

On Marital Relations

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

In 2019, His Beatitude Patriarch John X and the Holy Synod of Antioch released an important pastoral letter entitled [*Family, the Joy of Life*](#). This important letter was blessed, authorized and published by the Patriarch and Holy Synod and proclaims the teaching of our Orthodox Faith on family life. As such, it is a great help to all Orthodox faithful to understand the teaching of the Holy Church with regards to family life and so many of the issues that we face in the world today.

There is much confusion in contemporary culture about sexuality, marriage, and parenthood. The most basic assumptions of morality and religion about the relationship between man and woman are being called into question severely. In order for Orthodox Christians to live faithfully in today's context, we must remember how the Lord often used the wedding feast as a sign of the heavenly kingdom (e.g., Matt. 22:1-14) and also turned water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11). As St. Paul taught, the relationship between husband and wife is a sign of the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:21-33). Marriage is so spiritually profound that the consummation of the heavenly kingdom is described as the wedding feast of the Lamb in St. John's Apocalypse (Rev. 19:6-9).

The use of such marital imagery is not accidental, for the original "one flesh" union of man and woman in Paradise was shattered by their disobedience as a paradigmatic sign of the fall. The narratives of the Old Testament, the pastoral challenges addressed by St. Paul, and common human experience to this day all bear witness to the tragic brokenness of this relationship. As the New Adam, the Lord made possible the healing of this troubled union at the request of the Theotokos, the New Eve, at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. With His blessing, marriage has been restored as a path for man and woman to return to Paradise and as a sign of the salvation of the world.

In the Orthodox wedding service, the bride and groom are crowned in the Name of the Holy Trinity. Their union is not merely a legal contract or social institution, but a vocation to grow in communion with Christ in every aspect of their common life. Joined together as “one flesh” in the Body of Christ, they are called to the martyrdom of dying to the slavery of their passions through their sacrificial, faithful love for one another. The desires of their hearts are purified as they learn to love and serve Christ through and in one another. The many petitions for the blessing of children in the marriage ceremony reflect the expansive nature of the love of God in which they participate as embodied persons. The opportunities for healing from the passions through the ascetical struggles of submitting to one another, caring for their children, putting the interests of the family before their own, and conveying the hospitable mercy of the Lord to their neighbors are virtually endless. As the pastoral letter of our Antiochian Patriarchate *Family, the Joy of Life* states, “Conjugal love is not exclusively expressed in sexual relations, but in everyday mutual love and respect and self-giving that touches upon every aspect of life, bestowing upon it its glorious splendor” (paragraph 33). St. John Chrysostom taught that husbands and wives who respond faithfully to the opportunities for growth in holiness through marriage may attain a level of “perfection [that] will rival the holiest of monks” (Homily 20¹).

As implied by the petitions for childbearing in the marriage service, Orthodoxy does not teach that sexual marital intimacy is in any way sinful. Neither does the Church teach that intercourse in matrimony is merely tolerated for the sake of conceiving children, as does the Augustinian tradition of western Christianity. Nowhere in the New Testament does one find a denigration of sex in marriage or the view that it requires justification through procreation. St. Paul does warn, however, against excessive abstinence from marital relations: “Do not deprive each other, except by mutual consent and for a time, so you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again, so that Satan will not tempt you through your lack of self-control” (1 Cor. 7:5).

¹ [Popular Patristics Series](#), volume 7, pages 61–62.

The discipline of marital fasting in Orthodoxy should be embraced freely by mutual agreement between the spouses in light of their current state of spiritual maturity, not as a matter of rigid law. Especially in this most intimate dimension of married life, misguided ascetical strictness may have disastrous consequences that are counterproductive to the healing and wellbeing of all concerned.

While children are certainly one of the great blessings of marriage and the Church encourages couples to “be fruitful and multiply,” there are no canons in the Church that forbid the use of non-abortifacient means of birth control by married couples—and some barrier method contraception was known in antiquity. The canons of the Church have detailed descriptions of sexual offences, but none limiting births apart from the condemnation of abortion. What some identify as the rare patristic condemnations of contraception reflect the identification of them with abortion considering the limited medical knowledge of those times. As *Family, the Joy of Life* teaches concerning family planning, “each family prayerfully makes its own decision in consultation with the family’s spiritual father or parish priest on the basis of its spiritual, health, economic and social circumstances” (paragraph 33). Doing so reflects the freedom of the spouses as persons who together offer themselves to God as best they can in light of their spiritual maturity and the practical challenges that they face.

Through their free cooperation with the gracious blessing of the Lord, every dimension of the relationship between husbands and wives may become an epiphany of the salvation of the world. With a common life oriented to the heavenly kingdom, spouses journey together along a path for the healing of their souls and the fulfillment of God’s gracious purposes for their children and their family members and neighbors. Those who embrace the struggles and joys of marriage in this way will prepare themselves to accept the invitation to become guests at the wedding feast of the Lamb.