

## Transfiguring Voluptuous Choice: An Eastern Orthodox Approach to Marriage as Spiritual Path

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When St. Irenaeus in the early second century observed, “the glory of God is a human being fully alive,” he was referring to the fruit of becoming in the likeness of the divine Image revealed in Jesus Christ through whom each of us receives the gift of our personhood. All the world is *personal* Thou, a manifestation of divine eros, a gift of joy for those who experience it with illumined heart, and a wound to every heart that shares Christ’s cross of enduring love for a creation that revels in the life given without relationship to the life-giver.

The purpose of life is neither to resist it nor to indulge in it, but to transfigure it in order that we may live it in its fullness. There is a paradox here. Our relationship to creation itself, in the multitude of its wondrous forms, *is* the proverbial apple in the Garden of Eden, which is indeed voluptuous and to be desired as an expression of divine joy. Where, then, is the problem?

### ***Marriage as Dialogical Reciprocity***

To taste the sweetness of life and in marriage to come to know the “communion of otherness”<sup>1</sup> revealed through the Holy Trinity, according to Orthodox patristic witnesses, one

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Zizoulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

must first ask for a blessing. In the Garden of Eden, dust becomes responsive to the divine breath, awakening the potential for returning the embrace of the beloved as *person*. This means being willing to engage in a life-long struggle to “free ourselves from ignorance, and from evil and making the voluptuous choice,”<sup>2</sup> the urge to “take and eat” apart from the blessing of God’s gift of personhood.

Being in the likeness of God, able to feed on and enjoy creation illumined by the uncreated light is a potential, not a guarantee. It requires a response-ability to Spirit and earth simultaneously. Entered into, apart from grace, without blessing, both ascetical restraint and libertine self-indulgence render us impersonal and antihuman. Only the presence of Christ is a guarantee of authentic humility<sup>3</sup> which is the pre-requisite for love born of divine grace.

Marriage as a spiritual path moves along the narrow and paradoxical way of dialogical reciprocity – like the call and response of improvisational jazz – where the divine energies and the vital sap of daily life in the world converge in a never ending liturgy. We become persons through this dialogical breathing between heaven and earth as we encounter Christ on the “Emmaus way” of authentic meeting with *otherness*. “It is not good for *persons* to be alone.”<sup>4</sup> In a monologue, I am always dying.

### ***Sharing the Lord’s Name between Us***

Pure-hearted abandon to the Christian path is life-giving because it is in harmony with creation as God intends. It is *blessed*. God calls to each of us by name personally, and in answering “Here I AM,” we share in the gift of God’s own life. When we attempt to say “I AM” alone, without blessing, we use the Lord’s name in vain.

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<sup>2</sup> St. Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata or Miscellanies*, bk. 1, ch. 17, bk. In *ANF*:319 (Google book).

<sup>3</sup> “Where Christ is not present, there exists false humility”: Archimandrite Arsenios (Papacioc), “Eternity Hidden in the Moment” *The Orthodox Word* 281 (2011): 289.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Gen. 2:18

The Orthodox Church holds marriage in honor as a mystery of the Church – a means of grace uniting heaven and earth – where the word and action of the Lord turn ordinary water into the wine of the Spirit creating an effervescence in the soul of the partakers. Two persons together answer one another’s call of love with the Lord’s name, discovering together a third person in their midst.

Gospel evidence is that both men and women greatly loved Jesus and at times wept for him and he for them. The stories he told were life-reorienting and expressive of divine love in the ordinary conditions of life. Whether he was playing with children or scandalizing rule-bound, uptight religious authorities by departing from prescribed rituals, he was always affirming life. Through our Lord’s eyes and along his path, whores, adulterers, tax-collectors, fornicators, and “five-time losers” became saints, while the lack of love and mercy of the culturally inscribed, religiously “correct” and guilefully pious was artfully exposed.

Self-righteousness of any kind is a detriment to the bright sunshine of *sobornost*<sup>5</sup> where, as it is implied in the Lord’s Prayer, the neighbor shares being with one’s own self. In Christ we have the supreme paradox that he who was most pure practiced the greatest *economia*<sup>6</sup> so that untouchables and outcasts as well as social elites found themselves drawn to him, testifying by their responses that his life was already in them, hidden like a seed waiting for the waters of repentance and humility to be called forth to germinate in the light of Christ’s love.

It is often overlooked that whatever dimension of love we are talking about – *philia*, *agape* or *storge*<sup>7</sup> – divine eros is the root of them all. Eros is the wellspring of the soul’s deep year-

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<sup>5</sup> A Russian term used by Orthodox lay theologian Aleksey Khomiakov and others, distinguishing individualism from the freedom and diversity of persons within a shared communion – the mark of Christian community.

<sup>6</sup> A lessening and/or adapting of a prescribed penance as a means of healing a person and bringing the heart back to life following some kind of sin.

<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis in his book *The Four Loves* used these Greek words to tease out the dimensions of friendship, selfless love, affection, and desire.