

## THE EUCHARISTIC CONTEXT OF PASTORAL RESPONSE TO CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND SEXUALITY

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**ABSTRACT.** Pastoral ministry in the Orthodox Church on matters of marriage, sexuality, and family must focus on helping parishioners embrace the full meaning of a “one flesh” union with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. The “one flesh” relationship of marriage must be oriented through the blessing of the Church toward the eschatological fulfilment of the Kingdom of God. The connections of Eucharist and matrimony are so profound that pastoral ministry must guide parishioners to enter into only those marriages that may be blessed in the Church as signs of the communion of a man and a woman with Christ.

**Keywords:** Eastern Orthodox Ethics, Eastern Orthodox Moral Theology, Eucharistic Ethics, Marriage, Sexuality

In today’s climate of rapidly changing cultural standards about marriage, family, and sexuality, the Orthodox Church must respond to the attendant pastoral challenges in a fashion that fits coherently with the “right worship” and “right belief” of the Body of Christ. Otherwise, pastors and moralists will find themselves in the false position of underwriting stances and practices that fall short of bearing witness to the Church’s sublime vision of the “one flesh” union of matrimony as a sign of the salvation of the world. In this light, the celebration of the Eucharist provides a necessary context for undertaking pastoral response to contemporary challenges in marriage, family, and sexuality.

Contrary to those who would separate liturgy and life, St. Nicholas Cabasilas commented on the Eucharist that “its aim is the sanctification of the faithful.”<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the aim of the union of husband and wife is their

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<sup>1</sup> St. Nicholas Cabasilas, *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, J. M. Hussey and P. A. McNulty, trans., (Crestwood, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 25.

sanctification, their participation in the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Even as the Church enters mystically into the eschatological reign in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, the married couple become participants in the heavenly banquet through their common life in Christ. In the marriage ceremony, they wear the crowns of the kingdom and drink wine from a common cup in way that is reminiscent of the Eucharist. Both holy mysteries enable human beings to find the fulfillment of their ancient vocation to become like God in holiness.

Themes of offering, sacrifice, blessing, and communion are intrinsic dimensions of both marriage and the Eucharist. They also manifest the fulfillment of basic human desires and needs for life and love. Bread and wine become nourishment for eternal life, while conjugal union becomes an entrance into the heavenly bridal chamber. Due to the physical dimensions of each practice, communicants and spouses share as whole persons in the restoration of their humanity as they direct their hearts for fulfillment in God. Since the “one flesh” relationship between husband and wife serves as a sign of the relationship between Christ and the Church, their union is to become nothing less than an icon of the salvation of the world. (Eph. 5: 31-32)

After describing how the “one flesh” union of marriage includes husband, wife, and child, St. John Chrysostom notes that “Our relationship to Christ is the same; we become one flesh with Him through communion...”<sup>2</sup> St. Nicholas Cabasilas also affirmed that, through the Eucharist and the other holy mysteries, “Christ comes into us and dwells in us, He is united to us and grows into one with us” such that we “become one flesh with Him.”<sup>3</sup> These points of commonality reflect how the conjugal union of the couple is taken up into their communion with Christ in the Eucharist. This is how their “one flesh” union with one another becomes an entrance into the messianic banquet, for they are also “one flesh” with the Bridegroom. Hence, their embodied common life, which includes their children, is to become a radiant sign of the fulfillment of the relationship between man and woman. They wear together the crowns of the heavenly kingdom as they orient themselves together toward Paradise through the daily demands of living as a family.

The Church does not view this marital path as an extraordinary calling for a few exceptionally pious people, but as God’s intention for married couples in fulfillment of the ancient vocation to become like God in holiness. Their sanctification does not require escape from the limitations of the body or the practical realities of caring for children and maintaining a household.

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<sup>2</sup> St. John Chrysostom, “Homily 20,” *On Marriage and Family Life*, Catherine P Roth and David Anderson, trans., (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 51.

<sup>3</sup> St. Nicholas Cabasilas, 60-61.

Christ enables every aspect of their common life to become radiant with the divine glory as they embrace ever more fully the implications of being “one flesh” with Him and with one another.

The Eucharist has played a prominent role in how the Church has blessed marriages across the centuries. At first, a marriage was blessed by the bishop when the couple communed together in the assembly. By the fourth century, there is evidence of couples being crowned in the eucharistic liturgy. A marriage rite separate from the celebration of the Eucharist developed in the ninth and tenth centuries in response to an imperial demand that only marriages solemnized in the Church would have legal standing. In this context, a non-eucharistic rite of marriage developed for those canonically prohibited from receiving Communion. The connection of marriage and Eucharist remained, however. A marriage rite in which “worthy” couples received the reserved Sacrament continued in some places until the fifteenth century, while the “unworthy” received simply a common cup of wine. These practices are clearly reminiscent of the Eucharistic liturgy, as are many other dimensions of the contemporary wedding service.<sup>4</sup>

Due to the intersection of Eucharist and marriage, pastoral challenges abound. Even as prayers of preparation to receive Communion stress the communicant’s unworthiness, spouses struggle to embrace the full implications of their union in God. They inevitably stumble in fulfilling their sublime calling. When adultery gravely wounds a marriage or when divorce ends it, the Church responds pastorally by helping the spouses heal through repentance. Exclusion from the Eucharist for a time is part of that process as a way of acknowledging that a break in marital communion is also a breach in communion with Christ. This practice gives spouses time to gain the spiritual strength necessary to approach the chalice with a clear conscience and a renewed commitment to live a life in communion with the Lord.

The Church’s blessing of a second or a third marriage is a merciful act of *economia* that enables those who have endured the brokenness of previous marriages, whether through divorce or widowhood, to bring another marital relationship into eucharistic union with Christ. Yet even with the penitential prayers of the rite for second marriages, the bridal couple wears the crowns of the Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Despite the Church’s high vision of marriage, there is no perfectionism in the sense of condemning those who have fallen short of embracing the full implications of the “one flesh” union. Despite their personal

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<sup>4</sup> See Fr. John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 20-29; and Fr. John Chryssavgis, *Love, Sexuality, and the Sacrament of Marriage* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005), 45ff.

<sup>5</sup> Meyendorff, 44-47.

brokenness, man and woman may still make their common life an entrance in to the heavenly banquet. Their union with God in holiness does not require denigration of the physical dimensions of their union with one another, as shown by the prayers for fertility in the wedding service. Every aspect of their communion as persons is to serve as an icon of the fulfillment of God's gracious purposes for the creation.

A common pastoral challenge today concerns parishioners who engage in sexual intimacy without being married. Sex for the unmarried typically occurs without the intention of permanence and inevitably lacks the sanctifying context of marriage with its Eucharistic and eschatological characteristics. Consequently, such relationships stand in profound tension with the calling to "one flesh" communion with Christ, the spouse, and one's children. Those who repent of sexual intimacy apart from marriage require spiritual therapy in order to help them gain the strength to reorient their desires for intimate union toward God as they struggle to reserve sexual expression for the blessed state of marriage. Their healing may include exclusion from the Eucharist for a time as a sign of the need for recovery from the damage done to one's communion with Christ through sexual activity in a context of gratifying passions as opposed to pursuing sanctification together with a spouse in wearing the crowns of the Kingdom.

In such situations, some parishioners will end their relationships, while others will begin the process of preparing to enter into marriage. Some clergy instruct cohabitating couples to cease living together for a time before blessing their marriages, while others advise only a period of sexual abstinence. Such circumstances present opportunities for pastors to guide couples in confession, prayer, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines for the healing of their passions as they reorient their love and desire toward purification and fulfillment in God. Through such therapeutic processes, they may gain the spiritual health to offer themselves to the Lord and one another in marriage as a sign of the Kingdom.

More difficult pastoral situations arise in circumstances in which parishioners intend a permanent relationship that will not be blessed by the Church, including situations in which they have contracted a civil marriage. In addition to familiar impediments such as the number of previous marriages or differences in religious affiliation between the spouses, today we face the challenges posed by members of the same sex who are civilly married or who cohabit with the intention of permanence. What such cases have in common is the reality of parishioners in marriages or other relationships that cannot be not blessed by the Church and which exclude them from full participation in its life. For example, His Eminence Metropolitan Joseph of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America issued a directive on October

29, 2015, that Orthodox who marry outside the Church “voluntarily separate” themselves and may not receive Communion, serve as sponsors at baptisms, or hold any parish office. His Eminence notes that “this applies in all cases,” whether marriage to persons of the same or the opposite sex.<sup>6</sup> This directive highlights the intrinsic connections between marriage and reception of the Eucharist as enacting “one flesh” unions. They cannot be separated with theological integrity.

Parishioners in some civil marriages may have their marriages blessed in the Church and return to the Eucharist. Without that blessing, however, their marriages are not oriented to the Kingdom through crowning, the common cup, or other dimensions of the service that make marriage an entrance to the messianic banquet. The spouses’ exclusion from the chalice reflects that their unions remain as water not turned into wine, for their “one flesh” union has not been brought into communion with Christ.<sup>7</sup>

There is great difficulty today in providing pastoral care to persons in civil marriages and other relationships that cannot be blessed in the Church, such as those involving persons of the same sex. In light of ongoing changes in sexual mores, alternative marital and familial relationships are now quite public, often having the legal recognition of civil marriage and being championed by activists and affirmed by popular culture. Whether heterosexual or homosexual, parishioners in these circumstances may well have children and comprise a family together with their spouse or partner. Their relationships may be characterized by mutual fidelity and sacrificial commitment to children and other family members. It is one thing to guide a parishioner who struggles, in ways not known publically, with desires, actions, and relationships that fall short of the canonical standards of the Church in sexuality or other areas. It is quite different, however, to respond pastorally to a parishioner who is in a legally sanctioned marriage that cannot be blessed in the Church for whatever reason, especially in light of hierarchal directives that set definite boundaries, for example, concerning reception of the Eucharist.

In this context, pastors must be proactive in helping parishioners understand and accept the importance of entering only into those marriages that may be oriented toward the Kingdom through the blessing of the Church.

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<sup>6</sup> “Metropolitan Joseph’s Archpastoral Directive on So-called ‘Same-Sex Marriage,’” accessed June 2, 2017, <http://antiochian.org/metropolitan-josephs-archiepiscopal-directive-so-called-same-sex-marriage>.

<sup>7</sup> See Fr. Philip LeMasters, *Toward a Eucharistic Vision of Church, Family, Marriage and Sex* (Minneapolis, MN: Light & Life Publishing Co., 2004), 79 ff. for “An Orthodox Response to ‘Same-Sex Unions.’”

At stake is the basic Christian vocation to bring every dimension of their interpersonal relationships into communion with Christ, which will require refusing civil marriages and other intimate relationships that would exclude them from the Eucharist. The clergy should patiently encourage those who remain in relationships that separate them from the chalice to pursue the healing of their souls as fully as they presently have the strength to do. In “The Sacrament of Marriage and Its Impediments,” the Council of Crete taught that “The Church exerts all possible pastoral efforts to help her members who enter into... [same-sex unions or any other form of cohabitation] understand the true meaning of repentance and love as blessed by the Church.”<sup>8</sup>

Repudiating dimensions of relationships that exclude people from the Eucharist is a necessary step for reintegration into full participation in the Body of Christ. Sexual intimacy outside of a marriage blessed in the Church amounts to a separation of the “one flesh” relationship with a spouse from the “one flesh” relationship with Christ in the Eucharist. Likewise, contracting a civil marriage that cannot be blessed by the Church represents a refusal to offer crucial dimensions of one’s life to the Lord and impairs one’s communion with Him.

The goal of pastoral ministry is to equip the members of the Body of Christ to enter fully into the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. The communion of husband and wife with Christ in the Divine Liturgy should manifest His blessing upon their conjugal union as a sign of their vocation to enter the heavenly Bridal Chamber. Priests should guide their parishioners to pursue the healing of their souls in a way that accords with the profound intersections of marriage and Eucharist in the Orthodox Church. Otherwise, they risk underwriting an unhealthy separation between the spouses’ union with one another and with Jesus Christ. Such a separation amounts to a refusal to integrate liturgy and life.

Those who commune with the Lord in His great Self-offering in the Eucharist must offer themselves, in every dimension of their lives, for ever greater union with Him in holiness. The One Who created us in His image and likeness as male and female, and Who often used the wedding feast as a sign of the Kingdom, calls the members of His Body to become “one flesh” with Him through reception of the Eucharist. In order to do so, Christians must place the “one flesh” relationship of marriage within the larger context of the vocation to become more fully united with Christ. Pastoral ministry worthy of the name will work toward that end.

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<sup>8</sup> “The Sacrament of Marriage and Its Impediments,” *Official Documents of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church*, 1/10, accessed June 2, 2017, <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/marriage>.

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