

Transfiguring Voluptuous Choice: An Eastern Orthodox Approach to Marriage as Spiritual Path

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When St. Irenaeus in the early second century observed, “the glory of God is a human being fully alive,” he was referring to the fruit of becoming in the likeness of the divine Image revealed in Jesus Christ through whom each of us receives the gift of our personhood. All the world is *personal* Thou, a manifestation of divine eros, a gift of joy for those who experience it with illumined heart, and a wound to every heart that shares Christ’s cross of enduring love for a creation that revels in the life given without relationship to the life-giver.

The purpose of life is neither to resist it nor to indulge in it, but to transfigure it in order that we may live it in its fullness. There is a paradox here. Our relationship to creation itself, in the multitude of its wondrous forms, *is* the proverbial apple in the Garden of Eden, which is indeed voluptuous and to be desired as an expression of divine joy. Where, then, is the problem?

Marriage as Dialogical Reciprocity

To taste the sweetness of life and in marriage to come to know the “communion of otherness”¹ revealed through the Holy Trinity, according to Orthodox patristic witnesses, one

¹ Cf. John Zizoulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

must first ask for a blessing. In the Garden of Eden, dust becomes responsive to the divine breath, awakening the potential for returning the embrace of the beloved as *person*. This means being willing to engage in a life-long struggle to “free ourselves from ignorance, and from evil and making the voluptuous choice,”² the urge to “take and eat” apart from the blessing of God’s gift of personhood.

Being in the likeness of God, able to feed on and enjoy creation illumined by the uncreated light is a potential, not a guarantee. It requires a response-ability to Spirit and earth simultaneously. Entered into, apart from grace, without blessing, both ascetical restraint and libertine self-indulgence render us impersonal and antihuman. Only the presence of Christ is a guarantee of authentic humility³ which is the pre-requisite for love born of divine grace.

Marriage as a spiritual path moves along the narrow and paradoxical way of dialogical reciprocity – like the call and response of improvisational jazz – where the divine energies and the vital sap of daily life in the world converge in a never ending liturgy. We become persons through this dialogical breathing between heaven and earth as we encounter Christ on the “Emmaus way” of authentic meeting with *otherness*. “It is not good for *persons* to be alone.”⁴ In a monologue, I am always dying.

Sharing the Lord’s Name between Us

Pure-hearted abandon to the Christian path is life-giving because it is in harmony with creation as God intends. It is *blessed*. God calls to each of us by name personally, and in answering “Here I AM,” we share in the gift of God’s own life. When we attempt to say “I AM” alone, without blessing, we use the Lord’s name in vain.

² St. Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata or Miscellanies*, bk. 1, ch. 17, bk. In *ANF*:319 (Google book).

³ “Where Christ is not present, there exists false humility”: Archimandrite Arsenios (Papacioc), “Eternity Hidden in the Moment” *The Orthodox Word* 281 (2011): 289.

⁴Cf. Gen. 2:18

The Orthodox Church holds marriage in honor as a mystery of the Church – a means of grace uniting heaven and earth – where the word and action of the Lord turn ordinary water into the wine of the Spirit creating an effervescence in the soul of the partakers. Two persons together answer one another’s call of love with the Lord’s name, discovering together a third person in their midst.

Gospel evidence is that both men and women greatly loved Jesus and at times wept for him and he for them. The stories he told were life-reorienting and expressive of divine love in the ordinary conditions of life. Whether he was playing with children or scandalizing rule-bound, uptight religious authorities by departing from prescribed rituals, he was always affirming life. Through our Lord’s eyes and along his path, whores, adulterers, tax-collectors, fornicators, and “five-time losers” became saints, while the lack of love and mercy of the culturally inscribed, religiously “correct” and guilefully pious was artfully exposed.

Self-righteousness of any kind is a detriment to the bright sunshine of *sobornost*⁵ where, as it is implied in the Lord’s Prayer, the neighbor shares being with one’s own self. In Christ we have the supreme paradox that he who was most pure practiced the greatest *economia*⁶ so that untouchables and outcasts as well as social elites found themselves drawn to him, testifying by their responses that his life was already in them, hidden like a seed waiting for the waters of repentance and humility to be called forth to germinate in the light of Christ’s love.

It is often overlooked that whatever dimension of love we are talking about – *philia*, *agape* or *storge*⁷ – divine eros is the root of them all. Eros is the wellspring of the soul’s deep year-

⁵ A Russian term used by Orthodox lay theologian Aleksey Khomiakov and others, distinguishing individualism from the freedom and diversity of persons within a shared communion – the mark of Christian community.

⁶ A lessening and/or adapting of a prescribed penance as a means of healing a person and bringing the heart back to life following some kind of sin.

⁷ C.S. Lewis in his book *The Four Loves* used these Greek words to tease out the dimensions of friendship, selfless love, affection, and desire.

ning for communion with God and the creatures of God⁸ as well as the energy of repentance.⁹ All of these actions involve turning toward the beloved and making a free embrace of the primary condition of authentic human life which is made explicit in the prayer, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” As St. Anthony observed, it is only through responsiveness to God that I can become myself. Obedience to God is nothing other than the joy of God’s own love pouring through us for the whole world and every living creature in it. We become ourselves by responding to this, as Jesus did, in every nook and cranny of our lives, however seemingly insignificant at first glance.

Voluptuous Beauty as God-Bearing Image

Icons are a familiar expression of Orthodox worship. They reveal the person of God represented in and through them. To kiss an icon is to transmit one’s love and veneration to the one represented in it. If you remove an icon from the church, away from the call and response of worship, it becomes merely a “piece of art,” an object, however beautiful it may be in and of itself, capable of reflecting only the idolatry of the voluptuous desire projected onto it, instead of the presence of God who shines through both. Like a person reduced to an object, the icon is *defaced*, no longer acting as a messenger of God’s love that arises in the ‘between’ where I and Thou meet, revealing the uniqueness of each one.

Voluptuous beauty without capacity to function as a “window into heaven” is likewise “defaced” and becomes a means of enslavement rather than liberation. It is what happens to our relationship with the world and each other when we fail to honor the person as God-bearing image. The price of admission to the mystery of marriage is an on-going dialogical en-

⁸ “Being Himself desire and love, He moves towards us while, as desirable and beloved, He moves all those creatures toward Himself who are capable of desiring and loving”: St. Maximos the Confessor, cited in R. Amis, *A Different Christianity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 212.

⁹ Archimandrite G. Capsanis, *The Eros of Repentance* (Massachusetts: Praxis Institute Press, 1994).

counter with God through embrace of the ordinary as iconic *and* a willingness to endure all things for love, for apart from love, there is nothing beautiful.

Grace is gift that becomes active through vulnerable encounter, fulfilled by being received co-creatively through call and response as in the divine and cosmic liturgies. Beauty is revealed by love and protected by the asceticism that refuses to dominate, seduce, or coerce in order to force an unwanted encounter. Grasping at the gift while missing or refusing the giver is a monologue that leaves no room for the mystery of love. Can the moon shine without welcoming the sun's light? This dialogical mystery is the essence of an Eastern Orthodox approach to marriage and to life in the world.

Grasping the World without Blessing

The problem of living begins with our refusal to leave the world and one another free by first offering all to God in thanksgiving for blessing, *before* presuming to "take and eat," however enticing and desirable it all may seem. According to St. Clement, freedom to become ourselves comes from being able to "withhold our assent from those delusive fantasies," of self-centeredness that robs life of the reality that can only be entered into through ecstatic relationship with God. Fantasies are an indication of monologue which is a failure of the asceticism of love that protects the freedom of the other to be "other" and a failure of repentance that allows us to recognize and encounter the other *as* uniquely other.

Orthodox teaching holds that the forms of the created world as well as desire for those forms, reveal their true nature as icons only when approached in relationship to God. Otherwise they function as idols. St. Maximos the Confessor explains,

God is the producer and generator of tenderness and eros. He has set outside himself what was within himself, namely, creatures. Which is why it is said of him: God is Love. The Song of Songs calls him *agape* or "sensual pleasure," and "desire," which means *eros*. In

so far as the *eros* desire originates from him, he can be said to be the moving force of it, since he generated it. But in so far as he is himself the true object of the love, he is the moving force in others who look to him and possess according to their own nature the capacity for desire.¹⁰

Eros is best demonstrated and most perfectly evidenced in the self-emptying passion of our Lord who values humanity and all creation enough to risk being put to death in order to open up the possibility of eternal life by receiving into ourselves the life he offers us for our own. With regard to eros, Christian Tradition has from the beginning acknowledged two paths: one celibate (which includes monasticism) and the other expressed genitally in and through the life-long fidelity of marriage. Both paths grace the Church and are expressive of divine love that suffers willingly in order to bring forth abundant life in all.

Purification and Redirection of Eros

Marriage and monasticism are both paths vowed to God and to the world, each involving the interplay of ascetical restraint and eros lived out in different conditions and expressed in different ways.¹¹ The action of ascetical restraint and turning to God in both marriage and monasticism involves “the purification and redirection of eros, the chastity of a pure heart, without which no one can either see God or truly love his neighbor.”¹² For at the root of both, the relationship with God

¹⁰ *On the Divine Names*.

¹¹ “Tell her that you love her more than your own life, because this present life is nothing, and that your only hope is that the two of you pass through this life in such a way that in the world to come, you will be united in perfect love. . . . Pray together at home and go to church; when you come back home, let each ask the other the meaning of the readings and the prayers. . . . If your marriage is like this, your perfection will rival the holiest of monks.” St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 20 on Ephesians*.

¹² K.N. Leontiev, “Third Letter from Athos” cited by V. Moss, *The Theology of Eros* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2010), 227–228.

is primary, and to the degree that this is not central, all the rest misses the mark. Archimandrite Amilianos explains:

My need for love and companionship is essentially a longing for God, and not even my marriage will be of any help to me if I do not have the Church for my spouse. Marriage, like monasticism, is a longing for the infinite; it is not the satisfaction of a biological drive, but an orientation of the self toward the eschaton. Marriage is a journey, an ascent toward the perfection of paradise.¹³

As Orthodox Christians discussing marriage and sexuality we begin with fullness of life offered by God, with the recognition that the saints are those who are most fully alive, most human and capable of love, mercy, and forgiveness by virtue of being most deeply permeated by the Holy Spirit which enables them to appreciate and value the beauty and worth of all persons. The mark of healthy eros in a follower of Jesus Christ is that he or she turns toward the world (and those in the world) with the same self-denying impassioned love and mercy which God evidences in Christ, “the lamb slain from the foundation of the world,”¹⁴ for the sake of the world.

From an Orthodox Christian perspective, the mark of a healthy marriage is that, more than compatible personalities and chemical attraction, the marital relationship is becoming rooted in the deeper spiritual forces of life that arise over a lifetime of forgiveness and loving sacrifice. Author Ann Tyler in one of her novels poetically expresses this discovery after the fact:

I knew couples who had been married almost forever – tending each other’s illnesses, dealing with money troubles or the daughter’s suicide or the grandson’s drug addiction. And I was beginning to suspect that it made no difference whether they’d married the right

¹³ Archimandrite Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit: Reflections on Life in God* (Athens, Greece: Indiktos, 2009), 355.

¹⁴ Rev. 13:8.

person. You're just with who you're with. You've signed on with her, put in a half a century with her, grown to know her as well as you know yourself, and she *becomes* the right person, or the only person. I wish someone had told me that earlier; I'd have hung on then.¹⁵

Both partners in the marriage find one another anew in this way as each turns toward the other and toward the larger community with the passion that God has for us all in Christ.

The power of grace to transform marriage and the power of marriage to transform our lives through the encounter with Christ between us is poignantly expressed by Dee Jaquet, an Orthodox pastoral counselor who recognizes the link between God's desire for humanity and humanity's desire for God that is at the heart of marriage and faith:

Life is voluptuous, wild in its own transfigured way of being the untamed power of God at heart. That is why no one can ever really leave Orthodoxy once it's been tasted. It is the sweetness of the extreme love of God and when that sweetness imbues your marriage, you can never voluntarily choose to leave it either.¹⁶

For eros to be free to play, the heart must stand firm, uniting body and mind, both in joyful celebration as well as sacrificial difficulty where hell seems to prevail. Otherwise eros can be diverted from its course, turning back on itself in two forms of monologue: projections on to the other (auto-erotic fetishes, infatuations and paraphilias, relating merely to a manifestation of the fantasy "woman" or "man" rather than to a unique *person*) or by narcissistically incorporating others without recognizing uniquely personal boundaries (adultery, prostitution, fornication, judgmentalism). Both extremes are forms of monological self love and spiritual beguilement; the soul, bereft of encounter with the other, is starved of the vital nourishment of the divine energies as it begins to be dominated

¹⁵ From *A Patchwork Planet* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

¹⁶ Personal correspondence with author, May 3, 2012.

by various cravings of the body in the form of afflictive passions which intensify in direct proportion to the soul's increasing emptiness as it falls back on itself, an I without a Thou.

Asceticism and Fidelity to Love

The Islamic mystical poet Rumi observed, "Wine got drunk with us, not the other way around."¹⁷ This is why we joyfully embrace the boundaries of ascetical restraint, whether in celibacy or in marital sexual fidelity in order to make room for the joy of feasting on divine energies of eros which happens only where relationship with God is not sundered by sin. As Jesus said to the apostles, "I am the vine and you are the branches. Cut off from me you can do nothing."¹⁸ The wine of the grape becomes "drunk" with the Spirit only when it reaches fruition in the mystery of the Eucharist that brings the divine life into full union with the created order through the royal priesthood of all those found in Christ.

When Russian Orthodox theologian Sergius Bulgakov summed up patristic counsel to "kill the flesh in order to acquire a body,"¹⁹ he meant avoiding the enstatic compulsive slavery of drunkenness, licentiousness, avarice, pride and other sins so that the heart can be increasingly free to experience the joy and freedom of the virtues of fidelity to our vow of chastity (whether married or celibate), poverty (with regard to eros diverted to material possession or spiritual hedonism) and obedience, (which is love's surrender of self-will and self-indulgence for the sake of the beloved).

The human heart is made for the joy and sacrifice of love that arises through experiencing the world as an icon of Christ and offering one's life in return, as God offers his in Christ to us. St. Maximos the Confessor points out that the body and all human appetites and powers find their authenticity in this way. "Love is the unfailing pleasure and indivisible union of those

¹⁷ From "When Grapes Turn to Wine: Versions of Rumi," trans. Robert Bly (Somerville, MA: Yellow Moon Press, 1986).

¹⁸ John 15:15.

¹⁹ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 61.

who participate through their longing in what is good by nature.”²⁰ This includes the couple united in marriage.

Bodily love, feasting, keeping vigil, praying, fasting, or leaping and dancing half-naked like King David before the Ark of the Covenant, are all fueled by divine yearning for life-giving communion with God, creation, and humankind. The slightest admixture of seeking to possess, dominate or seduce another – to have power over the beloved in any way – is rooted in faithlessness and fear and stifles joy; it is compulsive in order to overcome the shame inherent in actions that proceed apart from God’s blessing. This is always a betrayal of human freedom and a refusal to stand in relation to the Beloved as “Thou” who ultimately remains a mystery revealed only through grace. Whatever betrays this grace fragments and divides both the body personal and the body politic, reducing each to a mere abstraction, a totalized version of an “it” and therefore a commodity that can be used for purposes less than God intends, to serve our individual self-centered whims. In this way, spiritual growth is arrested by slavery to carnality, bereft of the joy of the divine, binding the soul with a shame it seeks to escape through further avoidance inherent to its monologue.

The Spiritual Bond of Marriage

Contrast this with the doxological vision of St. Symeon the New Theologian who describes how his spiritual father, Symeon the Pious, was not ashamed in the presence of his own or anyone else’s nakedness, “for he had the whole of Christ, he was himself and all the members of his body Christ, and he was seeing each of the members of the body of anyone else as Christ.” For St. Symeon, as for his spiritual father, this meant “we become members of Christ ... the arm Christ and the foot Christ ... do not say I am blaspheming ... and my finger Christ and my penis [and vagina] Christ.”²¹ Or St. John Climacus who describes someone of great purity in his own day, who

²⁰ Third Century of Various Texts, (31).

²¹ P. Faros, *Functional and Dysfunctional Christianity* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), 116.

when he saw a person with a beautiful body, was moved to tears and glorified God. St. John observed that such a person, if he always feels and behaves this way “has risen immortal before the general resurrection.”²²

The passionate euphoria of “falling in love” does not last because it is largely the result of chemicals that temporarily change the homeostasis of the brain. After a couple years, these chemicals subside and a different relationship is forged which is accompanied by a deeper commitment to one another rooted in real love that involves the deep will of the heart that is vowed to God. It is by intentionally and consciously remaining faithful to the marriage over a lifetime through the dry times when we do not have hormonal euphoria (just as we do in prayer when we don’t have the spiritual consolations that make it enjoyable), that we eventually grow beyond our neurotic conflicts into full humanity where the joy of eros is newly evident and we rediscover one another in a richer and deeper way according to the growing depth of the heart.

In light of this, the ideals of marriage offered up for popular consumption by Hollywood fail to inspire. Contemporary films in America portray love in terms of bodily appetites that lack moorings in the deep knowing, self-sacrificial care, mercy and forgiveness between spouses that parallels the life-long commitment to the relationship between God and creation which both marriage and monasticism are designed to preserve and enhance. Apart from a heart vowed to God and without the ascetical sacrifice that evidences such a vow, only lust results – depersonalized eros – the fizzle of heat in the body without fire in the heart and *theosis* does not occur. While the so-called “sexual revolution” has the appearance of liberation from restraint on the surface, it conceals an atmosphere of shame-based sexuality that must be compulsive in order to bring together depersonalized bodies without hearts and wills that deeply know each other personally in the context of the whole community in God.

On the other hand, in a similar way, the life-enhancing, joy-protecting function of asceticism is lost when it lacks root

²² *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 15.60.

in faith, love, and humility. St. Basil observed somewhere that asceticism without worship, without humility before God, makes you a demon. This is expressed in the false, distorted, often body-hating control, whose motive is to provide artificial light for the prideful ego while the heart remains small and frightened, e.g. “I fast therefore I am better than” or in the lustful aesthete who is meticulous about observing the minutest details of the *typikon* of the liturgy but fails to find beauty, goodness or value in the continuous daily rhythms of creation and in the “living human icons” and their activities beyond the liturgical cycle of church services.

All these forms of “human doing” are variations of the familiar trap of co-opting Christian faith and religious practice to enhance or preserve the individual ego rather than to free us from the domination of self-enslaving passions which bring our souls into captivity in the desert not fed by the pure springs of God’s grace.

In the final analysis, God is not interested in what we can do on our own out of the strength of our created powers independent of the divine life, but only in what we do in partnership with Him. God is lover and “He pursues, without fail and at all costs, the sighs of our hearts, which mean far more than an obligatory or formal asceticism. The spiritual life depends significantly on the character of these sighs”²³ for they are the recognition that we are human, a fact we only truly experience in the process of seeking to answer the call of the uncreated one whose love invites us into Holy Communion with God. We do not truly become ourselves until we give ourselves away freely and ecstatically in love for Christ who has done this for us.

God did not come into the world to condemn it. God did not fashion the world of created bodies of flesh and blood in order to destroy them. He created and loved the world so much that He became human in order to make it possible for humanity to become eternally alive with God’s own uncreated life.

²³ Archimandrite Arsenios (Papacioc) “Eternity Hidden in the Moment,” *The Orthodox Word* 281 (2011): 289.