

Marriage as a Spiritual Path

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The purpose of life is not to resist it or to indulge in it, but to live. As St. Irenaeus in the early second century observed, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive” as we see in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Marriage as a spiritual path moves along the “narrow path that leads to life” between these two extremes where the Divine Energies and the vital sap of daily life in the world converge. The Orthodox Church holds marriage in honor as a Mystery of the Church—a means of Grace uniting heaven and earth—where the word and action of the Lord turn ordinary water into the wine of the Spirit creating an effervescence in the soul of the partakers.

Gospel evidence is that both men and woman greatly loved Jesus and at times wept for him and he for them. The stories he told were life-transforming and expressive of Divine love always in the ordinary conditions of life. Whether he was playing with children or scandalizing rule-bound uptight religious authorities by departing from prescribed rituals, he was always affirming life. Through our Lord’s eyes and along his path, whores, adulterers, fornicators and “five-time losers” became saints, while the lack of love and mercy of the religiously ‘correct’ and pious was artfully exposed. Self-righteousness of any kind is a detriment to the bright sunshine of sobornost where, as it is implied in the Lord’s prayer, the neighbor shares being with one’s own self. In Christ we have the supreme paradox that he who was most pure practiced the greatest *economia*¹ so that untouchables and outcasts as well as the social elite found themselves drawn to him, testifying by their responses that he was already in them, hidden like a seed waiting for the right conditions to be called forth and germinate.

What is often overlooked, is that whatever dimension of love we are talking about—*philia*, *agape* or *storge*—eros is the root of them all. Eros is the wellspring of the soul’s deep yearning for communion with God and the creatures of God² as well as the energy of repentance.³ All of these involve turning toward the Beloved and making a free embrace of the primary condition of authentic human life which is made explicit in the prayer, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” As St. Anthony observed, it is only through obedience to God that I can become myself. Obedience to God is nothing other than God’s own love pouring through us for the whole world and every living creature in it.

¹ A lessening and/or adapting of a prescribed penance as a means of healing a person and bringing the heart back to life following some kind of sin..

² St. Maximos the Confessor writes, “God is the producer and generator of tenderness and eros. He has set outside himself what was within himself, namely, creatures. Which is why it is said of him: God is Love. The Song of Songs calls him *agape* or ‘sensual pleasure,’ and ‘desire,’ which means *eros*. In so far as the *eros* desire originates from him, he can be said to be the moving force of it, since he generated it. But in so far as he is himself the true object of the love, he is the moving force in others who look to him and possess according to their their own nature the capacity for desire. *On the Divine Names*

³ Capsanis, Archimandrite G. (1994) *The Eros of Repentance*. Massachusetts: Praxis Institute Press

Eros is best demonstrated and most perfectly evidenced in the Passion of our Lord who loved humanity and all creation enough to lay down his life for those he loved. With regard to eros, Christian Tradition has from the beginning acknowledged two paths: one celibate (which includes monasticism) and the other expressed genitally in and through the life-long fidelity of marriage. Both paths honor the beloved community and are expressive of Divine love that suffers willingly in order to bring forth abundant life in which it rejoices. Marriage and monasticism are both paths vowed to God⁴ and to the world, each involving the interplay of ascetical restraint and eros lived out in different conditions and expressed in different ways.

As Orthodox Christians, in discussing marriage and sexuality we must begin with fullness of life, with the recognition that the saints are those who are most fully human, most capable of love, mercy and forgiveness, as evidenced by being most deeply rooted in both the genuine earthiness of their concrete selves as well as permeated by the Holy Spirit which enables them to appreciate and value the beauty and worth (as well as the weaknesses) of all persons. The mark of healthy eros in a follower of Jesus Christ is that he or she turns toward the world (and those in the world) with the self-denying impassioned love which God evidences in Christ, the lamb slain from the foundation of the world, for the sake of the world.

From the Orthodox Christian perspective, the mark of a healthy marriage is that, more than compatible personalities and chemical attraction, the marital relationship is becoming rooted in the deeper spiritual forces of life that arise over a lifetime of forgiveness and loving sacrifice. Novelist Ann Tyler poetically expresses this discovery after the fact.

I knew couples who had been married almost forever—tending each other's illnesses, dealing with money troubles or the daughter's suicide or the grandson's drug addiction. And I was beginning to suspect that it made no difference whether they'd married the right person. You're just with who you're with. You've signed on with her, put in a half a century with her, grown to know her as well as you know yourself, and she *becomes* the right person, or the only person. I wish someone had told me that earlier; I'd have hung on then.⁵

Both partners in the marriage find one another anew in this way as each turns toward the other and toward the larger community with the passion that God has for us all in Christ. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness all these things"—including a healthy and long marriage—"will be added unto you as well."⁶ But this is a matter of heart. For eros to be free to play, the heart must stand firm both in joyful celebration as well as sacrificial difficulty where hell seems to prevail. Otherwise eros can be diverted from its course, turning back on self (auto-erotic fetishes, various forms of self love,

⁴ "You are making a great mistake and seriously deceiving yourself if you think that one thing is asked of a layman and another of a monk; the difference between them is that one enters into matrimony, the other does not, in all other things they are subject to the same responsibility." --St. John Chrysostom

⁵ From *A Patchwork Planet*, (Ballantine Books: New York, 1999).

⁶ Mt 6:33

vainglory, and spiritual hedonism) or on others without recognizing boundaries (adultery, fornication, judgmentalism, and turning the particular into merely a manifestation of the abstraction of “woman” or “man” rather than a particular *person*). At either extreme, the body, starved of the vital nourishment of the Divine energies, begins to dominate the soul with its various cravings in the form of afflictive passions.

The Islamic mystical poet Rumi observed, “Wine got drunk with us, not the other way around.” The created order cannot be what it is meant to be without the human heart and mind honoring and reflecting the Image of the Creator in every person. This is why, toward that end, we joyfully embrace the boundaries of ascetical restraint, whether in celibacy or in marital sexual fidelity in order to make room for the joy of feasting on Divine Grace. When Russian Orthodox theologian Serge Bulgakov summed up Patristic counsel to, “Kill the flesh in order to acquire a body” he meant, avoiding the enstatic compulsive slavery of drunkenness, licentiousness, avarice, pride and other sins so that the heart can be increasingly free for the ecstatic joy of the virtues of fidelity to our vow of chastity (whether married or celibate), poverty (with regard to eros diverted to material possession or spiritual hedonism) and obedience, (which is love’s surrender of self-will and self-indulgence for the sake of the Beloved).

The human heart is made for ecstasy –the joy and sacrifice of love that arises through acting in accordance with the world as it is intended to be in Christ. St. Maximos the Confessor points out that the body and all human appetites and powers find their authenticity in this way. “Love is the unfailing pleasure and indivisible union of those who participate through their longing in what is good by nature.⁷” This includes the couple united in marriage. In this way, we are all priests who lift up the cup of salvation on a daily basis— earthen vessels pregnant with the treasure of the Divine Spirit, giving thanks and praying with our lives, “Thy will be done on earth (and in the earth of myself) as it is in heaven.” In this way Christ increasingly grows between us, so that all may be one—husband and wife in marriage—and every marriage with the larger human community. The infusion of Grace in the physical body itself through the indwelling of the mind in the heart is such that the church has experienced repeatedly the miracle of how bodies of sanctified persons evidence the glory of God after death, exuding a fragrant myrrh that surpasses the finest perfume.

Bodily love, feasting, keeping vigil, praying, fasting, or dancing naked like King David before the Ark of the Covenant, are all fueled by Divine yearning for life-giving communion among God, creation and humankind. The slightest admixture of seeking to possess, dominate or seduce another – to have power over the beloved in any way – is rooted in fear and stifles joy; it is compulsive in order to overcome the shame inherent in actions that proceed apart from God’s blessing. This is always a violation of human freedom and a refusal to stand in relation to the Beloved as a “Thou” who ultimately remains a mystery known completely only in and through God. It fragments and divides both the body personal and the body politic, reducing each to a mere abstraction, an “it, and so a commodity that can be used for purposes less than God intends and at our individual self-centered whims. Spiritual growth is arrested.

⁷ Third Century of Various Texts, (31)

Contrast this with the outlook of St. Symeon the New Theologian who describes how his spiritual father, Symeon the Pious, was not ashamed in the presence of his own or anyone else's nakedness, "for he had the whole of Christ, he was himself and all the members of his body Christ, and he was seeing each of the members of the body of anyone else as Christ." For St. Symeon, as for his spiritual father, this meant "we become members of Christ...the arm Christ and the foot Christ...do not say I am blaspheming...and my finger Christ and my penis Christ...."⁸ Or St. John Climacus who describes someone of great purity in his own day, who when he saw a person with a beautiful body, was moved to tears and glorified God. St. John observed that such a person, if he always feels and behaves this way "has risen immortal before the general resurrection."⁹

The passionate euphoria of "falling in love" doesn't last because it is largely the result of chemicals that temporarily change the homeostasis of the brain. After a couple years, these chemicals subside and a different relationship is forged which is accompanied by a deeper commitment to one another rooted in real love that involves the deep will of the heart that is vowed to God. It is by intentionally and consciously remaining faithful to the marriage over a lifetime even through the dry times when we don't have hormonal euphoria (just as we do in prayer when we don't have the spiritual consolations that make it enjoyable), that we eventually grow beyond our neurotic conflicts into full humanity where the joy of eros is newly evident and we rediscover one another in a richer and deeper way.

In light of this, the ideals of marriage offered up for popular consumption by Hollywood fail to inspire. Contemporary films in America portray love in terms of bodily appetites that lack moorings in the deep knowing, self-sacrificial care and life-long commitment that are part of the relationship between God and Creation which both marriage and monasticism are designed to preserve and enhance. Apart from a heart vowed to God and without the ascetical sacrifice that evidences such a vow, only lust results—depersonalized eros—the fizzle of heat in the body without fire in the heart and *theosis*¹⁰ does not occur. While the so-called "sexual revolution" has the appearance of liberation from restraint on the surface, it conceals an atmosphere of shame-based sexuality that must be compulsive in order to bring together depersonalized bodies without hearts and wills that deeply know, accept and are vowed to one another and the whole community in the presence of God. Passion without personhood is disintegrating.

On the other hand, in a similar way, the life-enhancing, joy-protecting function of asceticism is lost when it is not rooted in faith, love and humility. St. Basil observed "Asceticism without worship makes you a demon." This is expressed in the false, distorted control whose motive is to provide artificial light for the ego while the heart remains small and frightened, e.g. "I fast therefore I am better than..." or in the lustful aesthete who is meticulous about observing the minutest details of the typikon of the

⁸ Faros, P. (1998) *Functional and Dysfunctional Christianity*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press. P.116.

⁹ IBID, P129, cited from *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 15. 60.

¹⁰ An Eastern Orthodox term referring to the fullness of sanctification and union with God through the indwelling Divine Energies of Grace

Liturgy but fails to find beauty, goodness or value in the continuous daily Liturgy of the Divine creation and in the “living human icons” and their activities beyond the cycle of church services. All these are variations of the familiar trap of co-opting Christian faith and practice to enhance or preserve the individual ego rather than to free us from the domination of self-enslaving passions which bring souls into captivity to bodily appetites shorn from their place in the heart where they are fed by the pure springs of God’s Grace and transfigured, to enliven the world.

For God did not come into the world to condemn it. God did not fashion the world of created bodies of flesh and blood in order to destroy them. But God created a world He loves so much that He became human Himself in order to make it possible through Him, for humanity to become eternally alive with God’s own life. Behold, the Bridegroom cometh! Let us then keep awake and seek Him where he may be found...*wherever two or more are gathered for the purpose of finding Him.*