

## The Purpose of Marriage



### Marriage

Man was created as a communion of persons, male and female, according to the image of the Holy Trinity, which is a communion of persons; "and God created man, according to the image of God he created him, male and female He made them"; "and He took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man He made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for out of man she was taken""(Gen. 1,27. 2, 21-23).

Here we have two persons who constitute "one flesh". About this unity God prophesies: "For this cause shall a man forsake his father and mother and shall cleave unto his wife and the two shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2,24).

In the New Testament marriage is realized "in the Lord" (I Cor. 7,39) and is received in the Body of Christ, the Church. Just as Christ is the head of the Church, in like manner the husband is the head of his wife. We are all "members of His body, from His flesh and from His bones" (Eph. 5, 22-32).

The conjunction of the "one flesh" is strengthened within the unity of the Body of Christ, since the Christian marriage has its reference "to Christ and to the Church". It is for this reason that the sacrament of Marriage, which is performed within the Church, is not a private or family matter of the couple, but an event in the life of the Church; it is to this event that the hymn of the Church refers when it states:

*"Rejoice, O Isaiah!*

*A Virgin is with child,  
and shall bear a Son, Emmanuel,  
both God and man;  
and Orient is his name; whom magnifying we call the Virgin blessed".*



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According to St. John Chrysostom, Marriage is "a great compensation for man's mortality", because through Marriage the "succession of offspring" is accomplished. With the gift of Marriage God sought to "soothe" the harshness of the penalty of death and "to remove the fierce mask of death", and thus prefigure the victory over death, i.e. the resurrection.

Undoubtedly Marriage is also a "haven of prudence" for those who want to make good use of it, because as this same Holy Father of the Church points out, it does not allow nature to become bestial. Marriage is the "break water" of desire for in marriage is to be found "lawful sexual contact" i.e. "blessed union". In this sense Marriage grants serenity to man (cf. I Cor. 7, 1-2). Here, according to St. John Chrysostom, conjugal communion does not have as its purpose only the bringing of children into the world, but also the combatting of the temptation of the Devil (I Cor. 7,5,9).

Further in Marriage we have the mutual fulfilment of the spouses. The exclusive place that each of the spouses has in the life of the other and the bond of love create unique and unrepeatable presuppositions of mutual influence and edification.

Marriage, however, has yet a deeper meaning. In Marriage the spouses overcome the separation brought about among men because of the fall (Gen. 3, 12) and they return to the awareness of the one nature (Gen. 2, 23). Out of love, God ordained Marriage so as to have love as its goal and purpose. In the beginning love exists between the two spouses and as Marriage progresses love continually widens so that man can overcome all the more his egocentrism and embrace with his love his fellow men. Love continuously grows and widens but "never fails" (I Cor. 13,8).

Of course in the Kingdom of heaven there are no carnal bonds, or any "helps" for love (Matth. 22,30).

However, in this life Marriage constitutes a way for man to be taught love. This way is characterized by Holy Scripture as a "gift" or "charisma". But it is not the only way. There is also the gift of celibacy:

"But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind" (I Cor. 7,7). Yet the two gifts have the same purpose: the denial of one's own will and the "inner opening up" to love for God and for one's neighbor; the way of marriage however is more philanthropic and is helped by the natural bond that it entails.

In the Church everything is sanctified and transformed into spirit, even bodily union; "those things which you do according to the flesh, these are spiritual; for you do all things in Christ", says St. Ignatius and thereby characterizes as spiritual all the reality of conjugal life.

Already from early Christian times, the Christian Marriage was blessed by the Church. St. Ignatius ( +110) instructed those about to enter into Marriage "to enter into the union with the consent of the bishop, so that the Marriage may be in accordance with the Lord, and not in accordance with desire. Let all things be done in honor of God". Without the Marriage's being blessed by the bishop or the presbyter who is in union with the bishop, the Marriage is not according to the Lord but according to desire, for it does not refer "to Christ and to the Church" and was not taken up by the Church.

"How can we describe the success of that Marriage which the Church concludes, and which is strengthened by the offering of the Holy Eucharist and which is sealed by a blessing and which angels proclaim and the Father certifies?" writes Tertullian concerning the Marriage that was performed in the primitive Church within the framework of the Holy Eucharist.

The Orthodox Church condemns extra-marital relations. As St. Paul also states, our bodies are members of Christ and no one is allowed to make them "members of a harlot" (I Cor. 6,16). Extra-marital relations do not simply violate the love between the two spouses, but also destroy the unity of the "one Body"; they rend it asunder and constitute an insult extending to the Body of Christ. Extra-marital relations destroy the Marriage; there no longer exists a structured body; it has broken up, and the Marriage has already dissolved even before the formal issuance of a divorce.

Save for death and adultery, there is no separation for the truly Christian married couple. Just as in the Church there is but one Head, Christ, so too in Marriage the husband is the head. Marriage is a "Mystery and a type or image of the love that Christ showed to the Church", says St. Gregory the Theologian. He adds: " For this reason then the husband as the head, is obliged to know how to heal the body; even if there are countless wounds, the head never cuts itself off from the body: "Do not, therefore, sever your wife, for she holds the place of the body. This is why blessed Paul used to say: 'husbands ought to love their wives as their

bodies". "Just as it is an abominable thing for one to inflict cuts upon his body, so it is an abominable thing for one to separate his wife".

If the Church acquiesces to the granting of a divorce or to a second marriage, it does so to avoid even greater evils.

Indicative is the fact that the Church has a special Service "for a Second Marriage". The prayers of this service are exhortations to repentance, and the service is carried out "without pomp". One of these prayers states: "O Master, Lord our God...vouchsafe unto them the contrition of the Publican, the tears of the Harlot, the confession of the Thief; that repenting with all their heart, and doing all Thy commandments in peace and oneness of mind, they may be deemed worthy also of Thy heavenly kingdom...".

In the same service there is yet another prayer that clearly underlines the fact that the purpose of the second Marriage is the aversion of worse evils and the avoidance of a complete moral derailment due to human weakness: "O Lord Jesus Christ...forgive the iniquities of Thy servants; because they, being unable to bear the heat and burden of the day and the hot desires of the flesh, are now entering into the bond of a second Marriage..."

The Church does not teach in favor of the separation of the spouses, nor does it urge the faithful to divorce or to enter into a second Marriage. Before every "dissolution" of a Marriage, the bishop and his collaborators make every effort and exercise their spiritual influence to reconcile and reunite the couple.

Finally, it should be noted that the Orthodox Church condemns pre-marital relations, even in those instance where marriage follows. According to the Fathers of the Church, these pre-marital bonds which have not been assumed by the Church and hence have not been blessed, should be dissolved. Pre-marital relations do not constitute a preparation for marriage; they divide the Body of Christ and pollute the Church.

St. Basil says that fornication is not marriage, and he adds that such a licentious relationship can never be the "beginning of Marriage"- "Therefore," the Holy Father concludes, "if possible those united in the bond of fornication, ought to be separated - this is the best possible thing. If, however, they desire in every way to cohabit, then they are to be given the penance for fornication. Let them be allowed to cohabit, lest something worse occur".