

REVISITING THE MARITAL HOUSEHOLD AS THE 'LITTLE CHURCH'

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<https://doi.org/10.47433/tv.xcvin5-8.57>

Abstract

In the Orthodox Church, marriage is the mystery of the Kingdom. However, the appearance of various family forms and the high rates of divorce cases among Christians today indicate that marital relationships have lost their Christian identity and purpose as "households of God" and "little churches". Facing various legal, economic, social, cultural and spiritual pressures, the sacred role of Christian married men and women is to live up to their Christian calling. Knowing the family's Christian identity and its characteristics as a little church and a household of Divine grace ought to guide the couples and clarify their marital outlook and purpose. Thus, this study examines first the Patristic vision of marriage and family as a "little church", and then identifies seven essential characteristics of the Christian home, in order to guide the couple in bearing witness to the life in Christ in this postmodern age.

Keywords: Marriage, Family, Households, Christian Witness, Little Church, Askisis, Orthodox Church, Sacrament, Postmodernity, John Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria.

Introduction

In the Orthodox Church, marriage is the *mysterion* (μυστήριον or sacrament) of the Kingdom. The Church's vision of marriage is not just limited to the horizon of a social or natural organism, but essentially looked upon as an ecclesial entity and a God-established relationship (θεοσύστατον), whose purpose is living the Kingdom of God. However, the appearance of various family forms and the highly unprecedented divorce rates today give a clear indication that marital relationships have weakened and family households have lost their Christian identity as houses of God and little churches. This loss is not accidental; it is rather caused by a systematic plan aiming to deconstruct the Christian marital

household. This plan is a social and intellectual force. It consists of, on one hand, exploiting legal means and social norms to adversely changing the human way of living, and on the other hand, drawing on various secular ideologies and postmodern epistemologies propagated by the digital media to negatively affect human thought by the acceptance of relativity, radical individualism, materialism, and skepticism. Thus, many young people today, and many not so young, express that they do not see any connection or oneness between falling in love and marrying on one hand, and the mystery of marriage and personal faith on the other.

Facing various legal, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual pressures, the sacred role of Christian married men and women is to preserve the sanctity of the family as a “household of God” and a “little church”. In doing so, their labor to abide in the faith is seen as a great feat of martyrdom and a shining Christian witness in this day and age. In order to strengthen their endeavors, they need to be informed of the deep richness of the family’s Christian identity and its characteristics as a little church and a household of Divine grace. Since the purpose of human life is deification and acquiring the Holy Spirit, how are married couples able to live according to the family’s Christian identity, thus witnessing to Christ in this postmodern age? How can they preserve the sanctity of the family, remain faithful in marriage, protect their marriages against divorce, defend the sanctity of life, and raise God-fearing and God-pleasing children? First, there is need to see how the Christian Tradition views marriage and family as a little Church, and then to attempt to identify some characteristics of this Christian family.

The Church in the Home

The Apostle Paul describes several family households as home churches (Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19, Col. 4:15). One of these households is that of Aquila and Priscilla, to whom the Apostle sends his greetings and to “the church that is in their house” (Rom. 16:5)¹. Aquila and Priscilla were professional tent-makers,

¹ All biblical quotations are taken from the New King James version of the Bible.

but did not neglect to keep as a priority their relationship with God. They risked their lives for the Christian kerygma (Rom. 16:4). Indeed, marital life demands a high degree of spiritual labor and vigilance².

Two Christian writers and saints give a particular testimony on living marriage and family as households of God and little churches in challenging eras. The first is Clement of Alexandria, an early revered Christian writer from the late second century. His time was that of marital denigration through various philosophies and ideologies by various Gnostic sects and Manichaean groups, especially the Encratites. These groups sparked a controversy within the Church on the lawfulness of marriage and sexuality. They denounced marriage, since it involves sexual intercourse, a matter they considered as an act of fornication or sin, whether done in a legal marriage or outside it.

In his third book of the *Stromateis*, Clement emphasizes that marriage is the *mysterion*, lauding its goodness and the neutrality of sexuality³. He also underlines Paul's reference (Eph. 5:32) to marriage as the *mysterion* of Christ and the Church, stating that this *mysterion* opens the possibility for both husband and wife to attain the highest spiritual virtues through love, sobriety, and prayer⁴. He defends the view that marriage is more than a fleshly passion; it is rather established by God, and therefore without blemish. However, he underscores the need in marriage for a sound self-control or continence in all matters of life, such as the use of tongue, money, desires, and not just in sexuality⁵. The continence in the spirit is what is required as in 1 Corinthians 9:25, in order to obtain an "incorruptible" crown, as he said⁶. For him, true freedom is the use of will to control one's desires and impul-

² John Chrysostom, *On the Greetings of Aquila and Priscilla, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* [NPNF], series 1, vol. 11, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1974-1976, pp. 550-551; PG 51:187.

³ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988, pp. 134-135.

⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 3.12.83-4, *Miscellanies, Book 3. The Library of Christian Classics: Volume II, Alexandrian Christianity*, edited by Henry Chadwick, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1954, p. 79; PG 8:1182.

⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 3.1.4, *Miscellanies, Book 3*, p. 41; PG 8:1104.

⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 3.16.101, *Miscellanies, Book 3*, p. 88; PG 8:1201.

ses and obtain best self-restraint, and this ought to be practiced in marriage. Accordingly, marital life is a life ordered in a spiritual way that resembles what historically is seen as a monastic *rhythm* of prayer, as he advised: "We are to rise from our slumbers with the Lord and retire to sleep with thanksgiving and prayer... confessing the Lord in our whole life, possessing piety in the soul, and extending self-control to the body"⁷.

Moreover, Clement brings to light the Apostle Paul's point that successful married men are strong candidates for episcopacy, since their effective ministry as overseers of their household is a sign of their readiness to oversee the affairs of the Church as well⁸. The *mysterion* of marriage points to the sign of Christ's ineffable presence in the household, as he interprets the verse: *For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them* (Mat. 18:20)⁹. So, marriage is seen from within the context of a "house of God", namely the presence of God in the couple's household. Additionally, he insists that marriage is "co-operation with the work of creation"¹⁰, and in this cooperation, the human being reflects the image of God the Creator.

Most importantly are the works of St. John Chrysostom. In his exegetical expositions, he gathers, with an anthropological passion, linguistic analysis and historical explanations along with theological definitions and pastoral applications, especially about marriage and family life¹¹. His words are also relevant for today, since his sociocultural era has many similarities to today's post-Christendom situation. He lived at a moment of genuine cultural crisis in the fourth century, characterized by moral laxity and excessive preoccupation with material possession, power, and social status

⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 2.23, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* [ANF], vol. 2, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994, p. 378; PG 8:1096.

⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 3.12, *Miscellanies, Book 3*, pp. 76-77; PG 8:1177-1192.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 71; PG 8:1169B.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 71; PG 8:1169A.

¹¹ Some of the most important works on Virginitiy and Marriage by St. John Chrysostom are: "On Virginitiy", "To Theodore the Monk", "On the Avoidance of Fornication" and "Concerning One Marriage". For a discussion on the chronology of Chrysostom's works, see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology, Volume 3: The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature*, Christian Classics, Inc., Westminster, MD, 1994, pp. 429-473.

even among Christians: "His example is especially instructive for churches today as they themselves enter a definitively post-Christendom era marked by cultural deterioration. Christians are faced with difficult choices over how to relate to the emerging hegemonic secularity"¹².

An analysis of the corpus of Chrysostom's homilies on Genesis and the New Testament Gospels and Epistles leads to discover a remarkable, insightful Christian vision concerning marriage¹³. His vision establishes the Christian household as a little church in a characteristically sacramental language. The house as a little church opens the way for a complete transformation of society and the world. In fact, Chrysostom succeeds in replacing "the ancient Roman understanding of the household (*domus*) as the economic and societal unit, by a spiritual, purely Christian one, based on the prototype of the love of Christ for man"¹⁴.

St. John Chrysostom describes the Church as not only the place, but also the way of life, and not only the walls, but also "faith and life"¹⁵. This faith is translated as living a lifestyle with the "dress of the love of wisdom, with hospitality, with the succoring of the saints, with compunction, with continual prayer"¹⁶. Moreover, the truth about being human, both as nature and as person, is to be found in the human vocation as being the "image of the Image". The actualization of this vocation is in the call to exist as a person, to be a conscious personal existence, living relationally, on the likeness of the Divine¹⁷. How are the man and his wife called to live "in Christ" this incarnational, philokalian theology of marriage?

¹²Vigen Guroian, *Family & Christian Virtue in a Post-Christendom World. Reflections on the Ecclesial Vision of John Chrysostom*, in "St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly", vol. 35 (1991), no. 4, pp. 327-328.

¹³Main scriptural passages that are directly related to marriage and used by Chrysostom in his various homilies are as follows: Gen. 13, Song of Songs; Tobit; Isaiah 54: 1-8; Jeremiah 3:6-13; Ezekiel 6, 23; Malachi 2:10-16; Hosea 1, 2; Proverbs 31; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:1-7, 11:7-11; Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:18-21; 1 Timothy 2:14-15; 1 Pet 3:1-7.

¹⁴Archpriest Panayiotis Papageorgiou, *From the Askisis of Virginity to the Askisis of Agape (Love): Revisiting the thought of St. John Chrysostom on Marriage and Sexuality*, in „Synaxis: The Journal of Orthodox Theology”, vol. 77 (2001), Jan-March, p. 58.

¹⁵Chrysostom, *On Eutropius* 2; NPNF, series 1, vol. 9, p. 253; PG 52:397.

¹⁶Chrysostom, *On the Greetings of Aquila and Priscilla*, NPNF, series 1, vol. 11, p. 552; PG 51:196.

¹⁷John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1985, pp. 15-65.

The man and his wife's unity "in Christ" (Gal. 3:26-28) means that the destiny of marriage is Christological. Orienting the free will and choices (in the sense of ἐλευθερία προαιρέσεως) towards Christian living illustrates the Christocentric vision of marriage. All the potentialities of this orientation to be on the likeness of Christ ought to be realized in the daily life of the husband and wife, "in their nuptial consubstantiality and in their oneness with God"¹⁸. The relational dynamism in marriage, which contributes to the physical, spiritual, and emotional unity of the couple, becomes a transforming event in their lives, leading them to holiness.

Thus, what are the characteristics of the Christ-abiding household? We need to view the household as a training and educational ground (*asketrion*, ἀσκητήριον), a place of common prayer and spiritual labor (*leitourgia*, λειτουργία), an atelier to recognize true human faces and venerate them (*prokynesis*, προσκύνησις), a call to repentance and change (*metanoia*, μετάνοια), a home for Divine grace (*charis*, χάρις), a garden of joy (*chara*, χαρά), and a witness to the world (*martyria*, μαρτυρία).

The Home as *Asketerion*

Both the man and his wife are equal inheritors of the gracious gifts of life and love bestowed by the New Adam (1 Pet. 3:7). Their destiny is to live daily and willingly in "Christ's love", through the dialectic of Christ's death and Resurrection. This dialectic is fulfilled by living a spiritual *askisis*, that is emptying themselves and their ego for the sake of love towards God and the other, to the point of martyrdom¹⁹.

In Christianity, both the household and the monastery experience community life, having the same goal and purpose: "to live in Christ". Both ought to engender monks and nuns, or children, respectively, for the one purpose of preparing athletes for Christ, potential saints, and not just "morally good" people. In both places, the *askisis*, or labor of love, ought to be practiced as a daily personal choice and a necessary spiritual food. Chrysostom emphasizes

¹⁸ Anton C. Vrame, *The Educating Icon: Teaching Wisdom and Holiness in the Orthodox Way*, Mass: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, 1999, p. 44.

¹⁹ John Chryssavgis, *Love, Sexuality and the Sacrament of Marriage*, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, 1996, p. 22.

the importance and necessity of this ascetic labor unrestricted to monasteries, as follows: “Let us give heed to temperance [σωφροσύνη], and to all other virtues, and the self-denial that is practiced in the deserts, let us bring into our cities”²⁰.

This *askisis* includes the whole spectrum of biological, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual elements. The use of one’s free will to change, repent, cultivate Christian virtues, transfigure one’s passions, and receive holistic healing, leads to the renewal of the interior self and the attainment of love for God and the neighbor: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind’, and ‘your neighbor as yourself’ (Luke 10:27; cf. Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5). In other words, through directing their inner disposition towards Christ, Who is the Truth, Way and Life, the spouses are freed from the “tyranny of desires”²¹. Love as a strong longing (*eros*) is not denied, but transformed to Christ, and transfigured by faith for the salvation of the people.

Thus, it is vital to look at marriage not just as a complex religio-cultural, social, political venture for a happy life, which is the way of the “critical familism” theory and social activism²². The place to cultivate such love is in the household. Seeing the family household as a *kyriakon* or a house of the Lord, St. John Chrysostom draws the vision of the home as a domestic *asketerion*, a training ground, where athletes run to win Christian virtues and obtain theosis: “Let your home be a sort of arena, a stadium of exercise for virtue”²³. If Christian spouses do not accept their marriage as a struggle, training, and sacrifice, how will their relationship survive when the first difficulties arise?

The Home as *Leitourgia*

The couples’ spiritual labor is a common endeavor, a kind of *leitourgia*. In their life journey, they work together and both discover the “mystery” of the family and of the home. The progress of

²⁰ Chrysostom, *On Matthew*, Hom. 55.8, NPNF, series 1, vol. 10, p. 344; PG 58: 549.

²¹ Chrysostom, *On 1 Corinthians*; PG 61:153.

²² Don S. Browning, *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pp. 312-326.

²³ Chrysostom, *On Matthew*, Hom. 11, NPNF, series 1, vol. 10, p. 74; PG 57:202.

their “passage” into the life of the Kingdom reveal the inner mystical workings of Divine grace within the home. Through the communal experiences of this grace’s mystical workings, many of the social issues affecting marriage are challenged: the secular mentality discovers its mortal deficiency, moral freedom rejoices in responsibility and commitment, utilitarianism withers by sacrifice and kenotic love, and body worship disintegrates through the affirmations given by the holy materialism of Orthodoxy. Moreover, gender roles turn into a continuous path of mutual submission “in the fear of God”, involving taming prideful self-love and self-absorption. Marital intimacy is transfigured through spiritual exercises to regain the long lost “royalty” of self and the world, as in Gen 1:26.

The home is also a place of spiritual formation, where each family member experiences liturgy before the Liturgy and liturgy after the Liturgy. In the home (the little church), family members prepare piously for their participation in the Divine Liturgy at the Church’s Temple, and in it as well, they implement what the Divine Liturgy has implanted in them, in order to transfigure the world, after they “depart in peace”. The home practice of prayer, reading of Scriptures, and almsgiving, energizes the spiritual blood in the children and increases inner family harmony and respect among its members, as well as prepares one for the future service of the Church. Also, family members begin the day by giving thanks to the Holy Trinity, and end it by pleading His mercy and forgiveness. In patience, steadiness, and purposefulness, they help each other during the day, and support each other spiritually and emotionally. In this labor of spiritual perfection, the home becomes a “domestic church [κατ’ οἶκον αὐτῶν ἐκκλησίαν]”²⁴, wherein the “mystery of love [μυστήριον αγάπης]”²⁵ is invigorated, from now and till eternity, and not just “till death do them part”.

The daily living of the marital couple is the *kairos* for the dynamic process of transformation and transfiguration of the world, community, and creation, leading to a new creation in Christ

²⁴ John Chrysostom, *On Ephesians*, Hom. 20, *On Marriage and Family Life*, edited and translated by Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 2003, p. 57; PG 62:143.

²⁵ John Chrysostom, *On Colossians*, Hom. 12, *On Marriage and Family Life*, p. 75; PG 62:385.

[καινή κτίσις] (2 Cor. 5:17). As the Chrysostom exclaims: “If you ask Him... He will transform the water of your unstable passions into the wine of spiritual unity”²⁶. It is *time for the Lord to act* (Ps. 119: 126). In this lifestyle, Christian marital life is the “pulpit” proclaiming the Truth of Creation and the “altar” upon which the family is built as a “house church.”

The Home as *Proskynesis*

Perceiving the other as the icon of Christ, as the “image of the Image” requires *proskynesis*, in the sense of turning “toward” (προς) and revering the other. Notably, the verb “κυνέω” expresses this reverence by the act of kissing. Thus, the act of veneration or *proskynesis*, offered to the other as an icon of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit, is an act of turning and embracing, which involves the whole person (body, soul, emotion, mind), and is directed toward the other, in love and desire²⁷. This practice requires a constant, daily effort from each spouse to “turn” to the other and give full attention to the “image of the Image”, or the icon of Christ in the other. This also requires from both husband and wife to wait attentively one for the other, and to be present for each other, physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually, and be open to each other and to Christ.

The family home is also a place that teaches each member to recognize how to “read” the face of the other, of his or her brother, sister, father, and mother, and for discerning between a true, sincere face reflecting God’s image and a false face, a fake mask covering one’s ugly passions and unholy desires. While guarding their house (or οικία), both the man and his wife keep their home and their children from the invasion of profane foreigners, such as vain ideologies, carnal passions, and adverse social norms. In watching over their children and embracing them in love, they put a watch over the windows of their soul or their physical senses. This training school prepares children to get on in the world and successfully handle its challenges.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 78, PG 62:389.

²⁷ Vrame, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

In the icon corner of the Christian home containing the icons of the family patron saints, daily prayers take place, where the husband takes the role of a “domestic priest” leading his wife and children in a “rhythm” of prayer venerating the saints and worshipping the living God. Indeed, the veneration of saints teach each member of the family to recognize and venerate true faces of sanctity, and offer authentic obedience to God and to each other as a gift of love and sacrifice.

The Home as *Metanoia*

The journeying together of the couple in Christ points to another dimension of Christian marriage: *metanoia*. It necessitates the dynamic act of forgiveness by the renewal of mind (Rom. 12:2), which allows for warm relatedness and togetherness, and for agreeing and accepting the other as he or she is.

By the grace of the Holy Spirit, the couple, in their daily communion and fellowship with Christ, achieve, through *metanoia*, an ongoing inner transfiguration. The *inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory* (2 Cor. 4:16-17).

However, being buried under the heavy weight of the Fall, yet called to transfiguration and deification, each spouse ought to direct his or her will to embrace the will of God, under the guidance of a Spiritual Father. Just as the grace of Baptism needs to be enlivened by Christian works, and the free cooperation with this Divine grace, so too marriage requires the free and active cooperation of the spouses with the Divine grace which they received in the mysteries of Baptism and Marriage. In their home, neither the man nor his wife is domineering, but Christ is all in all, because they both desire to and pray: “Let Thy will be done”; they thrive to have their human will in intimate harmony with Christ’s will.

In a spirit of humility, the husband and wife ought to continually overcome the old self they hide within themselves and crucify their selfishness. Through keeping the “fire of love” burning warmly and brightly with the sweet wood of sacrifice, they “cross the ‘I’ out of life” in order to know “the secret of happiness”²⁸. In this

²⁸Seraphim of Sarov, “What Makes a Home”. *Orthodox Christian Parenting. Cultivating God’s Creation*, edited by Peter Eliades, Zoe Press, Dunlap, CA, 2012, p. 167.

respect, marriage is not *just* a participation in the Death, Resurrection and Ascension, but *also* in the Second Coming of Christ.

The Home as *Charis*

As a sacrament, the wedding carries the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*), which occurs at the time of crowning: “O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor”. This epiclesis is a “nuptial Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit making a new creation”²⁹. In fact, the presence of Christ in Cana of Galilee, and His participation in the wedding there “enshronds marriage in that atmosphere of grace that pours forth from His Person”³⁰. Through His intervention, the material and nature of wine is transformed into “good wine [τὸν καλὸν οἶνον]”, or divinely “created” wine (John 2:10). The salvific and healing presence of Christ brings the “fullness of joy” (Ps. 16:11). As Christ “manifested His glory” and blessed the “natural” water, turning it into a high quality, tasty wine, the Church asks the Holy Spirit to sanctify the natural marriage, by bringing this natural marriage of this world into the “world to come”, into the glory of the Kingdom³¹. The Divine grace overflows abundantly on the couple, empowering them for the new life in Christ, not only for their individual salvation, but also for the salvation and holiness of their home, and by extension of their surroundings, and through them it extends to the whole cosmos.

In this sense, marriage is not just about “procreation”. It is rather about a “new creation”, as God made “new” wine at the Wedding of Cana. The mystery of the unity in marriage is also an entrance into this newness: an ontological and mystical transformation of the life of each spouse: husband and wife.

Since the mysteries are “life in Christ”, they are a theophany of Christ. The mystery of marriage in Christ becomes “the sign which

²⁹ Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 2001, p. 153.

³⁰ Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, Volume Five, The Sanctifying Mysteries*, translated and edited by Ioan Ioniță and Robert Barriger, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, 2012, p. 173.

³¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1973, p. 89.

contains and expresses Christ Himself. When you see a couple who are conscious of this, it is as if you are seeing Christ. Together, they are a theophany"³². In this sense, the created reality of marriage is transfigured by God's grace into the reality of the Kingdom. Marriage is clearly an image of something far greater. "They have not become the image of anything on earth, but of God Himself... They come to be made into one body. See the mystery of love!"³³

Moreover, marriage involves a daily dynamism, related to the activation of the spiritual gifts or charisms of the Holy Spirit, which the husband and wife received upon Baptism and Chrismation. Each Christian is called servant of God [δοῦλος Θεοῦ] (Titus 1:1), that is a co-worker in His Holy Body, the Church. Both man and woman are called to a life of holiness (Eph. 4:11-16), by using the spiritual charisms of prayer, discernment, humility, service, and so forth. These gifts grow in a land fertilized by spiritual labor.

The Home as *Martyria*

The ethical revolution brought by the Lord Jesus Christ lies not just in establishing a "new" teaching, but specifically in revealing the glory of His Holy Cross. For this reason, the service of matrimony ends with the celebratory dance around the ceremonial table in front of the Holy Altar. On this table, the priest places the Holy Gospel and a Cross standing in the middle of two lit candles. The procession around the table is made, while chanting the martyrs' hymn: "O holy martyrs, who fought the good fight and have received your crowns"³⁴. The mention of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste also confirms this marital path of love, witness, and martyrdom: the married couple learn to love in martyrdom. The lover is always a martyr. Love always wins; *love never fails* (1 Cor. 13:8). The Christian martyrs and the spouses have the same good fight: to witness their faith daily through crucifying their ego, while expressing

³² Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra, *The Church at Prayer: The Mystical Liturgy of the Heart*, Indiktos, 2015, Athens, Greece, p. 123.

³³ John Chrysostom, *On Colossians*, Hom. 12, *On Marriage and Family Life*, pp. 74-75; PG 62:385.

³⁴ Isabel F. Hapgood, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, Englewood, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, New Jersey, 1996, p. 300.

their selfless love for each other and their loyalty to the life in Christ. In this way, the man and his wife remain steadfast until the end of their earthly life, and receive the crown of life according to the promise of the Lord: *Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life* (Rev. 2:10). The dance of Isaiah around the table and the martyrs' hymn are elements parallel to the liturgical service of the mystery of the priesthood, since marriage is a "nuptial priesthood"³⁵. The link between the two holy mysteries is the "mystery of martyr love".

The existence of martyrs denies the false claims of secularists, since martyrs testify to the immanence of God, His Incarnational reality, and the eternal character of the order of His creation. Post-modern thinkers consider martyrdom as foolishness³⁶. However, it is written: *Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe* (1 Cor. 20-21). Accordingly, the married couple committed to the Christian lifestyle are martyrs in this age, witnessing to the Truth and Wisdom of God's glory.

The life of "ascetic" martyrdom of prayer and spiritual labor in the present world is a universal vocation described as the life of "interiorized monasticism"³⁷. This "interiorized monasticism" calls for one to be clothed with "obedience, humility, and purity"³⁸, by cherishing chastity and virtue, and practicing prayer, repentance, and confession, whether as individual or as a couple. It calls both man and woman, working in various secular societies and pluralistic cultures, to the task of renewing their personal love for God, and recapturing the eschatological vision of the "joyous and impatient expectation of the parousia"³⁹. In fact, this experience of encounter and union which frees oneself from self-love makes

³⁵ Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World*, Crestwood, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, NY, 1994, p. 41.

³⁶ Michael P. Jensen, *Martyrdom and Identity: The Self on Trial*, T & T Clark International, New York, 2012, p. 41.

³⁷ Paul Evdokimov, *The Struggle with God*, Glen Rock, Paulist Press, NJ, 1966, pp. 111-130.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

the other “our *raison d’être* and the source of peace and all joy in our life and existence”⁴⁰.

The Home as *Chara*

The “joy of salvation”, experienced by the athletes for Christ is reached through acquiring the state of inner purification. This joy is the couple’s daily vitamins, their home’s backyard garden, or the consolation for their spiritual contest. In fact, the joy in marriage has a foretaste in the dance of Isaiah, during which the couple celebrate the “joy of salvation” accomplished by the Virgin’s Child, Emmanuel, “God is with us”. The continuous source of joy for the newly married couple is to abide by the inner assurance of having God as their eternal hope and firm support. Therefore, this eternal joy is anchored in the unfathomable unity in the Risen Christ, Conqueror of death.

Conclusion

The characteristics of the family are based on the family and marriage having an ecclesial nature based on the “life in Christ”. In this sense, the family household is a “little church”. Therefore, the family members turn their household into a church, or an earthly heaven, not by deconstructing the house walls and reconstructing them somewhere in heaven, but by preparing in the midst of their house an earthly “table” of virtues, an “altar” of sacrifice, and by inviting the Incarnate Lord of Heaven, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, to officiate the eternal, mystical Liturgy of the Kingdom.

This vision of the home as a little church has already been experienced so throughout the ages, as seen in the book of the *Synaxarion*, where one finds numerous credible accounts of married couples’ lives who experienced this vision⁴¹. Despite the changing social, cultural, industrial, technological, economic, and religious

⁴⁰ Porphyrios Georgi, *Peace and Peacemakers in Patristic Thought*, in „Annals of St. John of Damascus Institute of Theology”, vol. 11 (2016), p. 16.

⁴¹ David and Mary Ford gathered over one hundred and eighty accounts of ancient and contemporary married saints, in the book titled *Marriage as a Path to Holiness. Lives of Married Saints*, St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, South Canaan, Pennsylvania, 2013.

elements of their various times in history, these married saints were able in their free will to regulate unconditionally their behavior and relational life, according to God's will. The witness of these lives stand as undisputed testimonies of the living Orthodox theological view on marriage and family. Thus, Orthodox theology is not a theology of marriage shattered by experience, as some would like to speak about it in order to dismiss it. Certainly, the reasons why this theology has not been upheld in many places and various times throughout history, or was upheld to various degrees, are related to the neglect of this "philokalian living". As a result of this neglect, the headship of the selfish husband became utilitarian, and the submission of the licentious wife became slavery. Theology is not a sort of a philosophical or rational discourse about God. It is rather the vision of God; a Doxology; it is the Church, the Liturgy, the Sacraments, and the Scriptures. It is after all a mystical encounter of "the inner life of the Trinity"⁴².

The continuous challenge is to work on bridging the gaps found between words and actions in a changing social context. Here, the daily pastoral work of the priest, supported by parishioners and various parish ministry teams, is certainly essential. In this regard, the married couple need to have the freedom of choice for taking responsibility of living this marital *mysterion*, and be personally convinced to live out these characteristics of the family. In this way, the family as the "household of God" is rejuvenated and the home is a "little church". Nevertheless, the family's attempts at Christian living in their "households" are considered today acts of "spiritual" martyrdom equivalent to the state of confessors and martyrs who, in the old times, were tortured, maimed, or decapitated for their Christian faith.

⁴² Bishop Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita*, edited by Bogdan G. Bucur, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI, 2013, p. 37.