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IN PRAISE OF MARRIAGE

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The monk will never taste the experience (the real event) of sharing his life, his existence. Of sharing with someone else his body, his desire and his instinctive urges, the food that he has won by his labour, whatever sorrows he experiences, whatever joys. The monk will never share his name with anyone, that which ensures participation in the communion of relations. He will never taste any kind of sharing of himself, any "loss" of the "soul", a sharing or "loss" which is, moreover, also self-evident, "natural", without the slightest possibility of being experienced as a reward for virtue.

Marriage begins with a humble submission, clearly without awareness, to needs that are natural, individualistic and egocentric: a need for pleasure, a need for companionship, a need for independence from parental protection, a need for individual human beings to establish their own home, their own presence in society. And the love of God "who desires everyone to be saved" (he does not simply fish for the over-achievers), has mapped out a route for these natural, individual-centered needs to be satisfied unawares by means of sharing one's life and existence.

Sharing is not the goal. The goal is the satisfaction of individual need that comes through sharing. That is why there is nothing about sharing that is automatically virtuous. It is simply the involuntary humility of submission to need. And because need is egocentric, its satisfaction through sharing entails, at almost every step, a collision with the other, a clash, a visible or invisible conflict, an antagonism between the two egos. But need gains the upper hand. Need forces the ego gradually and imperceptibly to submit, to pay the costly price of backing down, the price presupposed by the satisfaction of needs.

Marriage, as a rule, involves a tough confrontation of egos, of demands for autonomy and for the imposition of one's will: it involves rows, bitter words, the wounding of feelings. Thus, through these birth pangs, a sharing of existence comes imperceptibly into being. The price paid in pain banishes any sense of achievement, of praiseworthy backing down. The sharing of life and existence "does not arrive in an observable manner" [Lk 17.20]. It comes into being without the awareness of those who are struggling to achieve it. "Just as a man sows seed in the ground and goes to

bed and gets up night after night and day after day, and the seed germinates and sprouts without his knowing it, for the earth brings forth fruit automatically" [Mk 4.28].

The sharing (more correctly: the communion) of life and existence "has the Holy Trinity as its teacher". It is the true life, the immortal life, that the Church proclaims. In the perspective of this proclamation that which is atomic, or individual, is death, and that which is self-transcendence, self-offering, and communion constitutes life. Atomic virtue, atomic morality, the individual pursuit of salvation, have no relation to the triadic mode of existence, the mode that has been revealed in the kenotic, or self-emptying, mode of Christ. They are the way of death. By contrast, the way of life and salvation (the mode by which the human person can become "sound", or complete, can participate in the plenitude of existence) is the imitation of triadic loving freedom, the kenotic self-denial of Christ: a withdrawal, in the case of the created human being, whether sought or unsought, from the autonomy of the ego, a sharing of the ego, a voluntary or even involuntary act of humility.

The elder Paisios the Kelliote used to say, "When a person is humbled, even against his will, the Grace of God is obliged to come upon him." With this phrase as a measure and criterion we can understand "in part" that God saves people who have never suspected that they are being saved: people who have been baptized into the Church, or people of other nations and other faiths.

In contrast to marriage, the choice of a monastic life seems to spring not from a humble submission to need but from an unconsciously arrogant pursuit of reward. If that is the case, the choice of a monastic life seems to be bound up with satisfying natural egocentric urges, different from those that are primarily bound up with marriage. They are those narcissistic instincts which the monk cannot by any effort of the will transform into a sharing of life and existence, into an involuntary self-denying humility, "for to conquer one's own nature is not possible". The monk struggles to reject narcissism by a strenuous effort of withdrawal from natural individual-centered desires, withdrawal from the will itself. But his initial motive is concern for

his atomic self; all his methods of freeing himself from his ego are governed by self-interest. This is not a way of sharing one's life and being, of sharing the body, the visible and tangible core of individuality, the sharing of necessity, the sharing of daily existence.

In the course of the Church's history many distinguished works "In praise of virginity" have been written. They perhaps give the impression to the immature reader that they are dominated by a formally narcissistic competitiveness. And as a rule such narcissism is accompanied (clinical psychology offers a detailed explanation of why) by a primeval fear of sexuality, by an extreme feeling of guilt about sex.

Today, within the context of a globalized culture of individualistic utilitarianism, we understand even virginity primarily as celibacy, that is to say, as the rejection of marriage for the sake of dedicating oneself to the work of the Church without the distractions of family responsibilities. And this is natural, because today's culture has been generated by the overturning of the presuppositions of the ecclesial mode of existence and life—it has been generated by the medieval West after its separation from the body of the Catholic Church.

The priorities that are taken for granted in our culture today, the priorities of individualism and utilitarianism, have brought about a wholesale distortion of the language of the Church's gospel: We understand salvation as something pursued individually and appropriated in legal terms, and faith as a parcel of individual convictions; the Church's presbyter as the "priest" of a religion, the bishop as a temporal "lord", the administrative head of religion's ideological and liturgical functions. With such assumptions we also understand celibacy as a formal prerequisite for the priestly "rank" of presbyter and bishop in Roman Catholicism, and for the "rank" of bishop in Orthodoxy. As a formal qualification, celibacy is distinguished silently but clearly from the virginity of the traditional encomia—it is esteemed on criteria of utilitarian efficacy: the service of the Church free from marital responsibilities. In "Orthodox" practice, when accession to the priesthood comes first, the Church's sacrament of marriage is precluded—and if a married priest becomes a widower, he must, whether he likes it or not, join the ranks of the celibate clergy.

The "celibate clergy" belong to a third category: neither monks practising the coenobitic or eremitical life, nor heads of families engaged in the struggle to share the self. They are (as a rule) careerists bent on exercising religious authority, rather like the eunuchs of the royal courts in the past. They usually sprout and develop in the cliques that surround bishops. They learn to subordinate their sexual privation to a career with an episcopal "throne" as the goal, an institutionalized indulgence of the ego: to exercise authority over con-

sciences, to exploit the sheep-like submission of the flock, to be offered incense like idols, and constantly to be wished "many years" in liturgical worship. Such a career attracts the young celibates of the episcopal courts. Moreover, they are drawn, too, by a feminine fascination with jewels, imperial mitres and sceptres, gold-embroidered vestments. In the hierarchy of responsibilities, offices and privileges, these young celibates naturally take precedence over grey-haired presbyters, merely because "they have not been polluted by association with a woman"— they have kept their narcissistic autonomy free from subjection to marriage.

Saint Isaac the Syrian did not write any work "In praise of virginity". He recorded his experience and his counsels concerning the ascetic struggle. In his own record one may begin to discern a convergence of the monastic and married ways of life, when they are viewed through the lens of the ecclesial event: the mode of the loving perichoresis of the Trinity, the kenotic mode of Christ. The monk, for Saint Isaac, is before anything else someone who has "left" the world with the intention of "giving himself to God"— not to God in an abstract and general fashion, but to the mode of God: the mode of the ascetic life that has been institutionalized by the Church's experience.

Marriage (*syzygia* in Greek) is submission to the yoke (the *zygos*) of the will of the other, a sharing of the self, of life, of everyday existence, of the body and of desire, with the other. That is how it is, too, for the monk, except that in his case the "other" is a very specific practice of ecclesial asceticism that is embodied in a loving obedience to the person of the abbot, of the spiritual elder— and sometimes, perhaps, directly to the person of the Lady Theotokos, to the person of Christ. With this personalized ascetical practice the monk shares his will, his food, his bodily toil, his hope.

The same secret belongs to marriage: the humbling of egocentric need—it is this that banishes from the struggle any suspicion of seeking reward. The exclusion of any eventuality of recompense, the complete (but erotic, that is, ecclesial) surrender and offering of the self, in time bears fruit "automatically", giving the monk the grace to be "separated from all and united to all"— the sharing of a life and existence "that has the Holy Trinity as its teacher".

Usually, says Isaac from experience, this grace is given when the ascetic life has been practised for many years without any response and the ascetic (whether married person or monk) despite being sunk in despair does not give in. Such persons persevere in their faith and trust. "In praise of marriage" means that we should manifest marriage as the measure and model of the ecclesial struggle, both the struggle of the married couple and that of the monk.