



HANDBOOK ON FAMILY

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The Family as the Extension of the Church

by Fr. George Aswad

May I begin this morning by sharing with you an experience of mine. Because of personal reasons, it was necessary for my wife Grace and I to have a new home built. When the contractor was preparing to pour the foundation, I placed a cross in the forms as the concrete was poured. It engulfed the cross. In my mind I symbolically dedicated this home to be built on the cross of Christ.

This newly constructed house of concrete, wood and metal will become a home when my family and I move in. This home is eight miles from the St. George Church of Niagara Falls. So here is the church and here is the home.

We ask the question, "How do we extend the church into the home?" We discuss, "The Family As the Extension of The Church".

First explore with me the word "extension" used often with the word cord. An extension cord is plugged in and the electrical power is transmitted from the outlet to an object where something happens. A light goes on, a radio, a drill. You plug in and something happens at the end of the extension that is in complete harmony with its source. An extension ladder is successful only if the original ladder enables you to climb to the extension thereby achieving your goal.

So now we ask, if you plug into the church, thereby transmitting to the family the power of the church, what is it that is passed on to the family from the church?

Electricity, could not be transmitted until its power and potential were understood. The church can only be extended to the extent that it is understood.

Secondly, let's briefly discuss the church. We can define it as:

A divinely instituted community of people, united by the true faith the laws of God, the hierarchy and the holy sacraments. St. Paul explains it throughout his Epistles: Ex. Ephesians 2, "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners but fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God, and are built upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.

Most of you can define and explain the church. That is, quote the Holy Fathers. By definition there are no boundaries between the church and the family, for we are all citizens of God's Household. But what does the church really mean to you and your family? We are Christians, plugged into a particular church. Ex. Saint Nicholas. But what do we take home with us and does something happen in the household?

Do many of us have a child's concept of the church — the building, the Icons, the priest? How many adults commit themselves to the physical, the external form of the church and not the content, the spirituality of the church?

So many individuals are more concerned about their physical bodies and not their spiritual soul. Even at a convention so many involve themselves with the form, procedures, rules, long and repetitious reports and not the true worth of the convention. How many sleep the days and worship the social events at night? For me, the highlight of the Convention is the Archbishop's message which is based on the scriptures. He gives us the spirit, the true content of the Convention. What do you take home with you and extend to your parish from these Conventions?

In today's Liturgy were you spiritually carried away by the content or impressed with the form? The form is not an end in itself, but carries the content. Therefore, in all situations we need both form and content. But where do you put the emphasis? Let me share with you a true story:

A Greek father was a real family man and above all a Greek Orthodox. He went to church every Sunday and in his home there were Icons in every room and vigil lights burning. All the members in his family made the sign of the cross at the proper times. One day his daughter came home and informed her father that she was going to be married. He was thrilled as any father would naturally be at such joyous news until she told him that the boy was not Greek and not Orthodox. He was stunned. He said if she married this boy, he would have nothing to do with her. This was not an idle threat for after she married the boy, he disowned her.

On the surface, in the eyes of society he was a Christian. You could visually see it in his home and in his actions. However, he confused and over-emphasized the form of the church. He neglected to extend the spirit of the church into his home — possible he just never understood the church. He was plugged into the church but nothing happened. And when he was faced with a family crisis, his shallow concept of the church failed him and the family unit was shattered. The spirit of Christ should have held this family together — it did the opposite. May we add, "Spiritually crippled parents give birth to spiritually crippled children."

The form of the church is easily seen by all but what is the spirit of the church, what is this content we refer to? It has been explained in many ways. Millions of sermons and books have and will be written explaining the spirituality of the church as a commitment to Christ, a commitment to His teachings, reading and understanding the Scriptures. It's accepting the responsibilities of a Christian, it's loving Christ and one another, it's the Holy Spirit living within us and uniting us as a family of God growing in spirit.

We need to extend the spirit of the church, to live in Christian harmony with our immediate family as well as with the whole family of God. We seek not our own secular gain, but rather act and live as the children of God.

We have briefly discussed extension meaning we plug into the church, transmitting the power of the church into the family and then something happens — a light goes on. And then spoke of the church as having form and content. And that the content, the spirituality of the church, is that which we extend into the boundaries of our families.

This leads us to the family. When we hear the word family we think of father, mother and children. The family can have members with a variety of relationships and not necessarily living under one roof.

In the family circle we see clearly an economic life, a social life and we now speak of a religious life, the family as truly an extension of the church. It must function as a religious and spiritual community; not to be going through the various external signs of the church, but to live in the spirit and love of Christ and to pass "on" this spirit one to another. A father and mother by example, teaching, and conduct extend the church to their children as Christ extended the church to us. The church grows through this extension. The family grows in spirit, becoming a spiritual fortress which can withstand attack from outside movements and forces that would destroy the family unit.

If the family does not truly extend the church in a living and active way, then the church will cease to exist as a vital force in the world. Today, we can see a great need for the church, politically, socially, and morally for our world is in a state of decay. What are the consequences? St. John Chrysostom said this hundreds of years ago in a sermon to a congregation like this:

"Yet now I behold the whole of the church prostrate, as though it were a corpse and as one may see eyes, and hands and feet and neck and head in a newly dead body and yet find not one limb performing its

proper function, so it is the same here also. Truly all who are here are of the faithful, but their faith is not living and active and so we have made the Body of Christ a corpse, we have quenched its life.”

If we neglect to extend the living Christ into our homes, to live by His will, to be witnesses to Christ, then as in the words of St. John, we make the body of Christ a corpse and quench its life. For a living Christ, for a church that is alive, we as families must be living extensions of the church. We must extend Christ into our homes, the community, and into the world. In the spirit of the Convention theme let us say, “But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”

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Family- An Orthodox Christian Perspective

by Archbishop Stylianos of Australia

Marriage as sacrament was instituted comparatively late in the Christian Church, but it appears that the soteriological significance of this institution may be traced as far back as the creation of male and female, as presented in the Genesis narration.

In other words, this means that the distinction between male and female does not signify an accidental or secondary phenomenon in the biological development of the species, but on the contrary reflects God's free will whose reason lies in God's essence.

The definition of God's essence as love (cf. I John 4:8), which is the foundation stone of all Christian theology, finds its fullest justification in the distinction between male and female in the crown of all creation, namely the human person.

The fundamental equality of male and female, already given in the original act of creation, is enforced by the fact of their difference that facilitates the experience of the deepest form of love as mutual enrichment in complementary communication.

According to all the above, one should clearly say that the significance of marriage as sacrament is, in the first line, given in the event of communion between male and female. This is the ideal presupposition for its expansion into the form of family wherein more persons share the blessings of communion and mutual respect. In other words, the sacredness of marriage and family primarily lies not in the creation of children or the continuation of the species, but rather in the quality of communion.

Thus the Christian family aims at the mutual sacrifice and sanctification of the couple in a divine unity which is modelled on the mystery of the Holy Trinity (that is, the Unity of the three Persons in one essence), and still more concretely and empirically on the unity of the two natures — human and divine — in the one Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. In both these doctrines of the Christian Church, namely the Trinitarian and Christological, the tension between the plurality of persons and the unity of essence is harmoniously balanced by virtue of divine interpenetration and love.

The Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon has coined two adverbs which became monumental in the whole Christian era as describing, in the most adequate manner, the mystery of unity and, at the same time, the integrity of persons living in communion among themselves. These adverbs are, as known, 'unconfusedly' and 'undividedly' Although these two adverbs were introduced by the said Council in order to clarify as best as possible the relationship between the two natures in the one Person of God Incarnate, the same adverbs can be applied to describe the communion and interpenetration, without subordination, of the three Persons in the Holy Trinity.

There is no doubt that the said two adverbs also signify the ideal conditions under which the institution of the family may achieve its divine goals.

The level of interpersonal relations between husband and wife is enriched in the family through a second level of relations between parents and children, as well as through yet a third level of relations among the children.

With so many and different levels of interpersonal relations, the family becomes the most dynamic and effective unit for the formation of the human personality. While in all other forms of human coexistence the driving force remains a social motivation, in the family and the Church, which is the family of God, the motivation is existential

and sacramental. This is precisely why family and Church are of unique importance in the preparation of the individual as a citizen.

In practical terms, all this means that the person who has, in the family and in the Church, experienced the variety of love on various levels of interpersonal relations will be able to appreciate different qualities of other individuals in a secular society. Having experienced the discipline required as respect towards each person according to ones place and mission in the whole body of the family unit, one is ready to accept the same order and discipline in social structures. However, in order to be able to react in such a positive way within the society at large, one should have felt the security and enrichment through the presence of others in one's own family.

The sense of family among Mediterranean people — Greeks, Italians, Turks etc. — is admittedly still so strong that normally one member of the family does not feel bothered by the coexistence of the others. Of course, one cannot overlook the frequent and truly high mutual demands between the various members, demands that are not only unknown but also incomprehensible to a modern Western family. Yet the sacrifices often resulting from such demands are also compensated by a real and manifold support which one enjoys from all members of the family in every possible difficulty of life. This wonderful support sometimes makes one feel one's physical and moral powers multiplied by the number of members in one's family.

In addition to the above, one should conclude that the family, as structured in the Orthodox world, may become not only the nucleus of the entire Church body but also the ultimate refuge of faith. This is particularly true when atheism or persecution render the official life of the Church difficult, if not impossible. The best examples of this are the survival of Orthodoxy during the four hundred years of Turkish occupation in most Eastern Orthodox countries, and more recently the situation in the Soviet Union.

Family as Unity- Our Little Church

by Fr. Peter E. Gillquist

The Orthodox Prayer of Marriage

There is a section in the marriage liturgy of the Orthodox Church which contains one of the most powerful prayers I've heard and which offers us great hope. In this prayer are four specific petitions which, if we grab hold of, understand, and trust God to answer, will add tremendous strength and stability to our marriages. This prayer is valid not only for newly marrying couples hearing them pronounced at their wedding, but also for old-timers as they witness an Orthodox wedding service.

Bless Them

The first petition goes like this: "Bless them, O Lord our God, as You blessed Abraham and Sarah. Bless them, O Lord our God, as You blessed Isaac and Rebecca. Bless them, O Lord our God, as You blessed Joachim and Anna. Bless them, O Lord our God, as You blessed Zacharias and Elizabeth." The first thing we ask God for in this prayer is a blessing upon the newly-married couple.

What does the word blessing mean? It literally means favor. "Favor them, O Lord." It could also mean "give them" or "bestow something good upon them." And notice the four famous couples mentioned in this petition. There is not the space available to go into detail on each couple, so let me zero in on just one pair, Isaac and Rebecca.

What tremendous drama we find in the Old Testament account of Isaac and Rebecca — one of the great arranged marriages of the Scriptures. Isaac needed a bride, so Abraham's servant is sent back to his homeland to find this bride. He and the Lord reach an agreement that certain things will happen so that when he meets "Miss Right," he'll know it.

Not only did the descendants of Rebecca and Isaac inherit the promised land, their descendants became the forbearers of Jesus Christ.

To have your marriage blessed as God blessed the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca means that even though your coming together might not have been as dramatic, God picked you out uniquely for each other. The same blessing God gave them is upon you.

Preserve Them

The text of this petition reads: "Preserve them, O Lord our God, as You preserved Noah in the ark. Preserve them, O Lord our God, as You preserved the three Holy children from the fire. And let that gladness come upon them which the blessed Helena had when she found the precious Cross."

To preserve means to "save," to "keep," or "guard." God knows, our marriages today don't just need His blessing. They need His preservation! That's why the priest prays that as a man and woman come together as husband and wife, God will preserve their marriage.

The first of these two illustrations of preservation is a very familiar one — the story of Noah and the ark. It rained forty days and forty nights, but Noah and those with him were preserved.

How does Noah's preservation relate to our marriages? The ark, of course, is the Church. As a matter of fact, the main section in an Orthodox Church is known as the nave — an old-fashioned word for "ship" or "ark." We as

persons are saved in the ark. And God preserves our marriages in the ark. We ask God to preserve our marriages in His Holy Church just like the ark preserved Noah and his family.

Remember Them

In the third petition of the marriage prayer, we find these words: "Remember them, O Lord our God, as You remembered the Forty Holy Martyrs, sending down upon them crowns from heaven. Remember them, O Lord our God, and the parents who have nurtured them, for the prayers of the parents make firm the foundations of houses."

It was March in the year 320. There was an emperor named Lycinius who at one time had favored the Christians, but for political reasons changed his mind. Lycinius set up a decree in Cappodocia, ordering every Christian to abandon his or her faith in Christ or face death.

When the governor of Cappodocia and Armenia communicated this decree to the army, forty young soldiers immediately stepped forward, refusing to worship idols or to deny Christ. The governor ordered the forty men to be stripped down and made to stand on the frozen lake naked until they either renounced Christ or froze to death. Tradition tells us that some of these men lasted three days and nights.

During all of this, the guards were continually urging them to offer up sacrifices to the false gods so that they could move near the inviting warm fire they had built for them on the shore. Finally, one of their number recanted. He walked to the bonfire, only to perish from the warmth of the heat on his frozen body.

One of the guards was so struck by the courage of the thirty-nine men that he flung off his clothes, stepped out onto the ice, and took his place among the tortured, proclaiming himself to be a Christian. By his martyrdom, he obtained the grace and the martyr's crown which had been forfeited by the one who deserted. God had indeed heard the prayer of the soldiers and answered it in this wholly unexpected way.

Now, listen to that prayer again, "Remember them, O Lord our God, as You remembered the Forty Holy Martyrs." God did not desert them out there, but he sent His angelic hosts to robe and crown them in their death. He even filled up the one spot left vacant. That's how God will remember you in your marriage. Keep on obeying him no matter what. God will never forget you or abandon you as a married couple.

Grant Them

The final petition says: "Grant them fair children and concord of soul and body." I want to remind you that one of the greatest things God can do for your marriage is to send along children.

And then the part I like best about this prayer. "And let them behold their children's children around their table like a newly-planted olive orchard, that, obtaining favor in Your sight, they may shine like the stars of heaven, in Thee."

I'll tell you, as wonderful as it is to have children, the fulfillment of having children is having grandchildren. Our job as parents does not end the day our children walk the aisle as man and wife. The next phase of parenthood is grand-parenthood, and the joy of beholding your children's children.

Well, how's that for stability in Orthodox marriage? First, God blesses us as He blessed the patriarchs. All the blessings that He gave to Isaac and Rebecca and the rest of the patriarchal couples are given us as we are joined in Christ to each other. Next, God preserves our marriages just the way he preserved Noah and his family from the flood and the three Holy Children from the fire. God also remembers us like He remembered those forty martyrs. That same grace is there for us. And, finally, he grants us children and grandchildren to enrich our lives with joy and favor.

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The Orthodox Family

by Archbishop Chrysostomos

The Orthodox Church exalts the family. The Church itself is often characterized by the Fathers in images drawn from the family. In the family, as in the Church, basic values are formed, the soul is shaped and established, and the path of salvation is set forth. The family is that warm place where the leaven of the Faith is nurtured, where we first begin to rise to full life in Christ. It is for this reason that every Bishop, every Priest, every monastic, and all pious laymen remember, in their daily prayers, their mothers and fathers, that their "days may be long on the earth." It is for this reason that, even after their repose, we remember our fathers and mothers and family members, praying for them fervently and, in our prayers, reaching across the chasm of death to be with them even in the afterlife, in the spiritual world. So special is the family that we remember those in error and heresy and sin even more dearly than those upright and unwavering in the Faith. This is the wonder of the family.

The Orthodox family, however, is always understood in its spiritual context. It is a spiritual unit. The selfish, social family, which triumphs the rights or privileges of blood ties, is for us Orthodox not a true family. An economic unit that uses family relationships to attain worldly possessions or wealth; the social unit turned in on itself, making the family responsible only for itself, that family which is a "god," the single most important thing in life, that thing most worth fighting for-these, too, are not families for the Orthodox believer. As exalted and sacred as the family might be, our first loyalty as true Christians is to God. Anything which comes before Christ, to paraphrase Holy Scripture, is not worthy of Christ. Anyone who places the priorities of the family before the Church and the commandments is a cultist, betraying both the Church and the authentic family. A true family is not worldly. A true family is an Icon of the Church and the brotherhood of all mankind. A true family does not confine its love to those within its boundaries, but extends to its neighbors (and even its enemies) the love which has been developed, cultivated, and refined within the family.

In contemporary America the social family, the family created without spiritual goals, is turning ugly. On Christmas and holidays, for example, we gather in our homes, ignore the poor, resent the "intrusion" of friends and acquaintances into our food- and drink-filled festivities, and pay homage to Christ or the theme of the holiday in perfunctory services or commemorations designed around the family activities-if any homage is paid at all. We have abandoned, to a great extent, the custom of visiting the infirm and needy on holidays. Rather, we have turned to a social selfishness that extends out from these holidays to the whole year, poisoning and killing society itself, making people cold, alien, and insensitive to others. And even the family itself suffers. Family members embrace, relate to one another in empty and inane exchanges of words, and often hide their need for real love and affection-for the true love and affection known only to the spiritual family, to that family which reaches beyond itself. Thus the model American family which so shocks us Christians, but which predominates in the society around us: a family beset by drug abuse, alcohol, the killing comforts of wealth and material gain, divorce, and even suicide!

So far has the American family strayed from the spiritual image that, if a young man or woman is to go away today and enter the monastic life, dedicating himself to prayer for the family and others, this is an occasion for shame and embarrassment. The family unit may even explode in hatred, decrying the personal separation that such a life might entail. Deep love, that love which survives separation (and even death), is disappearing from our families. We delight in those who succeed in the emptiness of material life and remove even the privileges of the family from those who seek the spiritual life. How far we have come from the traditional Christian family, based as it was in the past-especially in our Orthodox societies-on spiritual values, in which a monastic or Priestly vocation was the cause of merriment and rejoicing. To such families, a monastic or Priestly vocation represents a total fulfillment of family goals, a realization of the Christian life, and a reification of Christian ideals. If we reflect on the contrast between the true family and the social unit qua family created in modern materialistic society, we can precisely glimpse what the true Orthodox family is.

Just as an army trains soldiers to battle the enemy for the sake of the homeland, so the true family, the Orthodox family, endows its children with the spiritual armor by which they can overcome temptation, battle sin, live exemplary and moral lives, gain union here on earth with God, fulfill the divine potential within man, and pass into the next life with the spiritual power to pray for family members left behind. A true Orthodox family teaches love to its members-that intuitive, spontaneous love natural to blood relations-and encourages them to go out into the world sharing this love with others and perfecting it to whatever degree possible. A true family moves out beyond itself. If family members should gain wealth or fame, these are secondary things. These accomplishments are measured only by the primary contribution that they make to the Church, to society in general, and to the fulfillment of Christian ideals. And if a family member should embrace monasticism, it is for this individual that the Church reserves the greatest praise: for one who can, without the reinforcement of family ties and the comfort of marital affection, show and give love unselfishly; for one who can, living in poverty, produce richness in his soul and heart; for one who can, in the face of the world's ridicule and scorn, maintain inner dignity; for one who can, though separated from his family, show more real love, in his prayers and example, than those present to it.

Though only part of my family is Orthodox, my own experience in entering the monastic life has not been as difficult as it might have been. But I have seen terrible cases of ill treatment, in which monastics have been hurt deeply by the attitudes of their own families-usually in the case of converts who enter monasticism from non-Orthodox families. Some families, lacking a spiritual understanding of the family itself, consider such monastics outcasts, betrayers of the family, and destroyers of the family unit. Every foul and vulgar motivation is attributed to the monastic. Hatred, resentment, and antipathy are engendered among family members for the monastic. We must reflect on these instances with sobriety, since they reflect an attitude which is now invading even the Orthodox family in this country, where the larger Orthodox jurisdictions have either no monastic institutions or-with very few exceptions-monastic institutions wholly foreign to anything in Orthodox tradition. Where are those mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers who would rejoice in offering up a family member to intense service to God, a service in which limited family love is lifted up to expansive spiritual love? Where are those who would give up the best, the strongest, and most beloved to a life of purity? There could be nothing more pristine than the true Orthodox family. It is, after all, the crucible in which the elements of whole persons are formed. We should exalt such a family and pray that God will make us worthy to lead and to establish such families. At the same time, we must be careful not to accept as a true family that which is false! We must guard against mere social views of the family. And those families wrongly formed and wrongly operating we must call-by the power of love that even they have in their midst-back to the Christian image of the family that we see in the lives of Christ, the Theotokos, the Apostles, and the Martyrs and Saints.

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