

The Orthodox Christian Marriage

by Priest Alexey Young

Orthodox Christianity is a way of life, not merely something we do on Sunday mornings and quickly forget when we leave church. A way of life is a whole coming together of habits and attitudes, ideas and actions: a style of life, a way to live. For us Orthodox, Christianity is our daily bread. Like a fish in water, we must swim in our Faith. As followers of Christ, we take our whole direction from Christ and His Church, and not from the standards of today's world. This seems clearest when we visit a monastery, where the environment, the atmosphere, the focus of life - everything is clearly and deliberately Orthodox.

Most of us Orthodox Christians do not live in monasteries; we are married; we have homes, children, jobs. Among many married Orthodox there exists the mistaken idea that their following Christ does not require the same dedication required of the Orthodox monastic. But of course all Christians, whether monastic or not, are equally called by Christ to repentance and eternal salvation. There are no "classes" of Orthodox Christians - all are equal and all are expected to be followers of Christ, regardless of their position in the Church.

It is, however, very difficult for us non-monastic Christians to live an Orthodox life-style from day to day and year to year because we are constantly exposed to and live within a society that is not only not Christian but even at times, and increasingly, hostile to Orthodox Christian beliefs. But this should not discourage us, for Christ Himself understood this situation when He said: Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matt. 10:16).

A tremendous bastion of strength for Orthodox lay people in our circumstances is marriage and family life, a state that has been blessed by God for the salvation of each individual member of the family. In order fully to understand this, we must look at the doctrinal foundations of marriage found in Scripture and Sacred Tradition - which are the on-going conscience of the Church.

The Old Testament and the New Testament Views of Marriage

When we look at the practice of marriage, family life, and multiplication of the human race as described in the Old Testament, we are immediately aware of the fact that great emphasis was placed on the continuation of the Hebrew race. We have endless family trees given to us in the Old Testament. But marriage was not the only way by which the race was continued at that time. Children were also begotten through the custom of concubinage and the practice of having a man marry the widow of his brother, even though he might already have a wife. We read that Solomon, for example, "had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines," and the Old Testament records that King David "took more concubines and wives from Jerusalem after he came from Hebron; and more sons and daughters were born to him." Many of the great personages of the Old Testament had multiple wives and concubines. This emphasis on perpetuating the race seems to us extreme, and the methods of doing so seem almost bizarre. However, the primary reason for all of this mating was not the gratification of lust, but the desire for descendants. Sexual promiscuity was in no wise condoned by God in Old Testament times any more than He condones it in our own times. But during Old Testament times, God began to reveal to man what His expectations were. Gradually we see that God condemned polygamous marriages, concubines, and the practice of marrying one's brother's widow. He began to shift the focus of marriage from procreation to a higher, spiritual level.

Finally, God made His intentions very clear by the way that He dealt with people who were involved in illicit sex. To us, who consider ourselves so "cultured" and "educated," and "sophisticated," God's actions might seem to be very harsh. But He was trying to make plain that He was the ultimate source of life, not the physical union of a man and a woman. And where God is, there can be only holiness, and mystery. What procreates and perpetuates life cannot be anything but a mystery. And holiness and mystery must be protected, guarded, and preserved against blasphemy, uncleanness, and irreverence. The way in which God dealt with sexual transgressions and perversions in the Old Testament makes it very clear that marriage is an extremely wonderful and holy mystery - so holy and mysterious, that any kind of sexual transgressions is an abomination in God's sight, and to be avoided at all costs. But the sexual aspects of marriage will be considered later.

With the coming of Christ, marriage no longer had as its primary goal the reproduction of human beings and the perpetuation of a family line, although procreation was still regarded as an important part of marriage. But Christ had come to the world and brought with Him the proof and guarantee of the resurrection of the dead, therefore giving to Christian marriage a new primary goal - the attainment of eternal life by husband, wife, and all children.

The marriage service in the Orthodox Church begins with the words, "Blessed is the Kingdom, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen." This exclamation emphasizes the seriousness of marriage, and also the goal of marriage. According to the church canons, those Orthodox Christians who marry outside the Church are deprived of the sacraments of the Church. Some people find this shocking; they feel the Church is being too harsh. But the question is: What gives validity to marriage? From a spiritual standpoint, what gives meaning to a marriage? Unlike the wedding ceremonies in most non-Orthodox churches, marriage in the Orthodox Church is not a contract - a legal agreement with the exchange of vows or promises - between two people. Rather, marriage is the setting up, by two people, of a miniature church, a family church, wherein people may worship the true God and struggle to save their souls. It is also a family church that is in obedience to Christ's Church. As Saint Basil the Great says, it is natural to marry, but it must be more than natural; it must be a yoke, borne by two people under the Church.

Thus we see that in New Testament times the focus of marriage was switched from a primary purpose of producing children, to a primary purpose of providing a way for human beings to save their souls. The wedding ceremony itself is filled with rich symbolism that makes this whole aspect of marriage very clear.

The Husband's Responsibilities *The husband is the head of the wife...*

We know that every organization, every institution - whether it be the Church, a parish, a monastery, or, in the world, a bank, a corporation, a school - must have a head, a leader. The same is true of a successful marriage, for the family is also a unit, a spiritual and physical organization. According to Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition, the leader in a marriage is the husband. Again, the words of Saint Paul: The husband is the head of the wife... He is the leader. He represents the principle of authority in the family. Just as the priest is the spiritual leader of the parish, and responsible to God for the parishioners, and thus the spiritual authority in the parish, so too the husband is the priest in his family, responsible for setting the tone of family life.

This does not mean that he is superior to his wife. In Christ's sight, all are equal; there is neither male nor female. In fact, marriage is a partnership of equals. Let there be no mistake: there is no room for

chauvinism of any kind in Orthodoxy. Nor does being the head give a husband any kind of dictatorial, tyrannical, arbitrary, or absolute authority over his wife and children. But, as with every position of importance, certain responsibilities go with this one, and they are very heavy, very difficult, but also very challenging and potentially creative responsibilities. Scripture tells us that the husband must love his wife even as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it (Ephesians 5:25). Most Christian husbands have little idea of what this kind of love means. In the world, "love" usually refers to physical love or sentimental, romantic love. This has nothing to do with the Christian concept of love. Just recall Christ's words to His followers: Greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friend. Love, then, from the Christian standpoint, means sacrifice, and self-denial. A husband must take as much care, concern, thoughtfulness, attention, regard and precautions for his wife as Christ takes for the Church. The husband's attentiveness might even have to extend to death itself. For just as Christ was put to death for His love of the Church, so too the Orthodox Christian husband must yield all things - even his life, if necessary - for his wife. Again, Saint Paul says, The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church... We know what kind of head Christ was: He washed the feet of His disciples. According to our Savior, to be head, to be first, means to serve - to be the first in giving love, in giving understanding, in giving patience, in providing his family with protection. This is the kind of leader, or head, that the husband is called to be. And when he is this kind of leader, he is a real man, a true man, faithful to his divinely ordained nature.

A wise wife will encourage her husband to be this kind of man; she will not try to take on the position of authority herself. Psychologists tell us that the anger a woman feels towards a man who has allowed her to take over the leadership of the family is the deepest anger of all. And we are now discovering that many cases of delinquency and even mental illness come from homes where the father has ceased to be the leader, the source of compassion, love, and protection.

A husband's duty to give love to his wife and family does not allow him to intimidate his wife. He must not treat his wife as a hired servant - which many men do. Here is what Saint John Chrysostom has to say about this:

"A servant, indeed, one will be able perhaps to bind down by fear; nay, not even for him, for he will soon leave you. But the partner of one's life, the mother of one's children, the foundation of one's every joy, one ought never to chain down by fear and threats, but with love and good temper. For what sort of union is that, where the wife trembles at her husband? And what sort of pleasure will the husband have if he dwells with his wife as with a slave? Yea, even though you suffer everything on her account, do not scold her; for neither did Christ do this to the Church."

Men, husbands, true love for us begins when we give of ourselves to others. We first really begin to love - in a Christian sense - when we first give. A husband once complained to Saint John Chrysostom that his wife did not love him. The Saint replied; "Go home, and love her." "But you don't understand," said the husband. "How can I love her when she doesn't love me?" "Go home and love her," the Saint repeated. And he was right. Where there is no love, we must put some love, and we will find it.

Often husbands complain to a priest that their wife doesn't love them. Then the priest discovers that the husband isn't going out of his way at all to give love; he's merely sitting back and waiting to be loved, like some kind of idol, waiting to be served and worshiped. Such a husband needs to discover that the only way to receive lasting love in a marriage is to give it, for in life we usually receive what we give: if we give hatred, we receive hatred; but if we give love, we receive it back in return.

The Fathers of the Church tell us that Christian husbands must love their wives more than their secular jobs, for there is no success greater than a happy home, and no other success that we men achieve in life will have meaning if we fail at home. Our families deserve the best. There are altogether too many of us men today who are at our best out in the world, and at our worst at home. For this reason, the Church Fathers tell us to set the highest possible value on the company of our wives, and be more desirous of being at home with them than being in the market place. Husbands, and future husbands, let us take to heart these words by the twentieth-century Frenchman, André Maurois: "I bind myself for life; I have chosen; from now on my aim will be not to search for someone who will please me, but to please the one I have chosen..."

The Responsibilities of the Wife

Saint Paul says, *Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord ... As the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be subject to their own husbands in everything.* (Ephesians 5:22, 24)

Today's society, especially here in America, and particularly in public media - movies, television, magazines, books - despises the spirit of obedience. We are instead exhorted at every turn to "do our own thing," to look after "number one," to satisfy our every whim and desire. But an Orthodox Christian marriage, as we have said, is not part of secular or worldly society. Its goals and the goals of society are not merely at variance; they are diametrically opposed. The aim of Christian marriage is eternal life in Heaven with Jesus Christ; the aim of worldly society is pleasure, enjoyment of the here and now, and, especially, self-indulgence and self-will.

But it has been revealed through Scripture and Tradition, that obedience is actually a catalyst for Christian perfection - that is, obedience, submission, actually helps to speed the process of the struggle to acquire virtue in our lives. On the other hand, self-will greatly increases the passion of pride and eventually alienates an individual from a Christian way of thinking and living. Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky writes:

"If you wish to be a good, intelligent person and not a stupid sheep, just another member of the herd, then do not agree with your contemporaries who are perishing spiritually and physically; do not go by the path of self-will, but by the path of obedience. Only then will you be a person. Then, perhaps ... you alone ... will preserve your faith and your heart uncoarsened, an honorable soul, you will not be battered and storm-beaten like a weathercock, as are the majority of our contemporaries."

Christ Himself is the most perfect example of obedience, for it was through His obedience to the will of His Father that He went unto suffering and death for our sakes, and led us from sin to freedom and salvation.

We have all, at one time or another, seen examples of families where the wife "wears the pants." And what do we usually mean by that crude expression? We mean that the wife has taken over the position of leadership in the family and has tried to become the head of the husband. This may happen because the husband is very weak - or perhaps too selfish and preoccupied to assume his proper responsibilities; or it may be because the wife herself has a spiritual or emotional problem that causes her to desire authority and power. In such cases the woman often has a pushy and aggressive personality that manifests itself in her relationships outside the family as well. Such a wife lacks the most basic qualities of womanhood - gentleness, modesty of mind, and kindness. In such a situation

there are only feelings of despair, frustration, discontent and even anger among family members. One of the first things a priest must do when he is counseling a husband and wife who are in such a situation is to try and persuade the husband to begin assuming a true leadership role in his family, and he must also somehow persuade the wife to relinquish some of the authority that is not hers by right.

It should be said that these roles are not exclusive: there are times when it is appropriate for a wife to show strength, or for a husband to be obedient to his wife. In the most mature, highly developed and spiritual marriages, the relationship of a man and woman evolve into one of mutual obedience.

Characteristics of a Successful Marriage

Experience tells us that two people get married and immediately begin to discover how very different they are. The fact is, we don't really even begin to know ourselves until we are married. We live too close to ourselves. It really does take someone else to help us to see ourselves as we really are. One of the fringe benefits of a good marriage is that one acquires a built-in psychiatrist: a good spouse who cares enough to listen without having to be paid for it! We know that many emotional illnesses are a result of a person having some inner burden weighing on him which he had never been able to really share with someone else. In a good marriage, husband and wife share their burdens with one another, and this sharing is without reservation, without having to worry about how the other person will react, without having to keep up a front.

A marriage is not a missionary enterprise! It has enough problems and difficulties of its own without each partner trying to thoroughly change and remake the other. One of the most common and most serious illusions young marrieds have is that of marrying someone in the hope and expectation of changing that person.

True love does not force itself on anyone, and it does not force change; it evokes growth. How? First, by accepting one's spouse as he or she is. When we marry, we do not sign up to change the other person; we just agree to love him as he is. The best thing a husband can do to change his wife, or vice-versa, is to change himself, to correct his own faults - in keeping with Christ's instructions to His followers.

We think of disloyalty in a marriage as being when one spouse commits adultery. The fact is, we can be disloyal and unfaithful just as thoroughly by putting business, or parents, or hobbies, or someone else before our spouse. That, too, is disloyalty. And anyone who is not ready to place his spouse ahead of career, ahead of parents, ahead of friends, ahead of recreation, is not ready for marriage - and such a marriage will fail. Marriage is for adults, not for children.

If you fit the first button into the first hole of your suit, all the other buttons will fall in their proper place. But if the first button is placed in the second hole, nothing will come out right. It's a matter of putting first things in first place, of keeping priorities straight. Likewise in marriage. Husbands, if you put your wives first - and wives, if you put your husbands first - everything else will fall into its proper place in the marriage relationship.

There are many characteristics that a successful marriage has, but in my view the three most important are these:

- 1. Praise.** No marriage can prosper if there is no praise. Everyone in life needs to feel appreciated at some point by someone. And nothing can kill love faster than continual criticism. When we husbands and wives praise each other - in small ways as well as in big ways - we are also saying to one another: I love you; I value you. Praise nurtures a good marriage. And it is the one characteristic that is most lacking in modern marriages.
- 2. Forgiveness.** Forgiveness is essential for a happy marriage. When couples ask me, "Do you think our marriage can survive?" my answer is always, "Yes, providing you are willing to forgive each other." And this forgiveness should not be just after a major crisis in a family. It should be every single day. In a successful marriage, a husband and wife are constantly asking forgiveness of each other. When we don't do this, wounds don't get healed. We grow apart from each other. We grow cold towards one another, and we don't obtain the blessings that God sends down on husbands and wives that mutually forgive one another.
- 3. Time.** A successful marriage takes time. It does not happen overnight. It must grow. It is a long and difficult process; like all good things in life, it comes through considerable effort and struggle. Those of you not yet married, or on the verge of marriage, should remember this: we live in a society of instantaneous gratification - we want what we want, when we want it, and that when is now. And this impatience on our part has had a very destructive effect on marriages, even in the Orthodox Church. If we have no patience with each other, and are not willing to give many years to working out a successful marriage, then our marriage is doomed.

No marriage is so good that it cannot be better, and no marriage is so bad that it cannot be improved - provided that the persons involved are willing to grow together by God's grace toward the maturity of Christ, Who came "not to be served but to serve."

An absolute essential requirement for a good marriage is the capacity to grow up. Emotional immaturity is one of the greatest causes of failure in marriage. Of course, we all come to marriage with our private assortment of immaturities and hang-ups. But we have to learn to outgrow them. When I was a child, observed Saint Paul, I thought as a child. I spoke as a child, I understood as a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things. How essential it is to a happy marriage to put away childish things: irresponsibility, insisting on getting one's own way, egotism, lack of empathy, temper tantrums, jealousy. How important it is to pray every day: "O God, help me to grow up... to look beyond myself... to realize the needs and feelings of my wife/husband, and accept the responsibility God has laid upon me."

The Orthodox Christian Home

What is an Orthodox Christian home? To answer this question we must go back to square one and talk about the three main ingredients of true love. Our Faith teaches us that love is composed of three parts - not all of them of equal importance:

1. the physical
2. the mental
3. the spiritual

The physical is obvious: a boy is naturally attracted to a girl physically. This is the part of love which is usually very dominant early in a relationship. But there must also be a mental attraction between a man and a woman if they are going to have a successful marriage: by that I mean that they should have many interesting things to talk about, and genuinely enjoy each other's company, being interested in each other's total personality. This is an aspect of love that must last for the duration of

the marriage, until death. Sadly, it is often the first part of love that dies; and it dies simply because it has not been nurtured by both spouses. Thirdly, love consists of spiritual attraction. When two young people can talk about God and agree. They must be able to talk about the goals of life and agree; no wall should exist between them when they talk about the purpose of life. In other words, they have common goals. If they do not have common goals, if they believe differently about God, how can they seriously travel the path of life together? So, the most important ingredient of true love is this spiritual oneness.

What most often happens, however, is this: the spiritual attraction of love is completely overlooked or ignored by two people contemplating marriage. They experience a physical and mental attraction and they get married. They have never really dealt with the spiritual aspect, so that does not exist in their marriage, and soon, because of a lack of hard work and nurturing, the mental attraction that had originally existed begins to fade and finally dies. Then they are left with the physical attraction. And if there is nothing more substantial to base a marriage on than a physical attraction, then the first time a third person comes along to whom one of the partners is more strongly attracted, the marriage dissolves, and we have the tragedy of adultery being committed by one of both spouses and, ultimately, divorce.

Our society completely ignores the spiritual side of love, and is hostile even to the importance of a mental compatibility between a man and a woman; but the physical, the sexual - that's another matter: that is one aspect of love that our society exalts above all others. You have only to walk into a bookstore and count the number of sex manuals to get the point.

Orthodoxy, on the other hand, seeks to keep all three ingredients in a state of harmony, but the spiritual aspect governing the other two. If we remember that the primary purpose of a marriage is the same as that of the Church: the attainment of eternal salvation, then we can see why the spiritual part of a marriage must not only govern the physical and mental, but must be nurtured and encouraged to grow.

Sex, Children, Birth Control, Divorce

Now we come to a delicate issue: sex. It must be stated at the outset that the commandments and prohibitions concerning illicit sex in the Old Testament do not mean that there is something sinful about sex in itself. These commandments are like a fence that God has built around sex in order to protect it, because it is something sacred, something reserved by God for a special relationship - the marriage relationship - within which He gives the gift of life to our race. And there is something else: we know from revelation that our first parents in the Garden of Eden did not have sex. The sexual relationship between a man and a woman came into existence when Adam and Eve fell; for when they fell, their bodies took on the curse of suffering, sickness and, ultimately death, and it became necessary to reproduce their kind so that the race would continue until the time that God would send the Messiah. Sex, then, is a function of our fallen human nature, just as hunger is a function of fallen human nature. Neither the appetite for sex nor the appetite for food are in themselves sinful, but both can be abused and even perverted, and so God gave laws for us to use in governing these appetites (and others), so that they would not get out of order and cause harm. The sexual function of our nature, then, is something that dies when our bodies die - and that is why the New Testament says that there will be no marriage or giving in marriage in the Kingdom of Heaven. Our sexual nature is not eternal, and ceases when we die. In the same way, in Eden Adam and Eve did not hunger for food, nor were they sexually attracted to one another.

This is important to remember, because we have all grown up in a society which exalts sex and the sexual side of our nature to a very high degree, making sexual fulfillment the sign of the "good life," and despising celibacy or a controlled sexual appetite as being somehow Victorian, puritanical, or even mentally and emotionally unbalanced and unhealthy. Furthermore, we know that at the time woman was created, 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, LXX). This "suitable helper," woman, is of course much more than a helper; she is also bone of man's bone, and flesh of his flesh, and when a husband and wife come together in sexual intercourse, there is the coming together - the fulfillment and consummation- of two halves of a human person, two, which become one; as Scripture says, "and they shall be one flesh. This is the mystical side of our sexual nature. And this is why adultery is such a serious sin.

Just as we cannot give free rein to our appetite for food without doing severe damage to ourselves, undermining our health, and eventually even killing ourselves, so the sexual appetite must also be subject to control. Thus, even in the Old Testament we learn that married couples underwent times of abstinence from each other - usually during fast times, or before going to the Temple in Jerusalem. And this practice was affirmed in the New Testament. Saint Paul speaks of it in his first epistle to the Corinthians (7:5), when he recommends that man and wife abstain from each other at certain times of prayer and preparation. Consequently, to this day in the Orthodox Church, fast days and fast periods - such as Great Lent - are times not only of abstinence from certain foods, but of abstinence from each other as man and wife. Unfortunately, this ancient practice of our Faith is being neglected by more and more people today, who seem to think that the rules having to do with sexual activity are simply quaint old-world customs that have nothing to do with spiritual laws. Furthermore, it is the consistent teaching of the Church from the time of the Apostles, that a man and a wife abstain from one another on the evening before receiving Holy Communion and the evening after. Why? So that each individual can give himself over to prayer and preparation on the night before, and prayer and thanksgiving on the evening after Communion. This is a standard that we should be striving to attain; those of you who are not yet married should be aware of this now, and understand why the Church has these rules - not in order to be stuffy and puritanical, but in order to show us how to control and properly use our appetites and maintain harmony between the body and the soul in the marriage relationship.

We see, therefore, that just as the Church prescribes rules of fasting to keep in check our appetite for food, it similarly imposes restraints upon our sexual appetites, so that we do not ruin the delicate balance between soul and body.

This brings me to the most difficult and controversial question of all - what everyone wants to know about and no one wants to ask about: birth control.

Frankly, it is difficult to know where to start because the subject has many ramifications. Perhaps I might begin by mentioning how other churches tend to view this question. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, artificial birth control is forbidden under any circumstances. The reason is because the Roman Catholic Church officially teaches that the primary purpose and function of marriage is to have children; thus, procreation is the primary reason for sexual intercourse. This teaching is rooted in the Augustinian tradition, which treats sexuality, even within marriage, as basically sinful, and therefore procreation is held to be a necessary justification for the marriage act, as it serves to fulfill God's command to be fruitful and multiply. In Old Testament times there was a legitimate concern to perpetuate the human race. Today, however, that argument is unconvincing, and many Roman Catholics feel justified in disregarding it.

Protestants, on the other hand, had never developed a clear teaching on marriage and sex. Nowhere was birth control explicitly mentioned in the Bible, so when the Pill became available in the early '60s, they welcomed it and other reproductive technologies as milestones in the march of human progress. Very soon there came a proliferation of sex manuals, all developed on the notion that God had given man sexuality for pleasure. The primary purpose of the marriage act became not procreation but recreation, an attitude which simply fortified the Protestant teaching that God wants man to be personally fulfilled and happy, and therefore sexually gratified.

Even abortion was accepted. It was only in the mid '70s, when the Roe v. Wade debate heated up, and it became increasingly evident that abortion was murder that evangelical Protestants began to rethink their position. In the late '70s they came aboard the pro-life cause, where they remain in the forefront today. It was the issue of abortion that made them realize that human life must be protected from the moment of conception, and that contraception by means of abortifacients was impermissible. Meanwhile, liberal Protestant mainline churches remain committed to the pro-abortion position, and have no restrictions on birth control.

It is important for us to be aware of the teachings of these other churches on the subject of sexuality, for they can unconsciously affect our own views. We must be aware, furthermore, of the pervasive influence on our society of the sexual revolution unleashed by the availability of the Pill. The promiscuous attitude that it fostered still prevails today. Because of our culture's obsession with sex and sexual gratification, it is essential that we have a clear understanding of our Church's teaching concerning sexuality. This teaching is found in Scripture, in the canons of various Ecumenical and Local Councils, in the writings and commentaries of various Holy Fathers of the Church, who far from avoiding or tiptoeing around this issue, write about it very frankly and at length; and, finally, this teaching is mirrored in the lives of many of the saints (the parents of Saint Sergius of Radonezh come to mind).

The specific subject of birth control is less readily accessible; one cannot simply look it up in a concordance or index. It can, however, be extrapolated from the very clear teachings of the Church on abortion, on marriage, and on asceticism. Before plunging into a discussion on the subject, we should point out that the Orthodox Church is not as dogmatic here as the Roman Catholic Church, and it is very much a pastoral issue where there may be multiple considerations. Nevertheless, liberty should not be used for license, and we would all do well to keep before us the age-old standard given us by the Church.

Having said all this, what exactly is the Church's teaching concerning birth control?

The practice of artificial birth control - by which is meant "the pill," condoms, or any other kind of device - is actually condemned by the Orthodox Church. The Church of Greece, for example, in 1937 issued a special encyclical just for this purpose, to condemn birth control.

Likewise, the Romanian and Russian Churches, to name just two others among many - have more than once, in former times, spoken out against this practice. It is only in recent times, only in the generation since World War II, that some local Churches (the Greek Archdiocese in this country, for example) have begun to teach that it "might" be all right to practice birth control in certain circumstances, as long as this is discussed with the priest beforehand and has his agreement.

This teaching of our Church, however, should not be construed as being the same kind of teaching as is found in the Roman Catholic Church. The consistent teaching of the Church of Rome has been and

is that having children is the primary function of marriage. This is not the teaching of the Orthodox Church. Orthodoxy, by contrast, gives the first place to the spiritual purpose of marriage - which is the mutual salvation of the husband and wife. Each is to help and encourage the other in save his or her soul. Each exists for the other, as a companion, a helper, a friend.

But secondarily, children are the natural result of a marriage, and, until relatively recent times, they were the expected and much-desired result of a marriage. Children were sought as a fruit of the marriage union, a proof that a man and a woman had become one flesh, and this was always seen as a very great blessing on a marriage. It was considered a great tragedy, a great sorrow, if the marriage was childless; so much so that, although the Church always permitted a childless couple to continue to live together as man and wife, if a wife was barren or a husband was impotent, it was accepted by the Church as grounds for divorce, so that either would be free to enter into a marriage relationship with another, in the hope of having children.

Nowadays, of course, our society considers children more of a nuisance than a blessing, and many couples wait one, two, three, or even more years before they have a child. Indeed, some decide never to have children. And so, although in the Orthodox Church the first purpose of marriage is not merely to have children, the desire of most young marrieds today to wait before having children is considered sinful. As a priest, I must say to any couple that approaches me for marriage that, if they are not prepared and willing to conceive and bear a child, without interfering with the will of God by means of artificial birth control, then they are not ready to be married. If they are not prepared to accept the natural and blessed fruit of their union - that is, a child - then it is clear that their primary purpose in marrying is to have legalized fornication. This is a very serious problem today, possibly the most serious and the most difficult a priest has to deal with when counseling a young couple.

I've used the term "artificial" birth control because I want to point out that the Church does permit the use of certain natural methods for avoiding conception, but these methods may not be used without the knowledge and blessing of the priest, and only if the physical and moral well-being of the family demands it. These methods are acceptable to the Church under the right circumstances and can be used by a couple without burdening their consciences, because they are "ascetical" methods; that is, they have to do with self-denial, self-control. Those methods are three:

1. Total abstinence. In very pious families this is not at all as uncommon, either today or yesterday, as one might think. It often happens that after an Orthodox husband and wife have brought a number of children into this world, they agree to abstain from one another, both for spiritual and worldly reasons, living the rest of their lives in peace and harmony as brother and sister. This has happened in the lives of saints - most notably in the life of Saint John of Kronstadt. As a Church which very much cherishes and protects monastic life, we Orthodox have no fear of celibacy, and no silly ideas about how we will not be fulfilled or happy if we cease to have sexual activity with our spouse.
2. A limitation on sexual relations. This of course already happens with the Orthodox couple that sincerely tries to observe fully all of the fast days and fasting periods of the year.
3. Finally, the Church allows the use of the so-called "rhythm" or the more recently developed Natural Family Planning method, about which ample information is available today.

In former times, when poor parents knew nothing about contraceptions, they relied exclusively on God's will - and this should in fact be an example for us today. Children were born and they accepted

the last one just as they had the first, saying, "God gave the child; He will also give what we need for the child." Such was their faith, and it often happened that the last child proved to be the greatest blessing of all.

Now, what about the size of a family? Well, one thing that has a tremendous affect on how we view this is the fact that over the last one hundred years we have changed from a mostly agrarian or agricultural society, to a mostly urban and industrial society. This means that whereas in previous times large families were actually needed in order to run the farm or ranch - and there was always enough food and work to go around - today we have the opposite problem, and it is sometimes very difficult to support a very large family, although there are people who manage to do it. From a strictly spiritual point of view, one should try to have a large family so that the family will be strong and durable and full of love, with all of its members bearing the burdens of life together. A large family accustoms children to being concerned about others, makes them more sensitive, etc. And while a small family might be able to provide more of this world's goods for each child, a small family does not at all guarantee a good upbringing. Single children are sometimes the most difficult of all, for they often grow up spoiled and self-centered. No general rule can be given about this here, but we should be prepared and expect to have as many children as God will send and the moral and physical health of the mother and the family as a whole will allow, always staying in close touch with one's priest on these matters.

We must be careful, however, not to over-emphasize this whole business of having children, having a certain number, etc. Saint John Chrysostom says, "Giving birth to children is a matter of nature. Far more important is the parents' task of educating their children's hearts in virtue and piety." Indeed, this puts the emphasis back where it belongs, rather than on negative things about birth control and family size. For what the Church wants us to understand and remember is that the children we bring into the world do not belong to us; they belong to God. We did not give them life; rather, God, using us as His instruments, called them into existence. In a certain way, we parents are really only babysitters for God's children. And so our greatest responsibility as parents is to bring up our children "in the Lord," so that they come to know, love, and serve their Heavenly Father.

Eternal salvation is the whole goal of our earthly life. It is a goal that requires a constant striving, for it is not easy to be a Christian. The influences of our society make it extremely hard. The parish church and the home are the only bastions where God can be praised in spirit and in truth. Our lives, our marriages, and our homes will remain as inferior, poor wine, however, like the wine that was served first at the wedding feast at Cana, if we do not actively seek to be mature men and women, mature husbands and wives, and mature Orthodox Christians, willing to accept the responsibilities of the position in life to which we have been called. And it is only after we work - hard - at preparing ourselves, as individuals, and our families and home in order to receive Christ, that our lives, our marriages, and our homes will become like the good wine which Christ miraculously made from water at that joyous wedding. Amen.

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