

Marriage: The Great Sacrament

By Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra, Mount Athos

Nobody would dispute that the most important day in a person's life, after his birth and baptism, is that of his marriage. It is no surprise, then, that the aim of contemporary worldly and institutional upheavals is precisely to crush the most honorable and sacred mystery of marriage. For many people, marriage is an opportunity for pleasures and amusements. Life, however, is a serious affair. It is a spiritual struggle, a progression toward a goal—heaven. The most crucial juncture, and the most important means, of this progression is marriage. It is not permissible for anyone to avoid the bonds of marriage, whether he concludes a mystical marriage by devoting himself to God, or whether he concludes a sacramental one with a spouse.

Today we will concern ourselves primarily with sacramental marriage. We will consider how marriage can contribute to our spiritual life, in order to continue the theme of our previous talk. We know that marriage is an institution established by God. It is "honorable" (Heb 13.4). It is a "great mystery" (Eph 5.32). An unmarried person passes through life and leaves it; but a married person lives and experiences life to the full.

One wonders what people today think about the sacred institution of marriage, this "great mystery", blessed by our Church. They marry, and it's as if two checking accounts or two business interests were being merged. Two people are united without ideals, two zeros, you could say. Because people without ideals, without quests, are nothing more than zeros. "I married in order to live my life", you hear people say, "and not to be shut inside four walls". "I married to enjoy my life", they say, and then they hand over their children—if they have children—to some strange woman so they can run off to the theater, the movies, or to some other worldly gathering. And so their houses become hotels to which they return in the evening, or, rather, after midnight, after they've had their fun and need to rest. Such people are empty inside, and so in their homes they feel a real void. They find no gratification there, and thus they rush and slide from here to there, in order to find their happiness.

They marry without knowledge, without a sense of responsibility, or simply because they wish to get married, or because they think they must in order to be good members of society. But what is the result? We see it every day. The shipwrecks of marriage are familiar to all of us. A worldly marriage, as it is understood today, can only have one characteristic—the murder of a person's spiritual life. Thus we must feel that, if we fail in our marriage, we have more or less failed in our spiritual life. If we succeed in our marriage, we have also succeeded in our spiritual life. Success or failure, progress or ruin, in our spiritual life, begins with our marriage. Because this is such a serious matter, let us consider some of the conditions necessary for a happy, truly Christian marriage.

In order to have a successful marriage, one must have the appropriate upbringing from an early age. Just as a child must study, just as he learns to think, and take an interest in his parents or his health, so too must he be prepared in order to be able to have a successful marriage. But in the age in which we live, no one is interested in preparing their children for this great mystery, a mystery which will play the foremost role in their lives. Parents are not interested, except in the dowry, or in other such financial matters, in which they are deeply interested.

The child, from an early age, must learn to love, to give, to suffer deprivation, to obey. He must learn to feel that the purity of his soul and body is a valuable treasure to be cherished as the apple of his eye. The character of the child must be shaped properly, so that he becomes an honest, brave, decisive, sincere, cheerful person, and not a half, self-pitying creature, who constantly bemoans his fate, a weak-willed thing without any power of thought or strength. From an early age, the child should learn to take an interest in a particular subject or occupation, so that tomorrow he will be in a position to support his family, or, in the case of a girl, also to help, if this is necessary. A woman must learn to be a housewife, even if she has an education. She should learn to cook, to sew, to embroider. But, my good Father, you may say, this is all self-evident. Ask married couples, however, and you'll see how many women who are about to marry know nothing about running a household.

Once we reach a certain age, moreover, the choice of one's life partner is a matter which should not be put off. Neither should one be in a hurry, because, as the saying goes, "quick to marry, quick to despair". But one should not delay, because delay is a mortal danger to the soul. As a rule, the normal rhythm of the spiritual life begins with marriage. An unmarried person is like someone trying to live permanently in a hallway: he doesn't seem to know what the rooms are for. Parents should take an interest in the child's social life, but also in his prayer life, so that the blessed hour will come as a gift sent by God. Naturally, when he comes to choose a partner, he will take to account his parents' opinion. How often have parents felt knives piercing their hearts when their children don't ask them about the person who will be their companion in life? A mother's heart is sensitive, and can't endure such a blow. The child should discuss matters with his parents, because they have a special intuition enabling them to be aware of the things which concern them. But this doesn't mean that the father and mother should pressure the child. Ultimately he should be free to make his own decision. If you pressure your child to marry, he will consider you responsible if things don't go well. Nothing good comes from pressure. You must help him, but you must also allow him to choose the person he prefers or loves—but not someone he pities or feels sorry for. If your child, after getting to know someone, tells you, "I feel sorry for the poor soul, I'll marry him", then you know that you're on the threshold of a failed marriage. Only a person whom he or she prefers or loves can stand by the side of your child. Both the man and the woman should be attracted to each other, and they should truly want to live together, in an inward way, unhurriedly. On this matter, however, it is not possible to pressure our children. Sometimes, out of our love, we feel that they are our possessions, that they are our property, and that we can do what we want with them. And thus our child becomes a creature incapable of living life either married or unmarried.

Of course, the process of getting acquainted, which is such a delicate issue—but of which we are often heedless—should take place before marriage. We should never be complacent about getting to know each other, especially if we're not sure of our feelings. Love shouldn't blind us. It should open our eyes, to see the other person as he is, with his faults. "Better to take a shoe from your own house, even if it's cobbled", says the folk proverb. That is, it's better to take someone you've gotten to know. And acquaintanceship must always be linked with engagement, which is an equally difficult matter.

When I suggested to a young woman that she should think seriously about whether she should continue her engagement she replied: "If I break it off, my mother will kill me". But what sort of engagement is it, if there's no possibility of breaking it off? To get engaged doesn't mean that I'll necessarily get married. It means that I'm testing to see whether I should marry the person I'm engaged to. If a woman isn't in a position to break off her engagement, she shouldn't get engaged, or, rather, she shouldn't go ahead with the marriage. During the engagement, we must be especially careful. If we are, we will have fewer problems and fewer disappointments after the wedding. Someone once said that, during the period of

getting to know one another, you should hold on to your heart firmly with both hands, as if it were a wild animal. You know how dangerous the heart is: instead of leading you to marriage, it can lead you into sin. There is the possibility that the person you've chosen sees you as a mere toy, or a toothbrush to be tried out. Afterwards you'll be depressed and shed many tears. But then it will be too late, because your angel will have turned out to be made of clay.

Don't choose a person who wastes his time at clubs, having good time, and throwing away his money on traveling and luxuries. Neither should you choose someone who, as you'll find out, conceals his self-centeredness beneath words of love. Don't choose a woman as your wife who is like gun powder, so that as soon as you say something to her, she bursts to flames. She's no good as a wife.

Moreover, if you want to have a truly successful marriage, don't approach that young woman or man who is unable to leave his or her parents. The commandment of Christ is clear: man leaves his father and mother, and is united to his wife" (Mk 10.7). But when you see the other person tied to his mother or father, when you see that he obeys them with his mouth hanging open, and is prepared to do whatever they tell him, keep well away. He is emotionally sick, a psychologically immature person, and you won't be able to create a family with him. The man you will make your husband should be spirited. But how can he be spirited when he hasn't realized, hasn't understood, hasn't digested the fact that his parents' house is simply a flower-pot in which he was put, to be taken out later, and transplanted somewhere else?

Also, when you're going to choose a husband, make sure that he's not an uncommunicative type—in which case he'll have no friends. And if today he has no friends, tomorrow he'll find it difficult to have you as a friend and partner. Be on your guard against grumblers, moaners, and gloomy people who are like dejected birds. Be on your guard against those who complain all the time: "You don't love me, you don't understand me", and all that sort of thing. Something about these creatures of God isn't right. Also be on your guard against religious fanatics and the overly pious. Those, that is, who get upset over trivial things, who are critical of everything and hypersensitive. How are you going to live with such a person? It will be like sitting on thorns. Also look out for those who regard marriage as something bad, as a form of imprisonment. Those who say: But I've never in my whole life thought about getting married.

Watch out for certain pseudo-Christians, who see marriage as something sordid, as a sin, who immediately cast their eyes down when they hear anything said about it. If you marry someone like this, he will be a thorn in your flesh, and a burden for his monastery if he becomes a monk. Watch out for those who think that they're perfect, and find no defect in themselves, while constantly finding faults in others. Watch out for those who think they've been chosen by God to correct everyone else.

There is another serious matter to which you should also pay attention: heredity. Get to know well the father, the mother, the grandfather, the grandmother, the uncle. Also, the basic material prerequisites should be there. Above all, pay attention to the person's faith. Does he or she have faith? Has the person whom you're thinking of making the companion of your life have ideals? If Christ means nothing to him, how are you going to be able to enter his heart? If he has not been able to value Christ, do you think he will value you? Holy Scripture says to the husband that the wife should be "of your testament" (Mal 2.14), that is, of your faith, your religion, so that she can join you to God. It is only then that you can have, as the Church Fathers say, a marriage "with the consent of the bishop", that is, with the approval of the Church, and not simply a formal license.

Discuss things in advance with your spiritual father. Examine every detail with him, and he will stand by your side as a true friend, and, when you reach the desired goal, then your marriage will be a gift from God (cf. 1 Cor 7.7). God gives his own gift to each one of us. He leads one person to marriage and another to virginity. Not that God makes the choice by saying "you go here", and "you go there", but he gives us the nerve to choose what our heart desires, and the courage and the strength to carry it out. If you choose your spouse in this way, then thank God. Bring him into touch with your spiritual father. If you don't have one, the two of you should choose a spiritual father together, who will be your Elder, your father, the one who will remind you of, and show you God.

You will have many difficulties in life. There will be a storm of issues. Worries will surround you, and maintaining your Christian life will not be easy. But don't worry. God will help you. Do what is within your power. Can you read a spiritual book for five minutes a day? Then read. Can you pray for five minutes a day? Pray. And if you can't manage five minutes, pray for two. The rest is God's affair. When you see difficulties in your marriage, when you see that you're making no progress in your spiritual life, don't despair. But neither should you be content with whatever progress you may have already made. Lift up your heart to God. Imitate those who have given everything to God, and do what you can to be like them, even if all you can do is to desire in your heart to be like them. Leave the action to Christ. And when you advance in this way, you will truly sense what is the purpose of marriage. Otherwise, as a blind person wanders about, so too will you wander in life.

What then is the purpose of marriage? I will tell you three of its main aims. First of all, marriage is a path of pain. The companionship of man and wife is called a "yoking together" (syzygia), that is, the two of them labor under a shared burden. Marriage is a journeying together, a shared portion of pain, and, of course, a joy. But usually it's six chords of our life which sound a sorrowful note, and only one which is joyous. Man and wife will drink from the same cup of upheaval, sadness, and failure. During the marriage ceremony, the priest gives the newly-weds to drink from the same cup, called the "common cup", because together they will bear the burdens of marriage. The cup is also called "union", because they are joined together to share life's joys and sorrows.

When two people get married, it's as if they're saying: Together we will go forward, hand in hand, through good times and bad. We will have dark hours, hours of sorrow filled with burdens, monotonous hours. But in the depths of the night, we continue to believe in the sun and the light. Oh, my dear friends, who can say that his life has not been marked by difficult moments? But it is no small thing to know that, in your difficult moments, in your worries, in your temptations, you will be holding in your hand the hand of your beloved. The New Testament says that every man will have pain, especially those who enter into marriage.

"Are you free from a wife?"—which means, are you unmarried?—asks the Apostle Paul. "Then do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you are not doing anything wrong, it is no sin. And if a girl marries, she does not sin, but those who marry will have hardships to endure, and my aim is to spare you" (1 Cor 7.27-28). Remember: from the moment you marry, he says, you will have much pain, you will suffer, and your life will be a cross, but a cross blossoming with flowers. Your marriage will have its joys, its smiles, and its beautiful things. But during the days of sunshine, remember that all the lovely flowers conceal a cross, which can emerge into your sunshine at any moment.

Life is not a party, as some people think, and after they get married take a fall from heaven to earth. Marriage is a vast ocean, and you don't know where it will wash you up. You take the person whom

you've chosen with fear and trembling, and with great care, and after a year, two years, five years, you discover that he's fooled you.

It is an adulteration of marriage for us to think that it is a road to happiness, as if it were a denial of the cross. The joy of marriage is for husband and wife to put their shoulders to the wheel and together go forward on the uphill road of life. "You haven't suffered? Then you haven't loved", says a certain poet. Only those who suffer can really love. And that's why sadness is a necessary feature of marriage. "Marriage", in the words of an ancient philosopher, "is a world made beautiful by hope, and strengthened by misfortune". Just as steel is fashioned in a furnace, just so is a person proved in marriage, in the fire of difficulties. When you see your marriage from a distance, everything seems wonderful. But when you get closer, you'll see just how many difficult moments it has.

God says that "it is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2.18), and so he placed a companion at his side, someone to help him throughout his life, especially in his struggles of faith, because in order to keep your faith, you must suffer and endure much pain. God sends his grace to all of us. He sends it, however, when he sees that we are willing to suffer. Some people, as soon as they see obstacles, run away. They forget God and the Church. But faith, God, and the Church, are not a shirt that you take off as soon as you start to sweat.

Marriage, then, is a journey through sorrows and joys. When the sorrows seem overwhelming, then you should remember that God is with you. He will take up your cross. It was he who placed the crown of marriage on your head. But when we ask God about something, he doesn't always supply the solution right away. He leads us forward very slowly. Sometime[s] he takes years. We have to experience pain, otherwise life would have no meaning. But be of good cheer, for Christ is suffering with you, and the Holy Spirit, "through your groanings is pleading on your behalf" (cf. Rom 8.26).

Second, marriage is a journey of love. It is the creation of a new human being, a new person, for, as the Gospel says, "the two will be as one flesh" (Mt 19.5; Mk 10.7). God unites two people, and makes them one. From this union of two people, who agree to synchronize their footsteps and harmonize the beating of their hearts, a new human being emerges. Through such profound and spontaneous love, the one becomes a presence, a living reality, in the heart of the other. "I am married" means that I cannot live a single day, even a few moments, without the companion of my life. My husband, my wife, is a part of my being, of my flesh, of my soul. He or she complements me. He or she is the thought of my mind. He or she is the reason for which my heart beats.

The couple exchanges rings to show that, in life's changes, they will remain united. Each wears a ring with the name of the other written on it, which is placed on the finger from which a vein runs directly to the heart. That is, the name of the other is written on his own heart. The one, we could say, gives the blood of his heart to the other. He or she encloses the other within the core of his being. "What do you do?" a novelist was once asked. He was taken aback. "What do I do? What a strange question! I love Olga, my wife". The husband lives to love his wife, and the wife lives to love her husband.

The most fundamental thing in marriage is love, and love is about uniting two into one. God abhors separation and divorce. He wants unbroken unity (cf. Mt 19.3-9; Mk 10.2-12). The priest takes the rings off the left finger, puts them on the right, and then again on the left, and finally he puts them back on the right hand. He begins and ends with the right hand, because this is the hand with which we chiefly

act. It also means that the other now has my hand. I don't do anything that my spouse doesn't want. I am bound up with the other. I live for the other, and for that reason I tolerate his faults. A person who can't put up with another can't marry.

What does my partner want? What interests him? What gives him pleasure? That should also interest and please me as well. I also look for opportunities to give him little delights. How will I please my husband today? How will I please my wife today? This is the question which a married person must ask every day. She is concerned about his worries, his interests, his job, his friends, so that they can have everything in common. He gladly gives way to her. Because he loves her, he goes to bed last and gets up first in the morning. He regards her parents as his own, and loves them and is devoted to them, because he knows that marriage is difficult for parents. It always makes them cry, because it separates them from their child.

The wife expresses love for her husband through obedience. She is obedient to him exactly as the Church is to Christ (Eph 5.22-24). It is her happiness to do the will of her husband. Attitude, obstinacy, and complaining are the axes which chop down the tree of conjugal happiness. The woman is the heart. The man is the head. The woman is the heart that loves. In her husband's moments of difficulty, she stands at his side, as the empress Theodora stood by the emperor Justinian. In his moments of joy, she tries to raise him up to even higher heights and ideals. In times of sorrow, she stands by him like a sublime and peaceful world offering him tranquility.

The husband should remember that his wife has been entrusted to him by God. His wife is a soul which God has given to him, and one day he must return it. He loves his wife as Christ loves the Church (Eph 5.25). He protects her, takes care of her, gives her security, particularly when she is distressed, or when she is ill. We know how sensitive a woman's soul can be, which is why the Apostle Peter urges husbands to honor their wives (cf. 1 Pet 3.7). A woman's soul gets wounded, is often petty, changeable, and can suddenly fall into despair. Thus the husband should be full of love and tenderness, and make himself her greatest treasure. Marriage, my dear friends, is a little boat which sails through waves and among rocks. If you lose your attention even for a moment, it will be wrecked.

As we have seen, marriage is first of all a journey of pain; second a journey of love; and, third, a journey to heaven, a call from God. It is, as Holy Scripture says, a "great mystery" (Eph 5.32). We often speak of seven "mysteries", or sacraments. In this regard, a "mystery" is the sign of the mystical presence of some true person or event. An icon, for instance, is a mystery. When we venerate it, we are not venerating wood or paint, but Christ, or the Theotokos, or the saint who is mystically depicted. The Holy Cross is a symbol of Christ, containing his mystical presence. Marriage, too, is a mystery, a mystical presence, not unlike these. Christ says, "wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am among them" (Mt 18.20). And whenever two people are married in the name of Christ, they become the sign which contains and expresses Christ himself. When you see a couple who are conscious of this, it is as if you are seeing Christ. Together they are a theophany.

This is also why crowns are placed on their heads during the wedding ceremony, because the bride and groom are an image of Christ and the Church. And not just this, but everything in marriage is symbolic. The lit candles symbolize the wise virgins. When the priest places these candles into the hands of the newly-weds, it is as if he is saying to them: Wait for Christ like the wise virgins (Mt 25.1-11). Or they symbolize the tongues of fire which descended at Pentecost, and which were in essence the presence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.1-4). The wedding rings are kept on the altar, until they are taken from there by

the priest, which shows that marriage has its beginning in Christ, and will end in Christ. The priest also joins their hands, in order to show that it is Christ himself who unites them. It is Christ who is at the heart of the mystery and at the center of their lives.

All the elements of the marriage ceremony are shadows and symbols which indicate the presence of Christ. When you're sitting somewhere and suddenly you see a shadow, you know that someone's coming. You don't see him, but you know he's there. You get up early in the morning, and you see the red horizon in the east. You know that, in a little while, the sun will come up. And indeed, there behind the mountain, the sun starts to appear.

When you see your marriage, your husband, your wife, your partner's body, when you see your troubles, everything in your home, know that they are all signs of Christ's presence. It is as if you're hearing Christ's footsteps, as if he was coming, as if you are now about to hear his voice. All these things are the shadows of Christ, revealing that he is together with us. It is true, though, that, because of our cares and worries, we feel that he is absent. But we can see him in the shadows, and we are sure that he is with us. This is why there was no separate marriage service in the early Church. The man and woman simply went to church and received Communion together. What does this mean? That henceforth their life is one life in Christ.

The wreaths, or wedding crowns, are also symbols of Christ's presence. More specifically, they are symbols of martyrdom. Husband and wife wear crowns to show that they are ready to become martyrs for Christ. To say that "I am married" means that I live and die for Christ. "I am married" means that I desire and thirst for Christ. Crowns are also signs of royalty, and thus husband and wife are king and queen, and their home is a kingdom, a kingdom of the Church, an extension of the Church. When did marriage begin? When man sinned. Before that, there was no marriage, not in the present-day sense. It was only after the Fall, after Adam and Eve had been expelled from paradise, that Adam "knew" Eve (Gen 4.1) and thus marriage began. Why then? So that they might remember their fall and expulsion from paradise, and seek to return there. Marriage is thus a return to the spiritual paradise, the Church of Christ. "I am married" means, then, that I am a king, a true and faithful member of the Church. The wreaths also symbolize the final victory which will be attained in the kingdom of heaven. When the priest takes the wreaths, he says to Christ: "take their crowns to your kingdom", take them to your kingdom, and keep them there, until the final victory. And so marriage is a road: its starts out from the earth and ends in heaven. It is a joining together, a bond with Christ, who assures us that he will lead us to heaven, to be with him always. Marriage is a bridge leading us from earth to heaven. It is as if the sacrament is saying: Above and beyond love, above and beyond your husband, your wife, above the everyday events, remember that you are destined for heaven, that you have set out on a road which will take you there without fail. The bride and the bridegroom give their hands to one another, and the priest takes hold of them both, and leads them round the table dancing and singing. Marriage is a movement, a progression, a journey which will end in heaven, in eternity.

In marriage, it seems that two people come together. However it's not two but three. The man marries the woman, and the woman marries the man, but the two together also marry Christ. So three take part in the mystery, and three remain together in life.

In the dance around the table, the couple are led by the priest, who is a type of Christ. This means that Christ has seized us, rescued us, redeemed us, and made us his. And this is the "great mystery" of marriage (cf. Gal 3.13).

In Latin, the word "mystery" was rendered by the word sacramentum, which means an oath. And marriage is an oath, a pact, a joining together, a bond, as we have said. It is a permanent bond with Christ.

"I am married", then, means that I enslave my heart to Christ. If you wish, you can get married. If you wish, don't get married. But if you marry, this is the meaning that marriage has in the Orthodox Church, which brought you into being. "I am married" means I am the slave of Christ.

From The Church at Prayer: The Mystical Liturgy of the Heart, by Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra (Ormylia, Greece: The Holy Convent of the Annunciation, 2005), pp. 111-125. This wonderful book was not well advertised, and thus many people do not know about it. The entire book is highly recommended. You may find it at any good Orthodox book store, such as OramaWorld.com.