

## 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.