

Eros, Asceticism & Marriage: a Seamless connection?

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When couples have sex, they are telling each other the stories of their lives—that is often why they stop having sex. Intimacy is self-confrontation and self disclosure in the presence of a partner. In a poorly differentiated relationship, the person with the least desire for intimacy controls it and they control their partner's sense of adequacy too. --David Schnarch

The spirit seeks the body and lets speech help find it. --Martin Buber

He who loves acquires another self. --St. John Chrysostom

In Hebrew, God's intimate knowledge of His people is very closely related to the English word for sexual intercourse. Body and Spirit are one. Eros is intimately related to the presence of God among persons, like red hot fire rendering iron vulnerable to the Creator's creative touch. But in contemporary Western culture, eros has been more like the Roman God Janus who is depicted with a head facing in two opposite directions at once. Erotic desire constitutes both a deep yearning which beckons the soul toward God in repentance¹ as the author of all life and love, while simultaneously drawing attention to the flesh quite apart from any awareness of its participation in the invisible dimension of Spirit and the Image of God of which personhood constitutes a unique reflection.

Our human path through the world lies between the biological demands of the flesh tinged by certain death and the longing of the heart for eternity which is beyond what flesh and blood alone can comprehend and appropriate. The easy way to dissolve this tension is to split apart in one direction or the other, not quite realizing that it is in remaining faithful to God and persons within the seamless embrace of both flesh and spirit that the human soul matures into one capable of loving the ordinariness of ourselves and others as God passionately loves us in Christ which is the basis of all community. This is eros fulfilled through self-emptying for the Beloved as in the case of our Lord.

As Orthodox Christian psychotherapists, how do we help facilitate this kind of growth in ourselves and others? What are the developmental ideals for marital sanctity that include a healthy erotic component integrated with the eros of repentance and interior prayer that are traditionally part of Orthodox monastic life? What sort of theory of personal and marital growth informs our therapeutic methodologies? Are monasticism and marriage two different means to the same end? There certainly seems to be more evidence and instruction available on how to pray and live ascetically in monastic community than is offered about how to pray and live erotically in marital union within the marketplace². To the degree that the church fails to offer constructive help and developmental norms of holy marriage in this regard, confusion will continue to reign and secular models and methodologies will advance other norms as counselors attempt to guide and help persons shipwrecked on the rocky shoals of eros split off from the spirit which may not be congruent with Orthodoxy and may in some instances lead in directions that directly oppose it..

The confusion

One of my clinical supervisors used to counsel, "If the person begins by saying it's a sexual problem, it's spiritual. If they say its spiritual, look for a sexual hang-up." As psychiatrist Gerald May points out, the language of Christian mysticism is full of erotic metaphors while the language of sexual love takes up the images of spirit.

Even a cursory reading of Western mysticism is sufficient to impress one with the prevalence of sexual symbolism in spirituality. The word *union* itself more readily brings to mind sexual intercourse than spiritual fulfillment. The writings of Christian mysticism are filled with terms such as bliss,

ecstasy, rapture, burning desire, being devoured, consummation, joy, delight, holding, penetration, embracing, caressing. On the other side, popular descriptions of human romance rely just as heavily on terms that are deeply spiritual: divine, angelic, light, splendor, eternity, mystery, and so on.³

I was already confused about sex by the time I got into psychotherapy training. Subsequent lessons haven't totally straightened me out yet, but I continue to hold out hopes that Orthodox Christianity in its fullness will ultimately prove curative. I believe that all good things come from the Word Who is made flesh and that in Christ we are eventually rendered whole and complete through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which unites us with the Holy Trinity in community one with another and yet we remain distinct.

This paradoxical relational model of being *one yet distinct*, as in the Holy Trinity, is paradigmatic for the kind of psychological differentiation that is necessary for a grace-filled, erotically passionate marriage. Yet confusion abounds regarding what at times appears to be competing paths toward Christian life exemplified by the virginity/celebrity model in contrast with marital union; the monastic and the marketplace. Methods and instructions given in one arena do not automatically translate into helpful suggestions in the other.

What are the implications of Jesus's admonishment to his interlocutors that in heaven "they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels."? Is celibacy the angelic condition and marriage a second rate compromise until we are released from the prison of the flesh? That starts to sound like the same old mind-body split that some of the gnostic teachings promoted which have helped denigrate sex to "something dirty you do with the one you love" because the body is hateful and the spirit good. The idea that sexuality was for procreative purposes alone, without the dimension of fulfillment of erotic desire with one's partner which strengthens the marital union was condemned by the first and sixth Ecumenical Councils.⁴ Nevertheless the view often prevails in the Western Church, as in St. Jerome's admonition, that "Anyone who has too passionate a love of his wife is an adulterer" and Gregory the Great who counseled

The married must realize...when they abandon themselves to immoderate intercourse, they transfer the occasion of procreation to the service of pleasure. Let them realize that though they do not then pass beyond the bounds of wedlock, yet in wedlock they exceed its rights. Therefore it is necessary that they should efface by frequent prayer what they befoul in the fair form of intercourse *by the admixture of pleasure* (my italics).⁵

This perspective appears to have continued and been confirmed by the current Pope John Paul II some fifteen centuries later.⁶

In the face of this persistent confusion, what kind of ascetical methodology do we married persons employ to grow in Christ which includes erotic desire for our partners? How, to the extent that it is in my power, should I desire my spouse? I want my marriage to be the equivalent of a monastic cell in which my spouse and I remain faithful to Christ while the fires of ordinary living in light of the Gospel combine with prayer and Grace to work that alchemy of transformation that is the same condition of soul toward which over a lifetime the celibate monks and hesychast on a solitary mountainside also strive. If ordinary eros in marriage is not an obstacle to theosis how can it be an aid? How do married couples struggle with the passions that adulterate eros and split it apart from personhood rooted in the heart, in a way that frees them for the Passion toward God which includes continued passion for each other? In other words, can I both lust for, sacrifice for and befriend my spouse in an integrated way? Is this a path toward Christ? Or is it a hot bed for every sort of confusion?

secular models

The ideals of marriage offered up for popular consumption by Hollywood and even secular psychological models fail to inspire. Contemporary films in America portray love in terms of sexual encounters fueled purely by a sexualized-genitalized eros that is generally outside the confines of marriage moreso than within the context of the deep knowingness and care that is part of God's relationship to His people. There is little if any sacrificial element. Deep heartfelt committed self-giving, long-suffering love is absent. In its place is an eros shorn apart from Eucharistic communion; sex without soul; body without spirit. The Sacramental context is missing. Sex has no human name. Mere bodies - meat driven by an ecstatic grasping in the face of certain death. This is soulless sexuality, a sign of the splitting of eros into "spiritual"

and "physical" that God never intended. The opposite of this is equally problematic and lacking - a life together without eros - cordial and even friendly, but without passion and perhaps even developmentally stalled. How do we avoid and correct this split in us, avoiding both extremes to stay attentive to and engaged in the stuff of our human life together that is imbued with God's eros, both in couples relationships and in vital community with others?

God and Erotic love belong together

A woman and her husband came for therapy recently with a typical array of presenting problems "He doesn't help around the house, doesn't manage money well, etc.."

"She is too demanding. Nothing would satisfy her. I don't really think there is that much of a problem."

We talked for a while of her loss of desire in the relationship and then she said with her face flushing, "What I really want is for him to be the spiritual leader of the family so that I will *want* to submit to him as the church does to Christ" - not out of tyranny and boredom, but out of passionate self-giving erotic love! She recognized that their sexual problems - the loss of her desire for him - and her carping at him for things he wasn't doing around the house, was rooted in their spiritual problems. We submit to Christ and yearn for union with Christ, not because he is a tyrant or because he is seductive or manipulative or trying to sell us something, but because he is humble, and vital and empathic and *interested in serving us so as to empower us to become who we truly are*. In submitting to Christ we become ourselves which includes a maturing of our erotic potential into full man and womanhood.

Virtually every couple hits points in a marriage where former passionate romantic attachments cool and they begin to look around for "What is wrong?" One may conclude that someone "new" is needed to restore the feelings of the original fire. This reminds me of the situation where folks were assembled in St. Paul's day at the Areopagus with "itchy ears" always wanting to be stimulated by some new sensational religion. It has more in common with lack of rootedness in one's self and of addiction than love. The purpose is not commitment to growth in truth, but rather self-stimulation, passionate feelings elicited by a sense of merger with another to avoid confrontation with one's own limits and aloneness. Analogously, it is like being in love with God not as Person but only for the consolation God brings. As Dr. Rizzuto has said, we are not likely to be less neurotic with God than we are with each other.⁷ **Whatever shape we are in when we fall in love, it is precisely by intentionally and consciously remaining in the marriage when we don't have the passionate feelings, that we eventually discover ourselves and each other in a new way and truly grow beyond our neurotic conflicts.**

Forgiveness, mercy, acceptance and treasuring of the ordinary otherness of another is the mark of a maturing Christian. It comes by identifying and withdrawing the projections (finding the "log in our own eye") we make onto another of the stuff of our own unacceptableness to ourselves. The cooling of passion is an inevitable midpoint through which we must pass on the way to differentiation into the fullness of our own being. One psychologist has dubbed his efforts to facilitate this process as "constructing the sexual crucible" and identified it as the primary context for doing marital therapy which presumes a seamless connection between sexuality and spirituality that is essentially hard-wired into our brains.⁸

I believe that our marriage with the Church as the Bride of Christ is similarly a "crucible" in which we grow, provided we are committed even through the "dull times" where we are confronted with our own failure to be able to attend to the here and now in such a way that we feel alive in the Divine Liturgy, in our jobs and in our lives in general. Are we really finding Christ in the world around us? Eros again is involved, though we may not think of this since we are not dealing with genitalia. Nevertheless, being erotically engaged with life requires a confrontation with the logs in our own eye, so to speak, as much as in a marriage, removing the film that separates us from the stuff of life and the aliveness one feels when this direct contact with the real world is made, born of simplicity of heart. The late Fr. Florovsky of Blessed memory alluded to this fresh quality of Christian life when he wrote,

The Church gives us not a system, but a key; not a plan of God's City, but the means of entering it. Perhaps someone will lose his way because he has no plan. But all that he will see, he will see without a mediator, he will see it directly, it will be real for him; while he who has studied only the plan

risks remaining outside and not really finding anything.⁹

Without a life-long self-confrontation with our own "love maps" and preconceptions of others, in the presence of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, i.e, the "eros of continual repentance," we are subject to the dissipation and fragmentation of eros. What seems perfectly natural to the young child gazing with fresh eyes upon the world for the first time remains hidden from our view. Unless we "become as a little child..." life remains just outside our grasp hidden by the logs in our own eyes. We do not see it, as it were, directly, but once removed as one who encounters life from outside behind the glasses of various preconceptions born of self-justification, ignorance and attempts to protect one's separateness.

This struggle to continue in the truth until "thine eye be single and the whole body is full of light" is of course much easier to avoid. We avoid the confrontation with ourselves whenever we make the mistake of saying "Oh, there must be a problem with the Liturgy. Let's add balloons or change the form of it a little to make it more stimulating." as the Protestant churches have done in endless variations. Or we say, "Since I do not have the original desire I felt when I first became a Christian maybe Orthodoxy is not right after all and I should become a Buddhist or something. In other words, I go "whoring after other gods" because I fail to see that the problem is with *myself*. Renewal of the heart by "first removing the log in my own eye" enables me to grow and "re-member" myself enough to rediscover (like Kellogg's Corn flakes for the first time!) my partner and my faith in ways I had not been able to see before.

hydraulics theory of sexuality

Within the world of psychotherapy, the field of sex therapy has gone through a series of changes which have in many ways contributed to or at least reflected the confusion we have about eros. In the 1960's when the so-called "sexual revolution" was occurring in America, Masters and Johnson among others, demonstrated that sex could be a clinical area of attention. They couched their work in purely amoral terms of empirical science which ultimately led to a context of the cultural relativity of all sexual norms. Since that time sex therapy has helped a lot of persons with orgasmic difficulties, erectile problems and problems of arousal, but has it helped us discover ways to reintegrate sexuality and spirituality in long term committed marriages? Has it helped us find what the wife in the above example was looking for in her marriage and within herself and her husband?

The Hebrew notion of *nephesh* implies a seamless connection between spirit and soul. Sexuality is seen as "very good" and a blessing of Sabbath. Husband and wife become "one flesh" not simply in terms of hydraulics, but in terms of "knowledge, one of the other" which is rooted in being known by God. Biopsychologically, there is a neocortical involvement of self-other awareness that is an integral dimension of marital desire. It is not simply glands and groins and gyrations dictated by the lower brain processes which accounts for the attraction at work in copulating mammals and even of long-term mating.

A hydraulics theory of sexuality helps us understand why total strangers would want to have sex with each other on the basis of pure hormones and instinctive procreative drives to preserve the species, but not in terms of why persons married for thirty years would desire each other even more deeply than in the beginning of their relationship. A hydraulics based theory of sexuality certainly doesn't help us understand the parallel between God *knowing* His people and a husband and wife *knowing* each other.

David Schnarch has pointed out that from a purely physiological perspective, a man's sexual desire is at its peak around age eighteen and a woman around forty. Something is wrong with this picture if that's all there is to it. Our children are taught about sexuality at this level in the academic school context where they will learn that they are most sexual, the boys at least, at a time in their life when the church says they should be virgins and the women must look forward to losing both now and when they reach their sexual prime! What are we as Orthodox parents to say? How do we counsel our children in this area to go against their biology and pass up the prime of their life? Do we need to explain to mature forty year old women why they will not find fulfillment by marrying an eighteen year old boy?

If sexual desire was biologically hardwired in persons as it is for animals who enter estrus, a hydraulic and purely procreative approach would perhaps make sense, but at some point in the past women went from

an estrus cycle to menstrual cycle and became receptive to men sexually at times other than those biologically determined thus opening the door to sexual encounters that are not procreatively based.¹⁰ This fits with the Hebraic notion of sexuality which celebrates it for the "sheer joy and pleasure of it, even when procreation was obviously impossible,"¹¹ a theme which continued in the Eastern Church to some extent at least, as evidenced by the commentaries of St. John Chrysostom¹² which are in contrast to that of St. Jerome and St. Gregory the Great as quoted earlier.

Surely we can agree that the saints are those who are most alive, most fully human, most capable of love, most deeply rooted in both the earthiness of themselves as well as the Spirit of God and thus most sensitive to the personhood of other people and the world around them in an erotic way. Gospel evidence is that both men and woman greatly loved Jesus and wept for him and he for them. It's hard for me to believe that his eroticism (albeit expressed in celibacy) was in any way life-denying, but rather life-transforming in every way. Gospel evidence is that he was able to be with persons in all kinds of situations in ways that surprised, challenged and inspired them by his aliveness which drew sinners to him. His love was free and pure - virginal in the sense of unadulterated by passions - and thus fully Passionate, vital and life-giving to those around him. When he spoke "It was not as the Scribes and Pharisees, but with power."

Fantasy and friction

In the subsequent decades following Master's & Johnson's initial work, Dr. Helen Singer Kaplan proposed and refined a model of treatment for sexual desire disorders that incorporated a focus on combining use of sexually arousing images in combination with psychodynamic theory to help persons overcome blocks¹³ that inhibit sexual desire in their marriages. Kaplan's approach enables persons to get good results by prescribing various means of employing fantasy and friction, including at times watching pornographic movies together. What about the spiritual component? Do we compound problems for couples in the long run when we suggest entertaining sexual fantasy to excite arousal? What developmental norms for couples in terms of growth and intimacy do we indirectly advance by the methods we use to treat sexual dysfunction when we work out of this kind of clinical model of human sexuality that is focused on physiological functioning and/or arousal mediated by fantasy which is proscribed as potentially delusional by most of the ascetical literature on interior prayer?

St. Augustine knew this potential for beguilement so well that he feared it for the rest of his life (albeit perhaps in part because he never got totally free of the Manichaean gnostic teaching which split off flesh as bad and spirit as good). He writes in his Confessions that sexual relations between a husband and wife are to be for procreative purposes alone, and not to be enjoyed for pleasure, a teaching which has continued, as noted, even to the present Pope. Considering that estimates are that as many as 5% of Roman Catholic Priests are pedophiles¹⁴ and only 40% of celibate priests are actually able to maintain celibacy over a lifetime¹⁵, something isn't working.

moral relativity

One problem with science giving us methods to treat "illness" that is related to the spiritual realm is that empiricism can't give us moral truth. It can't give us norms other than those based on biology and sociological samplings. Morality is the province of conviction and revealed truth of faith and theology. This is not to say it is merely a subjective preference which again leads to relativism, but rather that any perspective that disavows moral claims by positing relativity based on empirical comparisons alone, is itself a convictional claim and requires a theological critique. We must employ some means of identifying the relationship between moral conviction and empirical truth particularly when we are going to be purveyors of this by way of professional psychotherapeutic disciplines which must inevitably work with persons in the convictional arena. We simply cannot fall back on the old cliché that psychotherapy is "morally neutral" as the theories we espouse and work from are laden with anthropological assumptions about the nature of humankind and developmental ideals of marriage, sexuality, and human growth and potential that may be far from consonant with those espoused and cherished by a particular faith.

For example, In Masters and Johnson's classic text, Sex and Human Loving, widely used as a textbook in sex education in our schools, the authors review sexual mores from a descriptive cross cultural perspective and conclude

"What is labeled as "moral" or "right" varies from culture to culture, from century to century. Many of

the moral issues pertaining to sex relate to certain religious traditions, but religion has no monopoly on morality. People who have no closely held religious creed are just as likely to be moral as those whose values are tied to a religious position. *There is no sexual value system that is right for everyone and no single moral code that is indisputably correct and universally applicable.*¹⁶

Just what exactly does this mean? What kind of "morality" are we talking about? Sex therapists are not likely to be moral theologians and to even ask such questions. Where for example, in American culture and media do we learn about restraint of consumption and transformation of erotic desire toward God other than perhaps the church? Too often sex is a subject we are either uncomfortable talking about or we may not know how to speak of sex and spiritual growth in the same breath as an integrated whole. So our children grow up like us, perhaps not fully comfortable with their sexuality within a religious context while acting it out elsewhere in the culture on the basis of ideas learned in an academic setting, continuing the split between a non-erotic "religious" side and a non-religious erotic side deeply immersed in the consumer culture. Significantly, one Western observer points out that there are cultural impediments to recovering from the split between sexuality and spirituality and the value of asceticism rightly engaged in; is subversive to the economy!

The logic of chastity is fatally opposed to the logic of consumerism. To live chastely requires that one master and control one's desires. As Thomas Aquinas points out, "Chastity takes its name from the fact that reason chastises concupiscence." The logic of chastity implies an ascetic attitude toward life. The logic of consumerism is quite opposite. Advertising, the propaganda of consumer society, attempts to arouse desire and to convince us that a certain purchase will satisfy it....Chastity is especially threatening to a consumer society, because the one who has learned to control the desire for sexual gratification has learned that he is master of his desires and not slave to them. It is much harder to sell anything to such a person, for one must appeal not simply to one's appetites but to the reason. When gratification is no longer an end in itself, reason unmask the propaganda of the consumer society for what most of it is: deceptive promises built on false values.¹⁷

The Ramsey Colloquium, an ecumenical think tank, evidenced their similar concerns in a statement examining cultural trends in America and concluding that perhaps the key presupposition of the so-called sexual revolution which has deeply influenced the ideals and methods of secular psychotherapy is

that human health and flourishing require that sexual desire, understood as "need" be acted upon and satisfied. Any discipline of denial or restraint has been popularly depicted as unhealthy and dehumanizing. We insist, however, that it is dehumanizing to define ourselves or our personhood as male and female by our desires alone. Nor does it seem plausible to suggest that what millennia of human experience have taught us to regard as self-command should now be dismissed as mere repression....It is important to recognize that linkages among the component parts of the sexual revolution: permissive abortion, widespread adultery, easy divorce, radical feminism, and the gay and lesbian movement have not by accident appeared at the same historical moment. They have in common a declared desire for liberation from constraint--especially constraints associated with an allegedly oppressive culture and religious tradition. *They also have in common the presuppositions that the body is little more than an instrument for the fulfillment of desire, and that the fulfillment of desire is the essence of the self.* (My italics) On biblical and philosophical grounds, we reject this radical dualism between the self and the body. Our bodies have their own dignity, bear their own truths and are participant in our personhood in a fundamental way. ...This constellation of movements...rests upon an anthropological doctrine of the autonomous self.¹⁸

So what do we do?

What is transfigured sexuality and erotic desire in light of Orthodox Christianity and how does this inform what I do as a husband and as a marriage therapist? What kind of norm does Orthodoxy invite us to in terms of marital sexuality, chastity and celibacy and what sort of methodologies arise out of this to inform

the practice of psychotherapy within an Orthodox context? Let me offer a few case examples by way of illustration of some possible areas of conflict.

Case #1 Using sin to fight sin??

Several years ago I had a referral from the Bishop for a young man who had been tried in church court for sexually molesting several young girls while in the mission field. He was now seeing the boy for spiritual counsel and had told him not to masturbate, which was regarded as a sin. He was reading Scripture and praying, but based on his history I didn't think he would be able to do this. I spoke with his Bishop and we agreed that if the man did in fact masturbate he should do it with images of an adult woman to avoid reinfesting himself with images of nine year old girls. The young man did this and a couple years later he reported he was interested in a woman his own age and he was avoiding any images associated with young girls to avoid the temptation which remained for him. He occasionally masturbated, but he did so with adult women in mind, associating the pleasure of arousal and orgasm with their image rather than nine year old girls. He had been badly abused physically and emotional and there were numerous contributing factors to his problems, but this kind of manipulation of sexual imagery seemed a necessary part of the treatment along with weekly Bible study and a confessional relationship with his Bishop. He also had a relationship with a father figure who gave him the emotional support his own father had found difficult to do and this helped lower some of the tension he lived with inside. It is of course hard to know what combination of things helped him, along with the Grace of God, but he did improve.

When I raised this up at a meeting of Orthodox clergy in light of the church's teaching against masturbation, one Father rose up vehemently and shouted: "Fathers, we can't use sin to fight sin!" Masturbation, once thought of as a grave sin and mental illness that could cause hair to grow on your hands and make you lose your mind, is now generally looked at as a standard means of treatment for a variety of disorders and research indicates that women who masturbate have happier marriages than those who do not as measured in terms of self-esteem, orgasms, arousal time, intensity of sexual desire and both marital and sexual satisfaction.¹⁹ In this study, it is interesting to note that while only 43.9% of the women thought masturbation was healthy, 60.9% felt it increased their total awareness of their sexuality which was presumably a desirable goal.

Did I suggest sin to fight sin in this man's case? Should he have stopped fantasizing altogether? If so, what is the basis for this teaching which contradicts much of current empirical studies and current methodologies? Is it possible to treat persons totally individually, understanding that "sin" is on a continuum and one cannot tell merely from the outer behavior or even the inner fantasy, the end toward which the act is intentioned? Or what are the psychodynamic injuries or deprivation that are part of the unconscious compulsion to self-stimulate? Is all "lust" a sin by virtue of the quality of the inner image and physiological arousal or does it have to do more with the nature of one's inner consent to the particular fantasy in terms of its perceived ends, i.e. relationship enhancing or self-enclosive? Can the ascetical rigor of the celibate monk simply be lifted up and applied to those sexually active persons "in the world" or will we injure them by applying too strong a medicine for which they are not prepared and do not have the necessary community support and on-going spiritual guidance? Perhaps the inner work of the celibate monastic is not entirely appropriate for those "in the world" who seek to be genitally active with their spouses. If so what adaptations are necessary and what criteria guides this?

What is the role of Sexual Fantasy in mature Christian love?

Case #2 Fantasy can help

A Couple married seven years had not had sex more than a half dozen times in several years. The woman was systematically "turning herself off" by concentrating on cleanliness and separating from her body into a kind of inner dissociated observatory "up in her head." Although she protested all her husband's attempts to interest her in sexual relations, she said she became aroused when he watched pornographic films and she felt ashamed of herself for feeling this. She wanted to be able to desire her husband, but in bed she lost her arousal in spite of her intentions. Giving her permission to guide the man's touch where she

wanted it and how she liked it and also instruction to "put a video in her head that she found arousing" freed her to accept her own desires. The couple felt much better and her embarrassment was gone. This was in an overall context of affectionate love for one another and no other obvious marital conflicts.

Did I inadvertently hurt this couple by suggesting that God made sexual desire and that it was good and if only the woman would allow herself to accept the part of her that was aroused by the images of the video while she was with her husband all would be well? Are these two as compatible as they appear to be by the couples obvious satisfaction in subsequent weeks?

Case #3 Fantasy can hurt

This couple had been married for more than twenty years. After the birth of the children, the wife had begun to reject her husband's sexual attention in similar way as in the above example. She said that she had once cooperated with husband's sexual fantasies and had dressed in lacy clothing from Victoria's secret for him which had heightened his desire. Over many years in combination with other difficulties in the marriage and some unconscious conflicts of her own from a promiscuous life before she was married, she felt used - "like a prostitute." When her husband approached her for sexual relations she avoided him. When she was alone in the house she would fantasize about him coming home and she would be aroused. When he got home she felt put upon. The only place she felt desire while actually with him was when they were sitting in church together! She was feeling a renewal of her life in God and becoming involved in leadership capacities in the church and deeply wanted her husband to share this part of her life with her. It was to her, a validation of her personhood which was a precondition for permitting herself to experience sexual desire for him that was "pure" and untainted by obligation she felt as his "prostitute."

What was the role of acting out sexual fantasy in ultimately damaging the relationship between this man and woman? What appeared to work in the beginning of their relationship, eventually backfired. As in the initial example, this woman intuitively understood that the erotic dimension of her self-giving and her enjoyment of her husband was seamlessly connected with her spiritual yearnings, with her sense of self worth and with her husband's capacity to identify this and to some extent share it with her. Sex without love was not something she was interested in. Her husband on the other hand, felt love without sex was something he could not endure. Not to be erotically desired by her in a demonstrative way was tantamount to not being loved and cared for emotionally, a scenario not uncommon in marital crises and an indication perhaps that sex and love are made for each other and that when united in this way they both contribute to the validation and valuation of personhood.

Case #4 Does it matter what kind of fantasy it is if love is behind it?

This man needed to imagine sex with men in order to get an arousal with his wife. His homoerotic feelings were ego dystonic and he loved his wife and felt shame for his erotic desire attached to male genitalia, beginning with sexual abuse by an older man when he was an adolescent. He had kept this a secret for decades out of shame and fear of losing her. They were never able to really discuss the root of many of their arguments and lack of intimacy because of this.

During marital therapy he was able to disclose his fantasy life to his wife. She was initially repulsed and felt humiliated and rejected by his fantasies which she took as "replacing me." The therapist worked to normalize this and suggested (a la Kaplan) that sexual imprinting of arousing fantasies early in life is very resistant to change. Would she be repulsed if he had fantasies of a woman that looked like her or was an image of herself, seen through his eyes, even better than she actually was? At what point did she feel the fantasies became intolerable? Ultimately this woman was able to allow her husband freedom to express his desire for her in the only way he was able. He used imagery of male genitalia to be with her because he loved her and he didn't know how to change the arousal pattern associated with images, without losing his desire, until after he was near the point of orgasm. Then he could switch channels to being with her without imagery.

In this example, homoerotic imagery was allowed by a couple who shared a deep emotional attachment for the purpose of enhancing sexual arousal which ultimately led to strengthening their marital bond. Multiple issues of poor emotional differentiation, childhood trauma, sexual abuse and surviving combat

complicated the picture. Nevertheless these are two committed Christians living as best they are able and evidencing tremendous mercy and forgiveness toward one another under the circumstances. The line between diagnosis and discernment, both in terms of sin and pathology as well as spiritual and psychological health becomes a complicated one. Pastoral sensitivity and good clinical judgment applied in a personal way are critical ingredients.

Case #5 Conscious fantasy as attempt to heal fragmentation

Recapitulation

Christian ascetical practice is frequently misunderstood by modern writers seeking to affirm sexuality and incarnate experience, depending on which writers they are familiar with. Contrasting perspectives as noted along with errors of extremism are plentiful and lead to further extremes by way of attempted course corrections. For example, one author in a contemporary book of essays on sexuality and the sacred is typical of the inadequate understanding of authentic Christian asceticism being summarily dismissed by writers seeking to deconstruct traditional orthodoxy in order to reconstruct Christianity along the lines of modern understandings of sexuality and spirituality when she writes,

We have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, reducing the spiritual thereby to a world of flattened affect--a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one, not of self-discipline, but of self-abnegation.²⁰

In contrast, the authentic aim of asceticism is to render us fully human. Its motivation is not fear but love. Its purpose, as Bishop Kallistos Ware points out, is not self-abnegation as some sort of Pyrrhic victory over the Self by eliminating the body, but rather a restraint of all that enslaves by further dividing the Spirit and the body and making us less than human.

The aim of ascetics is to secure our freedom. Ascetic rules are often expressed in a negative form--don't smoke, don't drink, don't eat meat on this day--but behind the negative rules there is the supremely positive aim. The Russian theologian and priest Serge Bugakov used to say, "Kill the flesh in order to acquire a body." That is exactly what ascetics is doing. Using the Pauline distinction between *sarx* and *soma*, the ascetic kills the flesh in order to acquire a body. In order to have true freedom in his body, so the aim of the asceticism is freedom.²¹

But if monasticism and marriage are equally viable paths to union with God, and asceticism serves in synergy with the action of the Holy Spirit to render persons vulnerable in body and spirit, to the Living God, why the confusion regarding the nature of desire when it comes to expressing sexuality in marriage? What can we learn from the wealth of Patristic counsel to those seeking to find God through the path of self-renunciation and imageless prayer on how to enter into the marital relationship and relationship with God at the same time?

One author in the respected journal Pastoral Psychology writes eloquently of eros in a way that both inspires and confuses me, perhaps because it is far beyond my own experience. In any case, with such distillations of the Patristic and monastic witness available to all who can read, and who will read, not only out of pride, but also out of a sincere desire to grow toward Orthodox ideals, it is incumbent upon Orthodox Christian Psychotherapists to seek to understand the phenomenon of theosis which is described here and to strive to live this in practice as far as one is able within the context of a Community of faith, Sacramental participation and on-going guidance from a competent spiritual confessor, in order to let it begin to inform how we do marriage therapy. What is true and valuable in this perspective can, according to our understanding, be offered to those who seek out help from us because of similar confusions inherited from the undigested and misconstrued crumbs that have fallen from the table of the Lord's disciples over centuries into the hands of those who, starving for truth, leave nothing untried whether understood accurately or not.

Union with God, divinization or *theosis*, rests in the highest form of spiritual love, in *eros*, since the spiritually transformed man is not only loved by God, but, because of God's love, is motivated to love God. He turns toward God with the same force and passion that a fallen human being turns toward those most desired things of the earth and of sinful life. He feeds on God's love. He hears, smells, and touches God's love. God's love pervades him. His whole being yearns for God and is satisfied only in God Himself....

In speaking of the association between the highest form of love and the passions, we must be very careful. There are two levels at which this association can be understood. At the psychological level, one may indeed say that erotic love...can be redirected towards God and transformed, cleansed as it were. Any human motivation, even a sinful one, paradoxically enough can be made to serve God. But, again, it must be transformed. It must be purified. Thus, sexual purity--and absolute sexual purity of the kind that our perverted times rarely know--underlies all attempts to direct human emotions or passions toward God. *The libidinal "erotic" impulses of the human being serve the purpose of finding God only when they are wholly and totally freed from human sexuality.* (my italics) For, as we are told clearly and plainly in Scripture and as the Fathers and Saints have taught throughout the centuries, "the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Romans 8:7). "Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot enter the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption.

"At the spiritual level, the highest form of love has nothing to do with the psychological life or with psychological motivations. It is above such considerations and separated from them... If the passions can be transformed to serve Christian love, they nonetheless do not vitiate it or play any role in it. This is especially true of the highest form of love."

"We should also note that the experience of the highest form of Christian love, which leads to union with God and an ecstatic state of spiritual communion with Him, has no physical or material dimensions to it. It is an experience typically described by the Fathers in apophatic or negative terms: as a union which no human sense of union can express or as an indescribable or ineffable state. Any sense of time or space is lost, and the content of the experience is never revealed--if only because, as the Fathers themselves so frequently point out, there are no human words to capture it."²²

To the extent that this is an accurate distillation of the Desert Fathers concerning *eros* of marital union and the ascetic monastic ideal, it points us toward a methodology for psychotherapeutic interventions in marital problems and problems of sexual desire in light of an Orthodox Christian understanding of the human person that is far more complex than prevailing secular psychological perspectives indicate. How can we begin to move in a direction that allows psychotherapy to be fully congruent with the mysteriological and ascetical components of our common faith which provide the primary context for development toward the ideal of *theosis*? To the extent that prayer and asceticism are parts of this larger whole, to what extent can they be lifted out of their context without losing something essential? This is a particularly important question for Orthodox in America whose formation is deeply influenced by the often times inconsistent values, world view and social norms of the surrounding culture. Should the faithful seek help through consultation with psychotherapists who are unfamiliar with the fullness of Orthodox Christian faith, life and practice, important opportunities to work in concert with their faith may be missed. On the other hand, the ambiguity that appears to be within the faith itself in this area provides sufficient challenge for Orthodox Christian psychotherapists to consider regular worship, prayer, on-going spiritual guidance and personal therapy a *sine qua non* for doing any sort of psychotherapy ourselves.

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