (Gen. 20:2-3). God Himself is shown as caring for the sanctity of the conjugal relations between Abraham and Sarah by directly interfering to prevent any kind of defilement.

Besides, Athanasius defends the sanctity of sexual organs and secretions. In his *Letter to Amun*, he treats two subjects: first, bodily excretion and the morality thereof, and second, the “two ways of life,” marriage and virginity. He writes to Amun in order to calm the over scrupulous conscience of some monks who were worried about “bodily excretions.” . . . He exclaims, “Tell me . . . what sin or uncleanness is there in any natural secretion, as though a man were minded to make a culpable matter of cleaning the sputa from the mouth?” About sexual organs he adds, “What sin is there . . . if the Master who made the body willed and

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Of course, the Orthodox Church understands that marital relations are not automatically free from sinfulness. There may well be lustfulness present if one or both of the spouses are more concerned about indulging their own sexual passions at the expense of the other. But when marital relations are filled with tenderness, gentleness, self-composure, and human dignity, there is no sin.

made these parts to have such passages?” . . . Then he concludes that all things made by God are beautiful and pure, “for the Word of God made nothing useless or impure” (*Hon. Marr.*, pp. 187-188).<sup>3</sup>

In the same vein, St. John Chrysostom says, in commenting on Romans 1:26-27 (in which St. Paul sharply excoriates unnatural – i.e., homosexual – sexual activity),

For *genuine pleasure (gnesia hedone)* is that which is *according to nature*. . . Here . . . he sets the pleasure according to nature, *which they would have enjoyed with more sense of security and greater glad-heartedness*, and so would have been far removed from shameful sins (Homily IV on Romans; PG 60.417B; NPNF I, XI, p. 356; W&M, p. 48; my emphasis).

In further emphasizing the inherent goodness of natural [i.e., heterosexual] sexual relations, Chrysostom even says that in fornication and adultery it is not the sexual relations that are unclean, but the one who uses them improperly:

The fornicator, then, is not the only one that is unclean, but others more than he, such as especially the adulterer. But both are unclean, *not due to the intercourse (ou dia ten mixin)* – for according to that reasoning a man cohabitating with his own wife would be unclean – but due to the injustice and rapacity of the act, and the injury done to his neighbor (Homily III on Titus; PG 62:682B; NPNF 1, XIII, p. 531; W&M, p. 48; my emphasis).<sup>4</sup>

As he also says,

Do not blame natural desire (*epithymia*) [for your sinful thoughts and actions]. Natural desire was bestowed with a view to marriage and to the procreation of children, not with a view to adultery and corruption. . . . Nothing is sin when it arises from [natural] needs, but all sin arises from wantonness [i.e., excess]. *God has not so framed human nature that there should be any necessity to sin,*<sup>5</sup> since if this were the case, there would be no such thing as punishment<sup>6</sup> (Homily II on Ephesians; PG 62.20B-C; NPNF 1, XIII, pp. 57-58; W&M, p. 50;

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<sup>3</sup> When St. Athanasius compares marriage and virginity in this letter, like many of the Church Fathers, he exalts the virginal/monastic life consecrated to GOD as higher than the more usual path of marriage, saying that virginity is “angelic and unsurpassed,” bringing forth fruit a hundredfold, while marriage is “more moderate and ordinary,” bringing forth fruit thirty-fold. Yet the unique glory of marriage is not diminished by saying that a life of consecrated virginity has even greater glory. And since the highest path of all is the path of humility, those who are married have the honor and blessing of willingly and humbly acknowledging the superiority of the virginal state. And actually, for each person, what really matters is discerning what the LORD's will is for one's own life, and being obedient to that calling.

For St. John Chrysostom's views on the relationship of marriage vis-a-vis virginity, see my book *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Full Views of St. John Chrysostom* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1994), Chapter Three, entitled “On Marriage and Virginity.”

<sup>4</sup> In other words, fornication and adultery – and any form of lustfulness, whether in action or even only in thought (see Matt. 5:31-32; Ex. 20:17) – are bad, sinful usages of sexual desire, which is good in itself.

<sup>5</sup> This axiom of our Orthodox Tradition is of direct relevance for those who claim that homosexual sexual activity is something that certain people have no control over. Of course, the Church asserts that people have the same *power of self-control* (see Gal. 5:22-24) regarding heterosexual sexual activity as well.

<sup>6</sup> He says “if this were the case, there would be no such thing as punishment” because no one can be punished fairly for doing something over which he/she has no control.

my emphasis).

Chrysostom also states emphatically that a woman's beauty must never be blamed for causing sin: “Was her beauty the cause of sin? God forbid! She is the work of the wisdom of God, and the work of God can in no way ever be the cause of evil” (*Homilies on Uzziah*.III.4; SC, vol. 277, pp. 126-127; W&M, p. 50, n. 46).

And in reference to those who refrain from going to church to pray with the excuse that they have recently had marital relations, Chrysostom asks very pointedly,

How do you dare to excuse yourself from prayer after you have enjoyed the company (*synousias*) of your own wife, although this has no blame at all? . . . Have you not heard Paul saying, “Marriage is honorable and the bed undefiled” [Heb. 13:4]? (Homily LI on St. Matthew; PG 58.516C; NPNF 1, X, p. 319; W&M, p. 50).

Chrysostom also marvels at the third crucial reason for marriage – the creation of new human life in the womb:

And how do they become one flesh? Just as if you should take *the purest part of gold*, and mingle it with other gold; so in truth here also the woman receiving the richest part *fused by pleasure (hedones)* nourishes and cherishes it, and *contributing something from herself*, returns it back as a human being. And the child is a sort of bridge, so that *the three become one flesh*, the child connecting each parent on either side. For as two cities, which a river divides through, become one city if a bridge connects them on both sides, so is it in this case – and yet more, since the very bridge here is formed from the substance (*ousia*) of each side (Homily XII on Colossians; PG 62.388B; NPNF 1, XIII, p. 319; W&M, p. 57; my emphasis).

We could ask here, what if marital relations do not result in the conception of a child? Here is Chrysostom’s answer to this question:

The child is a bridge connecting mother to father, so the three become one flesh. . . . But suppose there is no child; do they then remain two and not one? No, since their intercourse effects the joining of their bodies, and they are made one (*hen*), just as when perfume is mixed with ointment (Homily XII on Colossians; PG 62.388C; Roth, p. 76; NPNF 1, XIII, p. 319; W&M, p. 48).

Concerning some of the benefits of having children, Chrysostom says,

God has given you children that they may support your old age, and that they may learn virtue from you. For God on this account has willed that the human race should be held together, providing for two most important objects: on the one hand appointing fathers to be teachers, and on the other, implanting great love (*agapen*). For if humans were to come into being

haphazardly [i.e., without parents], no one would have any relationship with any other (Homily X on I Thessalonians; PG 62.459D; NPNF 1, XIII, p. 369; W&M, p. 55).

And as he says elsewhere, “For why do we not all spring out of the earth? Why are we not created full grown, as Adam was? In order that both the birth and the bringing up of children, and the being born from another person, *might bind us mutually together*” (Homily XXXIV on I Corinthians; NPNF 1, XII, p. 204; W&M, p. 56, n. 63; my emphasis).

Of course, all of us could easily rhapsodize about the inexpressible wonder of husband and wife cooperating/joining with GOD in producing new human life, with an immortal soul being created inside the woman's body at the moment of conception. Surely this is one of the most astounding aspects of the glory of marriage – even marriage apart from the Church. Here is how Fr. Alexander Elchaninov (France; 1920s and '30s) expresses something of the tremendous mystery of bringing children into the world:

Marriage, fleshly love, is a very great sacrament and mystery. Through it is accomplished the most real and at the same time the most mysterious of all possible forms of human relationships. And, qualitatively, marriage enables us to pass beyond all the normal rules of human relationships, and *to enter a region of the miraculous . . .* In fleshly love, *besides its intrinsic value as such*, God has granted the world *a share in His omnipotence: man creates man, a new soul is brought into being*” (*The Diary of a Russian Priest*, p. 46; my emphasis).

### ***Christ-centered Marriage – in the Church***

Now, if marriage between a man and a woman even apart from the Church has its own glory, and can be filled with so many wonderful benefits, how much infinitely more does a truly Christ-centered marriage shine with the glory of the LORD Himself? For in specifically discussing Christ-centered marriage, we can speak in even higher, more radiant tones about the possibilities of what such a marriage can look like. This is because here the husband and wife *first of all* at the very beginning of their married life together were *united by Christ Himself* at His holy altar, when they received all the powerful grace of the sacrament of marriage. Their first steps together as husband and wife were taken hand-in-hand with the priest around the holy table on which is placed the cross and the Gospel book. As Abbot Aimilianos of the Simonopetras Monastery on Mt. Athos very simply states, “Henceforth their life *is one life* in Christ” (Archimandrite Aimilianos, *The Church at Prayer: The Mystical Liturgy of the Heart*, p. 124; my emphasis).

Next, if they are serious Christians, they are continually drawing upon the ongoing grace of the Holy Spirit to help them live in their marriage as our LORD is desiring and encouraging them to do. So the possibility opens up that the husband and

wife may actually love each other with ineffably tender, gentle, strong, self-sacrificial love – indeed, *Christ-like love* – and thereby truly image Christ's ineffably tender, gentle, strong, self-sacrificial love for His Bride, His Body, the Church. Abbot Aimilianos is so convinced of this possibility that he can say, in his famous sermon on marriage,

Whenever two people are married in the name of Christ, they become the sign which contains and expresses Christ Himself. When you see a couple who are conscious of this, it is as if you are seeing Christ. *Together they are a theophany* (“Marriage: The Great Sacrament,” in *The Church at Prayer – The Mystical Liturgy of the Heart*, p. 123; my emphasis).

What a beautiful goal to aspire to!

As we know, throughout the Scriptures, the LORD's relationship with His people is most often described in terms of marriage. How utterly glorious is it for marriage that it is the prevailing, dominant image that God Himself, through His written Word, uses to describe His love-filled relationship with His people. In the Old Testament, for instance, the LORD tells His people Israel through the Prophet Hosea, “I will betroth you to Myself forever; . . . I will betroth you to Myself in faithfulness, and you shall know the LORD” (2:19-20). In the New Testament, Jesus refers to Himself as “the Bridegroom” in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 9:15; Mark 2: 19-20; Luke 5:34-35). And eternal life in Heaven, where Christ's love-filled fellowship with all His people will be endless, is described by Christ through St. John the Theologian as *a wedding feast!* In Revelation 19:9 it is called the “marriage supper of the Lamb”; and in Rev. 21:2 we read, “Then, I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, *prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*” (my emphasis).

Let us return to St. John Chrysostom to consider how he describes Christ-centered marriage. For him, as for all the Orthodox Tradition, marriage in a specifically Christian context is indeed meant to be a living image, or *icon*, of the marriage of Christ the Bridegroom with His Bride, the Church. Chrysostom seems to take delight in using this striking analogy from the Scriptures, undoubtedly because his essential vision for marriage is so positive. As he exclaims, “Never, surely, if marriage were a thing to be condemned, would Paul have called Christ and the Church a bride and bridegroom” (Homily 20 on Eph.; NPNF 1, XIII, p. 147; W&M, p. 68, n. 102).

A very vivid example of St. John Chrysostom's hearty acceptance of this Biblical imagery is in the final third of his second sermon on Eutropius, the desperate court official who fell out of favor with Emperor Arcadius, and who fled to the Great Church in Constantinople for refuge. Even as Eutropius literally clings to the altar, begging for protection, Chrysostom speaks of the ceaseless forgiving, protecting love of Christ for

His Church in terms of a husband's love and care for his wife:

For He espoused her as a wife, He loves her as a daughter, He provides for her as a handmaid, He guards her as a virgin, He fences her about like a garden (*paradeison*), and cherishes her like a part of His own body. As a head He provides for her, as a root He causes her to grow, as a shepherd He feeds her, as a sheep He is sacrificed, as a bridegroom He preserves her in her beauty, as a husband He provides for her support (*On Eutropius* II, PG 52.410D-411A; NPNF 1, IX, pp. 262-263; W&M, p. 68).

At the very beginning of his series of instructions to catechumens preparing for baptism, St. John exclaims,

This is a time for joy and gladness of spirit. Behold, the days of our longing and love (*hai potheinai kai eperastoi*), the days of *your spiritual marriage*, are close at hand. . . . Come, then, let me talk to you as I would speak to a bride about to be led into the holy nuptial chamber. Let me give you, too, a glimpse of the Bridegroom's exceeding wealth and of the ineffable kindness (*philanthropian*) which He shows His bride (*Baptismal Instructions* I.1 and 3; SC 50, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 108-110; ACW 31, pp. 23-24; W&M, p. 68; my emphasis).

It is very interesting to note that Chrysostom does not shy away from using sexual imagery in this context:

Shall I tell how marriage is also a mystery of the Church? Christ came to the Church, and she was made from Him, and He united with her in *a spiritual intercourse* (*synousia*). “For,” it says, “I have espoused you to one husband, a pure virgin” [2 Cor. 11:2]. Hear how it says that we are from Him: “We are all from His members, and from His flesh” [cf. Eph. 5:30] (Homily XII on Colossians; PG 61.389A; NPNF 1, XIII, p. 319; W&M, p. 69; my emphasis).

The theme of joy in the Church's marriage to Christ is pursued by Chrysostom when he comments on Matthew 22:1-14 (“The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who made a marriage for his son . . .”):

One might ask, “And why is it called a marriage?” So that you might learn about God's *tender care*, His *yearning* (*pothon*) toward us, the *cheerfulness* of the state of things, and that there is nothing sorrowful there, or sad, but *all things are full of spiritual joy* (Homily LXIX on St. Matthew, PG 58.648C; NPNF 1, X, p. 421; W&M, p. 69; my emphasis).

And just as Christ is always drawing His people closer to Himself, so in Christ-centered marriage each spouse is constantly endeavoring to provide *an atmosphere* in the home which helps the other to draw closer to Christ, to be always flourishing in the spiritual life. This certainly is another tremendously important reason for marriage. As Monk Moses of Mt. Athos states, “Two people come to the communion of marriage to help one another in their salvation” (*Married Saints of the Church*). Fr. Alexander Elchaninov hints at this with these remarkable words:

In marriage the festive joy of the first day should last for the whole of life: every day should be a feast day; every day husband and wife should appear to each other as *new, extraordinary beings*. The only way of achieving this: let both deepen their spiritual life, and strive hard in the task of self-development (*Diary of a Russian Priest*, p. 91; my emphasis).<sup>7</sup>

Another especially glorious aspect of Christ-centered marriage is that it is meant to last forever. Just as Christ will be married to His Church eternally in unbroken continuity, with each believer experiencing the unity of his or her marriage with Christ more and more in the timeless eternity of the life in Heaven, so too a Christian marriage is meant to last forever. Chrysostom often reminded widows of this fact as he encouraged them to remain true to their husbands by not marrying again. For example, in his *Letter to a Young Widow*, he writes,

But if you wish to behold him face to face (for this I know is what you especially long for), keep your bed in his honor sacred from the touch of any other man, and do your best to manifest a life equal to his, and then assuredly you will depart one day to join the same company with him – not to dwell with him for five years as you did here, or for twenty, or a hundred, or for a thousand or twice that number, but *for infinite and endless ages* (*Letter to a Young Widow 3*; NPNF 1, IX, p. 123; W&M, pp. 69-70; my emphasis).

And in his most famous marriage sermon, Chrysostom imagines a new bridegroom speaking to his bride in this way:

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<sup>7</sup> As we know all too well, in this fallen world there is virtually no marriage that actually lives up to our Church's high ideal for married life. Yet this should not be a cause of discouragement for those of us who are married. Rather, we are called to humbly accept our weaknesses, limitations, and fallenness, and to simply keep trying, with constant appeals to our All-Merciful LORD for His ongoing assistance, and with ongoing repentance and asking of forgiveness, to respect, honor, love, and serve our spouses as He is always encouraging us to do.

We also know that many marriages, even between Christians, end up disintegrating in divorce. This does not mean, however, that such marriages were never real marriages in the first place, which is what the Roman Church asserts through its contrived and unpastoral practice of officially bringing to an end through the granting of “annulments” what are in effect considered to be “pseudo-marriages.” In the Orthodox view, the Sacrament of Marriage is just as real and effectual as the Sacrament of Baptism, but just as our Baptism does not automatically guarantee our eternal salvation without our free, ongoing acceptance of and cooperation with the grace we received in our Baptism, so the Sacrament of Marriage does not guarantee that our marriage will last permanently, since this also requires our free, ongoing, active participation throughout our lifetime in the grace we received in the Marriage sacrament.

I fell in love with the excellence of your soul, which I value above all gold. For a young woman who is discreet and ingenuous, and whose heart is set on piety, is worth the whole world. For these reasons, then, I courted you, and I love you, and prefer you to my own soul. For the present life is nothing [in comparison with Heaven]. And I pray, and beseech, and do all I can, that we may be counted worthy to so live this present life, that we may be able also there in the world to come to be united to one another with great security. For our time here is brief and fleeting. But if we shall be counted worthy by having pleased God to exchange this life for that one, then shall we ever be both with Christ and with each other, *with more abundant pleasure (hedones)* (Homily XX on Ephesians; PG 62.146D-147A; NPNF 1, XIII, p. 151; W&M, p. 70; my emphasis).

We also see the Orthodox understanding of the eternity of marriage expressed in some of the Lives of the Married Saints. For example, St. Angelis, the Goldsmith and Father, exhorted his wife moments before his martyrdom at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1680:

O wife, let Christ be above everything for us. It is to Him that I give you and the children today, and for Whom I undergo this martyric death with joy. Therefore, my wife, also endure my absence so that in His fearful and glorious coming *we will behold each other and rejoice together forever*. What benefit is there for us in our transitory union in this life, when in a short while we must part again? What gain will we accrue from the delightful pleasures of the world, if we suffer the loss of our souls, to which all the world is not equal? Therefore, depart in peace, my beloved and dearest soul-mate, and I will proceed onward as quickly as possible to my beloved Christ, Who will soon come for you *so that we may both delight in eternal blessedness* (*New Martyrs of the Turkish Yoke*, for September 1<sup>st</sup>; *Marriage as a Path to Holiness*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p. 3; my emphasis).<sup>8</sup>

Let me conclude with some observations and a prayer about marriage from the *Prologue from Ochrid*, written by our own beloved St. Nikolai of Zicha and South Canaan:

My brethren, marriage is a great and wonderful mystery, one of the greatest mysteries in God's dispensation. . . . A pure and honorable marriage, in the fear of God, is indeed a vessel of the Holy Spirit. He who disdains marriage scorns the Spirit of God. He who defiles marriage with impurity blasphemes against the Spirit of God. And he who refrains from marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of God must make himself a vessel of the Holy Spirit in another way, bringing forth fruit in the spiritual sphere . . .

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<sup>8</sup> Some further thoughts on the traditional understanding of the eternity of marriage are given in an appendix below.

O God Almighty, Thou Holy Spirit, help Thou those in the married state – that they, in purity, fear, and mutual love, may be a church of God in whom Thou mayest dwell with joy, directing all things for good. To Thee be glory and praise forever. Amen (for May 28; vol. 2, pp. 233-234).

### **Eighteen specific ways to enhance the glory of your marriage**

1. Be faithful in morning and evening prayers together, no matter how brief, as much as possible; and be faithful in attendance at church; remember, husbands, that as the head of the family, the spiritual and material well-being of your home is ultimately your responsibility.
2. Conflict resolution: find a way to resolve conflicts as soon as possible; perhaps this will mean letting the one who feels the most strongly about a situation have the final say about it (there are good books about this topic that are really worth studying together!).
3. Ask forgiveness whenever something comes between you, no matter how small or large.
4. When your spouse is talking to you, *really listen*, with full attentiveness; and demonstrate that you have really listened by responding accordingly *with your mind and your heart*.
5. Always keep your word to each other – and give a full explanation and apology whenever you're not able to keep your word for some reason.
6. Do your chores around the house faithfully, without having to be reminded.
7. Have regular family meetings, perhaps weekly, to discuss issues of common concern (there are good books about why and how to hold such meetings).
8. Consistently do little things that you know will please your spouse.
9. Find out from your spouse the ways that he/she feels the most loved, and consistently express your love for him/her accordingly – even if the ways your spouse feels most loved are different from the ways you feel most loved.
10. In addressing your spouse, frequently use a term of endearment, as St. John Chrysostom urges.
11. Whenever your spouse does or says something that irritates you, quickly ask the LORD to help you *love him/her more* at that moment – and then talk it out!
12. As far as possible, fulfill requests made by your spouse as quickly and thoroughly as you can – even if you think sometimes that they are unreasonable; and try to accept the interruption gracefully. This is part of the asceticism needed in married life – the consistent denial of our own self-will for the benefit of our spouse.

13. When you are away from home, stay in contact with your spouse as much as is reasonably appropriate.
14. Make sure to have regular substantial times for just the two of you – especially if you have children at home; having a “date night” every week or two is ideal.
15. Make sure to remember your wedding anniversary and your spouse’s birthday and namesday, and celebrate accordingly.
16. Tell your spouse you love him/her several times each day, and give hugs and kisses accordingly!
17. When your spouse is sick or hurt in any way, be extra-tender and solicitous towards him/her.
18. Have at least one icon in every room in your house, to remind you of your calling to center every aspect of your marriage in Christ, and to be in constant communion with the Saints and Angels.

*Always remember the glory of marriage – especially Christ-centered marriage; and ask Christ each day to help your marriage to increase in that glory, and to be more and more **an image of His love-filled marriage with His Church.***

### **Appendix**

#### **Some Further Thoughts on the Eternality of Marriage**

Some people hesitate to affirm the eternality of marriage due to Christ's words as recorded in Matthew 22:30 - “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels of God in heaven” (also Mark 12:25). First of all, in response, I would suggest that being “like the angels” in this case means not having marital relations - and *not* that the marriage relationships forged by GOD Himself on earth will be dissolved and evaporated into oblivion! And to be literal, in this verse Christ is not saying that *existing marriages* will be obliterated; He's just saying that in the heavenly life there will be *no further marriages* formed.

Let's recall that St. Paul says that our joy in heaven will be greater than we can ever imagine (cf. 1 Cor. 2:9). Wouldn't that joy be very much less than we can imagine if the heavenly life does not include - at least in some sense and to some degree - the continuation of the relationships we've had during our earthly existence? And wouldn't the joy be even less since in heaven “sickness, sorrow, and sighing have all fled away” (in the Orthodox funeral service; cf. Rev. 21:4), which surely indicates that all our earthly relationships will be healed - with all hurts and misunderstandings healed and soothed away. So *we can imagine and believe* that in heaven we will enjoy forever all our earthly relationships in an infinitely better way!

And surely, it simply cannot be true that all our memories from our earthly existence are wiped out the moment we begin our heavenly existence. That would be a real death and devastation. If that were so, where would be our utterly glorious uniqueness that distinguishes every human being? Where really would be the immortality of the soul, if we had no memories left from our earthly life? Yet Jesus goes on in this same passage in Matthew 22 to speak about God being the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - and being the God not of the dead but of the living. This certainly makes it sound like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob still have their identities in heaven as they had in this life.

And also, how would the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31-46) have any real meaning if the “sheep” and the “goats” - the righteous and the condemned – receive their reward or punishment based on their actions done during their earthly lives which they no longer remember? In the writings of the early Christian Apologists, such as St. Justin Martyr of Rome (mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century) and Athenagoras of Athens (late 2<sup>nd</sup> century), one of their most convincing arguments for the truthfulness of the traditional Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead immediately before the Last Judgment is that it would not be just or fair for GOD to punish only the souls of the unrighteous or reward only the souls of the righteous without these souls being reunited with the bodies in which they did their righteous or unrighteous acts while living on earth.

Furthermore, can it really be the case that the Old Testament Patriarchs and all the Saints and our All-Holy Theotokos all no longer have the identities that they had on earth now that they've entered the heavenly realm? It's very clear in the Tradition, for instance, that the Mother of God still has a motherly relationship with her Son – many hymns speak of her "motherly boldness" before Christ. So it certainly seems evident that special relationships of love from our earthly life are not annulled, but deepened and expanded in heaven. So it will be a both/and situation in the heavenly life: we will have wonderfully deepened relationships with all those whom we loved while on earth, as well as a marvelously deepened love for all the rest of humanity. Our Lady Theotokos, for example, has a motherly love towards all believers, as well as a very special ongoing maternal relationship with her Son.

There is also a unity in love of human nature and human persons in this present life that doesn't annul special relationships, but again, deepens and strengthens them. St. Dorotheus of Gaza (6<sup>th</sup> century) uses the image that God is like the center point of a circle, with people on the circumference: as people grow in their relationship with God, they gradually move from the circumference towards the center; so the closer they are to God, the closer they are to one another. We also see that the holiest people, who love everyone equally, still have special relationships with their mothers, fathers, children, etc. - that's just part of who we are as persons.

It's also interesting that in the parallel passage in St. Luke's Gospel, the wording is very different: “nor can they die any more, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (Luke 20:36). This would seem to clarify that the focus in mentioning angels is on immortality, as well as on the fact that there will be no new marriages and no marital intercourse in heaven, without inferring that we will be *exactly* like the angels in every respect – and certainly not to the point of our losing our human nature in the next life.

So I think this is a case where we can end up saying, whatever that verse (Matt. 22:30) means, it cannot mean that all our earthly memories and identity are wiped out. As St. John Chrysostom says of the analogy of the Potter and the clay in Romans 9:20-24: whatever this may mean, it does not mean that human free will is eliminated. He says that the image can only be pressed as far as is appropriate, and no further. So also with "like the angels" - we should take the analogy only so far, and no further.

Some people may also wonder, “What happens with people who are married more than once in this life?” In response to this, I think we have to conclude that our All-Wise and All-Knowing LORD will know how to work all that out. Every single situation is unique, and only He knows the hearts of everyone involved in each particular case. Again, we can be sure that in the heavenly life there will be a healing and deepening of all relationships, and the maintaining of all relationships - but now purified of any hurt or pain. Concerning marriage specifically, we can be very sure that in the heavenly life there will be no marital relations, no new children born, no living in separate houses, no envy, no possessiveness, etc., so all this in a sense should make it “easier” for one's having more than one marriage in one's life on earth not to cause a problem in heaven! Still, with our very limited human intelligence and our completely earthbound experience, we can only begin to imagine how utterly glorious, all-embracing, and profoundly healing the heavenly life will be – with all of our earthly relationships purified, deepened, and transformed in scarcely imaginable ways.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Very interestingly and sadly, the belief in the eternity of marriage is not held by any other Christian group besides the various Orthodox Churches. However, this was not always the case, since the Marriage service in the Western Church did not include the phrase “till death do us part” until around the year 1400. It is ironic that the Roman Church, having introduced this innovation, considers their understanding of marriage to be higher than that of the Orthodox Churches, due to the Roman doctrine of the “indissolubility” of marriage (whereas for pastoral reasons the Orthodox Churches allow for and recognize divorce when a marriage becomes irretrievably broken). But in the Roman Church for the past 600 years, marriage has been considered to be dissolved by the death of a spouse. In contrast, the Orthodox Churches know that for each widow and widower who remains true to her/his departed spouse, marital love is stronger than death; and in this regard we would see these words of St. Paul as being directly applicable: “Love never fails” (1 Cor. 13:8).