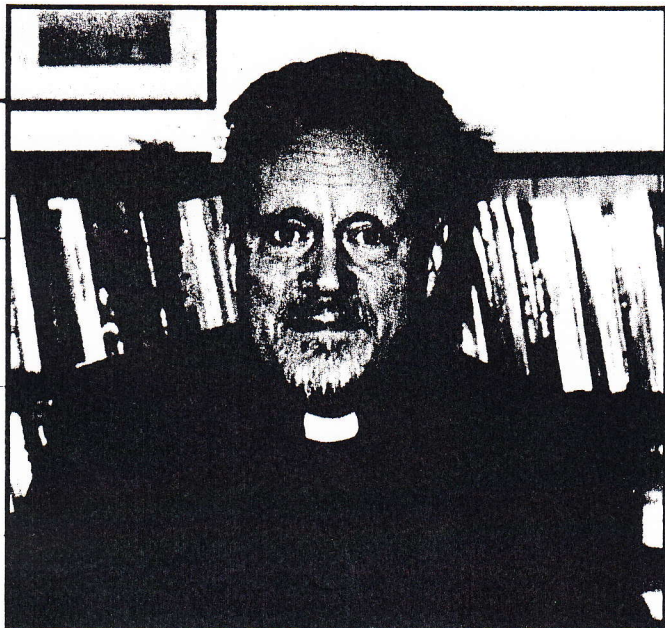


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# I N T E R V I E W

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FR. JOHN MEYENDORFF

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Marriage as

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Sacrament

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**AGAIN Magazine:** Marriage is and has been a universal practice of almost every civilized culture throughout history. Why is it then considered to be a sacrament in the Orthodox Church?

**FR. JOHN MEYENDORFF:** The first question we must address is, what is a sacrament? The word *sacrament* means literally *mystery*. A sacrament is an open door through which mankind passes from the realm of the physical, into the reality of the Spirit—the realm of communion with God. A sacrament is always seen through the context of created reality (for example, red wine in the Eucharist, or water in baptism). This created reality is then projected into the Kingdom of God and transformed into a higher reality which belongs to the eternal realm.

Now, let's apply that definition to marriage. Marriage is, on one level, a created reality which, as you have said, is indeed a universal practice. Men and women are attracted to each other, fall in love, and marry—this is a well-known phenomenon and a reality of the world as God has created it. But on the other hand, the Church also considers marriage to be a sacrament, a mystery of Christ and the Church, as Ephesians chapter five says.

In other words, the created reality of marriage can be assumed into the Kingdom of God and sanctified and continued there. It is not something profane or only secular. When a man and woman come to the Church to be married, they are expressing their desire to transfigure their marriage on earth into the reality of the Kingdom. The transfiguration which takes place is indeed a very profound one. When the Son of God took on human flesh, He ceased to be only Himself, but became also man so that mankind

could be joined to His Body. Similarly, a man and a woman cease being two people upon marriage, but in a very real way, become one single flesh. In this act they enter in to the mystery of God's salvation of the human race and participate in His redemptive plan.

**AGAIN:** So a wedding isn't just a private or family affair which only parenthetically takes place in the context of a Church. Something extraordinary occurs in the wedding liturgy which would not take place apart from it?

**FR. JOHN:** Yes, I believe so. Of course a sacrament is not magic. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit, which always must be followed by human cooperation—by men and women living up to the gift of the Holy Spirit which has been bestowed upon them. Even when performed in the context of a Church service, the sacrament of marriage is a gift which requires cooperation.

The reasons for marriage outside the context of the Christian Church are of course based upon other considerations. In the Old Testament, for instance, the predominant view was that one survives through begetting children and that one's life continues in the children. Marriage from that standpoint was seen as a vehicle for the continuation of the race. By this act the promise to Abraham and many others was fulfilled in the coming of Christ as a descendent of Abraham. But in the New Testament, as Ephesians five tells us, a radically different aspect of marriage appears. Marriage is not just seen as a tool to get children, but also something which is shared by a man and a woman who are able to find together the mystery of the Kingdom of God.

This relationship is expressed beautifully in the Scriptures. In

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the New Testament, the Lord Jesus Himself speaks often of the Kingdom of God as being a wedding feast. And even in the Old Testament, marriage is used to depict God's unique covenantal relationship with His people. The book known as the Song of Songs is actually a love song, but it is a part of the canon because it reveals that in the mutual love of a man and a woman the mystery of the Kingdom of God can be seen.

**AGAIN:** You have said that Christian marriage is essentially "...a meeting of two beings in love, a human love which can be transformed, by the sacramental grace of the Holy Spirit, into an eternal bond, indissoluble even by death." Could you explain this?

**FR. JOHN:** As a sacrament, marriage is more than a legal contract and a pledge of a mutual faithfulness and support between two people while they are on earth. A legal contract is interrupted by death. But because a Christian marriage belongs to the Kingdom of God, it is implicitly an eternal bond which will continue on into eternity. In the sacrament of marriage, the boundaries between heaven and earth are broken. Human decision and action acquire an eternal dimension.

Of course at this point the question always comes up concerning Jesus' conversation with the Sadducees in Mark chapter twelve. Why does He tell them that in the resurrection men neither marry nor are given in marriage but are as the angels in heaven?

Let's remember the context of this passage. Christ is dialoguing with the Sadducees concerning the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees, of course, denied the resurrection. To prove their point, they had raised a hypothetical question to Jesus. What about a woman who was married seven times on earth, to seven brothers? Whose wife would she be in heaven?

The Sadducees were actually making two mistakes. First, and most obviously, they were grossly mistaken in denying the resurrection. But secondly, they were also mistaken in their view of marriage. According to their understanding, marriage was nothing more than an instrument of procreation. Certainly, they thought, no one could believe that such an earthly institution would be worthy of God's eternal Kingdom.

With this in mind, we see that our Lord was actually refuting both heresies in His statement to the Sadducees. Yes, there will indeed be a resurrection, but no, marriage as the Sadducees understood it—a mere tool for bodily contact which results in child-bearing—will not exist. We must not take His statement farther than it was intended to go. The New Testament clearly teaches that marriage is more than procreative in design. Marriage

is the mystical union of two beings created in God's image, and is an icon of the relationship between Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5). As such, it can and does assume an eternal dimension. Christ's words to the Sadducees do not in any way contradict what the Scriptures consistently teach about the sacramentality of marriage.

Clearly the early Church understood marriage in this eternal sense. This can be seen from the decisive way in which the Canons of the Church depart from an Old Testament understanding of death and remarriage. In the Old Testament you find the so-called law of the Levirate, in which the brother of a man who died was supposed to take his wife and restore the seed of his brother. In the passage cited above, the Jews carry this out to an extreme: What if, because of this law of the Levirate, a woman is married seven times? Who's wife will she be in the resurrection?

Quite to the contrary, the canon law of the Church is directed at *discouraging* remarriages. The thought of marrying seven times is something which is absolutely unthinkable in the Christian Church according to the canon law and also according to the Tradition. The point of the resurrection, as Jesus explained to the Jews, is not whether we will go on begetting children in heaven. Rather it is about the unity of the two beings—that is the primary, the first priority, precisely because it is eternal, and therefore is not even interrupted by death. So it is very clear that it is a kind of Old Testament versus New Testament emphasis which is at stake.

**AGAIN:** Can you amplify a bit on the Orthodox position concerning divorce and remarriage?

**FR. JOHN:** Divorce is something which is utterly discouraged in the Orthodox Church. At best it is considered as an abnormality. But as with many of the deficiencies of our Christian life, divorce is treated within the penitential structure of the Church. It is handled with understanding (more understanding in some cases than in others), with love, and with concern. Although we look upon marriage as indissoluble, there are cases where it is dissolved—cases where one of the partners disappears without a trace, cases of insanity. The reasons why marriage simply does not exist are numerous.

This is why, for lay people, remarriage is permitted and understood as a second chance, or even a third chance in some cases. Second and third marriages are not permitted for the clergy, however. Somebody who is married twice, or even who is married to somebody who has been married before, canonically ceases to be a candidate for ordination. This is so not because it is a danger for his salvation, but because if he is in the ministry he should act



as an example and follow the norm.

A person doesn't need to be a bishop or a priest or a deacon to be saved. One needs to be a Christian to be saved, and the Church is concerned about securing people's salvation. If in certain cases someone is not eligible to be a minister or a priest, then so be it. There are many other avenues of service available to him.

**AGAIN:** Roman Catholic tradition differs from Orthodox tradition at this point. Catholic priests are not allowed to marry at all while Orthodox priests can be married, but only one time. Why does this discrepancy exist?

**FR. JOHN:** In my recent book on Church history, I have a whole chapter on the origins of celibate priests within the West. This teaching began to appear very early, starting in the fourth century. And the basis of it seems to have been double. On the one hand, there is the Augustinian idea that sex, and sexual relations as such, belong to the fallen world and are sinful. The thought here is that consecrated beings should not engage in worldly behavior.

The other half of the teaching is based on the levitical regulations found in the Old Testament. According to these regulations, before offering sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem, priests were to be continent. Because in the West Mass was often celebrated daily, this idea of ritual purity meant that a priest must be celibate.

Now in the East, you do not have that emphasis. There was always the teaching that on the eve of participating in the Eucharist one should observe continence. That idea exists in the East. But the reasons for it have nothing to do with ritual impurity or anything of that sort. Rather, they are based on the same regulations as those of fasting from food before taking the Eucharist. In both cases what is involved is a preparation for the coming of Christ—a kind of eschatological expectation which is better preserved by an attitude of sobriety and prayer.

So finally, the Orthodox Church considers that a man who is

married and has a normal family life is perfectly eligible for the priesthood. I believe that this is normal and goes back to the early Church.

**AGAIN:** And whether clergy or lay person, the ideal would be for a man and woman to remain married throughout their lifetime and, after death separates them, for the surviving spouse to wait in chastity to be reunited with their spouse?

**FR. JOHN:** That is correct. Everything else is a condescension to particular situations. Saint Paul allows, and even encourages, the remarriage of widowers. Allowances must also be permitted because there are marriages which are a mistake. We have teenage marriages, we have forced marriages, we have cases where the marriage was clearly a mistake. In some cases marriage, being a gift of God, was not truly received. And so a second chance is offered. And I believe that this is the way the Church approaches the idea of multiple marriages.

In the West, in the Roman Catholic Church particularly, the whole emphasis is placed upon the legal nature of marriage as a contract between two freely choosing parties. The world around considers this contract on a temporal level. It is based on the mutual consent of the two parties. When this consent does not exist, the contract is broken. In the Roman Catholic tradition this contract is seen to be indissoluble, thus making divorce impossible apart from annulment. So the emphasis of the Roman Catholic tradition is on the juridical nature of the contract, whereas in the Orthodox tradition, the emphasis is on the eschatological, eternal character of marriage as an ideal, and a recognition that the ideal is not always realized.

**AGAIN:** Let's talk for a moment about the ramifications of the Orthodox view of marriage in the practical area of family planning.

**FR. JOHN:** As I said earlier, the meaning of marriage is to be found in the union of the two persons according to the image of the union of God and Israel, Christ and the Church, and so on. That is central. Now on the other hand, having children is a great thing, is a blessing, and the Church is very explicit in saying that children are a normal and God-established consequence of marriage.

However, at no time did the Church condone, as the Jews would have before Christ, divorce in cases of infertility. A childless couple is no less obligated to mutual faithfulness than a couple with children. This points to the fact that their union is first priority, of which childbirth is a blessed, but not necessary,

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consequence.

There is a specific text in the writings of Saint John Chrysostom which contrasts the two visions of marriage in the Old and the New Testament. He says that according to the Old Testament, a woman who is sterile can be abandoned. Whereas in the New Testament, Saint Chrysostom says specifically that we are primarily concerned about the new birth, the birth from the font of baptism; that is the true birth, and therefore the birth of many children is not an end in itself anymore.

So in view of it all I think that the Orthodox Church has never stood against a rational, responsible attitude towards birth control in its acceptable forms. The Church doesn't try to make any false distinctions between what is "natural" and what is "unnatural" in terms of birth control. A so-called "natural" method of birth control by abstention from sexual intercourse is still a form of birth control, whether we want to call it that or not. And it's not any more "natural" than other methods, since there is nothing "natural" about a husband and wife staying apart from each other.

In the area of family planning, then, I think that Orthodoxy offers both a degree of freedom and responsibility. These follow from the overall understanding of marriage in the Orthodox Church.

**AGAIN: What about abortion?**

**FR. JOHN:** Here, of course, it is very clear. The Orthodox Church believes that human life begins at conception. Otherwise why would we celebrate the Feast of the Annunciation, the feast which marks the conception of Christ in the womb of the Virgin Mary? When Joseph looked at Mary with a secular eye, and thought that this was a girl in trouble, he wanted to "put her away privately," as we hear in the Gospel. He didn't turn to abortion.

So it's clear, therefore, that the Church and Scripture consider that the life has begun. Therefore, interrupting pregnancy is killing—there is no way we can escape from it. Now the Church has never been systematically and universally pacifist. It has never been universally against capital punishment. It has allowed killing in certain cases—self defense, as at war, and there are military saints.

But the Church has never said that killing was good. Killing was always killing. So the important thing about abortion is that it is not a question of a woman's free choice. It is a question of killing. Once she recognizes that this is a killing then let her choose. But she must realize that what she chooses is a great evil. If the abortion is clearly to save the life of the mother, a decision must be made in favor of the lesser evil. Even in such cases it is never a question of

human rights. No human being has the right to kill.

What deeply bothers me about the current debate over the issue of abortion is that the argument is based solely around the issue of rights. While Orthodoxy recognizes the importance of human freedom, it also recognizes the responsibility that goes along with that freedom. When the pro-abortion movement attempts to justify itself by claiming that abortion is a human right or a woman's right, it ignores human responsibility and becomes quite inhumane.

**AGAIN: What does Christ's attendance at the wedding at Cana (John chapter two) teach us concerning the sanctity and value of marriage—especially in light of the high view of monasticism and celibacy which is so apparent in the teaching of the Church?**

**FR. JOHN:** There is something about early Christianity which tends, even in the New Testament with Saint Paul, to exalt celibacy and continence even at the expense of marriage. The early Church, even before Constantine, is dominated by this exaltation of celibacy, and then afterwards comes monasticism. If you take the Patristic literature as a whole, you'll have an immense volume of writing justifying celibacy and a relatively small volume of text about marriage.

While not in any way denying the validity of this New Testament and Patristic emphasis on celibacy as a calling for some, we must never ignore the counter-balance which is also present in the Church's Tradition. For example, you have many fathers of the Church, particularly the great Saint John Chrysostom, who are so explicit about the value of marriage and the family. And then also in the fourth century the Council of Gangra flatly condemns those who are against marriage.

Last but not least, you have the Scripture where Jesus went to a wedding; and as our liturgy of the wedding service says, He sanctified marriage simply by being there. This passage of Scripture highly exalts the sanctity of marriage. It is a clear endorsement of marriage and is a strong text to explain why marriage is understood to be a sacrament by the catholic and universal teaching of the Church. I believe the John chapter two passage, the first of the signs performed by Jesus according to the Gospel of John, is also symbolic. The transformation of water into wine is symbolic of the sacramental transformation of earthly reality into something eternal. ■

In addition to being Dean of Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary and professor of Patristics and Church History, Father Meyendorff is also the author of many books, including *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (SVS Press © 1984).