

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 one's 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.