



Orthodox Perspectives on the Monastic Vocation, Marriage and Celibacy

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Abstract

Marriage and celibacy are both seen in positive terms in the history of the Orthodox Church and in its theology. Monasticism is a sacrament of love just as marriage is. The history of the relationship between celibacy and monasticism is outlined. The Orthodox Church does not link priesthood with celibacy although the practice of appointing only celibates as bishops dates back to the fifth century. This makes for interesting contrast to the history and practice of celibacy in the Latin West. Although it is not of the sacraments of the Church, monasticism plays a significant role in Christianity and is highly cherished by the Orthodox Church. In Orthodox spirituality, people are not separated into groupings of married and single, monastics and lay people. Celibacy involves living in an constant state of abstaining from sexual intercourse. Thus, unmarried people should strive to live a celibate existence. Those who are married are not called to be celibate but should strive to live chastely. Paul was not first to conclude that celibacy is in "a sense", "better" than marriage. After the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 19 on divorce and remarriage, the disciples exclaimed, "if such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry" (Mt 19:10). This remark prompted Jesus' teaching on the value of celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it (celibacy)" (Matt 19:12). Christ tells us that some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some because they were made so by others and some because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Celibacy is thus the renunciation of marriage implicitly or explicitly made, for the more perfect observance of chastity. What separates them is having the Holy Spirit or not. A Socio-Historical Criticism methodology and also Rhetorical Analysis was employed in which the author used primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: celibacy, marriage, monasticism, Orthodoxy, Simeon the New Theologian, hesychasm.

Introduction

Orthodox spirituality is available to all people who have been baptised in the name of the Holy Triune God and who are obliged" to uphold Christ's commandments. There are no exceptions toward *theosis*, or the "journey" from the image of God to His very likeness. Paul tells us "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3, 27). St. John Chrysostom teaches that in the commandments of the Gospel there is support for the notion that marriage should be shared by all men, whether they be monks married to Jesus Christ or men married to physical female spouses (Chrysostom, PG 57:81-82). Due to its role in the mystery of salvation, marriage must show restoration, and fulfilment of the distorted relationship between man and woman that exists today. Thus, holy matrimony summonses spouses to give themselves sacrificially to each other and to the Lord. Spouses who embrace holiness in their relationship may "rival the holiest of monks" when it comes to issues of spiritual excellence (Homily 20 on Ephesians).



Marriage and celibacy even if they suggest very different practical behaviour are based on the identical theology of the Kingdom of God. They are therefore based on the same spirituality. The Church views marriage and virginity which is identified with celibacy, as holy states. Celibacy without virginity and an ascetic life is unimaginable. Marriage is seen as a natural God-given institution whereas celibacy is viewed as a state above nature. Celibacy is a special gift from God, given to a few: “not all men receive it, but they to whom it is given. He who is able to receive this call (to celibacy), let him receive it” (Matt 19:10-12). In the Orthodox Church today, monastic life is defended, protected and promoted in witness to life in God’s coming kingdom where all holy men and women will be “like angels in heaven” (Matt 22:30). Marriage transforms and transfigures the natural human love between a man and his wife into an eternal bond of love. This *agape*, cannot be broken even by death. Marriage as we have seen, is a Mystery because in it the future Kingdom of God and the complete union between Christ and His church (Eph 5:32), is clearly expected and represented. The ultimate meaning of the Mystery of Marriage is in the *eschaton* (the last things) which Christ is preparing for His faithful believers. Sexuality and social stability are merely “by products” of the Mystery that the spouses share.

St. Paul, 1 Corinthians 7 asserts:

It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman. Indeed, I wish that everyone were like I am. I should like you to be free from anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord; how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world; how he may please his wife, and he is divided. Are you free of a wife? Then do not look for a wife. If you marry, however, you do not sin, nor does an unmarried woman sin if she marries; but such people will experience affliction in their earthly life, and I would like to spare you that (Mark 12:18-27; Matt. 19:10-12; 2 Timothy 2:3).

Celibacy is justified in both Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition by the very same reference to the future Kingdom of God. Christ tells us that: “when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). This clearly shows us that human relations will not be sexual any more. The New Testament thus praises celibacy as an anticipation of the ultimate “angelic” existence. From the earliest years of Christianity, Christians have been called by Our Lord to live in the world without necessarily being of the world (John 17:13-16). These Christians are clearly distinct from the world because of their special conduct and their outstanding ethical life. Towards 150 C.E., Christian life reached a low point.

This had the effect of making a few Christians raise their own standards of austere living. Many began to practice celibacy, chastity, poverty, prayer and fasting (Migne, 22:281).

Athenagoras of Athens was a philosopher and converted to Christianity. In about A.D. 177 during the rule of co-Emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus he stated that many decided to set themselves “apart” from the world and focussed exclusively on a strictly spiritual life” (Athenagoras, Apology, 33). The New Testament praises celibates as they are anticipators of the life “angels” will have. “There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matt 19:12). John the Baptist, Paul and the “hundred and forty thousand” who are discussed in Revelation 14:3-4, all served as examples to the many Orthodox saints who practiced celibacy to the Glory of God. This



“angelic” way of monastic life is especially blessed for men and women “able to receive this” as those so “assigned” and “called” (Matt 19:10-12; 1 Cor 7). These believers considered themselves as selected to live “angelic” lives (Matt 23:30). He began to live in isolation and a few opted to live in communal homes with other celibates. Thus, beginning with Mary the Virgin Mother of God and St. John the Forerunner and Baptizer of the Lord – not to speak of the Lord Jesus Christ himself – the Orthodox Church’s liturgical calendar of saints is filled with righteous celibates, virgin martyrs, and men and women who followed the monastic way in purity and holiness of life. St. Basil states that both monastics and married people are obliged to uphold the commandments of Christ and St. Gregory Palamas asserts that married persons ought to also endeavour to attain purity of heart (The Philokalia 1976, 4: 92).

The Gospel says that marriage is not a sin but it should be understood a traditional Christian marriage. Marriage is clearly not a sin if it is advanced in a Christian manner. One may get remarried after a spouse dies, and in the Orthodox Church, one can be remarried up to twice more. No one is obligated to select celibacy. St John Chrysostom tells us that marriage is Eucharistic, because it is communion in the Lord’s Body and Blood that the Church partakes in mystically in the Wedding Feast of the Heavenly Kingdom. St. John Chrysostom says “Our relationship to Christ is the same; we become one flesh with Him through communion” (Homily 20 on Ephesians).

The Monastic vocation

In the Orthodox Tradition the monastic calling is well thought-out as a personal gift of God to an distinct soul for its deliverance and service to the Body of Christ. A monastic vocation is a special calling to personal repentance. The monastic dedicates their life entirely to God. The monastic vocation is identified in Orthodox tradition with the “good portion” of Mary who sat at Jesus’ feet, listening to his teaching and contemplating his truth in purity of heart. Catechumens should living a deeply repentant life and undergo purification of their hearts, as all should do.

In traditional Orthodox societies monasticism and marriage were progressively united into the culture, and asceticism practiced by ordinary families and simple peasants exceeded in thoroughness and intensity of what is practiced in most monasteries in the West today (Rossi, 1996). The literature of the Orthodox tradition, such as the Philokalia, and the Ladder of Divine Ascent of John Climacus create the impression that only monastics are called to be ascetics. Whereas in truth, all Christians should strive for an ascetic life. In Matthew 16, Jesus makes it clear that "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt.16:24-25).

St. Maximos the Confessor argues that "A monk is a man who has freed his intellect from attachment to material things and by means of self-control, love, psalmody and prayer cleaves to God"(Char.2:54) ...who has renounced such things as marriage, possessions and other worldly pursuits is outwardly a monk, but may not yet be a monk inwardly. Only he who has renounced the impassioned conceptual images of these things has made a monk of the inner self, the nous. It is easy to be a monk in one's outer self if one wants to be; but no small struggle is required to be a monk in one's inner self" (Char.4:50). It is evident that the key to non-monastic asceticism is: strive without ceasing, according to one's ability, trusting in God and his Bride, the Church, not in oneself. Rossi (1996:9). It is the calling to men and women to live in singleness, solitude, stillness and spiritual struggle in service to God (Gould,



1993), the way which the apostle Paul practically recommends as the “better” way, if God so wills, in this fallen world filled with temptations and trials. Tertullian is clear on what he believes concerning celibacy and virginity:

To us continence has been pointed out by the Lord of salvation as an instrument for attaining eternity, and as a testimony of (our) faith; as a commendation of this flesh of ours, which is to be sustained for the “garment of immortality,” which is one day to supervene; for enduring, in fine, the will of God (Tertullian, To His Wife, 7.2).

In any monastic vocation a person must feel they are called and have a spiritual bond with Christ and can expect God’s grace in their calling. A person desiring a monastic life should partake of a prayer life participation in the mysteries or, sacraments. Many of the Holy Fathers of the Church appeal to a life of celibacy in their writings. This was probably a counter against the sexual promiscuity which engulfed the pagan world from the second to fourth centuries. An appeal to celibacy also expressed the early Christian sense of the future Kingdom orientation of Christianity. Many believers saw monasticism as a safe and lofty solution to the ethical problems they faced in the world. From roughly 260 C.E., Christians seeking a life of celibacy fled the “secular world” and went into the desert where they established permanent homes, wither alone or in small communal groups. These first groups were called “anchorites” (from *anachoresis* meaning departure). Others were called “hermits” (from *eremos* meaning desert) and the larger groups were called monastics (from *monos* meaning alone). Monastics thus lived a life in the presence of God alone. One of the most famous of the Anchorite monks was Anthony the Great (251 – 355 C.E. who fled the “world” in 285 C.E. and established himself in the desert of Middle Egypt where he soon had a group of imitators of his example join him. These people “populated the desert” and lived in small huts and clay houses in small “villages” called *lavra* (Troparion of St. Anthony, Orthodox Church). He lived an ascetic way of life and retired into total solitude as he lived in an empty funerary vault a “good distance” from the closest *lavra*. A follower of his world take him the necessary food supplies. At the age of thirty-five he crossed the Nile river and settled in an old fort at Pispir in Middle Egypt. He lived alone in this fashion until the age of fifty-five. He finally gave in to the requests of a group of hermits who supported his cause and agreed to instruct them. The ultimate Christian virtue of love is sought by the monk or nun primarily through prayer and fasting, and through the exercise of the Christian virtues of poverty, chastity, humility and obedience.

This group of hermits then joined him as Pispir and the first religious community of hermits was thus established in 305 C.E. Anthony is regarded as the Father of Orthodox monasticism. His particular style of “living alone with God as his only companion” remained the most respected monastic idea for the monks of the Eastern Orthodox Church throughout the ages.

One called to a life of monasticism must remain celibate with the monastic tonsure and take a vow of lifelong vow of celibacy. The monastic is thus ‘married’ to Christ since there status is sanctified by the Church in expected lifelong fidelity to the spouse who is Jesus. Monasticism is both apostolic and evangelical and the monk becomes a “temple” of the Holy Spirit. Married Christians are also called to live out the Gospel daily and observe all the commandments of Christ. All need to repent and overcome self-centeredness and narcissism. Above all, people need to love God and others. Hierotheos, an Orthodox Bishop of Nafpaktos states:

This is the “first love” of which the Evangelist John speaks in the book of Revelation. When repentance is accomplished monastic tonsuring takes place, which is referred to as the “second baptism”. Monastic tonsuring is



called a mystery because the monk experiences the purifying and illuminating energy of God. According to St. Symeon the New Theologian the second baptism is the baptism of the Spirit, that is, the illumination of the nous and the acquisition of noetic prayer. The following is said to the monk while he is being tonsured: "You are purged of your sins and becometh son of light", Thus, the monk experiences purification of the heart prior to his tonsure, and acquires illumination of the nous while being tonsured (Hierotheos, 1996).

For both monks and nuns, an ascetic life is necessary and this applies equally to married persons. Family is the place for practice in married life and it is in this context that all people are called to carry out God's will. A monastic Christian does not generally have a specific ministry in the Church such as that of priest. A monk or a nun, are typically laypeople and not clerics. In the Orthodox Church, numerous proselytizers, teachers and bishops have emanated from men with monastic inclinations. True love cannot in the long run be attained without chastity. In St. John Climacus "Ladder of Divine Ascent," he puts purity (step 29) directly before love (step 30). Monasticism, then, is not viewed as an abstaining from sexual love. It is simply another manifestation of this love.

Monasticism can never be an extinction or diminution of the most vital human response to life. There is an element of asceticism in marriage, a refinement to love; just as there is a dimension of love in monasticism, a passion for God. (Chryssavgis, n.d.)

Paul supporting celibacy

As far as "commanding" marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul actually also endorses celibacy for those who believe they are capable of it:

But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion (1 Cor 7:3).

It is primarily because of "sexual immorality" (1 Cor 7:2), that Paul provides the teaching about each man and each woman having a spouse and giving each other their conjugal rights:

Let the husband render to his wife the affection due to her, and likewise also the wife to her husband (1 Cor 7:3).

Paul specifically clarifies: "But I say this as a concession not as a commandment" (1 Cor 7:6). He says he wishes all men were "even as I myself (celibate), but each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that" (1 Cor 7:7). Paul concludes that he who marries does well: "but he who does not give her in marriage does better" (1 Cor 7:38).

Paul thus is recommending an unmarried state but affirms the holiness of marriage and gives the widow a choice to "be married... in the Lord" (1 Cor 7:39) that is to another Christian or she can remain "as she is" (1 Cor 7:40). Paul was not first to conclude that celibacy is in "a sense", "better" than marriage. After the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 19 on divorce and remarriage, the disciples exclaimed, "if such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry" (Mt 19:10). This remark prompted Jesus' teaching on the value of celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it (celibacy)" (Matt 19:12). Christ tells us that some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some because they were made so by others and some because they



have renounced marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Celibacy is thus the renunciation of marriage implicitly or explicitly made, for the more perfect observance of chastity. In chastity, one locates identity in relationships with others, centred on the Christ. St. Maximus the Confessor referring to Genesis 1:26-27 informs us that people are transformed, both male and female (Maximos, Ambigua, 67.10). It is precisely the Holiness of marriage that makes celibacy precious; for only what is good and holy in itself can be given up for God as a sacrifice. Just as fasting presupposes the goodness of food, celibacy presupposes the goodness of marriage. To despise celibacy, therefore, is to undermine marriage itself-as the early Church Fathers pointed out.

The Orthodox experience of chastity is not one primarily of deprivation, but the bright sorrow of struggling to direct one's deepest desires to their fulfilment in God with the help of His grace. Rather than an objectifying lack, authentic chastity expresses the beautiful fullness of a desire for authentic relationship in Christ. Rather than the repression of sexuality, chastity in the Church is an active and transfigurative state that empowers human beings to experience the true fullness of life of those created male and female in the image of God.

In investigating the growth of Monasticism, I have relied on a number of sources, especially seven publications from Holy Cross Orthodox Press, namely *Post-Byzantine Ecclesiastical Personalities*, numbers 1 –3, edited by Fr. N.M. Vaporis, 1978 and *Orthodox Saints*, Volumes 1-4, written by George Poulos, 1980. I also found the *Encyclopedia of Major Saints and Fathers of the Orthodox Church*, Vol.1, by B.E. Eleftheriou, 1988, to be most informative and invaluable as a source on Monasticism.

Once Christianity was established as a legal religion in the Roman Empire by Constantine the Great, with the Edict of Milan in 313 C.E., there was a decline in the ethical life of Christians. Monasticism flourished as numerous men "fled" to become hermits. Monasticism thus thrived, especially in Egypt. Two huge monastic centres developed in Egypt, namely in the desert of Nitria and the desert of Skete. The monastic centre in Nitria was under Abba Ammoun who was its founder while the centre in Skete was under Makarios of Egypt who was its founder. These anchorite monks followed the ideals of Anthony and lived in total isolation except on Saturdays and Sundays when they met to have common worship and prayer times.

Pachomios of Egypt (280 - 346 C.E.) was the founder of another distinct monastic order. This was the "Cenobitic" order (from *koinos bios* meaning communal life) of monasticism. Pachomios started as an anchorite in Upper Egypt. He later founded the first monastery in the modern sense of the word (Myriobiblos). Most monastics wore common garb which consisted of a linen robe and belt, a white goatskin coat with its belt, and a cone-shaped head covering or hood called a *koukoulion*. A linen scarf or *maforion* could also be worn. Monks became identified with lay people seeking Christian perfection. There was no religious ceremony required to become a monk and neither were there any vows.

Cenobitic monasticism spread to Sinai, Syria, Egypt and Palestine. Two monks and later saints of Egyptian descent, namely Ilarion and Epiphanius (who was later bishop of Salamis in Cyprus), brought well organised monasticism to Palestine. As monasticism was identified with the ancient church "charismatics", it was abused. One such abuser was Eustathios of Sebastia who introduced monasticism to Asia Minor from Egypt. The followers of Eustathios taught that if a person was married or ate meat they were going to be damned for eternity. Such over-zealous practices and teachings were condemned by the Council of Gangra (343 C.E.).



Another heretical group were the "Messalianists." The Messalians were ascetics who practiced poverty, celibacy and went on exhaustive fasting "sprees." They rejected sacramental life and pretended to see God with their physical eyes. This fanatical group of monks were anathematised by the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 C.E. Despite their anathematisation, the Messalians influenced the "Vigilant" (*Akoimetoí*) monastic movement which developed in mid-fifth century Constantinople. The most renowned instance of Vigilants was the Studion monastery. This monastery was well known for its anti-iconoclastic stance. Symeon of Antioch developed the Stylite monasticism and he lived on a pole (*stylos*) for 37 years.

Monasticism became a major force in the life of the Orthodox Church and the latter guided and directed monasteries to cater for its own needs. This was mainly due to a convergence of monasticism and clergy. Monks were not allowed to be ordained in a special religious service at which they took special monastic vows. They thus became a unique class of Christian between the clergy and laity in Orthodoxy.

Despite the monastic spirit's predominance, the Orthodox Church uncompromisingly kept the positive value of marriage. The Church also recognised marriage as a Sacrament as is expressed in the writings of Clement of Alexandria (third century) and John Chrysostom, whose ideas are expressed below.

Marriage and Celibacy serving God

In 1 Cor. 7, 36 – 38 we read:

If someone thinks he is behaving badly towards his maiden, if he is of surpassing sexual vigour and thus it must happen, let him do what he wants; he does not sin; let them marry. However, if anyone has stood stably in his heart, not having necessity, and has authority over his own will, and has judged this in his heart, to keep himself a virgin, he does well. So that he who marries does well but he who does not marry does better.

St. Maximos informs us that marriage, as we know it today, is due to the Fall (Maximos the Confessor, PG 90: 788). Nonetheless, traditional Christian marriage is not a depravity, and nowhere in the Holy Gospel is there a provision for probationary marriage. This puts the decision to marry on a different plane: criteria other than merely sexual compatibility must drive the important decision of a man and woman to marry each other. St Paul discussing states that If someone cannot control their desires then they should get married. But if a person can in fact control his or her desires and decides to keep themselves a virgin, they does better. St Paul is thus arguing for an existential choice for or against celibacy. There is no coercion or place for sexual guilt. If one opts for either celibacy or marriage this pivots on the capability of the person to freely to keep themselves chaste. In 1 Cor. 7, 8 – 9, Paul asserts:

I say then to the unmarried and to the widows that it is good for them to remain even as I am [celibate] but if they do not keep continent then let them marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.



Both marriage and celibacy are ways of living the Gospel of Jesus Christ in anticipation of the Kingdom which Christ revealed. Therefore marriage "in Christ" sealed by the Eucharist, and celibacy "in the name of Christ" carry profound deep eschatological Christian significance. Marriage must not be concluded to satisfy sexual needs. Neither must celibacy lead to inertia or egotism and irresponsibility (Meyendorff, 1975:80).

Discussing virginity and marriage the Apostle Paul says: "He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife" (1 Cor. 7, 32-33). He maintains: "But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none" (1 Cor. 7, 29). Married people should also strive to live ascetically and practice a spiritual life. Celibacy" refers to a sworn, continuous state of abstaining from sexual relations. A celibate state is ongoing and expected to be preserved. Chastity is the virtue whereby people abstain from all illegitimate sexual activity. For married couples, chastity means faithfulness to one's spouse in body, mind and heart, thus sexual contact with anyone outside of a marriage is adultery.

Paul says in 1 Cor. 7, 7: "For I wish that all men were as myself [celibate]. But everyone has his own gift from God, one this way and one that way". Celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom" is a gift, a call that is not granted to all, or even most people, but is granted to some. Other people are called to marriage. It is true that too often individuals in both vocations fall short of the requirements of their state, but this does not diminish either vocation, nor does it mean that the individuals in question were "not really called" to that vocation. The sin of a priest doesn't necessarily prove that he never should have taken a vow of celibacy, any more than the sin of a married man or woman proves that he or she never should have married. It is possible for us to fall short of our own true calling.

Celibacy is a personal gift from God but those who are celibate by choice should not pride themselves over their perceived superiority of their spiritual combat and Ignatius states "If anyone can persevere in chastity in honour of the Lord's flesh, let him do so without boasting about it. If he prides himself in this, he is lost; and if he tells anyone else about it except his own bishop, he is corrupt" (Letter of Ignatius to Polycarp, V. 1, 2). Celibacy is neither unnatural nor unbiblical. "Be fruitful and multiply" is not binding upon every individual; rather, it is a general precept for the human race. Otherwise, every unmarried man and woman of marrying age would be in a state of sin by remaining single, and Jesus and Paul would be guilty of advocating sin as well as committing it. The communal type of monasticism in which men and women live together in a very structured relationship of worship, work and service, has become the norm in the Orthodox Church. The Church has canonised this type of monasticism as the type most suitable to the nature of humanity and the formation of Christian life. The Celibates in monasteries are called by Clement of Rome to show the works of their faith and demonstrate that they are true believers:

Of all virgins of either sex who have truly resolved to preserve virginity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven - of each and every one of them it is required that he be worthy of the kingdom of heaven in everything. For not by eloquence or renown, by station and descent, or by beauty or strength, or by length of life, is the kingdom of heaven obtained; but it is obtained by the power of faith, when a man exhibits the works of faith. For whosoever is truly righteous, his works testify concerning his faith, that he is truly a believer, with a faith which is great, a faith which is perfect, a faith which is in God, a faith which shines in good works, that the Father of all may be glorified through Christ (PG 141:2).



The Mystery of Marriage implies sacrifice, maturity and dedication as well as responsible family development. Celibacy is likewise unthinkable without prayer, fasting, obedience, charity and ascetical perseverance:

Virgins, by the laying aside of all carnal affection, are imitators of God. For, if a man be only in name called holy, he is not holy; but he must be holy in everything: in his body and in his spirit. And those who are virgins rejoice at all times in becoming like God and His Christ, and are imitators of them. For in those that are such there is not "the mind of the flesh." In those who are truly believers, and "in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells" - in them "the mind of the flesh" cannot be: which is fornication, uncleanness, wantonness; idolatry, sorcery; enmity, jealousy, rivalry, wrath, disputes, dissensions, ill-will; drunkenness, revelry; buffoonery, foolish talking, boisterous laughter; backbiting, insinuations; bitterness, rage; clamour, abuse, insolence of speech; malice, inventing of evil, falsehood; talkativeness, babbling; threatenings, gnashing of teeth, readiness to accuse, jarring, disdainings, blows; perversions of the right, laxness in judgement; haughtiness, arrogance, ostentation, pompousness, boasting of family, of beauty, of position, of wealth, of an arm of flesh; quarrelsomeness, injustice, eagerness for victory; hatred, anger, envy, perfidy, retaliation; debauchery, gluttony, "overreaching (which is idolatry)," "the love of money (which is the root of all evils);" love of display, vainglory, love of rule, assumption, pride (which is called death, and which "God fights against"). Every man with whom are these and such like things - every such man is of the flesh (Clement of Rome, Two Epistles Concerning Virginité, 8).

A person selecting celibacy a free individual able to make choices and remains a free individual who will have to face enticements against a decision to be celibate. A celibate person thus makes a conscious decision based on a calling to remain as such enduringly and vows as much.

Paul articulates in 1 Corinthians 1 – 11:

Concerning, then, those things which you wrote to me, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. On account, however, of [the danger of] fornication let each [man] have his own wife, and each [woman] have her own husband. Let the man render to the wife the favour which is owed and likewise the wife to the husband. For the woman does not have authority over her own body but the husband; likewise the man does not have authority over his own body but the wife. Do not deny each other, unless it is by mutual agreement for a time so as to dedicate yourselves to fasting and to prayer and then to come together again, so that Satan not tempt you on account of your incontinence.

A person without a divine vocation to a life of celibacy should get married in anticipation of life-long fidelity to their spouse. Clement called on all celibates to imitate the divinity of the virginity for in this they will be "ever with the Lord".

Those, therefore, who imitate Christ, imitate Him earnestly. For those who have "put on Christ" in truth, express His likeness in their thoughts, and in their whole life, and in all their behaviour: in word, and in deeds, and in patience, and in fortitude, and in knowledge, and in chastity, and in long-suffering, and in a pure heart, and in faith, and in hope, and in full and perfect love towards God. No virgin, therefore, unless they be in everything as Christ and those "who are Christ's," can be saved. Basil was influenced in his monastic endeavours by Eustathios of Sebastia. Basil borrowed all the good innovations of Eustathios' monastic movement. Aspects such as tonsure (the special religious service for monks), vows and garments were adopted by Basil who regulated the life of monasticism in his "Great Rules"



(*Oroi Kata Platos*), and in the "Brief Rules" (*Oroi Kata Epitomen*). These rules of Basil regulated monastic life and extolled the virtues of a "life of perfection". They also condemned the solitary ascetic lifestyle of some monks. In the Orthodox Church, the anchorite spirit of Anthony continues to persist as the ideal but there are still aspects of Basil's cenobitic and Pachomian types of monasticism. Basil saw "perfection" as the goal of all monastic life. Love, obedience to a spiritual father, poverty, and a communal lifestyle in a monastery became the norm. Once a monk had achieved "perfection" in a Christian sense, they were allowed to go back to the secular world and help other believers to elevate their spiritual lives on the path to *Theosis*. Basil instituted *Basileias* or orphanages for the poverty-stricken as well as schools organised and run by monks. In this way he sought to aid the mission of the Orthodox Church to the world.¹⁰ By the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E., all monastics were placed in specific dioceses under the control of a bishop. Only the bishop of the diocese could allow new monasteries to be erected (canon 8). Monastic orders were thus unable to form as is the case in the Roman Catholic Church (Scazzoso, 1970). Athanasius of Alexandria was responsible for the spread of monasticism to the West. He was exiled there in 399 C.E. His life of St. Anthony was translated into Latin by Evagoras of Antioch (380).

Two Latin monks, Rufinus and Jerome, who lived in Palestine, brought monasticism to the West when they returned, during the second half of the 4th Century, Athanasius and Basil taught Orthodox believers to venerate marriage as a Holy institution - a Sacrament, an action of God upon our souls; one of the holiest things we encounter in this life. It is precisely the Holiness of marriage that makes celibacy precious; for only what is good and holy in itself can be given up for God as a sacrifice. Just as fasting presupposes the goodness of food, celibacy presupposes the goodness of marriage. To despise celibacy, therefore, is to undermine marriage itself - as the early Fathers pointed out (Theiner and Miklosich, 1872).

Celibacy is also a life-affirming institution. In the Old Testament, where celibacy was almost unknown, the childless were often despised by others and themselves; only through children, it was felt, did one acquire value. By renouncing marriage, the celibate affirms the intrinsic value of each human life in itself, regardless of offspring. Our Lord Jesus and Paul undeniably teach the desirability - even preferability - of celibacy for those so called. One must make a choice for or against the biblical teaching. If sexual abstinence is impossible and "unnatural," men and women are reduced to the level of mere beasts, devoid of God's image and strengthening power, utterly unable to control their appetites and passions (Tikhon, 2000).

It needs to be stressed at this point that no one is forced to be celibate. It is both a matter of personal choice, and, on a deeper level, an acceptance of one's calling, as given by God. Paul acknowledges both the divine impetus (1 Cor 7:7, 20) and the free will initiative of human beings (7:35, 38). These two are not contradictory, but rather, complementary. In other words, if a man is called to celibacy (and further, to the priesthood), he will be given both the desire and the ability to carry out this lifestyle successfully (see Phil 2:13). If one is not called, like most of us, to celibacy and/or the priesthood, then he or she ought to get married (1 Cor 7:7, 9, 20, 28, 38).

The Orthodox Church is not in any sense whatsoever against marriage, or sexuality (1 Cor 7:38), as long as these are within the proper biblical and moral guidelines. Marriage and ordination are both Sacraments, and in both are positive and wonderful means of God's Grace. Together with the most positive affirmation of marriage and family life the Orthodox Church also affirms that the Lord calls some men and women to a life of celibacy and



virginity. During the Byzantine period, monks took a very active part in the life of the Church. Spirituality was their strength and they lived devotedly for Christ.

Concerning this tension in Christian anthropology, two schools of thought were represented; that of Evagorus Pontus (d. 399), who followed a Platonic and Origenistic doctrine pertaining to the "mind," thus de-emphasising the importance of the human body and becoming dualistic, and Makarios of Egypt (or, better, the writings attributed to him), present a more Christian, holistic anthropology; for in this theology man is a psycho-somatic entity, and, as such, a being destined to deification. "Prayer of the mind," in the Evagorian spirituality, becomes "prayer of the heart" in the Macarian spirituality. The two schools of thought with the two different anthropologies continue to find representatives throughout the history of the Church (Ware, 2005).

Orthodox tradition and practice both respects and values the celibacy of priests in the Church. Thus both single and married clergy are respected as they serve the same sacrament of the Church and of human salvation. For various pastoral motives the Church insists on the institution of celibacy for bishops, and only celibate people are chosen as bishops.

Hesychasts and St Simeon

Symeon, the New Theologian (949-1022 C.E.), marks an important development in monastic spirituality. A disciple of a Studite monk, he left the *Studion* to join the small monastery of St. Mamas in Constantinople, where he was ordained a priest and became the abbot. He wrote several works, among which are the fifty-eight hymns of "Divine Love," in which he stresses that the Christian faith is a conscious experience of God. Symeon is the exponent of an intensive sacramental life, which leads to this personal conscious experience, as we can see in his Hymns. In this he is a predecessor of *Hesychasm*, which also shares this personal experience of God in conjunction with intensive sacramental life.

Finally, the spirituality of *Hesychasm*, as enunciated in the theology of Gregory Palamas (1296-1359 C.E.), is of paramount importance not only in the life of monasticism, but also in the life of the entire Church. An Anthonite monk, Gregory took it upon himself to defend the holy Hesychasts of the Holy Mountain in their ways of praying and experiencing the presence of God the "uncreated light" that they contemplated. Barlaam the Calabrian had led the attack against the pious monks and their psycho-physical method of prayer, and accused them of "gross materialism," Messalianism, calling them "navel-souls" (*omphalopsychoi*) and "navel-watchers" (*omphaloskopoï*). The hesychastic method of prayer consists of regulating one's breathing with the recitation of the "Jesus prayer": "O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The prayer is repeated constantly until it descends from the lips and minds into one's heart. At the end of the process, the peace of Christ is poured into the heart of the worshipper, and the light itself of Christ shines upon him and around him. This light, as that of the Holy Transfiguration of Christ, may also be seen by our physical eyes.

Gregory established that the experience of the Holy Hesychasts was an authentic one, for it is similar to that of the disciples on Mount Tabor. Theologically it is justified by the distinction between essence and energies in God, this light being the "uncreated light," or the "uncreated energy" of God, that "can descend toward us," whereas the essence of God "remains unapproachable" (St. Basil).



Monastic Advances

After the fall of Constantinople, the number of idiorrhythmic monasteries continued to grow, a fact which brought a further decline to monastic life. The 16th century was the lowest ebb. In reaction to this problem, many of the monks themselves, especially on the Holy Mountain, left the main monasteries and turned to idiorrhythmic ones, establishing *Sketai* (dependencies) of the main monasteries, with a more rigorous *typikon* (order). Also, Patriarchs Jeremy II of Constantinople, Silvester of Alexandria, and Sophronios of Jerusalem led the attack against idiorrhythmic monasticism, thus managing to counteract its spread. Cenobitic monasticism prevailed for a while, but the tide soon went in its original direction. Many monasteries of the Holy Mountain, including the mother monastery, the Great Lavra, became idiorrhythmic. Today an idiorrhythmic monastery may become cenobitic but not the other way round. Hopefully, this will guarantee that organised monastic life will finally prevail, according to the Basilian ideal of monasticism.

Monasticism played an important role under the Ottoman Empire, as well. The monks not only kept the faith alive, but they also kept the Greek culture and literature alive. Not only did the education of clergy continue at the monasteries, but the monasteries became the "clandestine school" (*Krypho Scholeio*) for all the Greeks under Turkish occupation. The monks thus prevented the Christian nations under Turkish occupation from being assimilated, and thereby became the natural leaders of national ("ethnic") resistance against the oppressors. It is no accident that the Greek Revolution started in 1821 at a monastery in the Peloponnesos, Aghia Lavra, with Metropolitan Germanos of Old Patras raising the banner of revolution and blessing the arms of the Greek freedom fighters.

The most famous community of monks lived on Mount Athos in Greece before the tenth century. The anchorite monks lived in cells called *kellia* and selected a leader or *protos*. It was the leader's "work" to keep order in the cells. Gradually cells joined up and "monasteries" were created. Cenobitic monasticism started on Mount Athos in 963 C.E. when the monk Athanasios the Anthonite built the cenobitic monastery at Meghisti Lavra. This community of monks developed a "pan-Orthodox" character and included Serbians, Romanians, Russians, Georgians, Bulgarians, Spaniards and mainly Greeks. Each monastery had its own abbot. Initially the monasteries were under the control of the Byzantine Emperors but the Emperor Alexios Comnenos (1081-1118 C.E.), gave the Patriarch of Constantinople the right to supervise the monasteries in terms of Novella 37. The Patriarch had a bishop representing him on the "Holy Mountain" of Mount Athos.

In the seventeenth century abbots on Mount Athos were replaced by three "trustees" who were selected by the monks. Four supervisors or *Epistatai*, replaced the *Protos*. One "trustee" became the chief supervisor or *Protepistatis*. He was a "first among equals." On the Holy Mountain itself, there is an impressive monastic renewal today as several monasteries, inactive in the recent past, were recently populated by young, educated enthusiastic monks, who give new life and a new spirituality, more in conformity with that of Basil, to the Holy Mountain. The monastery of Stavronikita is an example. Under the guidance of important spiritual fathers on the Holy Mountain today - among them are Father Ephraim, abbot of Philotheou; Father Aimilianos, abbot of Simonos Petra; and abbot Vassilios of Stavronikita - monasticism is thriving on the Holy Mountain, both spiritually and intellectually. The pattern of cenobitic life prevails at present, and continues to gain ground.

Numerous other monasteries are found in Greece today. One of the most impressive in terms of its ethical basis, is the Monastery of St. John on the island of Patmos. This monastery



was founded in the eleventh century by Christodoulos the Latrino, who was from Asia Minor. Christodoulos erected the monastery just metres away from the cave where St. John wrote the Revelation. The Meteora Monasteries were erected in the fourteenth century in Thessaly. Athanasios the Meteoritei and Barlaam were the main architects of the Meteora Monasteries that are perched on huge rocky hills. Many relics of Saints, icons and holy writings are preserved by monks in the monasteries. Aghion Oros is one monastery where Orthodoxy is at its most "extreme" today.

With the conversion of the Slavs in the ninth and tenth centuries, monasticism spread to the Slavic countries as well, where it continues to thrive up to our day, in spite of communist oppression. Important monasteries in Russia - Zagorsk, Optimo, and Valamo - continue the hesychastic tradition. Great monks and spiritual fathers were exponents of this tradition, including Nilus of Sora (1433-1508) (Goldfrank, 2007). Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833), and Father John of Kronstadt (1829-1908), a married priest. Orthodox monasticism thrives today in many countries worldwide.

If a candidate for priesthood in the Orthodox Church is uncertain of his call to serve Christ and the Church as a celibate, he is advised to marry by his spiritual father. The tradition of the Church is unanimous in maintaining the authenticity and purity of monastic life. It is monastic life which is regarded as the most authentic witness to Christ's Gospel. It was the monks who made Christianity credible. They were living proof that God's Kingdom was indeed also on earth. Today, bishops, priests and deacons of the Church have one main service - to manifest the presence and action of Christ to his flock. In the Orthodox Church today however, there are both married and unmarried priests. Most priests (presbyters) and deacons are married while all bishops are celibate.

There is thus optional celibacy. Canon law however rules, and the practice is that all individual men who plan to enter the priesthood have the freedom of choice as to whether or not they wish to serve as married men or as celibates. The ordinand is expected to honour his choice. After ordination, no marriage is permitted and no priest may remarry after his wife's death or after divorcing his first wife. The Orthodox Church practice of appointing only celibate priests as archimandrites or bishops, dates to the 5th Century, when the church decided to halt the loss of vast tracts of its land holdings to the heirs of married bishops. Bishops were subsequently selected from the monastic orders as these priests have always taken vows of chastity.

Conclusion

Monastics, celibates and married couples must persistently struggle to be what they are called to be, which is people living in divine love which is a special gift. Thus monks or nuns, and married couples must be enveloped in love. Marriage and celibacy for a Christian are two diverse spiritual paths', however each is effective for one to live a true Christian life based on faith and agape. Orthodoxy views chastity as an ascetical discipline which places people in collaboration with God's grace. Holy matrimony and monasticism are equally representations of chaste partaking in the mystical marriage of Christ with His Bride, the Church. Men and women created in God's image need to embrace the great calling of sexual purity, and Orthodoxy urges all whether married or celibate, to prepare for the Heavenly Wedding Feast and God's eternal Kingdom. We all participate in a spiritual life in varying degrees based upon where we are called, whether we are married, celibate, married, monk or nun.

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