

# Marriage as a Path to Holiness

- David and Mary Ford

## INTRODUCTION

As a supplement to the Lives presented in this book, we thought it would be of interest to provide an introduction discussing a few key aspects of the traditional understanding of marriage. This gives us an opportunity to share some of the many beautiful and instructive passages about marriage written by the Saints, which we have collected over the years. And we also offer some observations based on these writings which we hope will make the reading of these Lives even more meaningful.

### *The Orthodox Understanding of Marriage*

First, we can consider the main purposes of marriage, and God's intentions for it — as indicated in the Orthodox marriage service itself, as well as in the writings of the Fathers and the Saints. The entire wedding service conveys a very high view of marriage. This is seen particularly in certain phrases addressed to the bride and the groom, and in the Scripture readings for the service. The very fact that this service is one of the Mysteries, or Sacraments, of the Church reveals how important She considers marriage to be.

In a way, the first part of the ceremony — the betrothal, with the exchange of rings — is like any wedding, whether Christian or not. The second part of the service — the crowning — is the sacramental action that makes the wedding truly Christian, truly a means of participating in the life of the heavenly Kingdom.

When the couple processes into the middle of the church for the crowning, all of Psalm 127 (128)<sup>1</sup> is sung, beginning with the first verse, “Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in His ways!”

Their walking into the Church to marry, then, is considered to be walking in His ways.” In the Old Covenant, this psalm was sung

as the priests were going into the sanctuary of the Temple on great feasts days. Father John Meyendorff, a well-known Orthodox theologian and historian, observes that this psalm “exalts the joy of family life, the prosperity and peace which it brings to man as the highest forms of God's [earthly] blessing.”<sup>2</sup> This verse also makes clear that these blessings of family are meant precisely for “everyone who fears the Lord and walks in His ways.” On the highest level, this “fear of the Lord” is understood in the Tradition to mean fearing to displease Him, out of great love for Him. (Hence, this is not a servile fear of punishment.)<sup>3</sup>

Verse 5 of this psalm says, “The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life!” To the New Israel, the Church, “Zion” is the “Temple of the body of Christ” (John 2:2), and “Jerusalem” is the eternal city (Rev. 20:10), while “Israel” is “the new people of God, united in His Church.” As Father Meyendorff goes on to explain, this psalm and the procession signify, then, “an entrance into the Kingdom of Christ, . . . [where] human love will acquire a totally new dimension by being identified with the love of Christ for His Church. . . . The meaning of the marriage crowning is to integrate the bridal pair into the very Mystery of Christ's love for the Church.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the marriage relationship of the couple is directly called to reflect this perfect love of Christ for His Church.

We learn from the service that marriage is “ordained” by God, who Himself is “priest of mystical and undefiled marriage.”<sup>5</sup> And at the end of the service, in the closing prayers, we hear that it is Christ Himself Who has been “pleased to join together” the couple. Saint John Chrysostom, in his famous twentieth Homily on Ephesians (commenting on the Epistle reading for the wedding service, Eph. 5:20-33), says, “From the beginning God has been revealed as the fashioner, by His providence, of this union of man and woman, and He has spoken of the two as one: ‘Male and female He created them’ [Gen. 1:27] and ‘There is neither male nor female’ [Gal. 3:28].”<sup>6</sup>

Marriage, then, is described in the wedding service as “mystical,” “undefiled,” “the holy union which is from Thee.” Prayers are said for the couple to “walk,” by God's grace, in His “commandments with a pure heart.” We also pray that, through godly marriage, they will “find favor” in God's sight, so that they “may shine as the stars of heaven.”

More often than any others, ISAAC and REBECCA (August 21) are mentioned in the service as an exemplary holy couple, as “heirs of the promise” — that is, God's promise of salvation. References are made to many other Old Testament couples,

whose personal holiness and whose marriages are directly linked to the coining of Christ our Savior. And there is particular emphasis on the (martyrs, the Apostles, and those called Equal-to-the-Apostles. All (the references to these Saints indicate that marriage is a call to (witness to Christ through our lives, by making Him central in (every aspect of our lives.

### **Spiritual and Material Blessings in Marriage**

What else is prayed for the couple in the service? God is asked to fill them with many spiritual blessings, indicating that marriage can be truly a path to holiness for those, who, by His grace, live in it as intended. Hence, prayers for peace, faith, joy, harmony, and love are repeated often. The importance of these “fruits of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-23) can never be over-emphasized.

In the marriage service we also pray for various earthly good things. Reminders are given that these material things, while good, are not ends in themselves, but are meant to assist us in the spiritual life, in our journey toward Heaven. In the prayers we hear:

“Give them of the dew of heaven from on high, and of the fatness of the earth. Fill their houses with every good thing, so that they may in turn give to those in need . . .”

“So that, having enough of all things, they may abound in every work that is good and acceptable unto Thee . . .”

“May the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. . . fill you with all earthly good things, and make you worthy to enjoy the good things of the promise.”

In the following beautiful passage, Saint Gregory the Theologian summarizes many of the various blessings of marriage:

In our living together we are one another’s hands, ears, and feet. Marriage redoubles our strength, rejoices our friends, causes grief to our enemies. A common concern makes trials bearable. Common joys are all the happier, and accord makes riches more pleasant; it is even more delightful than riches for those without wealth. Marriage is the key of moderation and the harmony of the desires, the seal of a deep friendship, . . . the unique drink from a fountain enclosed, inaccessible to those without. United in the flesh, one in spirit, they urge each other on by the goad of their mutual love. For marriage does not remove from God, but brings all the closer to Him, for it is God Himself who draws us to it.<sup>7</sup>

### **Marital Unity and Love**

The wedding service, repeating the words of Holy Scripture (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4-6), speaks of the two becoming *one flesh*. In Christian marriage, this does not mean simply a bodily union, but oneness of mind and soul as well. For the prayers include all these phrases: “oneness of mind”; “unite them in one mind, wed them into one flesh”; “concord of soul and body”; that they may live “in faith and oneness of mind, in truth and in love”; “mutual love in the bond of peace”; and “perfect and peaceful love and assistance.” Again we can turn to Saint John Chrysostom as he amplifies this theme of marital unity:

Let husbands heed this, and let wives heed it: wives, so as to give evidence of such great affection for their husbands, and to put nothing ahead of their own welfare; and husbands, that they might show their wives great regard and *do everything as though having one soul and being one body*. This, after all, is true wedlock, when such harmony operates between them, when there is such close relationship, when they are bound together in such love. You see, just as a body would never be at odds with itself nor a soul at odds with itself, so husband and wife should not be at odds, but united.<sup>8</sup>

He speaks further of the advantages, both material and spiritual, of such oneness of mind and soul in marriage:

Nothing of the affairs of this life, in fact, will succeed any longer in worrying people bound together in this manner, nor in undermining their contentment. You see, wherever there is harmony and peace and a loving relationship between wife and husband, all good things come together there, and the couple will be safe from any stratagem, protected as they are by some wonderful impregnable rampart, namely, their harmony in God’s sight. This renders them stronger than steel, this makes them firmer than iron, this contributes to them more than all wealth and prosperity, this conducts them to glory on high, this also wins for them favor from God in generous measure.<sup>9</sup>

In another passage, Chrysostom emphasizes the link between unity in marriage and mutual love: “The other party thereafter is yourself, when you love. For this is friendship — that the lover and the beloved should no longer be two persons divided, but in a manner one single person,<sup>10</sup> something which can never happen except from love. Therefore, seek not your own, that you may find your own.”<sup>11</sup> Saint John concludes elsewhere that marital love is “a thing that no

possession can equal; for nothing, nothing whatever [apart from heavenly good things], is more precious than to be loved by a wife and to love her.”<sup>12</sup>

### Marital Chastity

Two other things which are asked for repeatedly in the marriage service are “chastity” and “fair children”:

“That He will grant to them chastity, and of the fruit of the womb as is expedient for them . . . the enjoyment of the blessing of children . . .”

“Chastity, mutual love in the bond of peace, long-lived offspring . . .”

“Give them offspring in number like unto full ears of grain.”

These references to “chastity” may be confusing, since the word *chastity* in English is sometimes erroneously thought to mean only “virginity” or “celibacy”; actually one can also speak of a “chaste marriage.” This second meaning is certainly that intended by the service, since we pray in the same phrase for both chastity and the fruit of the womb. There is no one word in English for the Greek word, *sophrosyne*, which is translated as “chastity.” This Greek word has many connotations: being of sound mind, discretion, self-control, moderation, temperance, chastity, and sobriety.<sup>13</sup>

This brings us to the Church’s understanding of sexual relations within marriage, as expressed by the wedding service and by the Fathers of the Eastern Church. Here we see that marital relations are by nature *inherently good*, and that they can be (but are not automatically) free from lust (immoderate desire, and/or an attitude whereby the other person becomes an object to satisfy one’s own desires). “Chastity,” then, in the context of marriage, means faithfulness to one’s spouse, and a disposition of graciousness, dignity, and temperance in all marital relations. Hence, the Church prays at the wedding “That the Lord our God will grant to them an honorable marriage and a bed undefined”; and, “Cause their marriage to be honorable. Preserve their bed blameless. Mercifully grant that they may live together in purity.”<sup>14</sup>

Saint Paphnutius (Egypt; 4<sup>th</sup> century), a bishop and a wonderworking monk,<sup>15</sup> came strongly to the defense of marriage at the Council of Nicea,<sup>16</sup> when the question of mandatory clerical celibacy was being discussed. In defending the Church’s practice of married clergy, he spoke so eloquently of “the chaste intercourse between husband and wife,” that the subject was dropped at the Council. Never again would the tradition of having married clergy be questioned in the Eastern Church.<sup>17</sup>

Clement of Alexandria (a Christian writer in Egypt; late 2<sup>nd</sup> century) and Saint Gregory the Theologian also speak of the fact that within marriage, sexual relations can be pure. Clement says in this regard, “it is always lawful for the pure to touch the pure.”<sup>18</sup> In the *Miscellanies* he talks positively about the sanctity of marriage, including the details of sexual relations; for instance, “I hold that even the seed of the sanctified is holy.”<sup>19</sup>

Saint Gregory the Theologian, in his famous Oration on Holy Baptism, exclaims to a group of adults preparing for baptism:

Are you not yet wedded to flesh? . . . You are pure even after marriage. I will take the risk of that. I will Join you in wedlock. I will dress the bride. We do not dishonour marriage because we give a higher honour to virginity. I will imitate Christ, the pure Groomsman and Bridegroom, as He both wrought a miracle at a wedding, and honours wedlock with His Presence. Only let marriage be pure and unmingled with filthy lusts.<sup>20</sup>

Saint John Chrysostom even says that the intercourse during fornication or adultery is not sinful in itself, but that the act is evil because it has turned something good to an evil purpose:

The fornicator, then, is not the only one that is unclean, but others more than he, such as especially the adulterer. But both are unclean, not due to the intercourse — for according to that reasoning a man cohabiting with his own wife would be unclean — but due to the injustice and rapacity of the act, and the injury done to his neighbor. . . . So the fornicator is not unclean on account of the intercourse, but on account of the manner of it, because it injures the woman, and they injure one another by making the woman common, and by overturning the laws of nature.<sup>21</sup>

Another text stating clearly that it is the misuse of the sexual act that is unclean — not the act in itself — is this passage from the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*: “A husband, therefore, and a wife, when they company together in lawful marriage, and rise from one another, may pray without any observations, and without washings are clean. But whoever corrupts and defiles another man’s wife, or is defiled with a harlot, when he arises up from her, even if he should wash himself in the entire ocean and all the rivers, cannot be clean.”<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the Eastern Fathers understand that marriage provides a God-given and God-sanctioned avenue of fulfillment for sexual desire. As Chrysostom puts it,

I do not of course count marriage among evil things, but rather I praise it exceedingly. For it is the harbor of chastity (sophrosynes) for those who desire to use it well, and it renders one's nature not to be wild. For like a dam, marriage gives us an opportunity for legitimate intercourse and in this way contains the waves of sexual desire.<sup>23</sup> It places us in a great calm and watches over us.<sup>24</sup>

He even speaks of a transformation of sexual desires: "If you drive away the other things [i.e., inappropriate revelry], Christ Himself will come to your wedding, and where Christ goes, the angels' choir follows. If you so desire, He will work for you an even greater miracle than He worked in Cana: that is, He will transform the water of your unstable passions into the wine of spiritual unity."<sup>25</sup>

### **Spiritual Joy**

In the long prayer before the crowning, there is a very striking passage: "Let that gladness come upon them which the blessed Helen had when she found the precious Cross."<sup>26</sup> One might easily ask, "How is Saint Helen's finding of the True Cross related to marriage?"

Surely the answer lies in the extremely high vision for marriage which the Church nurtures and imparts to Her faithful. For the Church is indeed praying here that the same kind of ineffable spiritual joy and gladness which Saint Helen experienced when she found the True Cross, will be experienced by the newly married couple who have found a new life together in Christ, made possible by Christ's victory over death through His Life-Giving Death on that same Cross. And by this reference, the Church is also reminding the couple that if they place the Cross of Christ at the center of their marriage, it will be a fountain of healing and of great spiritual joy for them.

### **The Scripture Readings**

As the couple stands with their crowns on (or over) their heads, the Scripture readings selected by the Church for this ceremony are chanted. The readings begin with a prokeimenon and verses taken from the Psalms, followed by the Epistle and Gospel readings. In all the Church's services, the verses from the Psalms are always carefully chosen, and it is very illuminating to look at the entire Psalm from which the prokeimena are drawn, to consider the original context of the verses. This is certainly true of the verses selected for the marriage service. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a more powerful choice.

The prokeimenon and verses are from the first half of Psalm 20 (21), which reads as follows in the Septuagint:

‘O Lord, the king shall rejoice in Thy strength; and In Thy salvation he shall greatly exult, ‘Thou hast granted him the desire of his soul, and hast not withheld from him the request of his lips. <sup>3</sup>For Thou hast gone before him with blessings of goodness; Thou hast set upon his head a crown of precious stones. <sup>4</sup>He asked life of Thee, and Thou gavest him length of days for ever and ever. <sup>5</sup>His glory is great in Thy salvation; Thou wilt crown him with glory and majesty. <sup>6</sup>For Thou wilt give him a blessing for ever and ever; Thou wilt gladden him with joy in Thy countenance. <sup>7</sup>For the king trusts in the Lord, and through the mercy of the Highest he shall not be shaken.<sup>27</sup>

The selection for the wedding service of this Psalm — so radiant with the joy and glory of salvation in the Lord — emphasizes in a striking way what is seen as the primary purpose of marriage in Orthodox Tradition: that the married couple may aid one another in their journey towards eternal salvation. They, and any children God may give, are to be "glad with the joy" of the Lord's "countenance," as the Psalm says. In other words, they are to be in His presence — to behold Him. We know from the Beatitudes that to see God requires purity of heart (Matt. 5:8), and this implies holiness of life. Clearly, by the chanting of this beautiful Psalm in the marriage service, the couple is summoned to help each other towards holiness, so that they may abide in the presence of the Lord, both now and forever.

The prokeimenon is from verses 3 and 4 of the psalm: "Thou hast set upon their heads crowns of precious stones. They asked life of Thee and Thou gavest it them." We see from the Psalm that originally this is spoken of the king — who, the Psalm says, did receive "length of days for ever and ever." The authors of the service simply put the verses in the plural. This is fitting, for the new husband and wife are called to be king and queen over their little realm in this life, and like the king in the Psalm, to enjoy eternal salvation in the next life. This is emphasized in the next verse chanted (verse 6 of the psalm), "Thou wilt make them most blessed forever; Thou wilt make them glad with the joy of Thy presence."

Then comes the Epistle reading from the fifth chapter of Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians. This passage is set in the midst of a long, beautiful exhortation to godly living in Christ, beginning with Ephesians 4:1-3: "I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." These words remind us of the fruits of the Spirit which the prayers of the service have been requesting for the couple. Saint Paul continues with similar words at the beginning of chapter 5: "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (5:1-2). Again, the context is life in Christ, with the emphasis on living in holiness and love.

The Epistle reading (Eph. 5:20-33) begins with an exhortation to constant thankfulness for everything Christ has done for us (v. 20), and a call for everyone to “be subject one to another in the fear of Christ” (v. 21). Saint Paul goes on to speak of the oneness of Christ with His Body, the Church, and of the endless sacrificial love which Christ has for His Bride, the Church. Every married couple is called to live in such a perfect union and harmony that their relationship reflects this relationship of Christ and His Church: “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church” (v. 23). Hence, “As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands” (v. 24).

Unfortunately, these references to male headship in the family, and to the wife being subject to her husband “in everything,” are often misunderstood in our culture today. Some think that Saint Paul here is allowing husbands to dominate and rule over their wives almost like dictators, with the wives forced to obey meekly whatever the husband says. But this passage as a whole provides the proper understanding of the headship of the husband, which is based on Christ’s teaching about leaders being self-sacrificing servants (Mark 10:44). This means that the husband has the responsibility to love and serve his wife as Christ loves and serves the Church. For Saint Paul goes on immediately to say: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for Her. . . . husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church” (vv. 25 and 28-29). And near the end of the reading, the comparison between marriage and Christ’s union with His Church is reinforced with the words, “This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (v. 32),<sup>28</sup>

Saint John Chrysostom, in commenting on this passage, speaks very emphatically to the husbands in his flock:

You have seen the measure of obedience [from verse 22 — “Wives, be in subjection unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord”]; so hear also the measure of love. Do you want to have your wife obedient to you, as the Church is to Christ? Then take yourself the same provident care for her as Christ takes for the Church. Yes, even if it becomes necessary for you to give your life for her, yes, and to be cut into pieces ten thousand times, yes, and to endure and undergo any suffering whatever, do not refuse It . . . In the same way then as He laid at His feet her who turned her back on Him — who hated, and spurned, and disdained Him — not by menaces, or by violence, or by terror, or by anything else of this kind, but by His unwearied affection — so also you must act toward your wife.<sup>29</sup>

We can see from Saint John’s words that the Church is not recommending an artificial or automatic submission of the wife, just because she is the wife. Rather, the natural response of the [wife to a husband who lives with authentic Christ-like love for her] will be to cooperate with him (hence, this is not a response that **has** to be forced from her). The headship of the husband is (intended to be a source of unity and harmony in the family — not the source of oppression and division).

Also, this one verse of the Bible should not be taken in isolation, in order to try to impose a rigid role of leadership in all aspects of life on the husband, regardless of his spiritual state or other factors. After all, in the very same passage, men and women are told first to “submit one to another.” We see also in the Lives of the married Saints that the Saints were not following inflexible role-patterns imposed from without, but lived their “roles” in unique ways, depending on their own and their spouses’ spirituality and life circumstances.

The images of the husband and wife being one flesh, and the Church being the Body of Christ, are intertwined throughout this passage from Ephesians — so close is the analogy. Everything in marriage, then, is to be done in Christ, with the purpose of bringing the couple closer to Christ and to each other in truly Christian love. Such love does not seek its own, but the welfare of the other (cf. I Cor. 13:4-7). This is not a psychopathic self-effacement or self-annihilation; one must be in a healthy emotional and spiritual state to truly offer this kind of love.

Next, we have the Gospel reading, from the second chapter of Saint John’s Gospel, describing Christ’s presence at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). His presence there, and the fact that Christ chose to perform his first miracle at a wedding, is interpreted in the Tradition as indicating His blessing on marriage in general. This is seen as an affirmation that God has ordained marriage, and that it is good and honorable. Many have noted that the changing of the water into wine is a fitting symbol for Christian marriage: taking something good — “natural” human marriage — and transforming it, through God’s grace, into something better — a foretaste and sacrament of the Heavenly Kingdom. Also, the saving of the best wine for last is an appropriate theme for a good marriage: as the years pass and the husband and wife grow closer and closer together, the wine of their love gets better and better.

### **Called to be martyrs**

The crowning concludes with “the dance of Isaiah.” The couple, led by the priest, take their very first steps as husband and wife, going three times around the table on which lie the Gospel book and a cross. This table resembles the altar, and the same three hymns which are now sung are also sung when a deacon or a priest is ordained, as he is led three times

around the holy altar. This “dance” symbolizes the couple’s commitment to be always led by Christ, and to have His teachings, proclaimed in the Gospel, at the center of their lives.

The first hymn, “Rejoice, O Isaiah,” actually begins with the Greek word *choreue*, which literally means “to join in a choral dance.”<sup>30</sup> This hymn expresses exuberant joy over the birth of the Savior. The next two hymns speak of the holy martyrs and the Apostles. Together these hymns proclaim the great joy of the salvation that God has granted to the world, and remind the couple of their call to be *martyrs*, or witnesses (the original meaning of the word), to Christ and His Kingdom.

This same call to be witnesses for Christ can be seen in the closing commemorations of the service: “Through the prayers of His most pure Mother; of the holy, glorious, and all-laudable Apostles; of the holy, God-crowned kings Constantine and Helen (May 21), Equals-to-the-Apostles; of the holy Great-Martyr Procopius, and of all the Saints . . . ”

Of all the Saints who could have been specifically named at this point, why were these three chosen? Saints Constantine and Helen played particularly important roles as witnesses for Christ in the history of the Church. Constantine, the first of the Roman emperors to adopt the Christian Faith, ended the persecutions against the Christians, and greatly aided the spread of the Faith in the Empire by building churches, favoring the clergy, and calling Church councils to settle doctrinal disputes. His mother Helen, by visiting Jerusalem and discovering the True Cross, helped to provide the occasion for countless miracles (and strengthening of people’s faith) occurring through the Cross and the many fragments of it which have been spread all around the world.

Perhaps it is also noteworthy that both of these Saints were married, living in the midst of worldly cares.<sup>31</sup> Another reason these two Saints are invoked here may be that, as the prayer notes, they are called by the Church “God-crowned”; that is, their sovereignty — their rule — was divinely ordained and blessed by God. Because they were faithful subjects of the Kingdom which is not of this world, the Kingdom of Christ, their lives and their earthly rule were sanctified and blessed and consecrated to God; ms they constitute a special model of crowning.

The Great-Martyr Procopius (July 8) is mentioned here probably because he also was a witness for Christ, and especially since he *is* one who specifically prepared others to become witnesses — martyrs — in the ultimate sense. For while he was in prison for the Faith, twelve women, no doubt inspired by his example, came him and said they were Christians, too. When they were also imprisoned, he prepared them to receive the crown of martyrdom, ‘hey all, with him, valiantly endured torture and death, winning their eternal crowns of glory, on July 8, 303. The invocation of saint Procopius thus recalls the theme of the second hymn sung during the dance of Isaiah: “O holy martyrs, who fought the good \*ht and have received your crowns: Entreat ye the Lord, that He ill have mercy on our souls.”

In the wedding service, the bride and groom are also crowned, id summoned to bear witness to Christ in their lives — even, if iced be, to death. And they are called to sacrifice their lives for each other, something the Church clearly recognizes and honors a form of martyrdom.

### **Eternality of Marriage**

Just before the end of the service, the priest takes the crowns off the heads of the newly married couple, and prays to the Lord: “Receive their crowns into Thy kingdom, preserving them spotless, blameless, and without reproach, unto ages of ages.” It as if the Church is saying to the bridal pair: “You have worn these earthly crowns briefly, at the very beginning of your life together; now strive hard to earn the heavenly crowns that you will wear forever.”

This brings us to the understanding of marriage as eternal in the Orthodox Tradition. Christ said that in the resurrection “they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in Heaven” (Matt. 22:30). Some people take this to imply that marriage is dissolved after death. This passage, however, refers to ~>ne particular aspect of marriage — having children (specifically “, to raise up descendants for one’s deceased brother — the Jewish custom of “levirate” marriage). That aspect of marriage certainly passes away, and people will “neither marry nor [be] given in marriage,” as Christ stated. But the love and help towards salvation and holiness that the spouses have given each other in this life does not pass away. Praying that Christ will receive their crowns into the heavenly Kingdom indicates — at least ideally — that marriage, as “an indissoluble bond of love,” is eternal.

We find this ideal witnessed to in the Saints’ Lives and in the writings of the Church Fathers. For instance, some saintly widows who were wealthy, and who partly for this reason were being pressured to remarry, refused to do so on the grounds that they were still married, even though their spouses had died — for example, Saint Olympias the Deaconess, confidante of Saint John Chrysostom; and Eupraxia the Elder, mother of Saint Eupraxia (Constantinople; 5<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>32</sup> Saint Macrina the Younger (Asia Minor; 4<sup>th</sup> century) took this view even though she was simply betrothed to a young nobleman who died before their wedding (in Orthodox canon law, the betrothal is considered as binding as the marriage).<sup>33</sup> Regarding Saint Macrina’s decision not to marry someone else, The *Prologue of Ochrid* says: “She justified this by her belief in the resurrection of the dead, regarding her betrothed not

as dead, but as alive in God. ‘It is a sin and a shame,’ she said, ‘if the spouse does not keep faith when the partner goes to distant climes.’<sup>34</sup>

This sentiment is reminiscent of the beautiful words of Saint John Chrysostom, written to a young widow in a long letter of consolation and encouragement. He begins by telling her that “the affection which you bestowed on him, you can keep now just as you formerly did.” He goes on to say.

For such is the power of love: it embraces, and unites, and fastens together not only those who are present, and near, and visible, but also those who are far distant. And neither length of time, nor separation in space, nor anything else of that kind, can break up and divide in pieces the affection of the soul. But if you wish to behold him face to face (for this I know is what you especially long for), keep your bed in his honor sacred from the touch of any other man.<sup>35</sup> And do your best to manifest a life like his, and then assuredly you will depart one day to join the same company with him, not to dwell with him for five years as you did here, or for twenty or a hundred, or for a thousand years, or twice that number, but for Infinite and endless ages.<sup>36</sup>

Saint John emphasizes that if the widow wishes to be with her husband in eternity, she must lead the same kind of virtuous life that he did. Indeed, “Let your way of life be even more diligent, so that having speedily attained an equal standard of virtue with him, you may inhabit the same abode and be united (*synaphthenai*)<sup>37</sup> to him again through the everlasting ages, not in this union of [earthly] marriage, but another far better. . . . [for] then there will be a union (*henosis*)<sup>38</sup> of soul with soul, which will be more perfect, and of a far more delightful and far nobler kind.”<sup>39</sup> By doing this, he says, “you will receive him back again no longer in that corporeal beauty which he had when he departed, but in a lustre of another kind, and splendor outshining the rays of the sun.

In one of his famous sermons on marriage, Saint John returns to this theme. He imagines a new bridegroom speaking to his bride in this way:

I fell In love with the excellence of your soul, which I value above all gold. For a young woman who is discreet and ingenuous, and whose heart is set on piety, is worth the whole world. For these reasons, then, I courted you, and I love you, and prefer you to my own soul. For the present life is nothing. And I pray, and beseech, and do all I can, that we may be counted worthy to so live in this present life, that we may be able also there in the world to come to be united to one another with great security. For our time here is brief and fleeting. But if we shall be counted worthy by having pleased God to exchange this life for that one, then shall we ever be both with Christ and with each other, with more abundant pleasure (*hedones*).<sup>41</sup>

A dramatic example of this conviction is seen in the life of Saint Angelis the New Martyr (September 1), who said to his wife as she wept over his impending martyrdom:

O my wife, let Christ take the place of everything else for you and for me. Today I surrender to Him both you and the children. For Christ I endure with joy this martyr’s death. Therefore you also, my wife, endure my absence, so that in the next life we may meet again and rejoice together eternally. . . . Now then, farewell, my beloved one and dear soul.<sup>42</sup> I will be going at any moment to Christ, Whom I so desire. And soon you will come also, and together we will enjoy the eternal blessedness.<sup>43</sup>

In the Church, married love is seen from a spiritual perspective — from the perspective of eternity. We do not know exactly how life will be in Heaven, but enough indications are given in the Tradition to be confident that those who had loving marriages, each helping the other toward eternal salvation, will be together more perfectly and with greater joy in the heavenly Kingdom.

### ***Not One Path for All***

So we see clearly from the wedding service, and from these passages from the Fathers, that marriage, like monasticism, is seen by the Church as potentially a path to true holiness, a way of salvation. Unfortunately, some people erroneously set up an opposition between marriage and monasticism, so that some discourage monasticism, as somehow an unnatural way of life, while others encourage everyone to enter the monastic life, declaring that it is always the best way, or even the only way, towards true holiness.

Such confusion is not just a recent phenomenon. This is evident from some of the passages already quoted, in which we have seen the Fathers correcting such misconceptions. The following is a dramatic example of such misunderstanding from the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Life of Saint Mary the new:

Many miracles occurred after Saint Mary fell asleep In the Lord, and many times she appeared to her husband Nicephorus as he slept, telling him to have a church erected and dedicated to her. As recorded in the beautiful account of this Saint’s miracles, some monks, overcome by envy and jealousy, asked how it was it possible that someone who lived in the world, and who ate meat, and who enjoyed the pleasures of marital relations, could have

worked wonders, when very often monks, who lack all such gratifications, and who are always suffering hardships and tribulations in everything, and who pray night and day, are not found worthy of such gifts of Grace. However, through her miracles the Saint convinced them that they were mistaken.<sup>44</sup>

In the Orthodox Tradition, from a theoretical perspective, monasticism is regarded as a higher calling. It is seen as a prophetic way of life, as an eschatological sign of the Kingdom of Heaven, in its renunciation of the normal pleasures of life “in the world.” The monk or nun abstains not only from what is bad, but also from what is good — the good things which God has blessed us to enjoy in this life — as a radical self-sacrifice and self-denial, a daily martyrdom.

But this in no way means on a personal level that the married cannot attain to holiness, or that monasticism is God’s will for everyone. As one contemporary monastic explains very well: “Discussions comparing marriage and monasticism are rarely profitable. Each person must find his own path of salvation by asking God to show him which path is best for him — and then ‘work out his salvation’ (Phil. 2:12) in the circumstances God has given him. We compromise our salvation not by choosing one way of life or another, but by falling away from the will of God concerning ourselves personally.”<sup>45</sup>

Ultimately then, the decision to marry, become a monastic, or live as a celibate in the world is a matter of personal gift and calling, and one must choose the way which will most assure one’s own salvation. As Saint John Chrysostom asserts:

There are innumerable models (eikones)<sup>46</sup> laid before you in the Scriptures of virtuous lives. . . . One has shown forth virtue through poverty, another through riches; for example, Elijah through poverty, and Abraham through riches. Follow that example which you esteem most easy, most befitting for you to practice. Again, one by marriage, the other by virginity; Abraham by marriage, the other [Elijah] by virginity. Follow whichever way you wish, for both lead to heaven.<sup>47</sup>

Saint John is indicating here the importance of both monasticism and marriage — “for both lead to heaven.” Indeed, each state can be seen as revealing the other as a gift from God; marriage is a gift in the sense of being a non-compulsory option, because monasticism exists, and vice-versa. And while it is often observed that there would be no monks and nuns without the marriages of their parents, it is also true that marriages are often sustained and strengthened by the prayers of monastics, and at times marriages even result from the “matchmaking” done by monastics.

The decision to marry or to become a monastic is not always so entirely left to personal desires, as Saint John Chrysostom implies above, for sometimes God acts persuasively to indicate the path He desires someone to follow. For example, Saint Gregory the Theologian, in speaking about his father (Saint Gregory the Elder; January 1), says that “God, Who orders all things in due variation, assigned to him a house and suitable fortune”<sup>48</sup> — by which he means the whole way of life of the married. He probably had in mind Saint Paul’s words in I Cor. 7:17: “only let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him” (cf. I Cor. 7:7). And Saint Gregory emphasizes that his father was converted to Christianity primarily through his wife, Saint Nonna (August 5; life given for January 1), some years after they were married.

Furthermore, we see in some accounts of lives of holy elders that at times they forbade their spiritual children who wished to become monastics to do so, because they sensed that it was God’s will for them to marry instead. One example comes from the Life of the Elder Gabriel (Russia; 19<sup>th</sup> century):

One student from the Theological Academy came in tears to the Elder and begged him to tonsure him into monasticism. The Elder would not be persuaded, for he had always advised him on the contrary to get married and be a priest. He finally followed Father Gabriel’s advice, and God blessed him with a beautiful family, love for his parishioners, and a special zeal for the Church, to such an extent that he is now a highly respected pastor. Another young man, on the contrary, the Elder wished to tonsure under any circumstances and, when he saw that his advice was not followed, he was deeply grieved and troubled for him, for this man’s life turned out later to be very chaotic, unhappy and full of illness and unpleasantness.<sup>49</sup>

In the life of Saint Martha (July 4), it is Saint John the Baptist himself who gives such guidance. As Saint Nicholas of Zhicha recounts: “Utterly consecrated in her soul, she had no thought of marriage. When her parents betrothed her to a young man, she planned to leave their home and retire from the world. But Saint John the Baptist appeared to her and counselled her to fulfil the desire of her parents and marry, which she did. From this marriage was born the great Saint Simeon, the ascetic of the Wonderful Mountain.”<sup>50</sup>

All of these examples serve to emphasize that we should not simply decide which path to take based on theoretical ideas as we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Rather, we must try to discern what is the will of God for us. According to a contemporary Athonite monk, one way to know God’s will for us in this matter is to discern which state we would consider to be paradise for us.

## The Value of Monasticism for All

Even if one is called to marriage, maintaining a close connection with good monastics is of invaluable profit. In the Preface we mentioned Saint Gregory the Theologian's beautiful description of the ideal relationship between those who are monastics and those who are married: "But be ye bound together, both virgins and wives, and be one in the Lord, and each other's adornment."<sup>51</sup>

We get glimpses of such harmonious and mutually beneficial relations between monastics and those who are married in the Lives of those numerous married Saints (many of whom are described in this book) who were great benefactors of monasteries. Other examples are given in the Lives of monastic Saints. In the Life of Saint Theodosius of the Kievan Caves (Russia; 11th century), for instance, we hear of "a man and wife," named John and Mary, of whom Saint Theodosius was particularly fond "because they loved God and loved one another."<sup>52</sup> Nicholas Motovilov and his wife Helen were especially beloved friends of Saint Seraphim of Sarov (Russia; 19th century), and protectors and benefactors of his monastery.

Near the end of Saint Gregory of Nyssa's account of the life of his sister, Saint Macrina the Younger (mentioned above), he relates a beautiful story told to him by his cousin. This cousin was a military commander who had visited Macrina's monastery with his wife and their daughter, who was afflicted with a serious eye disease:

I remember once, when I was with my wife, that we desired to go to the school of Virtue — for indeed, this is what the place necessarily must be called where the blessed woman dwelt. . . . [When we desired to leave], your blessed sister would not let my wife depart, all the while holding my daughter in her bosom. Then, according to her custom, the blessed woman kissed the child, placing her mouth by the girl's eye. As she observed the sickness of her eyes, she said to my wife, "If you will do me this favor by enjoying our table, I shall render a service not unworthy of such honor and grace." The mother said, "What service do you have to give us?" The blessed one answered, "I shall give you a drug that shall heal the disease of your child's eye." . . .

After the meal finished, we departed very happy. On the road, we spoke to each other about what we had seen and heard in those sacred places. I related what took place in the monks' quarters, and my wife described, in detail, what she saw and heard from the blessed woman. She did not leave out the most minute detail. . . . [Suddenly remembering Macrina's words about a drug for their daughter's eye, they were momentarily alarmed because they had forgotten to get it. But] the mother, looking at the child's eyes, said with joy in a loud voice, "Do not be distressed because of the drug, for we have been deprived of nothing of what the Saint determined. Her drug which cured the disease of our child is the healing that comes by means of prayer. No trace of the disease in the eye remains, which could not be cured except by her 'drug.'"<sup>53</sup>

And we know of many married people today who are considered "friends" of various monasteries, and who have, to the degree appropriate, a close friendship with certain monastics there.

If, however, our life circumstances prevent us from visiting monasteries and well-known holy people, we should not become discouraged. The words of Starets Macarius of Optina (Russia; 19th century) are of great help here;

Do not exaggerate the blessings enjoyed by those who frequently visit us. Abstain from rashly concluding that your own work prevents you from coming here because, in God's eyes, you [think you] are "unworthy of obtaining grace."

Everyone who comes here receives spiritual benefit according to his faith. Those whose faith is poor find little benefit, and sometimes, none at all. On the other hand, God is the Lord of all places. Now — since the Incarnation — Jerusalem is no longer the only sanctified spot; the whole earth shines with glory. There is no place where the incense of prayer cannot rightly rise. The manna of the Word of God rains down on every city and every wilderness; the incorruptible feast can be partaken of in the humblest church of the poorest village. The living waters of grace can be drunk by all who courageously and unflinchingly seek Him who says, "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink" (John 7:37).<sup>54</sup>

Starets Macarius also warns of a related kind of temptation — for a married person to fantasize that the monastic life would be so much better for him (or her) that he (or she) wishes he were no longer married. The Elder writes to a husband and father facing this specific temptation: "When the devil suggests that a man should strive after something that is seemingly — but only seemingly — good, it is always unattainable. For the devil's object is to lure man into spending himself in pursuit of illusions so that, while missing his real goal, he should live in agony of heart and in great commotion of soul — and all for an illusion, for nothing."<sup>55</sup> He also writes in a letter to a married woman, who has romantic illusions about life in a convent: "Your immediate concern should be with yourself. Strive hard to be a Christian wife and a Christian mother. This is not easy. If you do strive for this, you in your world will find as many snares and pitfalls as we [i.e., monastics] do in ours. Yours may be of a different kind, but they are no less difficult to evade."<sup>56</sup>

It is good in such cases for those who are married, and especially those having children, to recall how sacred marriage is, and how crucially important it is for God's Kingdom to raise children in a godly way. A contemporary monastic writes,

“A spiritual father was asked by a married man: ‘How can I, living in the world, dwell in the presence of God?’ The Elder answered: ‘Do everything as one cooperating in God’s work.’ To be a fellow worker with God in the task of marriage and bringing up Christian children is a grandiose and holy role. . . . All you learn about marriage, all your work for your marriage, is work for the salvation of your children, and this is not something small, but something which is of eternal value.”<sup>57</sup> Saint Theophan the Recluse (Russia; 19<sup>th</sup> century) can even say, “Of all holy works, the education of children is the most holy.”<sup>58</sup>

There may come a time when *both* the husband and wife decide that they would like to become monastics, discerning that they have a calling for this from the Lord. Several of the saintly married couples described in this book did this: Saints Andronicus and Athanasia (October 9), Saint Melania the Younger and Pinianus (December 31), Saints Xenophon and Mary (January 26), and Saint Laurence of Salamina and his wife (March 7). Some saintly couples even decided to live “as brother and sister” from the very beginning of their marriage: Saint Conan and Anna (March 5), Saints Chrysanthus and Daria (March 19), Saint Immoun and his wife (October 4), and saint John of Kronstadt his wife (December 20). A third possibility, which we see in a few of the Lives, is for the couple, after some time in their marriage, to decide that they want to put aside sexual relations and begin to live together “as brother and sister,” as we see in the Lives of saint Paulinus and Therasia (January 23) and Saint Cyril of Phileotes (December 2).

It should be emphasized, however, that this must only be done with the full agreement of both spouses. Otherwise, the injunction of Saint Paul in I Cor. 7:5a — “Do not deprive one another except by mutual agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer”<sup>59</sup> — will be broken. Hence, Saint Basil the Great gives this counsel concerning married people who want to leave their spouses to become monastics: “But if one party of the couple . . . does not agree to this, but contests such a separation . . . then let them not be admitted to the monastic life. . . . Let us remember the words, ‘God hath called us to peace’ (I Cor. 7:15), . . . The party who was prevented from taking up the monastic life by the other may, even while in the state of matrimony, succeed in achieving the aim of monastic purity of life by fervently praying and fasting.”<sup>60</sup>

Such a separation, whether to different monasteries, or living together “as brother and sister,” should not be attempted without considerable spiritual maturity, guidance from an experienced spiritual father, and a deep assurance from God that this is indeed His will. Also, this must not be motivated by any feelings of scorn or disparagement towards marriage or marital relations. As early as about A.D. 345, the Council of Gangra sternly warned against such views, which would compromise the Church’s teaching on the inherent goodness of marriage and sexual relations within marriage.<sup>81</sup>

Very realistic about the dangers involved in such separation. Saint Paul gives this advice immediately after his words to the Corinthian Christians (quoted above): “But then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control” (I Cor. 7:5b). Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk (Russia; 18<sup>th</sup> century) also emphasizes this:

There is a custom that some men leave their wives and some wives leave their husbands under the pretense of abstinence [from sexual relations], but this is a very dangerous matter. For instead of continence, there may follow the grave sin of adultery in one or the other, or in both parties. When the husband leaves his wife [without her consent] and the wife sins with another, then the husband is responsible for this sin, as he gave his wife occasion for sin. Likewise, when a wife leaves

her husband and the husband sins with another, then the wife is guilty of that sin, for the same reason.<sup>62</sup>

### **All Are Called to Holiness**

As we have already mentioned in the Preface, another mistaken idea people sometimes have is that only monastics are called to holiness. The Tradition is very clear, however, that all have this calling. For a very forceful reference on this point, we can quote Saint John Chrysostom:

You certainly deceive yourself and are greatly mistaken if you think that there is one set of requirements for the person in the world and another for the monk. The difference between them is that one is married and the other is not; in all other respects they will have to render the same account. . . . For all people must reach the same point. And this is what throws everything into disorder — the idea that only the monk is required to show a greater perfection, while the rest are allowed to live in laxity. But this is not true! It is not! Rather, Paul says, the same philosophy (*philosophia*)<sup>63</sup> is demanded of all.<sup>64</sup>

From the life of Saint Julianna Lzarevskaya (January 2) we read that the “divine Ephraim”<sup>65</sup> says: “How can you say that we cannot be saved in the midst of the world? If you wish I will tell you briefly: it is not the place that saves, but a heart and will turned towards God. Adam in paradise and in great tranquility, drowned, while Lot among the Sodomites, as it were on the waves of the sea, was saved. Saul in his royal palace lost this life and the next, while Job sitting among the ashes amidst great misfortunes, received the crown of the just.”<sup>66</sup> And in this same Life it is stated that “Not everyone who is shorn . . . is saved, but he who does what is worthy of monks.”<sup>67</sup> Starets Macarius elaborates on what is “worthy of monks”: “I am glad that you have come to see that a life lived in the world can be as good, in the eyes of God, as one spent in a monastery. It is indeed only the keeping of God’s commandments, love of all, and a true sense of humility that flatter, wherever we are.”<sup>68</sup>

There are also instances from the Tradition where very holy Monastics are told that someone living in the world is their equal. As Paul Evdokimov relates, The lives of the saints teach us that when Saint Macarius [the Great; Egypt; 4<sup>th</sup> century], the great ascetic, lived in the desert, an angel appeared to him, ordering that he follow him to a remote town. Upon arriving there, he made him enter a poor dwelling where a humble family lived. The angel showed him the wife and mother of this household, and told him that she had become a saint by living in peace and perfect harmony with all her family, since her marriage, in the midst of daily occupations keeping a chaste heart, a deep humility and a burning love for God. And Saint Macarius entreated God for the grace to live in the desert as this woman lived in the world.<sup>69</sup>

A similar story is found in the life of Saint Anthony the Great (Egypt; 4<sup>th</sup> century): “It was revealed to Abba Anthony in his desert that there was one who was his equal in the city. He was a doctor by profession and whatever he had beyond his needs he gave to the poor, and every day he sang the Sanctus with the angels.”<sup>70</sup>

Saint John Chrysostom not only summons all people, whether married or monastic, to holiness, but he gives examples of married Saints from the Scriptures who have attained this state: “Would you like me to give examples of men whose lives were patterns of virtue, even though they lived in the world? . . . I am referring to the holy men of the Old Testament. How many of them had wives and children, yet were in no way inferior to the greatest ascetic?”<sup>71</sup> And as examples from the New Testament, he often points to SAINTS PRISCILLA AND AQUILA (February 13), the married companions of Saint Paul: “For it is possible for one also in the married state to be worthy of being marvelled at and noble. See then how these were in that state and became very honorable, and yet their occupation was far from being honorable, for they were tent-makers. Still their virtue covered all this, and made them more brilliant than the sun. And neither their trade nor their marriage in any way hurt them, but the love which Christ required of them, this they exhibited.”<sup>72</sup> Thus he can conclude that “indeed the household is a little Church. Therefore, it is possible for us to surpass all others by becoming good husbands and wives.”<sup>73</sup>

Saint John also suggested that, in one sense, to promote the spreading of the Gospel in the world, those living “in the world” need to be “more approved” than the monks:

I am advising nothing burdensome. I do not say, “Do not marry.” I do not say, “Forsake the cities, and withdraw yourself

from public affairs”; but being engaged in (them, show virtue. Indeed, those who are busy in the midst of the cities, I wish to be more approved than those who have occupied the mountains [i.e., the ascetic hermits]. Why? Because great profit arises from this. “For no man lights a candle, and sets it under the bushel” [Matt. 5:15]. Therefore let all the candles be set upon the candlestick, that the light might wax great.

Let us, then, kindle His fire. Let us cause them that are sitting in darkness to be delivered from their error. Do not tell me, “I have a wife, and children, and am a master of a household, and therefore cannot duly practice all this.” For if you had none of these things, if you are careless, all is lost. Yet if you are encompassed with all these things, if you are earnest, you will attain to virtue. For there is but one thing which is sought for — the preparation of a noble disposition, and with this, neither age, nor poverty, nor riches, nor reverse of fortune, nor anything else, will be able to impede you.<sup>74</sup>

Clement of Alexandria goes even further, declaring on one occasion, “And true manhood is shown not in the choice of a celibate life. On the contrary, the prize in the contest of men is won by him who has trained himself by the discharge of the duties of husband and father and by the supervision of a household, regardless of pleasure and pain. It is won by him, I say, who in the midst of his solicitude for his family, shows himself inseparable from the love of God.”<sup>75</sup>

## **Spiritual Growth in Marriage**

For marriage to be a path to holiness, it must involve spiritual growth. This is an essential part of a good Christian marriage.

Alexander Elchaninov (Russia; 20<sup>th</sup> century) speaks eloquently of this: “In marriage the festive joy of the first day should last for the whole of life: every day should be a feast day; every day husband and wife should appear to each other as new, extraordinary beings. The only way of achieving this: let both deepen their spiritual life, and strive hard in the task of self-development.”<sup>76</sup>

Starets Macarius tells us that already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there<sup>er</sup> were many problems with families because they were not deepening their spiritual lives. He tells his spiritual children that “the enemy,” the devil, “enjoys nothing better than the distortion of family life, the mockery of it.”<sup>77</sup> He writes that many people are consulting him about “this new and growing visitation, this enmity between members of one family: parents and children, brothers and sisters, and so on.”<sup>78</sup>

In addition to temptations from the evil one, Starets Macarius gives several other important causes for family problems. To one correspondent he writes: “It is this growing indifference to His Word, and our consequent refusal to examine our hearts — where we could find both the peace He bequeathed us and the insight into our lack of love of Him and of our neighbor — which brings in its wake this punishment, this disruption of the [home](#).”<sup>79</sup> He also says that this is due to our failure to see Christ in others. He reminds us that when we mistreat others, we are in a real sense mistreating Christ.<sup>80</sup> So he tells us, “Remember that you are pupils of Christ — of Christ who teaches us to love not only our friends but even our enemies, and to . . . Forgive all who trespass against us. ‘But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses’ (Matt. 6:15). What a frightful prospect!”<sup>81</sup>

Along these same lines, he tells a correspondent that while it is good that she has a long prayer rule and often reads the Church Fathers, “remember that love of the neighbor is the first work you must strive for. And you do not even have to leave your house to find that neighbor: your husband is that neighbor; your mother is that neighbor; and so are your children.”<sup>82</sup> To another spiritual child, he says that the “poison” in the family cannot be cast out of their home “unless you promptly cease condemning each other. You clearly think you are always in the right; she, of course, thinks she is. You heap on her a multitude of grave or petty accusations. She does the same to you. Where will this all end?”<sup>83</sup> Then he points out that the chief things the husband accuses his wife of are actually the same faults he has. The Elder concludes:

All this financial trouble between you comes of your having completely forgotten that yours is a Christian home, or should be. A home is a Christian one when all the members of the household bear each other’s burdens, and when each condemns only himself. You have forgotten this, both of you. And so every word of hers pierces you, like an arrow dipped in poison. And your words, likewise, pierce her.

Ponder the truth of Christian marriage: man and wife are one flesh. Does it not follow that they must share all their possessions? And yet you two haggle over this property! And why? Because of words!

Unless you promptly strive for and achieve a loving peace between you, it is hopeless to try to bring tidiness and fairness into your business dealings with one another. Humble yourself, not her. Love her, not yourself.<sup>84</sup>

Friction can also arise in the home for another, somewhat I opposite reason. What happens when one of the spouses suddenly becomes converted to the Christian faith, or unexpectedly increases in zeal for Christ and the Church? In such cases, it may happen that the spiritually awakened spouse starts preaching, and/or stops showing interest in anything “worldly” — creating friction with the other spouse. This is usually not a healthy or a [helpful way to express one’s new-found faith. As one monastic<sup>1</sup> writer explains, “A genuine conversion or spiritual progress leads a married Christian to live family life with a more selfless love, with more desire to make the partner’s life comfortable. (We cannot take exceptional cases such as Saint Alexis, the ‘man of God,’ as a general example.)”<sup>85</sup> Thus, the best course is to “convert” by example, not words (cf. I Peter 3:1-6), and to seek guidance from a good spiritual director.

Furthermore, “The question for Christians who are already married and raising children is not: ‘How can I reduce to a bare minimum my family obligations so as to be “free” to lead a “more spiritual” life?’ It is rather: ‘How should I nurture within my family life my love for God and my neighbor?’”<sup>88</sup>

In Brenda Meehan’s book, *Holy Women of Russia*, we see an example of such a situation. Alexandra Shmakova, born in 1809, was from a very pious, noble Russian Orthodox family, yet she was given in marriage to a wealthy Baltic Russian Lutheran. After twenty-three years of happy marriage, they had a daughter, who died less than a year later. Both Alexandra and her husband were plunged into grief and despair. But after some time, as she later said, “I began to understand that the only comfort is from God. To love the poor and to go to church became an urgent need for me.”<sup>87</sup>

As she became more pious, she began to worry about the salvation of her Lutheran husband. Although she prayed day and night for his conversion to Orthodoxy, she saw no change in him. She became increasingly ascetic, and her severe way of life strained relations with her husband, to the point that he even sometimes criticized her abusively. She considered leaving him and becoming a nun. She went to many spiritual directors, both men and women, asking advice. All of them told her that it would be wrong for her to leave her husband — that she should live with him in peace, pray earnestly, and “have faith that God would eventually arrange things for her salvation.”<sup>88</sup>

Although Alexandra did not like this advice, she obeyed. As her life says, “She continued her good works of visiting the poor and imprisoned and lived simply, trusting in God’s will. With time, her simplicity and inner peace touched her

husband, and he began to think that there must be something powerful in Orthodoxy. To Alexandra's great joy, he converted to Orthodoxy . . . Thus began a period of great happiness and spiritual closeness for Alexandra and Nicholas. Together they prayed, together they worked and distributed goods to the poor."<sup>89</sup> Later they decided that after the death of one of them, the other would build a monastery in his or her memory; this Alexandra did after the death of her husband.

## **Deepening Our Spiritual Lives**

The primary way to nurture healthy growth, and to cure problems when they arise, is thus to deepen our spiritual lives. This means to love and follow Christ, His Holy Church, and the Holy Scriptures which witness to Him.

How, then, can married people deepen their spiritual lives? In general, we can say that this comes from attentive participation in all the aspects of the life of the Church, including regular attendance in Church and participation in the holy mysteries of Confession and the Eucharist, frequent reading of the Holy Scriptures, and fasting as the Church directs. In addition, there are other avenues for spiritual advancement in marriage to which we would like to give extra attention here — prayer, hospitality, almsgiving, mutual encouragement and example, reading writings of spiritual direction, and reading the Lives of the Saints.

### **Prayer**

The Tradition emphasizes, to the married as well as to the monastics, the central role of prayer. Saint John Chrysostom says to the married couples in his parish, "Pray together at home and go to Church. When you come back home, let each ask the other the meaning of the readings and the prayers."<sup>90</sup> Clement of Alexandria speaks about the importance of prayer in marriage in this way: "Marriage, as a sacred image, must be kept pure from those things which defile it. We are to rise from our slumbers with the Lord, and retire to sleep with thanksgiving and prayer . . . confessing the Lord in our whole life, possessing piety in the soul, and extending self-control to the body."<sup>91</sup>

Staretz Macarius tells his spiritual children: "The joint prayer of husband and wife is a great force."<sup>92</sup> And he explains to one of his correspondents that because such prayer is "a great force, that may be one of the reasons why the enemy is trying to get both of you to break this excellent habit. This may be one more temptation which God permits so that you should learn to overcome it, and come out of the testing stronger than before! Remember that, under all circumstances, humility is your surest weapon."<sup>93</sup>

Thus, it is clear that a regular time for family prayer is very important for increasing the spiritual soundness of one's marriage, and in promoting a Christian spirit in the home. But having joint prayer between husband and wife, of course, does not mean that the spouses are not to have their own individual prayer-life as well. Indeed, not only do the Saints encourage married couples to pray together, but they tell us that those who are married and in the world should also strive for unceasing prayer. For they emphasize that ceaseless prayer should be the goal for all, not only for monks,

For example, Saint Gregory Palamas (Greece; 14<sup>th</sup> century), who saw the exceptional gifts of prayer which his father (a layman) had, says, "Let no one think, my brother-Christians, that it is the duty only of priests and monks to pray without ceasing, and not of laymen. No, no! It is the duty of all of us Christians to remain always in prayer."<sup>94</sup> He goes on here to quote Saint Paul (I Thess. 5:17 — "Pray without ceasing"); the prophet David (Psalm 15:8 LXX — "I foresaw the Lord always before my face"); and Saint Gregory the Theologian (who "teaches all Christians to say God's name in prayer more often than to breathe").

In our own time, a contemporary elder on Mount Athos was once asked by a professor:

"How can we lay people pray the Jesus prayer? We haven't got the time." "Don't say you haven't got the time," the elder replied. "What is required is the proper disposition. Take, for example, when you get up in the morning: say 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'; when you wash, the same; when you sit down for breakfast, the same; when you get into your car to go to work, the same. Do you really not have time?"<sup>95</sup>

### **Mutual Encouragement and Example**

Mutual encouragement between husband and wife can also be a great help in the spiritual growth of them both. As Saint John Chrysostom suggests to his married parishioners, there can be a friendly "rivalry" in this respect — and

indeed, in all aspects of the Christian life: “But at home also, let the husband hear of these things [about virtue] from the wife, and the wife from the husband. Let there be a kind of rivalry among all in endeavoring to gain precedence in the fulfillment of this law.”<sup>96</sup>

While the spouses can help save each other through words of mutual encouragement, they will have even more influence through the example of their lives:

Not merely by living with him as a wife will she be able to save her husband, but by openly demonstrating a life lived according to the Gospel. . . . it is possible in the case of wives to display the same zeal and enjoy the same advantage [as Saint Priscilla in teaching Apollos; Acts 18:24-26] . . . The display of ; a grand philosophy and much patience, the scoffing at the misfortunes of marriage, and the determination to follow this task through from beginning to end — this is to make the soul of one’s partner to be saved.<sup>97</sup>

Saint John Chrysostom also says.

For nothing, nothing is more powerful than a pious and sensible woman to bring her husband into proper order (rhythmizein),<sup>98</sup> and to mold his soul as she wills. For he will not listen to friends, or teachers, or rulers, as much as he will his partner advising and counseling him, since the advice carries some pleasure with it, because she who gives the counsel is greatly loved. I could tell of many hard and disobedient men who have been softened in this way.”

### **Hospitality and Almsgiving**

These two virtues are sometimes particularly associated with the married life — especially almsgiving, since presumably the married have more material goods to give to others than the monastics have. Saint John Chrysostom, in his Homily XIV on I Timothy, immediately speaks about the giving of hospitality after (mentioning that marriage is a state “of much occupation.” He then says,

Observe, the hospitality mentioned here [in ITim. 5:9-10] Is not merely a friendly reception, but one given with zeal and alacrity, with readiness, and going about it as if one were receiving Christ Himself. . . . If you receive the stranger as Christ, do not be ashamed, but rather glory in this; but if you do not receive him as Christ, it is better not to receive him at all. . . . Abraham thought that he was receiving men who passed as strangers [Gen. 18:1-22]. And he did not leave it to his servants to make the preparations for their entertainment, but took the greater part of the service upon himself, and commanded his wife to mix the flour, even though he had 318 servants and maidservants in his house. But he wished that he and his wife should have the reward, not only of the cost of providing for the visitors, but of the actual waiting upon them. Thus we ought always to provide hospitality by our own personal exertion, that we may be sanctified, and our hands be blessed. . . . This is hospitality, this Is truly to do it for God’s sake.<sup>100</sup>

So closely does Saint John link hospitality with almsgiving, that he immediately adds: “And if you give to the poor, do not disdain to give to them yourself. For it is not [ultimately] to the poor that it is given, but to Christ Himself. And who is so wretched as to disdain to stretch out his hand to Christ?” And the Monk Moses writes in his introduction to his collection of married Saints’ Lives, “It is fitting to emphasize again that almsgiving is the single most distinctive characteristic of the Lives of the married Saints. To the holy Chrysostom belongs the important teaching that almsgiving is higher than virginity.”<sup>101</sup>

### **Writings of Spiritual Direction**

There are many excellent writings of spiritual direction in the Orthodox Tradition. Although most of these texts were written by monastics for their fellow monks, they are nevertheless extremely helpful for married people. This is because they deal with things important for all Christians, such as acquiring the virtues, purifying the passions, and other aspects of the spiritual life. Thus, much of what the spiritual experts say on these topics is helpful to all, regardless of personal circumstances.

In addition, almost all of the great monastic writers of spiritual direction lived in community with other monastics. Hence, they have much to say specifically about relationships with others, and about daily living in a community, which is often very applicable to a married couple and/or family. Indeed, several contemporary Athonite monks have pointed out the similarities between cenobitic (communal) monasticism and family life. In each state, our calling and responsibility as Christians involves learning to love unconditionally those with whom we live.

### **Reading the Lives of the Saints**

Reading the Lives of the Saints is another very important way for people, both married and celibate, to grow hi the spiritual life. In reading these Lives, there are at least four important points to keep in mind:

1. Spiritual growth takes diligence, persistence, and patience. It is a life-long process requiring much hard work, and involving many mistakes and falls. So we should not get discouraged, no matter how slow our progress may seem, or how far we fall short when we compare ourselves to the Saints. They themselves wrote about such struggles from their own experience. As Saint Dorotheus of Gaza (Palestine; 6<sup>th</sup> century) says: “Work at this and understand clearly what you hear, for unless you work you will not absorb it by word alone. For what man wishing to learn a trade can master it by verbal instructions alone? No! Always he has to start by doing — and doing it wrong — making and unmaking, until, little by little, working patiently and persevering, he learns the trade while God looks on at his labor and his humility and works with him.”<sup>102</sup> This is also a helpful reminder about the persistent hard work that a good marriage requires.
2. As indicated in the Preface, we cannot simply copy the external behavior of a Saint’s life and expect to become holy. Holiness is always a result of cooperating with God’s grace in one’s own unique life. Each Saint’s life is a fruit of his particular gifts from God, his particular circumstances, personality, and so on. Again, we must listen to God’s will for each of us. It is of invaluable help in this regard to be under the guidance of a good spiritual director.
3. Sometimes, influenced by society, or perhaps by the brevity of many of the Saints’ Lives, those who have never met a living saint may imagine that Saints are usually remote, or severe, or perhaps always doing what is right and good in such a way as to make others feel inferior. These are all serious misconceptions.

To try to give a sense of what it is like to be with someone who is truly holy, it is well worth quoting from Archimandrite Vasileios’s description of a living “saint,” a monk whom he knows on Mt. Athos. Although, of course, not all saints are alike, the following description gives a very good sense of what it is often like to be with someone who is very holy. A saint, then, is one who

is at peace in himself in such a way as to *be* peace for men, his brethren. . . . he pours out strength and comfort. In his presence one feels boundless peace and security. Near him everything is filled with light. Uncertainties vanish; one begins to love Christ, and to love life. One no longer fears death. . . . He has a treasure of inexpressible joy hidden in an earthen vessel, small and fragile. And this Joy overflows and spreads all around him, filling his surroundings with Its fragrance. . . . His presence . . . is something which renews man, calms his nerves, extinguishes his anger, enlightens his mind, gives wings to his hope and prepares him for a struggle that gives quiet and peace to a whole people. . . . this light which shines out from the monk, . . . helps everyone to find his own true self. It helps everyone to love his own life, leading him forward in the light which knows no evening. . . . He does not frighten men with his ascetic exploits, but brings them peace by sharing with them the love of God in which he lives night and day.<sup>103</sup>

If some people, with the same human nature that we all share, can reach such a state of purity in this life, imagine how radiant with the Spirit of God are the Saints in Heaven — including all those described in the following pages.

4. This brings us to a fourth point to remember as we read the Lives of the Saints. We should read their Lives with prayer, and with full confidence that the Saints we read about are still alive, abiding with Christ in Heaven. How comforting it is to know and remember that the married Saints — and all the Saints — are always inviting us to ask them for their prayers, to commune with them, and to be brought closer to our Lord through their love, their prayers, their very presence. As SAINT JOHN OF KRONSTADT (December 20) reminds us:  
We ought always to have the most lively spiritual union with \ the dwellers in Heaven, the apostles, prophets, martyrs, saintly < bishops, confessors, with all the saints, as they are all members of one body, the Church of Christ, to which we sinners also •• belong, and the living Head of which is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. This is why we call upon them in prayer, converse , with them, thank and praise them. It is urgently necessary for every Christian to be in union with them if he desires to make Christian progress; for the saints are our friends, our guides to salvation, who pray and intercede for us.<sup>104</sup>

Finally, we must remember that regardless of how much we make use of all these means for spiritual growth, our progress always depends on God’s grace.

It is our hope and prayer that what we have quoted above from the Saints, and the Lives of the married Saints which follow, will encourage those who are married as they strive for holiness. We also pray that all of us, whether married, monastic, or living singly “in the world,” may seek to do God’s will in our lives, and to support all our fellow Christians. By doing this, we truly will be building up the body of Christ.

Let us close this introduction with the following words about marriage, and this prayer for those who are married, by a newly canonized monastic Saint of our own day, Saint Nicholas of Ehicha:

My brethren, marriage is a great and wonderful mystery, one of the greatest mysteries of God’s dispensation. A pure and honorable marriage, in the fear of God, is indeed a vessel of the Holy Spirit. He who disdains marriage scorns the Spirit of God. He who defiles marriage with Impurity blasphemes against the Spirit of God. And he who refrains from marriage

for the sake of the Kingdom of God must make himself a vessel of the Holy Spirit in another way, bringing forth fruit in the spiritual sphere . . .

God Almighty, Thou Holy Spirit, help Thou those in the married state — that they, in purity, fear and mutual love, may be a church of God in whom Thou mayest dwell with joy, directing all things for good. To Thee be glory and praise forever. Amen.<sup>105</sup>