



Male and Female in God's Image

It's unfortunate when we become so focused on the symptoms of a problem that we ignore its underlying causes. Some Christian rhetoric on same-sex marriage has done precisely that and has failed as a result to transcend the dynamics of conventional partisan politics. Instead of illuminating the unique glory of the life-giving union of husband and wife as an icon of the Holy Trinity and of the salvation of the world, the defenders of traditional marriage often merely skim the surface of public morality. The fundamental problem isn't that increasing numbers of Americans approve of same-sex marriage; it's that many Christians and others have forgotten the holiness and unique vocation of the man-woman relationship. Once we lose that key link, the possibility of thinking coherently—and faithfully—about human sexuality is gone.

In order to speak with integrity on marriage and family issues, we need first to take a sober look at the failure of the churches to equip our members to embody chastity and sexual purity, and thus to be a witness of holiness in stark contrast to the moral corruption so pervasive in our culture and world.

Especially since the dawn of the sexual revolution, Christians have too often turned a blind eye to promiscuity, pre-marital sex, serial divorce and remarriage, and a hedonistic culture that excuses all things in the name of an individual's pleasure and self-defined happiness. No wonder so many Americans seem to dismiss opposition to same-sex marriage as self-righteous hypocrisy and arbitrary discrimination. Those who tolerate—and at times even seem to condone—sex and cohabitation for unmarried men and women have little standing to criticize the prospect of legal sanction for gay unions. If there is no visible difference between how Christians and others handle these crucial life-shaping matters, why should anyone take seriously what we have to say? If we do not call heterosexuals to holiness, why all the bother about the much smaller population of homosexuals?

Likewise, we misdirect our energies when we speak of civil marriage in contemporary America as though it were identical to Christian marriage. Something accomplished before a justice of the peace and recorded at the court house impacts taxes, inheritance, and other legal matters, but cannot turn water into wine as a sign of the Kingdom of God. Holy matrimony does not simply grant civil sanction to the broken union of Adam and Eve, but heals and blesses their common life as a sign of the relationship between Christ and the Church. It is a calling, not a right, for anyone. Man and woman wear the crowns of the Kingdom as their love for one another finds its true fulfillment in the Lord. God created us male and female in the divine image and likeness, giving opposite-sex couples the unique ability to bring forth new life from their own bodies out of love for one another. Through this blessed union, parents and children become an image of the Holy Trinity, sharing a union of love that binds them together and enables them to learn to love Christ in one another. By the restoration of the primal unity of male and female in God, Christian marriage becomes a sign of the salvation not merely of two individuals, but of all humanity and of the creation itself. Perhaps that is why our Savior so often used the image of a wedding feast for the Kingdom of God.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity believes that man and woman are not interchangeable bundles of individual rights; instead, the two sexes play complementary roles in our common salvation. Jesus Christ and the Theotokos, the apostles and the myrrh bearing women, St. Macrina with her brothers Sts. Basil and Gregory, and so many other examples from Scripture, hymnody, icons, and the saints demonstrate the abiding mystery of the male-female distinction and relationship in our pursuit of *theosis*. The same God



who creates us as male and female saves us in relationship to one another. Instead of abandoning biological distinctions as though our bodies were irrelevant and the two sexes identical, we look to the Lord, His Mother, and ongoing generations of holy men and women to teach us how to live faithfully in relation to one another as male and female. We deal here with a great mystery, as the Logos who spoke the world into existence also made us man and woman in the divine image. The male Son rose from the dead and ascended into heaven; and the female Mother who bore Him followed into the Kingdom at her Dormition. Even in the world to come, the distinction of man and woman will remain.

No, God does not call everyone to marriage, not even all heterosexuals. Yes, He invites everyone to holiness; preserving sexual intimacy for the blessed state of marriage between a man and a woman is part of that calling, as the Church has taught consistently for two thousand years. Nonetheless, holy people have—and continue to—struggle with temptations of all kinds. Through fasting and other forms of self-denial, nourishment by the Holy Mysteries of the Church, participation in healthy friendships and communities, and sincere confession and repentance when we stumble, all of us—regardless of sexual inclinations—find strength and healing to press forward to the high calling that is ours in Christ Jesus. The nature of one's particular temptations is irrelevant; the point is to turn away from them and live faithfully.

Christian witness on these matters faces serious cultural challenges today. One hears that the growing support for same-sex marriage reflects positive portraits of homosexuals on both the small and the large screen, as well as the experience of knowing friends and family members who are gay. Straight people are apparently marrying at declining rates, while many gay couples enthusiastically seek legal recognition of their unions. Some people seem to be more impressed by the commitment of same-sex partners to one another than by that of the married couples they know. Appeals to the equal rights of individuals to the benefits of marriage, however defined, clinch the argument for many.

Until very recently, of course, no culture or world religion recognized same-sex relationships as holy, or even legal, matrimony. From the perspective of Orthodox Christianity the revisionist claims distort the truth about what it means to be man and a woman in God's image and likeness. They endorse sexual expression apart from the loving, covenanted unity of male-female difference that alone is blessed to bring forth new life. They respond to the desires of individuals in terms of the categories of the corrupt world, not of the struggle of disciplining oneself in order to respond more fully to the divine eros. Though Christian and civil marriage are not identical, Orthodoxy will not embrace society's official redefinition of the fundamental nature of marriage contrary to what God has established from the origins of the human race. The Church cannot bless same-sex unions as marriages, for that is not what they are. Sacraments restore persons and their relationships according to God's original intention for us to be like Him; and He created us male and female in His image toward the end of our salvation.

Contrary to popular assumptions, this stance on marriage does not entail that we should condemn, judge, or shun people who are in intimate relationships with members of the same sex. Orthodox priests concern themselves only with the sexual and other sins named in confession or with the very rare scandalous situation that has to be addressed in the parish. And confession is not about condemnation, but forgiveness, healing, and growth, regardless of the sin confessed. Like the rest of us, those who struggle with same-sex attraction need guidance and support throughout their lives as they progress in holiness. Yes, all really are called to enter into the holiness of God, to become saints. A Church that honors King David, Photini, Moses the Black, and Mary of Egypt can ask no less. Like the Samaritan woman, all who suffer disordered sexual passions are more likely to respond to genuine expressions of compassion and



respect that point them toward the living water that satisfies at a level deeper than physical desire. Yes, the Church must speak the truth about sexuality, but also about pride, self-righteous judgment, hatred, and gossip. And given the Lord's definition of adultery in the Sermon on the Mount, none of us is in the position to look down upon others for sexual sin. After all, who doesn't have disordered desires? And the vast majority of sexual sin is surely between people of opposite sex. We must be very careful with our words.

In our currcultural context, the witness of true Christian marriage simply must become visible, vibrant, and robust, if it is to be taken seriously by mainstream cultureent . All the more is our need to be vigilant in our parishes and families, in our friendships and neighborhoods and schools, in our choices of entertainment and attire, to form ourselves in chastity both in our bodily actions and the thoughts of our hearts. Of course, we never do that alone, but in communion with the Church and with the support of fellow strugglers who want to participate more fully in the divine nature.

The early Christians impressed even the pagan Romans with their care for the dying and their rescue of exposed infants. It's time for the current generation of Christians to impress our society with the chaste love of man and woman as a sign of God's covenantal fidelity in Jesus Christ. There is no better response to the challenges posed by the ongoing sexual revolution than the living icon of Christian marriage—of Adam and Eve healed and blessed as they wear the crowns of the Kingdom and bring new persons into the world out of their love for one another. That's how God intends life to go on in His good creation. It's precisely the differences between male and female that make the union of marriage life-giving, complementary, and a path to salvation. True marriage manifests the healing of our humanity in the image of God as man and woman. Our challenge is not only to say words about marriage, but to live them out in ways that draw others to Christ and His Church. That's the most fundamental political action of the Christian community: to embody a life that conquers death, that heals our broken, corrupt humanity—body and soul, male and female. If we do that, we will address not just the symptoms of the moral decay of our society, but also its underlying causes.