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Hieromonk Gregorios

The Mystery of Marriage

A Fellowship of Love



CELL OF ST JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN
KOUTLOUMOUSIOU MONASTERY
MOUNT ATHOS

Hieromonk Gregorios
THE MYSTERY OF MARRIAGE:
A Fellowship of Love

First published in 2010
by the Cell of St. John the Theologian
Holy Monastery of Koutloumousiou
P.O. Box 13, 630 86 Karyes
Mount Athos, Greece

First English edition published in the
United States by Newrome Press in 2013

© for the English language: Newrome Press

Translated by the Rev. Fr. Michael Monos
from the second Greek edition entitled
Τὸ Μυστήριον τοῦ Γάμου (Mount Athos 2011)

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Quotations from the Sacrament of Marriage are based
on the translation of the V. Rev. Archimandrite Ephrem Lash.

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Printed and bound in the United States
ISBN 978-1-939028-15-0

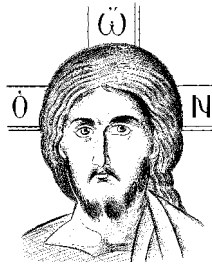
Distribution in the United States
Newrome Press LLC
PO Box 30608
Columbia, Missouri, USA, 65205
Tel: 573.823.7272
Email: info@newromepress.com
Web: <http://www.newromepress.com>



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*This is a great mystery:
I speak concerning Christ
and the Church.*

-Apostle Paul



PROLOGUE

It is well established that in our day the institution of marriage and the family is experiencing a profound and unprecedented crisis. Today, while young people find the decision to marry difficult to make, they separate easily. And even in cases where the marriage does not end in divorce and the couple remain together, it is a coexistence endured for the sake of children or social norms and not one of shared love.

This raises the basic question: What are the causes of this fundamental crisis of marriage and the family? In the opinion of many spiritually-minded people, the reason is that marriage has ceased to be a “workshop of love” in which the spouses are accompanied by Christ.

Unfortunately, nowadays, marriage has evolved into a minefield of endless selfish conflicts that make married life unbearable. When the foundation of the household is not Christ, that is, Love, but rather selfishness and willfulness, namely ourselves, the union soon ends in divorce, either during the early stages of the relationship and betrothal or shortly after the wedding ceremony.

* * *

The author long ago decided not to write about his experiences concerning the mystery of marriage, painful and compassionate experiences gleaned from the Sacrament of Holy Confession. He

believes that the most competent to perform this task are his married brothers and concelebrants, who are also spiritual fathers, and who have themselves personally experienced the mystery of marriage. Nevertheless, he has chosen to reverse this decision, in obedience to an honored and beloved fellow priest, hoping thus to obtain the forgiveness of the married priests and brethren [for its shortcomings].

Therefore, he has acquiesced to present his related insights, derived from decades of humbling experiences in the Sacrament of Holy Confession, as a spiritual father of married persons. Finally, he begs forgiveness from his readers for any inadequacies in this offering, and for their prayers for his salvation.

9, September, 2009

Hieromonk Gregorios

On the Feast of the

Holy Ancestors, Joachim and Anna





INTRODUCTION

Marriage as a fellowship of love

God created man according to His image and likeness. After the creation of Adam, God said: *It is not good that the man should be alone, let us make for him a help suitable to him.* (Gen. 2:18) And then God created woman from the side of man, and Adam said: *Now, this is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...* (Gen. 2:23)

The Prophet Moses continues the biblical account with the following prophetic words: *Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.* (Gen. 2:24) For these reasons we have God's blessing for the sacrament of marriage and its definition as *a fellowship of love*.

When Christ came, He supplemented the ancient divine blessing, adding: *Therefore the spouses are no longer two, but one body. And what God has united, let no man separate.* With His presence at the marriage in Cana and the miraculous transformation of water into wine, Christ wanted "to sanctify the begetting of children," and bless the mystery of marriage.

In Holy Scripture we read: *Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh,* and thus recognize that in order to celebrate the Sacrament of Marriage there must be a double movement of love by the husband and the wife: 1) to be severed and independent from their

parents and the paternal home, and 2) to walk together and be united with one another.

This does not mean that the married couple cease loving and respecting their parents, but rather that they cease to depend upon and be directed by them, for now they are parents themselves. When we plant a vine, we cut off a branch and plant it somewhere else so that it becomes a new vine. Marriage is the cutting of two branches from two older vines, which are planted together and grow into a new vine.

* * *

If a fellowship of love is to be established through the Sacrament of Marriage, the man and woman who will be joined together and wish to follow Christ must travel the road set forth by Him: *If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.* (Matt. 16:24) It is impossible to love our companion if we do not deny ourselves. Moreover, the love of our spouse is simultaneously the road which leads to the love of God.

The first step in creating a fellowship of love is the denial of our own ego; love presupposes the eradication of egoism (self-centeredness), because the ego is the rejection of love. Things in the spiritual life are entirely different from that of the secular. Christ said: *The one who saves his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will obtain it.* (Matt. 10:39) By losing a person wins, by winning he loses; the faithful experience this reality within marriage.

The foundation upon which marriage is built is love. We reject our ego for the sake of love, which includes, to a certain extent, our paternal family, which is an intimate part of ourselves, bound to us through the ties of blood and strong emotion. We uncouple ourselves from these things in order to be successful in loving a

spouse. This helps us realize that the family of our spouse is like our own family, and that the salutation “father” or “mother” offered to our in-laws is not a mere matter of courtesy or simply a figure of speech, but borne out of love for our spouse and the things that belong to him or her. We love the other to such an extent that the other becomes part of us.

St. Paul says that the husband who loves his wife, in reality loves himself: *In the same way, a husband should love his wife as his own body. He who loves his own wife loves himself.* (Eph. 5:28) This naturally applies to the wife as well: She who loves her husband loves herself. If the one loves the other, and in so loving loves also themselves, the two together will love Christ, and Christ will love both of them, and the couple will live in a fellowship of love.

St. Paul, in the epistle reading from the Sacrament of Marriage, explains how the husband and the wife must love each other:

Brethren, always giving thanks for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, even to God the Father. [Finally], be in mutual subjection in the fear of Christ. Wives, husbands, Christ and the Church. Wives, be subject to your own husbands as [you are] to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church, and he is the savior of the body. As the Church is subject to Christ, wives should likewise be subject to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her in order to sanctify her, having purified her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present her to himself in glory, without any spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and flawless. In the same way, a husband should love his wife as his [own] body. He who loves his own wife loves himself! No man ever hates his own body but feeds it and cares for it, as the Lord also does for the Church. Yes,

we are members of his body, his very flesh and bones! This is why a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his wife; and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery: I speak concerning Christ and the Church. Now concerning you: each one of you must also love his own wife even as his own self; and the wife must respect her husband. (Eph. 5: 20-33)

Christ is the measure of the love which will govern the marital bond: *As the Church is subject to Christ, wives should likewise be subject to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church...* Therefore, by these two means, the woman and the man hope to become a loving couple. The wife sees Christ in her husband, and the husband loves his wife as Christ loved the Church. Christ is the loving bond of the husband and wife: and the love of Christ for the Church is the measure of the love which the couple hopes to attain.

The mystery of love within marriage represents the mystery of the love of Christ for the Church. Thus, those who are able to achieve true love within marriage make Christ their own.

* * *

When the married couple attains the [measure of] love, as Christ has urged them, then they understand that everything belongs to one another. Thus the Apostle writes: *The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does!* (1 Cor. 7:4) When there is true love, we surrender our own authority to our beloved.

Within a marriage, there must be a communion and mutual sharing of material and spiritual wealth. Whatever belongs to the husband is offered in love to the wife, and whatever belongs to the wife is offered in love to the husband. When you hear a cou-

ple saying: “these things are mine, those things are yours,” something bad is happening. It suggests that they are not treading the pathways of love. “This is my money, my salary, this is what suits me, these are my wants and desires”; today these expressions are heard everywhere, and they betray a lack of love.

However, it seems as though this is nothing new. St. John Chrysostom reproaches spouses on this very topic saying:

After the wedding you are no longer two bodies, but one, and how is it that your riches are two and not one? Woe to such avarice! You have become a single person, you share a common existence, yet you say “these things are mine”? This sort of language is cursed and miserable, and a suggestion of the Devil. God created all things in common for all, even those things which are most necessary, and yet you say that what is yours is not to be shared? Can you really say that: The sun is mine, the light is mine, the water is mine! Everything that is necessary God made to be shared equally; and your riches, are they not to be shared?¹

In a case where a wife says “this is mine,” or “that is yours,” St. John advises the husband to teach his wife with much gentleness:

Above all, banish this from her soul: ‘this is mine,’ and ‘that is yours.’ If she says, ‘this is mine,’ say to her: ‘which things do you think are yours? I have nothing of my own, how then do you say ‘these things are mine,’ since everything is yours? ... Everything is yours and I am yours.’ This is not an expression of flattery, but of one of great wisdom... Thus he says: Even I am yours, my child. This is what Saint Paul advised, saying: *‘Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does!’* If I have no authority over my own body, even more so have I no authority over riches... So in

¹ St. J. Chrysostom, On Ephesians (*Εἰς Ἐφεσίους*) 20, PG 62, 148.

this way, teach her to never say, ‘these things are mine and those are yours.’²

* * *

Elder Paisios writes about the love which a husband and wife owe each other:

Each loves the other for what he offers [to that person]. The wife gives her husband confidence, dedication and obedience. The husband gives his wife assurance that he can protect her. The wife is the ruler of the house, but also the chief maid. The husband is the governor of the house, but also the servant. The husband and wife must share a purifying love, in order to have mutual consolation and to be able to perform their spiritual responsibilities. In order to live in harmony, they need to establish love as the foundation of their lives together – precious love – which is found in spiritual nobility, in sacrifice and not in falsity, worldliness and carnality. If there is love and sacrifice, everything that effects one also effects the other, and can be understood and suffered. And when one sees that his beloved suffers some heartache, he takes them to Christ, who fills them with inexpressible joy... When there is only carnal love, then, if for example, the wife learns that her mate is interested in someone else, she flies into a jealous vitriolic rage. However, when there is pure love, she suffers greatly, and searches for a way to return him to the right path. This happens by God’s grace.³

When God’s grace comes [into the relationship], the couple lives in a fellowship of true love and St. John Chrysostom’s axiom finds its fulfillment:

² St. J. Chrysostom, On Ephesians (*Εἰς Ἐφεσίους*) 20, PG 62, 148.

³ Elder Paisios the Hagiorite: Works, Vol. 4: Family Life (*Οικογενειακή Ζωή*), Sourti, Thessaloniki, 2002, p. 38.

Wherever there is harmony, peace and a loving relationship between husband and wife, all good things come together there. The couple will be safe from any stratagem, protected as they are by a wonderfully 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.⁴



⁴ St. J. Chrysostom, Homilies On Genesis (*Εἰς Γένεσιν*) 38, 7, PG 53, 360.





1. Acquaintance and Betrothal

The acquaintance of two young people and their agreement to get engaged naturally precedes the celebration of a marriage.

During this time, the two young people speak with one another about their dreams for their future family, and they try to ascertain whether they are right for each other. Their feelings of love for one another grow at this time, feelings which are expressed in various ways.

When there is certainty within the souls of the young couple that they can move forward in their lives together, the betrothal occurs. At this time they pledge themselves to each other: that they will try to walk together for the rest of their lives, creating a new family and confronting the joys and sorrows of life together.

* * *

Our Church has a specific *akolouthia*⁵ (rite) of Betrothal whose distinguishing characteristic is the blessing of the rings and their placement on the hands of the betrothed.

The priest begins by placing the rings on the Holy Table. Already from the time of the betrothal, the blessing which the Church gives has as its starting point the Holy Sanctuary. With this blessing, our Church orients us towards a life of sacrifice and love, a love in the image of Christ's love which accepted the Cross and death.

Following this, some prayers are read, and then the priest takes the rings, making the sign of the cross with them over the heads of the betrothed, and places them on their hands. At the same time, the celebrant invokes the blessing of the Holy Trinity for the union of the betrothed, saying: *The servant of God N. betroths himself to the servant of God N., in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

After this, the celebrant prays to the Lord: *Lord our God, bless the betrothal of your servants N. and N. and make firm the word that they have spoken... make firm their betrothal in faith and concord and truth and love. For it is you, Lord, who declared that at times a pledge is to be given and made firm in everything... Therefore, Master, with your heavenly blessing now bless also this putting-on of rings.*

The Church, from the very first blessing offered, supplicates the Lord on behalf of the couple to be married: that they trust in Him with faith, for their life to be strengthened in concord, truth and love, and that their common journey together be blessed with a heavenly blessing. In this way the Church, already at this point in the Service of Betrothal, assists the betrothed in establishing the foundation of their common life together in Christ, who is Love.

⁵ The prescribed form / manner of words and / or actions of a (religious) ceremony.