

For Better or Worse: Marriage Today
ReCatechism 5
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As we begin this evening, our discussion on “The Orthodox Family” deals with a topic that, in our Church history, the most renowned people to discuss it did not experience it. It is an experience – indeed, a way of life – that forms a person and unites them together with another person, making the two “one flesh”. Tonight’s session is, *Marriage Today: For Better or Worse?*

The Sacrament of Marriage is as old as humanity. As the first-created, Adam and Eve were the first married couple who were blessed by God to be in His image. During His ministry, Jesus Christ shows that marriage is blessed with His presence and first miracle during the wedding at Cana in Galilee. Every human being is on their way to the Kingdom of God. Marriage is the joining of these two people and walking to the Kingdom of God together *as one entity, “one flesh”*.

The theology we have discussed during a previous *Re-Catechism* session. Today, we come to examine and discuss the state that marriage is in today. Every day, we see shows like “Say yes to the dress” and “Four Weddings”, which are guilty of glamorizing “marriage” in the way Hollywood would like to portray it to us. People being willing to spend a *lot* of money to make the fairytale wedding (one website reports the average is \$27,800). Yet, with disagreements and “irreconcilable differences”, people are asking (now more than ever): “is marriage really worth it today?”

If we are to see an example of “marriage today” when it comes to commitment vs. indifference, which couple do we look at? Elizabeth Taylor and Mickey Rooney have been married eight times, respectively. Zsa Zsa Gabor has been married nine. Although we might say, “that’s Hollywood, things are different here”, statistics say that there were 26,577 divorces in 2001 (the last year statistics are available for this). According to the same statistics, there is a 37.7% chance that marriage ends in divorce before reaching the 30th anniversary.

Having said all the above, with the 21st century being a different time to live than any other the world has seen, does marriage stand a chance? Is marriage ‘*for better or worse*’?”

The fact is that marriage should not be seen as “for better or worse”, but should be seen as a covenant – a promise – between God, husband and wife in order for them to attain the ultimate prize: holiness. In this covenant, some of the crossroads are those of: commitment, communication, conflict resolution and having a living prayer life.

Commitment vs. Indifference (“We” or “Me”?)

From the beginning of time, the greatest problem humanity faces is not famine, war, disease or any of these things. All these things are symptoms of the greatest problem we face. Adam and Eve faced it in the Garden of Eden. As God asked what happened, first Adam and then Eve decided to point fingers and blame someone else. It was the first instance where “we” became “me”, where commitment to the spouse was not important – it was individual gain at the cost of everything else.

Commitment is something that is hard for regular familial relationships, friends and acquaintances – even with Church. The same problem of commitment also exists with marriage. The underlying assumption, from the engagement to the Sacrament of Marriage and beyond, is that both husband and wife, “from this time forth and forevermore”, are committing themselves to one another and to Christ. The Church prays for the couple to be committed to each other during the Sacrament when the Priest joins their hands, reminding them of the Lord’s words: “what God has joined together, let no person separate” (Matthew 19:6, Mark 10:9). Christ was committed to His Church and died for Her. The Church is committed to Christ by being His Bride forevermore.

Yet, the truth is that it is sometimes difficult to keep that level of commitment in one’s marriage – today more than ever. With both spouses working, with children going to school, tournaments and hockey practice, with a myriad of other things (including being involved in the digital world), it is no surprise many couples say that the time given towards people’s marriages is becoming less and less over time.

The effects are different for each couple: some go through a process of *defamiliarization* (where spouses usually say to one another, “I don’t know you anymore!”), while others go through isolation and fear of the unknown. During extreme cases, infidelity appears in the marriage. Although every case is unique, vanishing commitment in a marriage means there is no reason to be united.

When couples think in terms of “we”, they see themselves as a team, walking together to the Kingdom of God. When couples see themselves as “me and him/her”, they go through what Rev. Dr. Charles Ioannidis, head of the *Department of Interfaith Marriage* of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, says:

We’re a society that’s fixated on our personal needs. I believe that’s one reason why many unhappy spouses have bought into the notion that they deserve to be happy, and if they aren’t happy, then it must mean that their partner and marriage has failed to meet their needs. In fact, the advice in most self-help books that addresses marital satisfaction is predicated on these assertions.

As pervasive as these attitudes are, I also believe these assertions are fatally flawed. Moreover, some of the newest research - and by extension, couple’s therapy - coming out of the human sciences suggests that no one can make us happy, and that we are in charge of our happiness. This work, which has an empirical foundation, also maintains that happiness essentially emerges when we

give of ourselves to others, rather than when we focus on our needs and take from others.

But these findings, while they're being marketed as innovative, are anything but new and innovative to those of us who know Christ. That's because Christian relationships are based on service, giving and compassion.¹

Commitment is something spouses promised one another. It might be difficult at times, but that is why marriage is like a Cross, as Fr. John Mack says:

In our modern culture, many people are lost in a world without eternal meaning.... In that kind of world, it makes no sense to stay in a marriage when the thrill is gone and the suffering begins.... But if working through the day-to-day difficulties of a marriage relationship becomes part of your labor to attain the Kingdom – because it requires a denial of self and an embracing of selfless love – then it becomes an event of cosmic significance, because it involves the overthrow of the satanic pseudo-kingdom and the planting of God's Kingdom here on earth.²

Orthodox Christianity changes the dynamics of human relationships: from broken-down realities we all are aware of today, the couple is blessed by God to be committed to one another, even in difficult times. God gives us the strength to stay committed to each other during these difficult times. Without that help, it would break down like any other marriage. Sometimes commitment will waver and couples will be at different points in their lives; yet, when we allow God to “become the glue of marriage”, commitment to one another will always be there because love will always be there.

Communication vs. The Brick Wall

In the Orthodox Church, we are taught that to have a relationship with God, we are to partake of the Sacraments. Every Sunday, we have the opportunity to have Holy Communion and receive Christ into our hearts. Communion means that a relationship still exists. There is no ‘brick wall’ there to stop us from receiving the Lord. For married couples, communication is key in order for the relationship to grow daily.

It sounds so easy, but marriage counsellors report that 85% of couples seeking counseling say that *poor communication* is a source of marriage strife. The root of communication is not merely speaking to another person. Fr. Mack describes that speaking is merely the first level of communication! He says, “Communication is listening, it is understanding, it is sharing. It involves words, but it goes beyond words to the heart!”³

To hit “the brick wall” means that communication has been severed. The reasons could be endless: sports, TV shows, forgetting a major event or milestone, being late...the list goes on. There was even a CBC special about the new digital age and how one member of the couple was playing an internet videogame, staying up for hours on end and having

¹ <http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/marriage/interfaith/attending-to-your-marriage/notgettingenoughmarriage>

² Fr. Mack, 22

³ *Ibid*, 74.

“digital relationships” with other people online. In some cases, it broke up marriages. It all started because one of the spouses was always “busy” and the other wanted to feel love and acceptance. She thought she found it on the internet – and it broke up her family.

That is why the brick wall does not go away by itself. It must be taken down with care, with love and with patience.

There can be no communication between spouses if there is no *praise*. Saying “I love you, I value you, great job with that” makes a world of difference to a spouse. St. John Chrysostom even points it out: “whenever you give your wife advice, always begin by saying how much you love her.”⁴

There is no communication in marriage if there is no *time* for the spouse. It is important for both husband and wife to find time to be together and live their marriage together. Of course, there will be times that spouses will work, have a “guys” or “girls” night; yet, the couple is no longer two people, but one. If the couple remembers that, communication in marriage becomes simpler.

Conflict Resolution

Humanity is a proud bunch: that’s what got Adam and Eve to sin, thus severing our communion with God. While some might get upset, other times people tend to take the “ignorance is bliss” approach – that ‘things will be okay in the future, just give it time.’ The apex of conflicts can lead couples to situations such as those of Rihanna and Chris Brown, Halle Berry (who was hit so hard by an ex-boyfriend, she actually lost hearing in her right ear) and many others. That is why the St. Paul says, “‘In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.” (Ephesians 4:26)

Couples who say there are no conflicts at all, with them agreeing all the time, are too proud to admit that they have went through times where the start is the husband wanting to watch football and the wife wanting to see *Survivor*, and it ends with one of them sleeping on the couch.

The important thing to remember is that conflicts will occur – they are part of life. How we deal with them is up to us. It usually deals with what Fr. Charles Joannides calls, “the 3 R’s: Recognition, Remorse and Repair”.⁵

Spouses who are in conflict about any issue usually are focused only on the shortcomings of the other partner. They do not pay attention to if or how they have contributed to the conflict (*pride is a deadly sin*). With *Recognition*, both husband and wife need to acknowledge they might be at fault for this conflict arising in the first place. With *Remorse*, “Spouses who are locked in conflict must discern how their actions and caustic remarks have hurt their partner, then actually feel the pain as well as the painfully destructive consequences that their actions have had on their

⁴ Quoted from Fr. J. Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life: Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics*, 55.

⁵ <http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/marriage/interfaith/attending-to-your-marriage/thethreers>

partner.”⁶ Finally, with *Repair*, partners need to ask forgiveness from one another. This might sound like a simple process; however, it is a task that can only be accomplished by bringing God into the equation. Without God, the Head of the “house Church” is excluded from the marriage. So, how do we bring God into the “house Church”?

“A Living Prayer Life” vs. “One worshipping and another sleeping”

St. Theophan the Recluse writes: “Prayer is the test of everything. If prayer is right then everything is right.” Everything that we’ve touched on so far tonight cannot work if prayer is not at the center of everything that a family does together. The nerve center of a loving and functional family is prayer...it is our connection with God because it is in Him that we find the source of the wisdom, sacrifice and love required to make a family work. Prayer is, as one contemporary Orthodox Bishop (Bishop Dimitri of the OCA) put it, “spiritual food, without which the Christian life is empty and meaningless.” So how do we go about making prayer a part of a family’s lifeline? Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of Diokleia gives us three very important presuppositions:

1) We need to be a part of the Orthodox Church. And not just nominal members but rather active and participating members because no one is saved alone. In order for your physical family to work, you have to be a part of God’s spiritual family first because it is here that you find guidance and wisdom.

2) Being a part of the Church means that you have to be united with God and all the brothers and sisters of His Church. And we do this through the sacraments, and most importantly through the sacrament of Holy Communion. The great theologian St. Nicholas Cabasilas writes that in Holy Communion “we attain God himself, and God himself is made one with us in the most perfect of all possible unions.”

3) Study and become immersed in the Bible. St Tikhon said: “Whenever you read the Gospel, Christ himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking to him.”

So as you can see, it is only when we become intimately connected with the perfect family—the Trinitarian God-- will we be able to live out this perfection within our own worldly families. There is no other way to living a joyful and blessed family life.

*Other positives and negatives do exist, yes; however, we only have so much time ☺
Please feel free to bring them up so we can discuss them later on.*

In Conclusion...

As a Sacrament blessed by God, marriage is not something like a car or computer that becomes “obsolete” (and people can just ‘upgrade with a newer model’). When speaking about marriage, St. John Chrysostom goes further than the Western-Christian way of thinking “‘til death do us part”. He says, “Husbands and wives commit themselves to

⁶ *Ibid.*

one another over the course of this lifetime and beyond...[for] love relationships transcend death....”⁷ Although *Marriage Today* is as difficult as ever, the pursuit of holiness was never easy to begin with. That’s why the Church prays at the end of the marriage service a very important prayer, the thoughts that I’d like to leave you with this evening:

*May the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the All-Holy, Consubstantial and Life-creating Trinity, One God-head and Kingdom, bless you; grant to you long life, well-favoured children, progress in life and growth in Faith; replenish you with all good things of the earth and count you worthy of the promised blessings, through the intercessions of the Mother of God, the Theotokos, and all the Saints.*⁸

With God on our side, marriage today might be tough ... but with God, all things are possible.

With that, let the discussion begin.

⁷ <http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/marriage/interfaith/attending-to-your-marriage/theglue>

⁸ http://www.goarch.org/chapel/liturgical_texts/wedding