

SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA'S VIEW ON THE ORIGIN OF HUMAN SEXUALITY IN ORTHODOX CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGY

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Abstract

The opinions of Saint Gregory of Nyssa on the origin of human sexuality stirred up passionate debates over the time. Adopted with no critical reservation by some theologians, they tend to reduce anthropology to a kind of "angelism" that has devastating effects on the understanding of marriage, in particular, and on human life, in general. In this article I undertake a scrutiny of Saint Gregory's influence on Orthodox anthropology and question the compatibility of his opinions on sexuality with the teachings of the Orthodox Church, as expressed by contemporary remarkable theologians.

Keywords: human sexuality, Saint Gregory on Nyssa, eschatology, divine image.

Introduction

The Orthodox anthropology seems sometime split between two major and opposed tendencies: one of them is to state the origin of human sexuality in connection with the original sin, while the other one is to see this origin as a natural aspect of the human being, intended by God from the very beginning and with no reference to the fall. In this respect, it is possible to speak about two divergent traditions that informed the life and the theology of the Church over the time, claiming legitimacy. The first one is linked more with the monastic life, while the second one is connected more with the theology of marriage.

A great representative of the former tendency is Saint Gregory of Nyssa. His opinions highly challenge the presuppositions of the latter, and although they received critical negative reviews in contemporary Orthodox theology, they continue to influence to some extent the issues related to sexuality in the Orthodox world. The thesis of this article is that the opinions of Saint Gregory about

the origin of human sexuality, although widespread in some monastic circles, are not consistent with Orthodox anthropology, in its contemporary formulations, at least. An investigation of the theme in the whole Patristic tradition and its subsequent reception is beyond the purpose of this article, but an excursion in the work of some of the most representative theologians of the 20th century and the beginning of the 2st century would fit the demonstration.

Why is this topic of human sexuality so important that generated a whole trend, the “theology of the body” in the West, at least? Its importance cannot be underestimated, as happened during most of the time in Christianity, both in East and West. The so-called “sexual revolution” of the '60s was partially possible because the Christian voice on the issue was silent or offered wrong answers. The importance of this topic is huge because it has to do with the definition of the human being, with the troubling questions: “Who we are?” and “What is the purpose of the human life”. Unless Orthodox theology doesn't take a clear stance in front of this issue, it is hard to offer a credible, realistic and, in the same time, a profound spiritual vision on the anthropological questions. Neglecting the concerns related to the *eros* and the human sexuality, failing to articulate them in a coherent vision, leaves space for many mystifications and misinterpretations, both in the life of the believers and of non-believers. Approaching this topic, the theology must necessarily turn to the Patristic authors, which offered suggestions and solutions sometimes difficult to interpret and to frame in the same picture. This is, at least, the case of Saint Gregory of Nyssa.

1. The relationship between the prototype of humanity, the image of God and sexuality in Nyssa

In his classical treatise, *The Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Peter Brown summarises Saint Gregory's anthropology, with a special emphasis on the division of sexes:

“Men and women were poised between an original, lost prototype of human nature, created by God *in His own image*, and revealed to the visible world in the shimmering ‘angelic’ majesty of Adam, and a fullness of humanity that would come about, through

the restoration of Adam's first state, at the Resurrection"¹. This intermediate state between a lost prototype and a future fulfilment of humanity is marked by sexuality, one not intended by God for the "ideal" or the prototype of humanity:

"He [Saint Gregory] had no doubt whatsoever that the present division of sexes into male and female formed part of the present anomalous condition of human beings. This division made sexuality possible. Sexuality was designed for marriage and childbirth: it enabled mankind to continue its forlorn attempt to stem the tide of death by producing progeny. This had not been intended in God's first creation of the prototype of human nature. Adam's physical body had been unimaginably different from our own. It had been a faithful mirror of a soul which, itself, mirrored the utterly undivided, untouched simplicity of God"².

The previous text summarizes the Gregorian view and especially a much debated passage from the work *On the Making of Man*³. Saint Gregory stated that:

"... He Who brought all things into being and fashioned Man as a whole by His own will to the Divine image, did not wait to see the number of souls made up to its proper fullness by the gradual additions of those coming after but while looking upon the nature of man in its entirety and fullness by the exercise of His foreknowledge, and bestowing upon it a lot exalted and equal to the angels, since He saw beforehand by His all-seeing power the failure of their will to keep a direct course to what is good, and its consequent declension from the angelic life, in order that the multitude of human souls might not be cut short by its fall from that mode by which the angels were increased and multiplied – for this reason, I say, He formed for our nature that contrivance for increase which befits those who had fallen into sin, implanting in mankind, instead of the angelic majesty of nature, that animal and

¹ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, London, Boston, 1988, pp. 293-294.

² *Ibidem*, p. 294.

³ For a more detailed description of Saint Gregory's views on sexuality and on their critical reception, see Lect. Florin Toader Tomoiogă, *Questioning St. Gregory of Nyssa's anthropology and theory of sexuality*, in „On the Making of Man” (forthcoming article).

irrational mode by which they now succeed one another"⁴. According to Saint Gregory, the "separation of sexes" took place before Adam and Eve's fall⁵. It seems that Gregory conceives for the original man, in his *ante peccatum* condition, a virgin life, almost angelical, within which the function of sexuality would not have been part of God's initial plan⁶.

Some theologians have noticed the negative implication that such a "spiritualised" anthropology may have on human life generally, and on family particularly. It is true, that in most of the cases, the reservations are indicated in a footnote. Thus, Paul Evdokimov notices Saint Gregory's "excessive spiritualisation, a reduction of the human being to angelism, to a pure spirit"⁷.

Another great theologian, Vladimir Lossky denies the idea that the division of sexes is "super-imposed" or "super-added" to the image of God – the ontological centre of the human being. He writes in this sense: "One cannot, however, follow Gregory when, arguing about this 'preventive' character of sexuality, he affirms that the division into male and female is 'super-imposed' upon the image"⁸. Lossky's short statement is extremely important because essentially it affirms that this division is ontologically linked with the condition of the human being, which is always, in its concrete existence, male or female. In other words, God made man and woman upon His image from the beginning, the division not being added subsequently to an asexual prototype of humanity. But Lossky is inclined to consider that Saint Gregory's view on the origin of sexuality explains how it became affected by sin and doesn't change its anthropology, as Evdokimov thinks:

⁴ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XVII, 4, in „Nicene and Post-nicene Fathers of the Christian Church”, second series, vol. V, Schaff Philip (Editor), translated by William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1917, p. 407.

⁵ For more details see Rodica Pop, *Sensul căsătoriei la Platon și la Sfinții Părinți. De la soma la împărțășirea prin trup*, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2012, p. 157.

⁶ Cecilia M. Flueraș, *Grigorie al Nyssei: Harmonia Mundi, Harmonia Hominis. Muzică, moștenire clasică*, Editura Arpeggione, Cluj-Napoca, 2017, p. 169.

⁷ Paul Evdokimov, *Le sacrement de l'amour* (Rom. ed.), Lethielleux, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 2011, footnote 1, p. 199.

⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology. An Introduction*, translated by Ian and Irita Kesarcodi-Watson, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1978, p. 77.

“For him, sexuality must have been created by God in prevision of sin, to preserve humanity after the Fall, thought simply as a possibility. The sexual polarization endowed human nature with a safeguard that implies no constraint: likewise the passenger who is given a life-buoy, but is in no way tempted by this to hurl himself into the sea. This possibility can only be actualized at the moment when, through a sin that has nothing to do with sex, human nature will break and become close to grace. It is only in this fallen state, in which death is the wages of sin, that possibility will become necessity”⁹.

Some observations must be made here. First, the idea that sexuality was created only “in prevision of sin” raises the question of an alternative constitution of the human being, which may lack sexuality. But this brings the issue back to Evdokimov’s designation of such a view as “angelism”. What kind of human being could be this? Is it a real human being or an angel? Secondly, metaphorically, the “life-buoy” indicates the presence of a “see”. The danger was real and, one may say, imminent. In His foreknowledge, God knew that the human being would sin so – following Saint Gregory’s logic – He created sexuality with a purpose. But if instead of the human being created in accordance with its prototype, God created one linked with sexuality in the perspective of the fall, this means that, however, the fall into the sin conditioned not only the manifestation of human sexuality but, as well, its origin.

2. The influence of Plato and Origen on Saint Gregory’s teachings

If, as we have seen, sexuality is related to sin and the fall from paradise, what are the consequences on marriage? The problem regards not only the origin of sexuality, but as well its role and place within marriage. Finally, the issue is how can be overcome the negative consequences of sexuality on human life and how is possible from now, from this earthly life, to obtain the conformity of the human being to its asexuate prototype. Saint Gregory will “solve” the problem by postulating virginity as a way of restoring human being to the prototype intended by God when He said:

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

“Let us make man in our image and resemblance” (Genesis 1.26). Some Orthodox authors noticed that this approach is a direct influence of Origen on Nyssa’s teachings. David C. Ford, for example, writes in this respect: “Assumed by Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Origen’s ideas regarding the fact that the sexual differentiation appeared along with our forefathers’ fall into sin and, as such, it will not persist in the afterlife, had generally negative repercussions on marriage and human sexuality”¹⁰. But what was the general view of Origen on this topic? According to Peter Brown, “... Origen was prepared to look at sexuality in the human person as if it were a mere passing phase. It was a dispensable adjunct of the personality that played no role in defining the essence of the human spirit. Men and women could do without it even in this present existence”¹¹.

In the above quotation, it is easy to replace Origen’s name with that of Saint Gregory because they share similar views. Of course, Saint Gregory doesn’t approve Origen’s doctrine of the pre-existence of the souls and fully appreciate the value of the body, unlike his master. But his solution is a compromise between the myth of Origen and the realistic anthropology of other Church Fathers. Hans Urs von Balthasar writes that “the attempted solution of Gregory of Nyssa is more or less a rough compromise between Origen’s mythic structure and the historical approach of the Antiochenes and Irenaeus – a compromise that tries to solve the riddle of the fall with the paradox of a ‘reciprocal causality’ (that is, the consequence of sin is also its cause)...”¹². We hope to clarify below the precise meaning of the expression “reciprocal causality”.

What he borrows from Origen is an idealistic way of treating anthropology, a way in which something essential to the human being, its sexuality is pushed to the margins of its existence and can be easily denied. It is something super-added, unnecessary and related to the fall, although fully naturally from the beginning

¹⁰ David C. Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Full Views of St. John Chrysostom* (Rom. Ed.), St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, South Canaan, Pennsylvania, 1996, footnote 3, p. 60.

¹¹ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society...*, p. 168.

¹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy. The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, translated by Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: S.J., Ignatius Press, 2003), p. 187.

of man's creation and existence on earth. Where is the issue? According to many Patristic authors, Saint Gregory included here, the image of the human being in God's initial design for it and its future in eschatology correspond each other. The end reflects the beginning. But in Nyssa, both in the beginning and in the end, the difference of sexes is abolished. Why? Because it doesn't correspond to God's initial plan for human existence. Its place is secondary, it is only a necessity measure taken in advance for the emergency situation of the fall. One must recognise in this view a trace of Origenism. This very soft nuance of Origenism can be detected in Saint Gregory's teaching regarding this topic, summarized as follows:

"Gregory distinguishes between pre-lapsarian angelic-like multiplication and post-lapsarian sexual procreation, and he believes that the reason why God nonetheless introduced gender differentiation already in Paradise is so that human beings would be appropriately equipped to procreate once they would fall into sin. All of this is predicated on Gregory's assumption that Jesus' words regarding the angelic absence of marriage in the eschaton (Luke 20:35–6) apply to the initial paradisaic state, as well—seeing that the resurrection will be a restoration (*ἀποκατάστασις*) of the paradisaic state"¹³.

In the history of ideas and of philosophy, the scepticism regarding human sexuality can be traced back to Plato, Origen's master in many regards. The philosophical affinity among the three authors in discussion is clearly established by modern researchers. Thus, commenting on Nyssa's treatises *On Virginity* and *Life of Macrina*, Peter Brown writes: "Gregory was a Platonist of the school of Origen. To be effective, a method had also to be a mirror. The virgin body was an exquisitely appropriate mirror, in which human beings could catch a glimpse of the immense purity of the *image of God*. The woman's untouched flesh was both a mirror of the purity of her soul and a physical image of the virgin earth of the garden of Eden"¹⁴. This scepticism sprang from a Platonic, *i.e.* pessimistic general view on life in relationship with spirituality: "A man writing

¹³ Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa. An Analogical Approach*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p. 106.

¹⁴ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society...*, p. 299.

in an ancient, Platonic tradition, Gregory tended to assume that the mere fact of living in the physical world might tarnish the purity of the soul, as imperceptibly and as inexorably as the dire eye infections that were the scourge of Gregory's Near East clouded the bright vision of the eye"¹⁵.

Philip Sherrard observes, as well, the exclusion of sexuality from the image of God in the thinking of Saint Gregory and, lately, Saint Maximus the Confessor. Commenting on their texts, Philip Sherrard writes: "In his original state as he is created 'in the image', man is free from sexuality. There is not even a division between the sexes. There is no man and woman"¹⁶. The starting point of their anthropology is, as it was mentioned before, Genesis 1.26: "Let us make man in our image and resemblance". But the creation of the human being "in the image" is not interpreted by Saint Gregory – unlike Sherrard, as an actual creation, but as the intention of God, as the inner council of the Trinity, one may say. And Sherrard continues: "Sexuality is one of the consequences of a fall and of the loss of immortality and incorruptibility that goes with it. It is a consequence of man's investiture with an animal or organic life. It is one of the most disastrous consequences of the fall because it is the source of the passions, and it is the passions which lead to sin"¹⁷.

The last description must be nuanced. Saint Gregory never professed the belief that sexuality is a "consequences of a fall", as such. The strong connection between sexuality and the fall was stated mainly in the Western patristic theology (e.g. Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome). Reading the Gregorian texts, one may notice that the fall conditioned it, but it did not necessarily precede it. Therefore, here one must accept Hans Urs von Balthasar's paradox of a 'reciprocal causality': namely that the original sin is simultaneously the origin and the consequence of human sexuality! It is no wonder that, losing sight these nuances, Sherrard generalizes and pronounce a harsh judgement on Church Father's teachings

¹⁵ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society...*, p. 300.

¹⁶ Philip Sherrard, *The Sexual Relationship in Christian Thought*, in http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/Public/articles/The_Sexual_Relationship_in_Christian_Thought-by_Philip_Sherrard.aspx, 18.09.2019.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

(including Saint Gregory and Saint Maximus), which fits more the Western Christianity than its Eastern counterpart:

“Although precluded by their basic doctrine from subscribing to an out-and-out dualism in this matter, and so from attributing the origin of sexuality directly to an evil power, their practical attitude differs little from that of dualists of a Manichaean type. Sexuality is tainted. It is impure. It invests matrimony (which in any case must be regarded as a concession to those too feeble to endure the single state) with shame and contaminates those who indulge in it. If not actually evil in itself, its use stirs up the passions and so leads directly to sin. It is the springhead through which the tribes of evil pour into human nature. Consequently any progress in the life of the spirit demands as an initial step the circumventing or transcending of sexuality. Not until that step is taken is man capable of entering into a truly spiritual state”¹⁸. The dualism is exaggerated in this depiction of the Patristic authors, at least of the Greek ones. In their case, sexuality as such is not considered impure and tainted. They never blamed marriage and did not associate it with the feeling of shame. But it is true that they warn against the spiritual dangers of the passions and of the human feebleness.

3. Marriage or celibacy – an unnecessary hierarchization

Unavoidable, starting from this debate on Saint Gregory, the previous issues and interpretations generated concrete attitude regarding life options among theologians. The theological debate reached a more practical level once the question of marriage or celibacy, as better frames for spiritual life was raised. The variety of answers ranges from open affirmation of the superiority of celibacy over marriage to its negation or to an egalitarian view.

A nuanced and balanced view appears in the work of Prof. Chrisostomos Stamoulis from Greece. He describes the theory of “double creation” in Nyssa, recognising that it generated a lot of polemics in the theological literature dedicated to it, without an ultimate, decisive answer. According to him „the division of the sexes in man and woman represents a ‘post-creationist’ reality that followed the initial making of the spiritual and divine part of the

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

human existence before the creation, the only one that resembles the divine and incorporeal nature"¹⁹. The result is that for St. Gregory, the sexes, which belong to the animal and bestial part of man's existence, are not a part of the divine image. Already overcome in Christ, they will be overcome in the *eschaton*, when will be re-established the full likeness of the image to its Prototype, God²⁰. Accordingly, the prising of the virgin life was preferred by the Cappadocian Saint and not only, while the marital life was considered less spiritual. The long-term consequences of such a vision were tremendous in the history of the Orthodox Church. Although Prof. Stamoulis recognises the benefits and the importance of the celibacy in the life of the Church, he cannot avoid the polemic with conceptions which – starting from a misrepresentation of St. Gregory's teaching on human sexuality – transform the marriage in a second hand spiritual life and the married people in second grade people. Therefore, according to a controversial position, "the marriage, is a shortage of the real life, i.e. of the unmarried life, that was instituted after the fall of the human being in order to conquer the corruptibility and the death, while the married people are a second grade category of human beings, of a second speed, which are - they and their way - only hardly accepted by God"²¹.

Another equally controversial position maintains that "the only purpose of the marital sexuality – and it is obvious from the whole patristic and biblical tradition that the sex is acceptable only inside marriage – is the procreation and prudence and surely not the pleasurable communion, the 'recognition' of the person, the love, which in any case represent a sin and a wound in the face of God"²². These misconceptions regarding marriage charge the human being with useless burdens. "...The man of Orthodoxy... continuously and everywhere seems to apologize for the mode of his existence, for his existence itself"²³. It seems that in the history of Christianity, both in the East and in the West, under the influences

¹⁹ Chrisostomos Stamoulis, *Έρως και θάνατος. Δοκιμή για έναν πολιτισμό της σάρκωσης (Eros and Death. Essay for a Civilization of Incarnation)*, Akritis Publishing House, Athens, 2009, p. 177.

²⁰ Chrisostomos Stamoulis, *Eros and Death...*, p. 177.

²¹ Chrisostomos Stamoulis, *Eros and Death...*, p. 187.

²² Chrisostomos Stamoulis, *Eros and Death...*, p. 190.

²³ Chrisostomos Stamoulis, *Eros and Death...*, p. 193.

of a late and special Gnosticism “the human being was almost never accepted as such”²⁴.

All these misrepresentations of marriage and human sexuality are spread „although it is a biblical truth” the fact that „from the beginning, God the Creator made the male and the female, and this confirms that sexuality constitutes a basic choice of God and certainly not an enforced addition in a second time...”²⁵.

Prof. Stamoulis rightly notices that the teachings of Saint Gregory on the origin of human sexuality represent the result of his own “thinking” and “not at all the expression of a final dogmatic formulation”²⁶. Precisely because “the theology is the result of life and not the consequence of a static and magical theorisation of things”²⁷, Saint Gregory is “absolved” of any “theological sin”. His opinions regard, afterwards, the field of ethics, of anthropology, where there is plenty of room for debate, and not the field of dogmas.

Despite this “absolutions of theological sins”, most often, the consequences of such a view can be as tragic as the violation of dogmas. Many of Saint Gregory’s followers transformed his “thinking” in something similar to a dogma in ethics. This cannot be denied.

The vision of Theodore Zisis, a former professor of Patrology in Greece, represents such an example. In his commentary to Saint Gregory’s treatise *On Virginity*, he states that the marriage is a “post-lapsarian institution”²⁸. The marriage is related to the fallen human being and to its suffering human nature. It is an institution that most of the time, almost always, prevents man’s full dedication to God. It is not a holy and divine thing, neither a spiritual gift nor a charisma. Although marriage is good and blessed, it is neither divine nor an organ of deification (*theosis*). In a strict hierarchy, the marriage is inferior to celibacy and virgin life²⁹.

²⁴ Chrisostomos Stamoulis, *Eros and Death...*, p. 194.

²⁵ Chrisostomos Stamoulis, *Eros and Death...*, p. 175.

²⁶ Chrisostomos Stamoulis, *Eros and Death...*, p. 180.

²⁷ Chrisostomos Stamoulis, *Eros and Death...*, p. 183.

²⁸ «Παρθενία και γάμος. Αξιολόγηση και ιεράρχηση κατά τον Άγιο Γρηγόριο Νύσσης» *Πρακτικά ΙΗ' θεολογικού συνεδρίου με θέμα «Ο Άγιος Γρηγόριος Νύσσης»*, Thessaloniki, 1988, p. 79.

²⁹ Theodore Zisis, «Παρθενία και γάμος...», pp. 80-97.

Georgios Mantzaridis³⁰ and Panayotis Nellas³¹, while quoting St. Gregory of Nyssa in a similar context, affirms that God would have been able to multiply the man on the Earth using other method than sexuality, had man not fallen. The implications are clear: celibacy is superior to marriage³².

Jean-Claude Larchet, intending to present a faithful picture of Orthodox patristic theology regarding procreation, turns to the same Fathers. The consequences are the same: a rejection of human nature as it was created by God, a depreciation of sexuality and finally, of marriage. The French author writes: "According to God's initial design, man was meant to reproduce in a bodiless manner, of spiritual nature"³³ and that "the sexuality of the couple is a reality that happened afterwards; it is not inborn, but added, not being related to man's essential nature... but to it's second, fallen nature; therefore, it doesn't belong to the original modality of humanity's existence, neither to the future time to come after the general resurrection"³⁴. Therefore, the sexuality in the frame of the marriage is only "tolerated" if it doesn't have the purpose of procreation and the couple needs permanently to repent for their weakness³⁵! A very strange and Puritanic stance for an Orthodox contemporary theologian! When the creation of sexuality is at stake, the expressions become even more explicitly. N. Stan, quoting St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. John of Damascus, states that "God created the sexual organs of Adam and those of Eve as alternative in view of the humankind's perpetuation"³⁶. Probably this formulation is directly influenced by Hans Urs von Balthasar's reading of Saint Gregory. He observes that "in the anthropology of Gregory of Nyssa, the sexual organs are both a (precreated) consequence of

³⁰ Georgios Mantzaridis, *Χριστιανική Ήθική II. Άνθρωπος και Θεός, Άνθρωπος και συνάνθρωπος, ύπαρξιακές και βιοηθικές θέσεις και προοπτικές*, Pournara Publishing House, Thessaloniki, 2004, p. 370.

³¹ Ζών Θεούμενον. Προοπτικές για μία Όρθόδοξη κατανόηση του ανθρώπου (Rom. Ed.), Sinaxi Publishing House, Athens, 1981, p. 46.

³² Georgios Mantzaridis, *Χριστιανική Ήθική II...*, p. 371.

³³ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Pour une éthique de la procreation. Éléments d'anthropologie patristique*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1998, pp. 38-39.

³⁴ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Pour une éthique de la procreation...*, p. 39.

³⁵ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Pour une éthique de la procreation...*, pp. 63-64.

³⁶ *Antropologia din perspectiva hristologică. Bazele doctrinare ale vieții duhovnicești*, the 3rd edition, Mitropolia Moldovei Publishing House, Craiova, 2016, p. 64.

sin and a means of limiting the self-destructive tendencies of creation and providing for the continuity of the human race"³⁷.

It is easy to understand that the previous considerations go along with a very ascetic and monastic vision of life. Some authors propose even a hierarhization of celibacy and marriage. But is such a hierarhization necessary?

Many contemporary theologians consider that this is useless. The focus should be on the spiritual gifts that both states may offer to the human person according to his/her call, marriage or celibacy. Each state has its gifts and its challenges, its spiritual advantages and disadvantages. More important is what monks can learn from the spiritual struggles of married people and vice versa. There is a mutual enrichment and not a competition, if things are perceived from the right Christian angle. The aim is the same: spiritual union with God and the love for our neighbour. Kallistos Ware is a keen advocate of this mutual learning: "For, as Paul Evdokimov has rightly maintained, there is only one way in which to learn the distinctive value of the monastic vocation, and that is by learning to appreciate the wonder and sanctity of the married state. By the same token married couples cannot properly perceive the beauty of their own vocation unless they also honor the monastic life. The two callings are not opposed but complementary; each affirms the other"³⁸.

Fr. John Meyendorff affirms in this respect: "In spite of this predominance of the monastic spirit – which also expressed itself in the establishment of the unmarried episcopate – the Church maintained uncompromisingly the positive value of marriage. It also universally recognized in marriage a sacrament, while only some ecclesiastical writers attribute also a sacramental character to the ceremony of the monastic tonsure"³⁹.

A close look at the life of monks and married people reveal that there are essential Christian virtues that appeal to both states. Only their expression is different, their way of manifestation,

³⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy...*, p. 191.

³⁸ Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, "Foreward" to Ford, David, and Mary Ford, *Marriage As a Path to Holiness: Lives of Married Saints*, Pennsylvania: St Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1995, p. 2.

³⁹ John Meyendorff, *Marriage. An Orthodox Perspective*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2000, p. 70.

either we speak about asceticism, love, humility, obedience or other virtues: "Just as Christian marriage implies sacrifice, responsible family-building, dedication and maturity, so Christian celibacy is unthinkable without prayer, fasting, obedience, humility, charity and constant ascetical effort"⁴⁰.

Love and sexuality are in the centre of the human being. Expressed as such in marriage, they are not missing from the monastic life, as someone is inclined to consider, but they are transformed, transfigured. Repressed, they may generate psychological problems: "Modern psychology did not discover the fact that the absence of sexual activity creates problems: the Fathers of the Church knew it very well, and elaborated a remarkable system of ascetical precepts-the basis of all monastic rules-which make purity possible and enjoyable. They knew, sometimes much better than modern psychologists, that the human instinct of love and procreation is not isolated from the rest of human existence, but is its very center. It cannot be suppressed, but only transformed, transfigured and channelled, as love for God and for one's neighbor, through prayer, fasting and obedience in the name of Christ"⁴¹.

Like in a mirror, marriage and monasticism correspond each other; each needs the opposed characteristic virtue that apparently belongs exclusively to the other: "There is an element of asceticism in marriage, a refinement to love; just as there is a dimension of love in monasticism, a passion for God. In the monastic tradition, passions are dealt with differently; they are overcome by greater passions. One single, vivid experience of passionate love will advance us much further in the spiritual life than the most arduous ascetic struggle. One single flame of pure love is sufficient to spark a cosmic fire and transform the whole world"⁴².

Despite their phenomenological difference, monasticism and marriage are essentially shaped by the same goal: "Monasticism, like marriage, is a sacrament of love. Monasticism, like marriage, is a sacrament of the kingdom. The true dimension of both is

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

⁴² Fr. John Chryssavgis, *Love, Marriage and Sexuality. Orthodox Theological Perspectives for a New Millennium*, in <http://www.pravmir.com/love-marriage-and-sexuality-orthodox-theological-perspectives-for-a-new-millennium/?format=pdf>, 26.09.2019.

eschatological. Thus love is greater than prayer itself; indeed, it is prayer. For, love is what defines human nature. Both monastics and married couples must continually struggle to be what they are called to be – enraptured by the living flame of divine love”⁴³.

Conclusions

The passages regarding the origin of human sexuality from the work of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, cannot be easily interpreted and integrated in his theological system. Although they express Nyssa’s own “thinking”, they became crucial in contemporary theological debate about the purpose of human life starting from the concrete division of man in male and female. In Saint Gregory’s treating of sexuality, the researchers detected Platonic and Origenist influences. Despite these facts, some Orthodox thinkers, more traditionalist, consider that his vision is totally acceptable. From their point of view, the division of sexes represents a consequence of the original sin or a preparation of the human nature to survive in the fallen, post-paradisiacal condition. Sexuality is super-added and does not belong to the “true” nature of man, which would have been different man wouldn’t have fallen, according to the interpretation of Saint Gregory, Saint Maximus the Confessor. Marriage and sexuality are just a passing phase in the human life, a necessary evil, a compromise, until the person will be restored at the resurrection to his/her “true”, original, intended by God nature. Monastic life is already an anticipation of this restoration because it refuses the temporary phase of a sexual life in the frame of marriage. Consequently, the marriage is underestimated, celibacy is considered superior and the expression of sexuality in the life of the married couple is reduced to utilitarianism (procreation); any spiritual insights related to it are denied. It is only morally tolerated and the couple needs repentance and a feeling of guilt. This is a very puritanical perspective on family life, rich in Platonic and Origenist suggestions! The “angelism” projected on the human nature in this way questions the very ontological constitution of man.

⁴³ *Ibidem.*

A brighter vision appears in the work of theologians more open to the dialogue with modernity, such as Kallistos Ware, Paul Evdokimov, Ch. Stamoulis and J. Chryssavgis. For them, the hierarhization of celibacy and marriage is a false problem. Each state has its own spiritual gifts and challenges, but the Christian calling is the same for married or unmarried people: growth in love, growth in union with God. Where is, therefore, the origin of the strong support for the monastic way of life which we may find in the work of theologians like Theodore Zisis, G. Mantzaridis or Jean-Claude Larchet, starting from Saint Gregory? I think it is the same that gave Saint Gregory the input to write his treatise *On Virginity* – the need to plead for the monastic way of life using words, while, on the contrary, marriage has a better advocate: the human nature, its faithful ally. And, in the case of contemporary writers, there is something more, sometimes indirectly recognised and confessed: a great scepticism regarding the compatibility between *theosis* and family life.

The advocacy for monasticism may find better arguments than the postulation of a false ideal of humanity and the denial of the natural gender, created and intended by God. The whole theological tension is dissolved if the division in male and female is rightly understood and, consequently, marriage is recognised as the original way God designed for the multiplication of man on the Earth. More precise in their approach, great contemporary dogmatists, like Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae for instance, avoid the problematic Gregorian ideas exposed above. In his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, he does not affirm anywhere that the human being was ever meant to multiply in another way than as a man and woman. There is, of course, a difference in the *manifestation* of sexuality before and after the expelling of Adam and Eve from Paradise. Probably there was not at all a manifestation of erotic love in Paradise, but it would have been and man would have multiplied in a sexual manner, had Adam and Eve not fallen. If the human being had not fallen, his/her bodily condition and sensitivity would have not been touched by passions, carnal feelings and desires. This is the real difference between a sexuality marked by the fall or the (possible) paradisiacal one:

“Certainly, before sin the love between man and woman was not burdened by that violent passion that shares in the elemental

quality of an impersonal and unspiritual nature"⁴⁴. This is the issue, and from this point of view, I think that there is general consent in the Orthodox theology. Only in this frame the famous theory of the "garmens of skin" can be accepted. They are not equivalent with the appearance of sexuality, of biological multiplication in man, although, of course, they affect the entire human life, including its most intimate and delicate aspects.

Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae is quoting Vladimir Lossky, according to which the fall perverted all the aspects of the human being related to sexuality. Of course, not only them: "But this paradisiacal 'eros' would have been... different from our fallen and devouring sexuality... the Fall has changed the very meaning of the words. Sexuality, this 'multiplying' that God orders and blesses, appears in our universe as irremediably linked to separation and death. This is because the condition of man has known, at least in his biological reality, a catastrophic mutation. But human love would not be pregnant with such a paradisiacal nostalgia if there did not remain painfully within it the memory of a first condition where the other and the world were known from the inside, where, accordingly, death did not exist"⁴⁵.

The above considerations make clear that the origin of human sexuality, as postulated in the frame of Saint Gregory's anthropological system and echoed by his followers, is not coherent with contemporary Orthodox theology, mainly in its dogmatic expression. They are more easily adopted by treatises dedicated to ethical themes, like the ones signed by G. Mantzaridis and Jean-Claude Larchet. At stake in these contradictory interpretations are not some abstract concepts that have nothing to do with reality, but the life itself. Therefore, the projection of a false idealism must be regarded with due caution because it has a tragic impact on marriage and family life, on human life in general.

⁴⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology. Vol. 2. The World: Creation and Deification*, translated by Ioan Ioniță and Robert Barringer, preface by Ion Bria, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2000, p. 95.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 96. See as well, Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology...*, p. 67.