



## *Fire & Light*

### **St. Symeon Orthodox Church**

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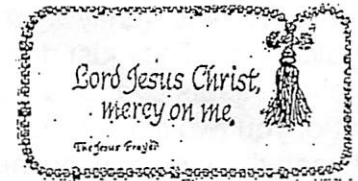
**August 21, 2016**

### **Postfeast of the Dormition**

**Apostle Thaddeus of the 70**

**Martyr Bassa of Edessa & her Sons (311)**

**St. Abraham of Smolensk (1220)**



**Crown them,  
O Lord our God  
with  
glory and honor!**

**Today: Sacrament of Holy Matrimony ~  
Alexandra Stratas and Luke Hobbs, 3:00pm**

**† Tuesday, August 23 6:30pm Inquirer's Class**

**☞ Looking Ahead: Annual Parish Meeting, Sunday, September 18**

## **The Purpose of Marriage**

**"Well, what's the purpose of marriage, Father?" someone asked Fr. Maximos (Metropolitan Athanasios of Limasol, Cyprus)**

**"The purpose of marriage is to transcend marriage itself," Fr. Maximos replied. Realizing they did not understand what he was talking about, he went on to say that the primary purpose of marriage is neither to procreate, as people commonly assume, nor to maximize physical pleasures. "It is good and a blessing to have children. And it is good for two people to enjoy each other's company. But the deeper reason for their marriage, as the Church understands it, is for the two people together to restore their relationship with God and work toward their deification. That is the foundation for a successful marriage. Everything else is a by-product of that supreme purpose.**

**"Don't assume your married life is going to be easy," he cautioned. "Family life is a training in how to think and take care first and foremost of others and then of yourself."**

**"It is a training to overcome selfishness," someone interjected.**

**"Yes. You go beyond the boundaries of the ego. I have come to realize over the years through confessions that being a monk and being a married person have much in common. To be successful in either of these two roles you must overcome your narcissism. The Church blesses married life because in reality it is a means to reach God by uniting in love with another person. If you expect endless pleasure and happiness, you will be grossly disappointed. This is what happens to many couples. With the slightest of difficulties they seek a way out through divorce or an extramarital affair."**

*Inner River, by Kyriacos Markides*

# Marriage and Listening

**“Fr. Maximus,” from the book, *Inner River* by Kyriacos Markides**

Fr. Maximos (Metropolitan Athanasios of Cyprus):

“I see people who come as couples searching for mediation for their problems. Most of them are very sincere. They fervently wish to live in harmony with each other but cannot because they are listening-handicapped. They just don’t know how to pay attention to what the other person is saying. Each side simply presents over and over their very compelling arguments and complaints. It is like having in front of you two finely tuned tape recorders playing simultaneously. There is no communication between the two, none whatsoever.

“I can tell you from personal experience that ninety percent of divorces take place not because of the involvement of third parties but primarily from this inability to listen to the other. Third parties usually enter the picture afterward, as a result of this problem. The spouses just shut themselves within themselves. The husband gets absorbed in his work, often handling two and three jobs to offer what he thinks is the good life to his family, and the same applies with the wife. They both come home exhausted. Not only do they have no time to sit and talk, but they also project on each other all the accumulated frustrations and fatigue from the day’s work. If they have children, they try to convince themselves I am a good father or I am a great mother because of this or that. Their entire life is an endless sacrifice for their children. They don’t realize that what their children truly need is harmony between them.

## Premarital Relations

“I often go to high schools and have dialogues with teenagers. A standard question students ask me is ‘Father, why is it wrong for us to have sex? **Why is the Church so strict about premarital relations?**’ I tell them that indeed the Church is against premarital sex, not because it wishes to undermine relationships between men and women but because it wants these relationships to be built on solid foundations. If you do not learn from your teenage years to see another human being not merely as a man or as a woman but first and foremost as a person, then you are bound to create problems in your marriage. You will be unable to see the other as an individual and not merely as an object of pleasure. At least this is what seems to be happening here in Cyprus.

**“For a successful marital bond to emerge, it is important that a man and woman first learn how the other feels and thinks and how, they see the world. The aim is not to conquer, subjugate and absorb the other person, to obliterate the other’s personality, but rather for the two to become a new person.**

We have, I believe, a unique word in our language when we refer to a married couple. We call them *androgyno* [man-woman], a new personal reality, the loving union between a man and a woman. Such a situation emerges when each party brings into the union his or her respective gifts, leading to a new joined personality, which defines them both. This is the ideal that one should strive for in a marital bond.”

## **There are No Perfect Marriages**

There are no perfect heart surgeons, no perfect presidents, no perfect parents, no perfect children, and there are no perfect marriages. Many couples enter marriage with expectations that are altogether too idealistic. Imperfect people marry imperfect people and then begin to expect perfection from one another. We expect from our spouse the kind of perfection that belongs only to God. A husband said to his wife one day, "Young lady, you made a grave mistake. You married a man instead of an archangel." No marriages are made in heaven. They come in kits and we have to put them together. A perfect wife is one who doesn't expect a perfect husband. One wife said to her husband one day, "If you weren't such a perfectionist, you'd be a perfect husband." I guess we need to remember that love has eyelids as well as eyes.

## **No Perfect Christians**

Just as there are no perfect families or marriages, so there are no perfect Christians.

A stranger came into town on a Sunday morning and looked around for a church to attend. While standing outside one church he heard the minister and the congregation praying together: "We have left undone the things we ought to have done, and we have done the things we ought not have done."

He hesitated no longer, went inside, and dropped into a seat, sighing: "Thank goodness, I've found my kind of people at last."

In all other religions one has to be perfect in order to come to God. In Christianity one does not. One comes admitting he is a sinner but not wanting to remain one. He comes to the Savior asking to be forgiven and cleansed. Christ did not die for us because we are perfect but because we are not. The perfect person needs no Savior. We cling to God's grace. He loves us in spite of our sins.

"The Saints," someone said, "are the sinners who keep on trying." The Church has never been a museum for the exhibition of perfect Christians, but always a hospital for the healing of ailing and imperfect Christians.

The Lord did not commit Himself to loving only perfect people. Just the opposite! He said, "I came not to call the righteous (the perfect), but sinners to repentance." He served those who desperately needed to grow up in the knowledge of God. Not only did He not despise them but He said, "There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who do not."

Someone wrote,

Since the entire world after the Fall was not the perfect world that God had created or intended, but is the world that God loves nevertheless, we can paraphrase John 3: 16: "For God so loved the less-than-perfect people of the world that he gave His Only Begotten Son that no matter how less-than-perfect we are, if we believe in Him, we will not perish but have everlasting life."

## **Is There No Hope for the Less Than Perfect?**

Many people are bothered by Christ's words on perfection. They seem to think that Jesus was saying, "Unless you are perfect, I will not help you." Since they cannot be perfect, they feel that their situation is hopeless. This, of course, is not what Jesus is saying. What He is saying is that the only help He will give us is help to assist us on

our journey toward perfection. We may want something less: but He will give us nothing less. The words are clear: "You shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

### **Who's Perfect?**

If there are no perfect people, no perfect families, no perfect marriages, no perfect Christians, is there such thing as perfection?

There most certainly is. We read in Hebrews 7:26-27, "For it was fitting that we should have a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for His own sins and then for those of the people; He did this once for all when he offered up himself." Jesus was the only High Priest Who was "holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens," Who had no need to offer sacrifices for His own sins, for He had none. So, there is such a thing as perfection. Only it is not a thing but a Person. Jesus is the Perfect One-the only Perfect One.

We are to leave perfection to Christ. He is God. According to the ancient Greeks to "know thyself" meant to know that you are human; that you are not God.

Fr. Anthony Coniaris, *The Philokalia, the Bible of Orthodox Spirituality*, pps. 74-75

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### **Changing Others and Changing Ourselves**

Learning to live peacefully and in humble harmony with others, be it in a family, parish or monastic community, is not as easy as one may hope. We are often annoyed by another's behaviors, habits or faults. We find ourselves judging and criticizing others, even trying to change others - correcting their habits or behaviors that annoy or inconvenience us.

Yet, it is not others that we are called to change, but ourselves. A short sentence from the book, *The Imitation of Christ*, says it so clearly and so well: "If you cannot make yourself be what you would like, how can you expect another to be as you would like?"

The honest fact is that we may try very hard to change one of our bad habits or rid ourselves of a sin, such as talking too much, eating more than is required, spending less time on the internet and more time in prayer, etc. and find it almost impossible to change even one thing about ourselves.

Recognizing our weakness and the difficulty of changing ourselves, we learn to excuse ourselves, hoping in the patience and mercy of God. We should extend this patience to others:

"Learn to be patient in enduring the faults of others, remembering that you yourself have many which others have to put up with." In the Lenten prayer of St. Ephraim we beg God, "Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother."

May we remind ourselves, during Lent and throughout the year, that it is only ourselves we can change, and only with much effort and patience. May we extend the same patience to those around us whom we are so often tempted to judge harshly.

*Life Transfigured, a journal of Holy Transfiguration Women's Monastery, Ellwood City, PA*

## ***Introduction to the Desert Fathers (Conclusion)***

St. Anthony the Great famously said, 'My brother is my life,' and he himself returned to the city twice, once to relieve those dying of plague, and once to defend the faith against heresy. The old men of the desert received guests as Christ would receive them. They might live austere themselves, but when visitors came they hid their austerity and welcomed them. A brother said, 'Forgive me, father, for I have made you break your rule,' but the elder said, 'My rule is to receive you with hospitality and send you on your way in peace.'

There are innumerable stories about desert hospitality. One monk was moved to question the difference between the monk who received visitors and the one who did not: the example he chose was his visit to the austere nobleman, Arsenius, and to the reformed robber, Moses. The former received him and sat down again to pray in silence, until the brother felt uncomfortable and left. Moses came out to greet him with open arms, and they talked all day with joy. That night the monk had a vision; he saw Arsenius in a boat with the Holy Spirit, sailing quietly along the river of life; and he saw Moses in a similar boat with an angel, and they were eating honey cakes—so he knew that both ways were acceptable to God.

One of the marks of this charity was that the fathers did not judge. St. Macarius, they said, was like God "who shields the world and bears the sin of all; so he shielded the brethren and when anyone sinned he would not hear or see it.' St. Moses, the black man who had been a robber, heard one day that a brother was to be brought before the council and judged; so he came also, carrying a basket full of sand running out behind him, and he said, 'How should I judge my brother when my sins run out behind me like the sand in this basket?'

### **The Place of Asceticism**

The desert was not a gigantic gymnasium where athletes vied with one another in endurance tests. When one of the fathers went in disguise to a monastery during Lent, he outdid all the monks in asceticism. His name was Macarius the Egyptian and he was very tough. At the end of a week, the abba led him outside and said, 'You have taught us all a lesson, Father, but now please would you mind going away, lest my sons become discouraged and despair? We have been edified enough.'

The monks went without sleep because they were watching for the Lord; they did not speak because they were listening to God; they fasted because they were fed by the Word of God. It was the end that mattered, the ascetic practices were only a means.

The cell was of central importance in their asceticism. 'Sit in your cell and it will teach you everything,' they said. The point was that unless a man could find God here, in this one place, his cell, he would not find him by going somewhere else. But they had no illusions about what it meant to stay in the cell: it meant to stay there in mind as well as in body. To stay there in body, but to think about the outside world, was already to have left it.

The Desert Fathers had a deep understanding of the connection between man's spiritual and natural life: this gave them a concern for the body which was part of their life of prayer. Much of their advice was concerned with what to eat, where to sleep, where to live, what to do with gifts, and—very specially—what to do about demons. This aspect of warfare with the demons was a major concern in the desert. The desert itself was the place of the final warfare against the devil, and the monks were 'sentries who keep watch on the walls of the city'. Monks were always meeting the devil face to face, and once the great Macarius asked the devil why he looked so depressed, 'You have defeated me', he said, 'because of your humility'; and Macarius put his hands over his ears and fled. But most of the

advice given was not about objective, personalized demons; nor was it about holy thoughts, or the pattern of the spiritual life, or the dark night of the soul. When it was not about ordinary Christian charity, it was about the vices. The knowledge of how to deal with the passions was learned slowly, by long, hard living, but it was the great treasure for which men came to the desert from the cities. It was this aspect of warfare with demons that was called 'asceticism', the 'hard work' of being a monk. 'Abba Pambo came to Abba Anthony and said: "Give me a word, Father," and he said, "Do not trust in your own righteousness; do not grieve about a sin that is past and gone; and keep your tongue and your belly under control..."

### **Prayer**

About prayer itself they had little to say; the life geared towards God was the prayer; and about experiences in contemplation, who could speak? Arsenius prayed on Saturday evening with his hands stretched out to the setting sun, and he stayed there until the rising sun shone on his face on Sunday morning. The usual pattern was to say the Psalms, one after another, during the week, and to intersperse this with weaving ropes, and saying, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me' (The Jesus Prayer). The aim was hesychia, quiet, the calm through the whole man that is like a still pool of water, capable of reflecting the sun. To be in true relationship with God, standing before him in every situation — that was the angelic life, the spiritual life, the monastic life, the aim and the way of the monk. It was life orientated towards God. 'Unless a man can say, "I alone and God are here", he will not find the prayer of quiet.' It is the other side of the saying of St. Anthony, 'My life is with my brother.'

### **Conclusion**

St. Anthony said, 'Whatever you find in your heart to do in following God, that do, and remain within yourself in Him.' This personal integrity before God, without any disguises or pretensions, is the essence of the spirituality of the desert. All ascetic effort, all personal relationships, life in all its aspects, was to be brought slowly into the central relationship with God in Christ. All the means to this end were just that, means and no more; they could be changed or discarded as necessary. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers must be used in the spirit in which they were spoken, otherwise they will have less than their true value. They are not just for interest but for use. Radical simplicity and integrity is their aim and purpose. The literature of the desert might be called the essence of Christian monasticism; but as the monk is preeminently the one who seeks to live by the Word of God, it has a basic relevance for all Christian people. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers may help towards a valid interpretation of the Gospel in our own day; their words may come alive in contemporary life, whatever the particular setting. Evagrius described the monk as one who is separated from all and united to all; it is in that spirit that we have prepared this translation.

Sister BENEDICT WARD. S.L.G., Oxford 1979

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"Be full of goodness, free from envy, devout, self-restrained, gentle, as generous as possible, kindly, and peaceable. For to conform to God through such qualities, and not to judge anyone or to say that he is wicked and has sinned, is to render the soul inviolate." ~ St. Anthony the Great

Abba Agathon said: "I have never gone to sleep with a grievance against anyone, and, as far as I could, I have never let anyone go to sleep with a grievance against me."

Whenever his thoughts urged him to pass judgment on something he saw, he would say to himself, "Agathon, it's not your business to do that." Thus his spirit was always recollected.

The same Abba said, "A man who is angry, even if he were to raise the dead, is not acceptable to God."

A brother asked Abba Agathon about lust. He answered, "Go, cast your weakness before God and you shall find rest."

## **FROM THE TEACHINGS OF ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE**

- They come to be made into one body. See the mystery of love! If the two do not become one, they cannot increase; they increase only by decreasing! How great is the strength of unity!
- ...One's partner for life...the source of one's every joy, should never be fettered with fears and threats, but with love and patience.
- Virtue gives birth to love, and love brings innumerable blessings.
- If husband and wife order their lives according to God's law, their children will also submit willingly to the same law.
- Let those who take wives now do as they did at Cana in Galilee. Let them have Christ in their midst.
- Since, you know, therefore, how great a mystery marriage is, and how great a matter it represents, do not consider marriage lightly or casually... You must consider that marriage is not a business venture but a fellowship for life.
- ...when harmony prevails, the children are raised well, the household is kept in order, and the neighbors, friends, and relatives praise the result.
- Marriage exists in order that we may enjoy another's help, that we may have a harbor, a refuge, a consolation in the troubles which hang over us, and that we may converse happily with our spouse.
- There is no relationship between human beings so close as that of husband and wife, if they are united as they ought to be.
- Let us not seek wealth, nor high social position, but true nobility of soul
- A wife who is chaste, gentle, and moderate, even if she is poor, can make poverty better than wealth.
- Husband and wife are equally responsible for the honor of their marriage bed.
- When husband and wife are at odds with one another, their household is in no better shape than a storm-tossed ship in which the captain and the pilot disagree.
- The love of husband and wife is the force that welds society together.
- ...Let us seek just one thing in a spouse, virtue of soul and nobility of character, so that we may enjoy tranquility, so that we may luxuriate in harmony and lasting love.
- There is no influence more powerful than the bond of love, especially for husband and wife.
- So when the wife is in harmony and peace with her husband, nothing will be unpleasant, even if innumerable storms arise every day. If marriages are begun this way, we will be able to raise our children to virtue with great ease.

*Submitted by Helen Ritchey*



## **A Bishop's Letter on Marriage**

June 28, 2015    Feast of Sts. Cyrus and John

Beloved in Christ,

May God bless you always.

On June 26, the Supreme Court of the United States handed down a decision that effectively defines "marriage" as legal between any two consenting adults throughout our country, regardless of their biological sex, a decision that will no doubt have sweeping effects in our society, not just for these couples but for children, families, churches, other religious organizations and all people of faith.

This action by the Court attempting to redefine marriage is deeply wrong, but it gives us an opportunity to reiterate for ourselves and also for our whole country the unchanging, timeless teaching of the Holy Orthodox Church regarding marriage and sexuality. With the creation of marriage by God for Adam and Eve, the first human bond was instituted. This bond preceded all the other social bonds of humanity, including not just governments but even the covenants that He Himself instituted. It is fundamental to human nature that marriage consists of one man and one woman in a lifelong, exclusive bond. Marriage is therefore not about private desire but about the complementary, conjugal bond of family, as created by God and blessed by Him.

It is only within that blessed bond that sexuality finds its proper expression. All other sexual behavior— whether between a homosexual couple, an unmarried heterosexual couple, multiple people, a person by himself, or anything else—is sinful, meaning that it distorts our relationship with God, each other and ourselves. Yet such actions, including their sanction by entering into one of these new legal unions, which are not truly marriages, can always be repented of. No one is a lost cause. No one is our enemy.

Repenting of our sins is what the Church is for. We are all sinners. Even if you do not have one temptation or one sin, you have others. So we do not condemn anyone for any reason. In love and faith, we hold out the hope of salvation through repentance for every human person.

This is teaching of the Holy Orthodox Church of Christ. It has never changed and can never change, even if it costs us. We will continue to preach and to practice accordingly, and we expect that all of our pastors, teachers and parents will continue to do so. May God give you courage and love as you do so.

Yours in Christ,

Rt. Rev. Bishop THOMAS (Joseph)

Diocese of Charleston, Oakland, and the Mid-Atlantic

ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ARCHDIOCESE OF NORTH AMERICA