

# Authority and Obedience in Marriage

by Fr. Alexey Young

*No connection on earth is greater than that between man and wife – Elder Macarius of Optina*

## The Church: a Model

The perfect model for husbands and wives is the Church, where all is and must be done according to good order and for the express purpose of saving souls, of quickly and efficiently "catching" as many souls as possible in the sea of life, bringing them into the Ark of Salvation--which is the Orthodox Church--and then sailing safely with them into the harbor of eternal paradise. In order that the Ship of the Church might reach its appointed destination without shipwreck, she has a skilled Pilot, Christ, and under Him the officers, who are the bishops and their assistants, the priests and deacons, all of whom have charge of the passengers. It is a clear and necessary chain of authority. Without this authority, and the obedience it implies, there will be chaos, rioting, and rebellion among the passengers; no one will heed the Pilot's voice; the rudder will be seized by the ignorant and the evil, and the ship's course will change; many will fall off the Ark and be forever lost.

A microcosm of this is the Orthodox monastery, where the chain of command flowing from the Abbot or Abbess is well understood and fully respected if the monastics are to accomplish their goal. A monastery is therefore a perfect mirror-image and also an extension of--authority in Christ's Church. It is not a frivolous authority, nor a mere cultural or historical phenomenon; it does not exist for the pleasure or whim of those who command, It is a serious authority, with grave repercussions for those who abuse it. It has one purpose and one purpose only: the expeditious salvation of those in obedience. Thus, St. John Chrysostom sees that an Orthodox family is amazingly akin to a monastery: both exist for the salvation of souls. Both may, of course, have secondary aims--the monastery may publish books or paint icons, the husband and wife may have children, pursue careers, etc.-but the primary aim of getting into the Kingdom of Heaven must never be forgotten or given a lesser place. For this reason, Fr. Konstantine stressed, every young couple in love should ask himself this question: will my beloved help me to save my soul, or hinder me?

## God Blesses Through Obedience

Just as God's grace flowed to the Hebrew people through the hierarchy of the Old Testament Church's high priests, prophets, patriarchs, etc., in the same way this grace comes to us in the New Testament Church through bishops (who are the "fountain of the sacraments") and priests. And linked to them are husbands, as heads of their families. The husband who stands before God and intercedes for his wife and children, as the parish priest intercedes for his flock, truly receives God's blessing upon his family and all "the work of his hands."

Furthermore, we can say that the husband who functions as the Orthodox spiritual leader in his family, praying for and instructing his wife and children, as well as showing them (by his example) the way--such a man is already satisfying his wife's deepest needs. Such a man is easily and willingly obeyed by his wife, just as Eve would have obeyed Adam had he acted as her loving head and leader, instead of her follower into sin.

Thus, the good order of the Church becomes also the good order of the family. And just as the monastery is a microcosm of the Church, so too is that family where God is rightly worshipped, and where His "chain of command" is upheld and respected.

### Inferiority and Inequality

Does this mean that husbands are "superior" to their wives? Our society would see it as such, for the world today promotes the idea of two heads in a family, both the husband and the wife (in spite of the fact that from a worldly standpoint no organization or institution can withstand two chiefs at the same time!). No, there is but one head, again following the divine pattern given by Christ to the Church, where we find but one ruling bishop in a diocese and one rector in each parish. And just as bishops and priests must obey the Lord, wives must obey their husbands:

*Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church. (Eph. 5:22-23)*

We know that in Christ "there is neither male nor female." Obviously, then, the husband is not superior to his wife. But just as the President of the United States has no innate worthiness not equally shared with all citizens, but is respected and obeyed only because of his office and calling so too a husband and wife are completely equal one to another in God's eyes (for which reason St. Paul even commands: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ"), but a husband is obeyed and respected because of his office and calling, which were bestowed upon him mystically in the Sacrament of Marriage.

If, then, they are both equal in God's eyes, why did God choose the man to be head of the wife, instead of the other way round? Because it was Eve that initiated the first sin. Thus, all her descendants must be in obedience to their husbands, giving them the initiative in all things; similarly all the sons of Adam are required to assume their original place as leaders in the marriage relationship, the place which Adam only too willingly abrogated to Eve, thus joining in her sin.

In St. Paul's instructions to husbands and wives there is a great mystery, and a seeming contradiction. A husband is appointed head of his wife, but he is also to be her servant. How can this be? "Husbands," says the Apostle, "love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify her..." In other words, a husband's authority is commensurate with his willingness to empty himself like a sacrificial lamb, in this way actually "sanctifying" his wife. It is a wonderful and worthy calling for a man, but one which too few husbands actually strive to attain.

### **The Wife's Role**

What happens if a husband doesn't take his responsibilities seriously, or makes mistakes as head of the wife? Must he still be obeyed? Yes, in all things not sinful, he must be obeyed. Of course, a wife's first obedience is always to God, but in all other things she must submit, just as the Church constantly--although sometimes with groaning--submits to the will of Christ. It is not easy, but if wives trust that God will not allow their husbands to mislead or mistreat them, or in any way endanger their salvation, there is already a firm spiritual foundation to the relationship. (Similarly we read of instances where a monk saved his soul by being in obedience to a bad, incompetent, or foolish abbot, so long as he sincerely obeyed him in all things not sinful.) If a wife is suffering because of her husband's unworthy leadership, and she accepts this as a cross

sent by a loving God, then she begins to walk the soul-saving path of martyrdom , as Scripture says: "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first."

To be second in a marriage (in other words, to be the wife) is a positive good, not an evil, for God does not hold the wife free of the burden of responsibility—and it is a terrible burden—in a way that her husband can never be. Fr. Konstantine compared this to the parish priest, who carried the heavy burden of his spiritual children on his shoulders all through his life, never escaping it for one moment, and being accountable for the entire burden, whereas his deacon, or his reader, is relatively free of these responsibilities and therefore in a more enviable position. Wives, he said, often make the mistake—especially in today's society—of taking that responsibility away from their husbands (as Eve tried to do with Adam), and this is what creates the famous "power struggle" that is so unedifying and unsatisfying in contemporary marriages.

All this, of course, makes sense only if both husband and wife are looking seriously at the purpose of life and marriage. If we understand that our first love must be not our spouse, but God and His Church, then everything falls into its proper place, all is in good order, and life is fruitful and meaningful. In such a context no wife will be afraid of being in obedience to her husband, just as the Church is in perfect obedience to Christ. To live under obedience is a safeguard against temptation and therefore a truly blessed role.

People in the world, filled with pride, seek authority and position; they seek to rule over others, believing that this brings happiness. But Christ has taught us that happiness comes only through self-sacrifice (the husband) and obedience (the wife). Obedience cannot be forced; it must come from the heart, voluntarily--this is true love. We are only pilgrims, preparing for the next world; therefore, how can we fail to rule wisely, lovingly, and givingly, if we are husbands'; And, if we are wives, how can we fail to be meek and humbly obedient supports to our husbands? In both of these consists true happiness, for in both is to be found the essence of man and woman, the undoing of the sin of Adam and Eve, and the path--through this world--to the Kingdom of Heaven.