

Toward a Better Understanding of the Clergy Couple

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The content for this brief article is informed by a variety of sources, which include: anecdotal information gathered from clergy wives and couples, the personal experience of the author, and general findings of research on clergy couples from a variety of sources. As such, this is not an academic paper, and sources will not be cited. The purpose of this article is to offer insight into some of the blessings and challenges clergy couples encounter.

Increasingly, the marriages of clergy couples are in distress. This reality is manifested in the growing number of divorces among clergy and the decreasing number of clergy marriages that outwardly reflect life and vitality. In the Orthodox Church, unlike other Christian churches, divorce statistics among clergy are not systematically maintained; thus, evidence for these disturbing trends is presently anecdotal. Furthermore, unlike the practice of other Christian churches, where divorced clergy are allowed to remarry and remain in ordained ministry (depending on the circumstances of the divorce), the divorced Orthodox priest cannot remarry and remain a priest. He must choose between the two.

In the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, a growing awareness of marital distress among clergy couples has prompted its leadership to take several initiatives, which include collaboration with the Danielsen Institute of Boston University for a study of the impact of the stressors of ministry on priests and presvyteres and funding for an intentional ministry to seminarian and clergy couples. The specifics of this ministry are evolving as information is gathered and needs more clearly emerge.

Clergy couples generally regard the opportunity to be present with people at the time of the most significant events in their lives—weddings, births, baptisms, sickness, crisis and death—to be the greatest blessing of their lives in ministry. In the best circumstances, the presence of the priest (and his wife, if she is inclined) is requested in times of joy and sorrow. For example, still to this day, even with decreasing church attendance in America, the pastor is often the first person contacted when a marriage is in distress. Furthermore, those who are connected to the life of the Church, even marginally, tend to “return” to the Church for marriage, the 40-day blessing of an infant, baptism, illness, and death. In these instances, both the priest

and his wife are given the opportunity to reach out and be the living presence of Christ. Boundless opportunities to serve Christ by reaching out to others in times of joy and sorrow are “built in” to the life of the clergy couple.

Clergy couples also face some very difficult challenges and struggles. These include but are not limited to boundary issues and seemingly endless time demands and expectations. Unfortunately, clergy couples often grapple with these challenges and struggles in isolation. To paraphrase an oft-quoted reality of clergy life: “Ministry is the loneliest vocation.”

In the last 20 years, a growing number of clergy have divorced. In my own archdiocese, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, about 60-70 clergy have divorced in the last 25 years. And, I have heard from reliable sources in Greece that the number of clergy divorces is also growing there. Unlike the impact of the divorce of a lay person, the divorce of a priest has a greater impact on the body of Christ. Not only does the family suffer, but parishes are left to heal, and shock waves are felt throughout the national church, as those who are looked upon as models of Christian life experience brokenness.

For those who remain married, some are either in distressed or static marriages. Clergy wives sometimes resign themselves to the perceived reality that they: “are single moms,” “have husbands who are workaholics,” “are competing with a mistress with whom they cannot compete—the church,” (some even give up because they believe they are competing with God for their husband’s attention). These couples may live parallel lives with some sense of partnership for household duties and the raising of children. Others, upon entering parish life, are so overwhelmed by the challenges they face, bond with each other in their struggle, offering “support” in the form of commiserating misery. They quickly become embittered, and the bitterness grows and festers as time passes. I remember being in the presence of a group of several older and seasoned clergy wives when I was younger. What I remember most about that gathering was how much bitterness and anger I sensed. I promised myself that I would never become an embittered presvytera. As the years have passed, however, I now better understand how bitterness, anger and cynicism can grow and fester if we do not guard against them. For some, the struggles are seemingly endless; for others, the road is a bit smoother. However, the key to the well-being of the clergy couple is not how difficult the road is. It is rather, how

the couple, personally and collectively, responds to the unique stressors inherent to the clergy marriage.

Some clergy couples are intentional and deliberate in nurturing, guarding and growing their marriages. They choose to live the sacramental reality of marriage, that is, they intentionally seek oneness, salvation, and sanctification. Furthermore, they practice healthy, holy personal and couple care, with healthy and life-giving rhythms of prayer, work, intimacy, Sabbath, acts of mercy, and leisure. They seek help when needed, grow and nurture healthy friendships, and build a support system around them.

In the Orthodox Christian understanding of marriage, two persons are joined by Christ and become “one flesh,” sharing a personal, private and intimate life in the context of community. Let us now look at the unique challenges of clergy couples in this three-dimensional framework of marriage: the person, the couple, and the couple in their social context.

As already mentioned, research clearly shows that the seemingly endless demands and expectations of time placed on the priest is one of the greatest challenges he and, by extension, his wife must face daily. Priests, and often their wives, become so consumed with “doing” that they forget about “being.” Many neglect personal prayer, solitude, Sabbath and continued learning. “Being in Christ” can get lost in doing the “work of Christ.” If we look at the life of Jesus, we see a man who took time to be alone with his Father. Time and again, we read that “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16, NIV). Additionally, we know that he ate a healthy Mediterranean diet and walked nearly everywhere he went. Finally, we know that Jesus had good friends. He had his inner circle of Peter, James and John with whom he was most intimate, the larger circle of the 12 disciples and others who followed him, and friends such as Lazarus, Mary and Martha. In contemporary terms, Jesus practiced healthy, holy self-care—taking time alone to grow his relationship with his Father in prayer, eating healthfully, exercising, and engaging in meaningful relationships with others. He was a healthy, whole person who gave of himself sacrificially, to the point of laying down his life for us; He gave from a place of fullness, as both man and God.

From what do we give as clergy couples? Do we give from a place of fullness, or do we often give from tanks that are either half or nearly empty? Recognizing the need for clergy couples to attend to issues of well-being,

several years ago, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese instituted wellness workshops at the clergy laity congresses. These workshops focus on spiritual, physical, emotional, relational and mental well-being. Furthermore, annual clergy and clergy wives' retreats have been instituted that focus on all aspects of well-being. The multi-faceted demands of parish life make it difficult for priests and their wives to practice healthy, holy self-care and be healthy, holy people, following the example of Christ. If we are calling our priests, and by extension their wives, to lovingly, sacrificially and humbly serve their flock, then they must be encouraged to take care of themselves. Elements of this care include: a day of Sabbath; time away from the parish—daily, weekly, and yearly to decompress and be reenergized; and, opportunities to retreat. The healthier the priest and his wife, the better the quality of his ministry. In the words of Father Vasileios Thermos, a practicing psychiatrist and priest in the Church of Greece, “The clergy couple is the touch-stone of the quality of our pastoral ministry.”

For the clergy couple, the intimate, personal, private relationship is challenged by all three of the primary struggles indicated by research: time demands/expectations; the blurring of boundaries between the parish and the couple; and isolation. The time demands and expectations of the parish on the priest, combined with the internal expectations the priest has of himself, often leave little time for his wife and the nurture and growth of their relationship. Any energy left is often directed toward the children. For clergy couples, the demands are heightened because the priest is on call 24/7, with the exception of vacation time. Even then, if a death or emergency occurs in the parish, and the priest is within driving distance from home, he may leave his vacation to attend to the needs of his parishioners. The wife can be left feeling as if she gets the crumbs of her husband's attention.

Complicating the situation of the clergy family is the understanding of both husband and wife that the husband is doing God's work, and if the husband or wife or both want to devote more attention and care to their marriage, he, she, or they may feel guilty for taking time from the parish for themselves and each other. The clergy couple can fall to the temptation of taking their marriage for granted. Just as each person in the marriage is called to healthy, holy self-care, the marriage, by virtue of its sacramental nature, is also called to healthy, holy care and nurture. It is not a competition between the marriage of husband and wife and the marriage of the husband to the parish. It is both, and the couple must understand that by the grace of God, they have entered into a life of sacrifice, both for each other and for the flock that

has been entrusted to the husband's care.

Finally, all couples live in the context of relationships—to extended family, friends, work colleagues, neighbors, and church communities. The clergy couple is in a unique situation in regard to the community of faith, as the “workplace” of the husband is also the place of worship, socialization and spiritual nurture for his wife and family. As such:

1. The husband leads the worship in the place where his wife and family worship; thus the family does not worship “together” as other families do.
2. The clergy couple lives in what has been coined as a “glass house.” They live a public life. They are held to a higher standard, expected to set the example for spirituality, personhood, marriage and family life. The husband's salary is public domain. This “glass house” syndrome leads some clergy couples to portray a false public façade, when in fact, they may be experiencing immense suffering in their personal lives.
3. As public figures, many clergy couples lead very isolated and lonely lives, a seeming contradiction given the public nature of the priest's vocation
4. Some clergy maintain that it is inappropriate to have friends in the parish. Others maintain that friendships can be cultivated and nurtured, but with clear boundaries.
5. Sometimes the people in the parish put the priest and his family at arm's length, seeing them as people of God, set apart, not like “us,” thus making the cultivation of appropriate friendships difficult.
6. Some clergy couples work hard at cultivating friendships with other clergy couples, claiming that they are the only people with whom they can be completely themselves and not hold back. For some, these friendships are lifelines that deflect the day-to-day isolation; for others, these relationships have little daily impact, particularly for those living in more isolated areas where Orthodox churches are sparse.
7. Adding to the isolation is the reality that many clergy couples often do not live near their extended families; this isolation is sometimes heightened on holidays when, because of the schedule of worship services and other circumstances, the clergy family may not be able to enjoy the presence and

embrace of family.

Upon reflection, it is evident that the clergy couple experiences many of the same blessings and challenges that all married couples encounter. Unlike other couples, however, the context in which the clergy couple lives out their marriage is different from that of the faithful lay couple and presents some unique blessings and challenges. For some clergy couples, the challenges lead to dismay; for others, the challenges are opportunities for couples to be proactive, deliberate and intentional about nurturing and growing their marriage. In fact, some couples view these struggles as blessings, prompting them to work with each other to find creative ways to build closeness and intimacy into their marriages and to seek God more fervently.

This brief overview has only begun to scratch the surface of the challenges clergy couples encounter in their personal lives and marriages as they fulfill their call to ministry, which is, in reality, a “mutual ministry.” Whether the wife of the priest is publicly visible and active in the life of the parish, or whether she chooses to be a more silent partner, she, too, is called to a life of sacrifice beside and with her husband. Along with the sacrifice, by the grace of God, it is a life of abundant joy that presents boundless opportunities to serve and grow in Christ.

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