

Living the Faith: Christian Marriage and the Role of Sexuality  
in the Life of the Orthodox Christian  
By His Grace Bishop THOMAS (Joseph) and Fr. David Hyatt

*“Let us pursue holiness, that we may be counted worthy to see Him  
and to attain the Kingdom of Heaven...”*

Homily 19, St. John Chrysostom

When we hear the term “sexual revolution” many think of the 1960s during which time there was a cultural liberalization of societal sexual norms. The monogamous marriage between one man and one woman was challenged by the increasing acceptance of pre-marital and extra-marital sexual activity. “Free Love” became the mantra through the 1960s, 70s and 80s until the rise of HIV AIDS provided a pause in the cultural imagination of what was a beneficial expression of one’s sexual new found freedom.

In addition to the liberalization of societal sexual norms, the advent of widespread use of birth control, and the legalization of abortion with the U.S. Supreme Court decision on January 22, 1973, of the Roe v. Wade case, brought about a newly expanded detachment between sexual activity and childbirth. No longer was it to be expected that sexual relations between a man and a woman might very well bear the fruit of a child, further separating the means from the end. Now, the ‘end’ of sexual activity could simply be the temporary enjoyment of physical pleasure without the previous constraints of marriage and the expectation of pregnancy.

As the effectiveness of birth control increased and sexual activity outside of marriage became increasingly permissible within society, the hope for free love without consequences came face to face with a growing number of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including the deadly human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Rather than rethinking our newly embraced sexual freedom as a society, we turned to a new public health campaign encouraging ‘Safe Sex.’ According to the Planned Parenthood document titled, *History of Sex Education in the U.S.*<sup>1</sup>, “In 1975, the World Health Organization (WHO) offered this definition of sexual health:

Sexual health is the integration of the somatic, emotional, intellectual, and social aspects of sexual being, in ways that are positively enriching and that enhance personality, communication, and love. Fundamental to this concept are the right to sexual information and the right to pleasure.”

The document further explains, “The concept of sexual health includes three basic elements:

1. a capacity to enjoy and control sexual and reproductive behavior in accordance with a social and personal ethic;
2. freedom from fear, shame, guilt, false beliefs, and other psychological factors inhibiting sexual response and impairing sexual relationship; and

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<sup>1</sup> *History of Sex Education in the U.S.* (Planned Parenthood, Nov 2016)

[https://www.plannedparenthood.org/uploads/filer\\_public/da/67/da67fd5d-631d-438a-85e8-a446d90fd1e3/20170209\\_sexed\\_d04\\_1.pdf](https://www.plannedparenthood.org/uploads/filer_public/da/67/da67fd5d-631d-438a-85e8-a446d90fd1e3/20170209_sexed_d04_1.pdf)

3. freedom from organic disorders, diseases, and deficiencies that interfere with sexual and reproductive functions.

WHO's early definition is at the core of our understanding of sexual health today and is a departure from prevailing notions about sexual health — and sex education — that predominated in the 19th and 20th centuries. Until the 1960s and 1970s, the goals of social hygiene and moral purity activists eclipsed broader sexual health concerns in the public health arena. Their narrow goals were to prevent sexually transmitted infections, stamp out masturbation and prostitution, and limit sexual expression to marriage (Elia, 2009)."

Indeed, this description articulates well the desired change in societal sexual norms that activists began working for — “a departure from prevailing notions about sexual health” (i.e., sexual activity is good and fruitful only within a marriage of one man and one woman), and towards the “right to pleasure.” Through efforts made in public education, public information campaigns, and the marketing of products offering ‘safe sex’, much of the Western world has adopted this view of the purpose and role of human sexuality. This, however, is not the understanding of the Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox Church has always held together the sanctity and dignity of both the married and celibate life. Rather than seeking to liberate sexual activity from the relationship of a monogamous marriage for the purpose of maximizing the pursuit of physical pleasure, sexual relations are understood to be pure and fruitful only in the context of the sacramental marriage of one man and one woman for life. Outside of this sacramental relationship, sexual activity of all kinds is to be refrained from. To modern readers, this sounds like madness because they have accepted the notion that as physical animals, we all have the right to gratify our sexual desires in a consensual manner. Gratifying the flesh, however, is not the highest aim of the Christian, but rightly ordered, the flesh will serve the soul in its ascent to God — this includes the sexual dynamics of male and female. St. Paul writes to the Romans, “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” (Romans 8:5-6)

This, however, is not to imply that the sexual relations between a husband and wife are to be viewed as inherently sinful. St. John Chrysostom writes, “Impurity does not originate in the union of their bodies, but in their thoughts and motives.”<sup>2</sup> The Patristic understanding is that while earthly marriage and sexual relations for procreation were not a part of life in the Garden of Paradise, they are a merciful concession that God made to fallen mankind. Through this relationship the procreation of humanity is furthered, “Be fruitful and multiply”;<sup>3</sup> aid and support is rendered for both husband and wife for the furtherance of their loving union and edification to avoid sexual immorality, “let each man have his own wife, and let each woman

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<sup>2</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, Homily 19 (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:28

have her own husband”;<sup>4</sup> and a living example of the mystical union of Christ and His Church is put on display for the world, “This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”<sup>5</sup> Marriage, and consequently all sexual relations between a husband and wife, should adhere to and keep as its aim a loving union with Christ which will surpass the veil of death and remain for eternity in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Because earthly marriage and sexual relations were not a part of the life of Adam and Eve in the Garden, the celibate life should be understood to be a blessing and not a curse. In fact, St. Paul writes that it is to be preferred if one has the gift for it. “But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am...”<sup>6</sup> And, “I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife.”<sup>7</sup> The celibate life, however, is not to be devoid of relationship, but instead is free from the responsibilities of spouse and children. The monastic life is a particularly poignant expression of the celibate life – living as it were the life of the angels as well as the future life of the Kingdom where “...they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven.”<sup>8</sup> The celibate life, whether monastic or lay, is an opportunity to more fully devote one’s life to the pursuit of a loving union with God, and, like marriage, requires self-discipline, prayer and fasting, and the ascetic struggle to put off the works of the flesh and be clothed in righteousness.

This sobering and yet joyful boundary for human sexuality should be appropriately modeled and taught in our parishes, Orthodox schools and colleges, and in our homes. We must not give way to the cultural forces which seek to dilute our faith, deceive our minds, and ignite our passions. St. John the Evangelist and Theologian warns us against allowing our affections to become enflamed for the ways of the world. He writes, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.”<sup>9</sup>

Brothers and Sisters, let us heed the instruction of our father among the saints, St. John Chrysostom who writes, “We must strive for self-control...St. Paul tells us to seek peace and the sanctification without which it is impossible to see the Lord. So whether we presently live in virginity, in our first marriage, or in our second, let us pursue holiness, that we may be counted worthy to see Him and to attain the Kingdom of Heaven, through the grace and love for mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory, dominion, and honor, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:2

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 5:32

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:8

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:32-33

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 22:30

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 2:15-16

<sup>10</sup> *On Marriage and Family Life*, 42.

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## **Additional Reading**

- St. John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986
- Evdokimov, Paul, *The Sacrament of Love*. Yonkers, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985
- Meyendorff, John, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*. Yonkers, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975
- Trenham, Archpriest Josiah B, *Marriage and Virginty According to St. John Chrysostom*. Platina, California: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2013