

## **Marriage, Divorce, and Mixed Marriages**

Marriage is one of the sacraments of the Orthodox Church. Orthodox Christians who marry must marry in the Church in order to be in sacramental communion with the Church. According to the Church canons, an Orthodox who marries outside the Church may not receive Holy Communion and may not serve as a sponsor, i.e. a Godparent at a Baptism, or as a sponsor at a Wedding. Certain marriages are prohibited by canon law, such as a marriage between first and second cousins, or between a Godparent and a Godchild. The first marriage of a man and a woman is honored by the Church with a richly symbolic service that eloquently speaks to everyone regarding the married state. The form of the service calls upon God to unite the couple through the prayer of the priest or bishop officiating.

The church will permit up to, but not more than, three marriages for any Orthodox Christian. If both partners are entering a second or third marriage, another form of the marriage ceremony is conducted, much more subdued and penitential in character. Marriages end either through the death of one of the partners or through ecclesiastical recognition of divorce. The Church grants "ecclesiastical divorces" on the basis of the exception given by Christ to his general prohibition of the practice. The Church has frequently deplored the rise of divorce and generally sees divorce as a tragic failure. Yet, the Orthodox Church also recognizes that sometimes the spiritual well-being of Christians caught in a broken and essentially nonexistent marriage justifies a divorce, with the right of one or both of the partners to remarry. Each parish priest is required to do all he can to help couples resolve their differences. If they cannot, and they obtain a civil divorce, they may apply for an ecclesiastical divorce in some jurisdictions of the Orthodox Church. In others, the judgment is left to the parish priest when and if a civilly divorced person seeks to remarry.

Those Orthodox jurisdictions which issue ecclesiastical divorces require a thorough evaluation of the situation, and the appearance of the civilly divorced couple before a local ecclesiastical court, where another investigation is made. Only after an ecclesiastical divorce is issued by the presiding bishop can they apply for an ecclesiastical license to remarry.

Though the Church would prefer that all Orthodox Christians would marry Orthodox Christians, it does not insist on it in practice. Out of its concern for the spiritual welfare of members who wish to marry a non-Orthodox Christian, the Church will conduct a "mixed marriage." For this purpose, a "non-Orthodox Christian" is a member of the Roman Catholic Church, or one of the many Protestant Churches which believe in and baptize in the name of the Holy Trinity. This means that such mixed marriages may be performed in the Orthodox Church. However, the Orthodox Church does not perform marriages between Orthodox Christians and persons belonging to other religions, such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, or any sectarian and cult group, such as Christian Science, Mormonism, or the followers of Rev. Moon.

## **Questions on Sexual Issues**

The teaching of the Orthodox Church on sexual questions is strongly determined by the Church's attitude toward marriage and the family. A representative Orthodox statement which shows the centrality and importance of the family in Orthodox thinking is found in an encyclical letter by former Archbishop Iakovos of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, issued on the occasion of National Family Week in 1972. He stated:

*"Home and family life is the bedrock of our Greek Orthodox life-style. The spirit that binds us together as a people finds its deepest roots in the home where the tenderest values of human existence, love, compassion, forbearance and mutual helpfulness thrive in abundance."*

Over the centuries and throughout most cultures and civilizations the family has been proven to be the unifying unit of society. Today we find the family under attack both from within and from without. Outside forces would have us believe that the family as we have come to know and cherish it is no longer necessary. From within, the erosion of spiritual values and emphasis upon materialism has created for many families

confusion and uncertainty where commitment and dedication once reigned. Marriage is holy. The home is sacred. Birth is a miracle. In these we find the very meaning of life itself.

One aspect of the "commitment and dedication" of the holy state of marriage and family is cast in terms of sexual behavior. Most moral questions relating to sex are generally best understood in the light of this high regard for marriage and the family. Some of the questions on sexual issues addressed by the Orthodox Church are the following:

1. The Orthodox Church remains faithful to the biblical and traditional norms regarding premarital sexual relations between men and women. The only appropriate and morally fitting place for the exercise of sexual relations, according to the teachings of the Church, is marriage. The moral teaching of the Church on this matter has been unchanging since its foundation. In sum, the sanctity of marriage is the cornerstone of sexual morality. The whole range of sexual activity outside marriage - fornication, adultery and homosexuality - are thus seen as not fitting and appropriate to the Christian way of life. Like the teaching on fornication, the teachings of the Church on these and similar issues have remained constant. Expressed in Scripture, the continuing Tradition of the Church, the writings of the Church Fathers, the Ecumenical Councils and the canons, these views have been restated by theologians, hierarchs and local Orthodox churches in our own day. For example, the Decalogue prohibits adultery. In the tradition of the Church, the second-century Epistle of Barnabas commands "Thou shalt not be an adulterer, nor a corrupter, nor be like to them that are such." The fourth-century Church Father St. Basil wrote against the practice (Canons 35 and 77); and the Quinisext Council (A.D. 691) repeated the same condemnation in its eighty-seventh canon. All major Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States have had occasion to repeat the condemnation of adultery.
2. Generally stated, fornication, adultery, abortion, homosexuality and any form of abusive sexual behavior are considered immoral and inappropriate forms of behavior in and of themselves, and also because they attack the institution of marriage and the family. Two representative statements, one on abortion and another on homosexuality, from the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America follow. They are from the Twenty-Third Clergy-Laity Congress held in Philadelphia in 1976. The Orthodox Church has a definite, formal and intended attitude toward abortion. It condemns all procedures purporting to abort the embryo or fetus, whether by surgical or chemical means. The Orthodox Church brands abortion as murder; that is, as a premeditated termination of the life of a human being. The only time the Orthodox Church will reluctantly acquiesce to abortion is when the preponderance of medical opinion determines that unless the embryo or fetus is aborted, the mother will die. Decisions of the Supreme Court and State legislatures by which abortion, with or without restrictions, is allowed should be viewed by practicing Christians as an affront to their beliefs in the sanctity of life. The position of the Orthodox Church toward homosexuality has been expressed by synodicals, canons and patristic pronouncements beginning with the very first centuries of Orthodox ecclesiastical life. Thus, the Orthodox Church condemns unreservedly all expressions of personal sexual experience which prove contrary to the definite and unalterable function ascribed to sex by God's ordinance and expressed in man's experience as a law of nature. The Orthodox Church believes that homosexuality should be treated by religion as a sinful failure. In both cases, correction is called for. Homosexuals should be accorded the confidential medical and psychiatric facilities by which they can be helped to restore themselves to a self-respecting sexual identity that belongs to them by God's ordinance. In full confidentiality the Orthodox Church cares and provides pastorally for homosexuals in the belief that no sinner who has failed himself and God should be allowed to deteriorate morally and spiritually. Psychiatric reconciliation is bound to prove short-lived.
3. The possible exception to the above affirmation of continuity of teaching is the view of the Orthodox Church on the issue of contraception. Because of the lack of a full understanding of the implications of the biology of reproduction, earlier writers tended to identify abortion with contraception. However, of late a new view has taken hold among Orthodox writers and thinkers on this topic, which permits the use of certain contraceptive practices within marriage for the purpose of spacing children, enhancing the expression of marital love, and protecting health.