

**HUMAN SEXUALITY:
AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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PREFACE

While I was pondering the topic of this paper, human sexuality, I had to confront/resolve several dilemmas. The most significant was just how exactly I should approach and present the subject. For example, I could have presented the prevailing views of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism and contrasted to those views our Orthodox Christian perspective. However, those two religions, especially the papal church, happen to be in such a state of flux today (concerning ethical issues) that I would be seriously hard pressed to accurately define their positions in such a brief format as this without risking the accusation that what I stated was either not the official doctrine or not representative of contemporary realities within both those religious groups. Focusing our attention on present-day American secular society poses a similar problem, compounded by society's legal/judicial predicament.

Another manner in which I could have discussed this topic of human sexuality would be to have concentrated on the applications of our Church's perspective to specific sexual concerns, as adultery, homosexuality, and fornication. Some attention would inevitably have to be given to the approach of the groups noted above, since they do have an impact on us. More importantly, such a presentation assumes that each of us is fully aware of that doctrine of our Church which is the underpinnings of Her treatment of each specific sexual concern. It is this, the most critical consideration of all, which finally influenced me to discuss this topic of human sexuality as I do: by presenting the underlying perspective of our Holy Orthodox Christian Faith.

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+ In-the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. +

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the Holy Orthodox Church has always openly and sensitively addressed the concerns of Her faithful flock pertaining to human sexuality. She has done so in a reverent, respectful manner. On the one hand, She views human sexuality as one of many earthly facets of Man's transitory life in this world; the Church does not sever human sexuality from the rest of humankind's existence. On the other, the Church expresses Herself on the issue of human sexuality at the same moment She preaches on the sacred and divine Mysteries; She perceives human sexuality within the entire context of God's scheme for the salvation of Man.

Hence, there is no patristic treatise of any size which discusses only the topic of human sexuality (which this paper is now doing), though there are many other texts devoted to other sacred subjects, as the Holy Trinity, prayer, fasting, virtue, feasting, liturgy, priesthood, and baptism. It is primarily within the context of such profound themes as these that the Holy Fathers refer to the moral life of the Orthodox Christian. This is as it should and can only be, since the Christian's ethical mode of living is, after all, an existential expression of the Church's teaching and dogma. Thus it is, for example, that St. John Chrysostom, writing on the grace of the priesthood, also expounds on deception, vainglory, and emotional temperance.¹

Similarly, as Moses is illumined with the brilliant glory of the divine revelation concerning God's plan to save Man, the holy Prophet is also given the moral code of the Decalog to deliver to the People of God. Again, while St. Paul, in his pastoral remarks to the Ephesians, preaches on the spiritual and ethical responsibilities Christian spouses have toward each other, he also speaks of the sublime, mystical Marriage of the Bridegroom Christ to His Bride, the Church.

Likewise, when the God bearing Fathers come together in local or ecumenical synods to rightly divide the Word of Truth and proclaim the dogmas of the Orthodox Faith, they also issue canonical decisions specifically addressing the moral conduct of the people of New Israel. Thus, there are canons concerning usury, abortion, murder, bearing false witness, thievery, simony, and the abandonment of infants, as well as canons regarding sexual matters, such as fornication, adultery, bestiality, masturbation, and incest—all promulgated along with the tenets of Faith.

The secular society in which we are currently living appears to undertake to explore and experience human sexuality apart from the rest of human life, as if humankind's sexuality were independent of other areas of human beings' earthly existence. Moreover, it is very evident that contemporary American society focuses inordinate attention on—indeed, is obsessed with—human sexuality. The ubiquitous pornography, "sex studies," and requests for sexual advice addressed to newspaper columnists underscore these contentions. Consequently, to solely focus this study on human sexuality (albeit, of course, from an Orthodox Christian perspective) is to repeat this societal syndrome, which is so contradictory to the aforementioned spiritually integrated view of the Church.

¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Treatise Concerning The Christian Priesthood*, trans. N.R.R. Stephens, *A Select Library of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, 1st ser., Vol. IX (Grand Rapids, MI: N. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1975), pp.33-83. This particular patristic reference collection is cited as *Post-Nicene Fathers* in all subsequent footnotes throughout the remainder of this paper.

Nevertheless, it is obvious there is a need to address human sexuality from the wellspring of knowledge of the Christian Faith if only to mitigate the negative influences of this secular society's unlimited preoccupation with human sexuality. The intent, then, of this presentation is to examine the topic of human sexuality from within the Holy Christian Faith and Experience, rooted well in the doctrine, understanding, and approach of the Church.

GOD'S GOOD CREATION

Human Nature

All that God does is good, and every thing that the Lord God creates is good because He, Himself, is Good. The Good God undertakes and fashions only that which is good. It is on this account that, as the world's creation progressively evolved through periods of time (the "days," as Genesis reckons them), the Good Maker of all things visible and invisible gave His blessing, seeing "it was good" (Genesis 1: 8ff)—indeed, very good. The summit of this good creation is Man, fashioned according to the human nature and made in the image and likeness of God.

This human nature is comprised of both the tangible body and the intangible soul, the union of which composes a single entity. Both the soul and the body are good because both are creations of the Good God. Hence, neither soul nor body (nor any part thereof) is "dirty" or "unclean," and none is "unfit" for everlasting life in the Heavenly Kingdom. Most assuredly, all of the human being's various body parts are good, including the sexual organs.

It is this nature—this body (with all its members) and this soul—that the Good Lord willed to take on Himself when He became incarnate to save the race of Man and to bring it into union with Him. It is this nature—this body (with all its members) and this soul—that sits on the throne of God, united with the Divinity in the one Person of Jesus Christ, the Logos. By this, God, Himself, eminently, and manifoldly, and unequivocally manifests that human nature (body and soul) is, indeed, good.

The Bodily Functions and Their Purpose

Since the body is good as created by God, it definitely follows that the bodily functions are also good: after all, the Good God created them along with the body for Man's maintenance in the world. For example, the ability to eat and to digest is obviously critical to the human being's physical survival on earth. In like manner, the body's health maintenance and disease-resisting capabilities are vital and clearly good bodily processes that the Almighty Creator provided for the benefit of the human race in this world. The same loving principle pertains to all the other bodily functions, among which, of course, is the sexual function. Therefore, the human body's sexual function is also good; it, too, has been created by God. As with everything else, God made the body's sexual function to benefit the race of Man. The Lord God provided humanity with sexuality out of profound love for Man.

Here, it is important to observe that each of the many functions of the body has as its purpose the overall welfare of human beings in this world, the sinful fallen state. There surely would not have been any necessity for the body's hygienic mechanism had Man not been sinful, which is the fundamental reason for nature's present condition, with all its sickness and corruption. In God's Kingdom of the Heavens, there is no disease against which to protect the body; there are no hunger pains necessitating the intake of food; there is no death to rob Man of life. Thus, it is plainly evident that these body functions are created for this life in the spiritually fallen state.

This significant point is equally applicable to sex, a function of the body. There is no need for sexual activity in Heaven, as the Savior, Himself, points out when He declares that there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage in God's Kingdom (Matthew 22: 30)². Moreover, Genesis records that Man (human nature in the image and likeness of God) is made first (1: 26 & 27). Then comes the sexual distinction between male and female (1: 27). St. Gregory of Nyssa states:

Our whole nature, then, extending from the first to the last, is... one image of Him Who is; but the distinction of... male and female was added to His work last...³

The sexual attributes were appended to Man in the image and likeness of God precisely because the Creator foresaw Man's Fall, and knew of the human race's consequent need of the sexual function.⁴

Divine Dispensations

Now, no one would declare that the bodily functions, such as eating and digestion, health maintenance, and disease resistance, are evil or, at least, somehow not good because they happen to be dispensations⁵ provided by the Lord because of sinful Man's weaknesses and needs in the fallen state or because they are not useful following Man's departure from here. The human body functions just do happen to be the very good creation of the Good God. They are good regardless of the limitation of their importance or usefulness to this earthly existence. That they are, in and of themselves, good also applies equally to all the body's functions God made (including sex), especially because He created them all.

Moreover, that certain aspects of life on this earth constitute, in effect, a dispensation from the Lord to Man does not demean their significance or diminish their goodness. No person may deride or otherwise hold in contempt that which God blesses.

By way of illustration, eating animal meats is a divine dispensation clearly allowed the human race on account of its sinful condition and weakness, and not because this food is essential to Man's earthly survival. Nevertheless, Apostolic Canon 51 declares that any individual who abstains from eating meat because, in his estimation, it is abhorrent to do so, is expelled from the Church whether he is a layman or a cleric. Note that the Orthodox Church perceives this attitude to be a blasphemy and that this canonical rule applies to other dispensations, as well, including marriage, in which the sexual relationship between a man and a woman is unquestionably implicit. The canon reads:

If any Bishop, or Presbyter, or Deacon, abstains from marriage, or meat, or wine, not [for] mortification, but out of an abhorrence thereof, forgetting that all things are exceedingly good... and that God made man male and female, blasphemously

² Cf. Mark 12: 25; Luke 20: 35.

³ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On The Making Of Man*, trans. William Moore and H. A. Wilson, *Post-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2nd ser., Vol. V (1979), P.406. Cited hereinafter as *Man*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

⁵ In this paper, "dispensation" has the same meaning and is used exactly as the word, "ekonomia," which is borrowed from the Greek language to denote God's exceedingly merciful (1) overall design and (2) specific means by which the infinitely Loving Lord provides for the salvation of Mankind in general and the individual human being in particular.

misrepresenting (thus) God's work of creation, either let him mend his ways or be deposed from office and expelled from the Church. Let a layman be treated similarly."⁶

One may not malign the dispensations of God, irrespective of the form they take, including sexual intercourse. One solely wonders at the infinite love and wisdom of the Lord, and renders Him ceaseless glory and praise. Indeed, this perspective becomes very distinct and most poignant when one recalls that Mankind's entire existence and very salvation constitute, in fact, the greatest of all dispensations!

THE PURPOSE OF MAN'S SEXUAL FUNCTION

Comprehending the purpose of the divine dispensation regarding human sexuality arouses in one a profound appreciation of the infinite wisdom of the Lord; one stands in awe of God's deep love for Man. One also apprehends that the Orthodox Church understands that the purpose of Man's sexual function is, in fact, not single but multifaceted.

To begin with, it is readily obvious that one purpose of the sexual function is the procreation of the human race. This is, of course, a biological fact of life. In the Church's view, there is a spiritual reason for the provision of this biological reality.

When the Lord comments on the absence of marriage in Heaven, He notes that there, Man dwells as the angels dwell (Matthew 22: 30).⁷ St. Gregory of Nyssa amplifies on this statement. He writes that before the fall, Man was in Paradise in an angelic state. If he had not fallen into sin, Man might have increased his ranks in the mysterious manner by which the angels are multiplied. Sin and the Fall deprived Adam and Eve (and their descendents) of the angelic condition. So God equipped Man with the sexual function and organs so that he would be capable of procreation in this world.⁸

Based on this understanding, virginity is considered identical to angelic life and, hence, spiritually higher and more noble than marriage,⁹ wherein it is expected the sexual function is exercised. Of course, this refers to virginity practiced within the context of sound Christian asceticism, which has as its aim union with the Godhead and which is certainly blessed by the Savior and His Holy Church. Virginity assumed out of loathing for the sexual function, even if it bears the external attributes of asceticism, is not blessed, as the Holy Apostles pronounce in the canon cited earlier in this study. Indeed, St. Gregory of Nyssa declares that persons who disparage marriage follow after demonic doctrine, and they "have some ulcers and blisters stamped upon their hearts,... land) are not installed under God's roof, but in the monastery of the Evil One."¹⁰

The Christian virgin is unencumbered by the inevitable material and emotional entanglements of married life. The inescapable pressures of sustaining the commitment to one's spouse, bringing up one's children in the ways of righteousness, and providing for the general welfare of one's family are not present. The virginal state more readily disposes him to pursue his warfare against the passions and to achieve, by God's grace, *union* with the Lord, the goal of all

⁶ Agapius, Hieromonk and Nicodemus, Monk (eds.), *The Rudder*, trans. D. Cummings (Chicago: The Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 1957), p.91.

⁷ Cf. Mark 12: 25; Luke 20: 36.

⁸ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Man*, p.406-407.

⁹ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, trans. William Moore and H. A. Wilson, *Post-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2nd ser., Vol. V (1979), p. 360.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

Christians, virgin and married. Virginity is an icon, as it were, of the purity, the "passionlessness"—the virginity-abiding in the Holy Trinity, which Christ God disclosed to Man by His *Incarnation* and Virgin Birth.¹¹

By teaching, in this manner, that virginity is the more sublime spiritual state, the Church is establishing spiritual priorities; She is not detracting from the Almighty Lord's blessing of the use of the sexual *function* in marriage. Furthermore, that one abstains from sexual intercourse immediately before receiving the Holy Body and Blood of Jesus Christ is not because the sexual act in-and-of-itself is "bad" or "dirty," which earlier in this paper was demonstrated not to be the case, but because—with the exception of the rarest of *instances*—it has become, for all practical purposes, a physical expression of carnal passion, hardly the way in which the Christian prepares to partake of the Immaculate Mysteries.¹²

The second purpose of Man's sexual function is more significant, from a spiritual perspective, than procreation. A principal reason why God made Man is so that Man might enjoy unity by grace with the Creator of all and unity by nature with all men, since a single human nature is common to all persons. In His omniscience, God knew of Man's fall into sin and of the loneliness and disunity that would and did ensue from Man's separation from his Maker. In His boundless love and mercy, God provided the sexual function as a means (though surely not the only one) to overcome this consequence of the Fall.

Immediately preceding the account of Eve's creation from the rib of Adam, God speaks thus: "It is not good that the man should be alone, let us make for him a help suitable to him" (Genesis 2: 18). Hence, at that point in the account of the creation when the Prophet Moses reports on the making of Eve and the distinction of the sexes, as signified by Adam and Eve, the Lord, Himself, bears witness to this purpose of the sexual function. In fact, it would appear that unity and companionship compose the primary intent of sex, since procreation is mentioned later on, following the Fall. St. John Chrysostom, in his exegesis on St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians, stresses this unity, this oneness, in the creation of man and woman in this manner.¹³

By their attraction to each other and their physical commingling, man and woman relieve the dreadful loneliness of this fallen life, which not only isolates Man, but arrests his ability to love another, as well. Through the sexual function, he tastes, so to speak, of the unity that was once his in Paradise. He is moved thereby to pursue the greater, deeper, and more enduring, Godlike selfless love for another. This love may continue to be expressed through sexual intimacy—now, however, not to meet one's personal desires for physical pleasure, but to share one's whole self with another, as a demonstration of this dispassionate, selfless love.

Now, this genuine unity and profound love is a very powerful force, for this union begets life. This is not just any life, but as St. John Chrysostom eloquently attests, the very image of God:

They come together, and the two make one.... making not a lifeless image... [or even]... of anything upon earth, but of God Himself,. . .after His likeness.... They come, about to be made one body. See... a mystery of love! If the two become not one ... [but] continue two, they make not many, but when they ... come into

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

¹² This same principle applies just as equally to all other passions, too.

¹³ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies On Colossians*, trans. J. Ashworth, *PostNicene Father&*, ed. Philip Schaff, 1st ser., Vol. XIII (1976), pp-318'319.

oneness, they then make many. What do we learn? ...That great is the power of union.¹⁴

And great, indeed, is the power of such a God-pleasing union of two bodies, of two people, of two humble servants of the Lord, who come together in sexual intimacy, not out of lust or passion, but out of mutual selfless love and respect and faith in the true and living God. As the Church teaches, of such a sexual and spiritual union was the Holy Forerunner born. Above all, conceived of just such an intimate union between SS. Joachim and Anna was that most pure blossom of the race of Man, the Mother of the Good God, Himself, Mary, the All-holy Theotokos. Such is the power and such the fruit of that which the Lord blesses!

In all of the foregoing, there is an intimation of the third purpose of Man's sexual function. This is the most sublime of the three. It is the "logical," so to speak, spiritual culmination of this ascending progression. The procreative purpose allows Man to increase and multiply in this world, to raise-up souls to worship and adore the Lord God, that they enter thus into union with Him. This desire to love God and to aspire to union with the Savior is abetted, in part, by the urgings of the sexual function, which arouse in the fallen man a yearning for the physical and emotional intimacy of the sexual union—a prompting, as it were, to give-up his isolation and to seek a lasting personal union predicated not on self-gratification but on selfless love. Such has been the divine dispensation since before the ages.

And herein is a Mystery, the Mystery of the Church. St. John Chrysostom teaches: "What? is marriage a theater? It is a mystery and a type of a mighty thing; ... [thou ought: reverence that whose type it is.... It is a type of the Church, and of Christ]"¹⁵ It is this union between a man and a woman that is a type—an icon-of the union between Christ the Bridegroom and His Bride, all the saved and sanctified, the Church.

In the Holy Service of Matrimony, the Church reads the words of St. Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians, wherein he draws the comparison between the Sacred Mystery of the union of Christ with the Church and the union of man and woman:

For the husband is the head of the wife... as Christ is the head of the church....

Therefore, as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.

Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it....

This is a great mystery... I speak concerning Christ and the church.¹⁶

The union of Christ with the Church is a very intimate bond, a physical and spiritual union, in which the members of the union sacrifice themselves for each other after the manner of the ideal selfless love of the union between man and woman. Hence, the bond between husband and wife, wherein the Church expects the realization of the sexual union, is blessed by the Church as the icon of the Mystery of the Church, so that the sexual tie between man and woman may ultimately bear the spiritual fruit which is the aim of its purpose, the loving unity between the spouses and their unity with the Lord Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 318

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ephesians 5: 23-25 & 32.

In conclusion, as one matures in the Orthodox Christian comprehension of human sexuality, one commences to perceive how this aspect of Man's existence is created by God with special purpose. As with all else the Lord has fashioned, sexuality, too, is aimed to assist Man to seek after unity with God, from Whom the race of Man was separated after the Fall. Man's sexuality is a gift to be respectfully used for the purpose for which it has been provided.

When one grasps the profound divine purpose underlying human sexuality, one cannot but be amazed at God's great mercy and love for Mankind. The Savior, Himself, is incarnate and born of a Virgin to depict for Man the "virginity" of the Holy Trinity. But He does not overturn the order He created in this world in any other manner. Therefore, He is born of a Woman who is conceived, as all humankind, of a sexual union, albeit a most pure one. Thus, Jesus Christ, at one and the same time, bears testimony to the goodness of His creation and to the purpose for which it is created. It is no wonder that the Church looks on the divine dispensation of the Lord with great reverence, as on a great Mystery, and ceaselessly sings praise, honor, and glory to the only Friend of Man, the One God in Trinity. Amen.