

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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