



*THE TWO PATHS

*from "The Veil"; newsletter of Protection of the Holy Virgin Orthodox
Monastery*

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You certainly deceive yourself and are greatly mistaken if you think that there is one set of requirements for the person in the world and another for the monk. The difference between them is that one is married and the other is not, - in all other respects they will have to render the same account. .. for all people must reach the same point! And this is what throws everything into disorder: the idea that only the monk is required to show greater perfection, while the rest are allowed to live in laxity. But this is not true!

St. John Chrysostom, "Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life"

As one can deduce from the above quote, the Church considers that there are two paths upon which one can trod in the journey toward salvation: the married life or that of the monastic. Contrary to what many may believe, these two paths are very similar, with many of the same spiritual responsibilities; the difference being, aside from that noted by St. John, that the monastic path is much narrower since the monastic life takes the precepts that govern the life of those in the world to a more stringent observance. For example, *all* Orthodox Christians are to fast on the prescribed days and seasons of the Church; the monastic then includes every Monday as a fast day and abstains from meat altogether - something not required of those who are not monastic.

Although the root for the word "monastic" comes from "monos," meaning "alone", few monastics in the traditional observance do live alone. Most live in community, or with at least one or two others monks (or nuns, as the case may be). After the creation of the world, the Lord said, "it is not good for man to be alone," at which point He fashioned Eve from Adam's rib. Thus, Adam, who found no suitable helpmate in all the animals, was given Eve. As "helpmates" they were to keep their eyes on God and walk in His ways together, accountable not only to God but to each other. It is in this same way that the monastics live together in a monastery: accountable to each other and to the monastery as they strive to keep their focus on God. The fathers of the Church say very plainly: when you are saved, you are saved in community; when you fall, you fall alone.

When Adam and Eve took their eyes off God and disobeyed the one commandment, they fell and lost paradise. Through the coming of Christ, His crucifixion and resurrection, that paradise is once more accessible to us, but it requires sacrifice. The way is clearly defined, for we are all called to be saints. *Be holy as I am holy*, the Lord said. These words were directed to *all* people!

Those who are married *and* those in the monastic life must die to self, sacrifice self, give of self in order to live in Christ. Both those who marry and those who embrace monasticism find that their lives change dramatically from their younger/single days which were more self-pleasing and self-willed. Monasticism is a mystical death in that it is a death to self. Marriage is a death to self in that one must live in, serve, love and submit to the spouse. Both of these paths, in their self-sacrificing aspect, are paths to regaining paradise. Marriage is specifically *a sacrament* of the Church for it is a path to holiness in that sacrifice and renunciation of self.

Monasticism and marriage are both based on martyrdom. This is obvious in the monastic life where the monk/nun renounces the world - all that is evil in it as well as all that is good. The married life is also a martyrdom and this is clearly expressed in the marriage service in which the hymn "o holy martyrs" is sung as the couple is led by the priest around the table on which the Gospel -the Word of God - rests. The husband and wife are to be martyred to each other *in Christ*. They are to give not 50-50 but 100% to each other! The sacrament of marriage is obviously a commitment - a promise - of the husband and wife to each other in Christ. The monastic life is a commitment through the vows which are irrevocable.

Both monasticism and marriage are holy in the Church for they are both also based on love which is shared with others and the love of God. While monasticism is called the imitation of the angels, the married life is the imitation of Adam and Eve before the fall. St. John Chrysostom gives two examples of lives leading to salvation from the Old Testament: Abraham, a married man, and the prophet Elijah - a forefigure of the monastic.

The vows taken by the monastic of poverty, chastity and obedience are virtues that are practiced in the married life as well. Poverty, in the married life, is expressed in the giving of self to the

other as well as in almsgiving to the Church and those in need. Chastity is found in the monogamous relationship of one man to one woman as well as in the avoidance of "looking at another with lust" and keeping oneself from all pornographic materials. The third monastic vow of obedience - clearly expressed in the Epistle read at the marriage service - is also an imitation of the monastic life, for the Epistle begins with St. Paul saying, *submitting to one another in the fear of God*. This is a *mutual* submission of husband to wife and wife to husband, however the husband's responsibility is greater, for he is told to *love his wife as his own flesh*. He must be ready to die for the wife, to love her as Christ loves the Church. The wife's obedience to her husband, therefore, is an easy matter when the husband fulfills his role of sacrificing his entire life for the wife!

While the married life is considered the "norm" both in our own days and at the time of Christ's preaching on this earth, the monastic life goes beyond what is expected of everyone. The young man who approached the Lord and asked Him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" was told to follow the commandments - something everyone must do! However he persisted in asking, "what more must I do" and the Lord's answer is what is called the *evangelical recommendation* "if you want... sell everything and follow me." This is the call of the monastic life. It is a call to do all that is commanded and go one step further, voluntarily. There are no "shades of gray" in the monastic life, no "levels" of obedience, poverty or chastity, but absolutely following these virtues. The monastic life is very much an eschatological life, living in the age to come while yet on this earth. There are other aspects of the monastic life that those who are married can, and should, follow. However, in doing these things no one should think that they are living a monastic life in the world. The monastic life, as viewed by those outside - no matter how involved or close they are to a monastery - is still seen as through a sheer curtain and never clearly. Still, those who are married can, from time to time, come onto the monastic path, but the monastic can never travel on the path of those in the world. Specific aspects that are common to those in the married life and those in the monastery, aside from what we have already mentioned above, include the fact that all of us are

called to a life of prayer. Of course in the monastery this is more intense, but those living in the world must also have a daily prayer rule of at least the morning and evening prayers. All are to participate in the sacraments of Confession and Communion in the frequency established by each one's spiritual father. The fasting and feasting times are applicable to those living "in the world" as well as those in the monasteries. Everyone should be reading spiritually edifying books under the guidance of their spiritual father. There is one virtue that can be practiced more readily by those who are married than by the monastic, and that virtue is material almsgiving.

One thing that is probably obvious by now is that we have made no mention of those who are single. This "single" life is a phenomena in the western world for the Orthodox Christian. The Fathers of the Church speak only of the monastic path and the married path, with no mention of a "singles' path." (note: widowed individuals are considered as married, unless they embrace the monastic life). Remember that, until relatively recent years, marriages were arranged by parents for the children, or the young man or woman went into a monastery. There was no such thing in traditional Orthodox countries as someone who chose to be single. This is not to say that there is no salvation for a person who is neither married nor in a monastery, only that there is little reference - if any - in the writings of the fathers of the Church.

As we have mentioned, both the married and the monastic life demands sacrifice and a dying to self. While the single person may offer himself extensively in the service of others, it is always a willing offering of self and not one imposed by another. The monastic submits himself in obedience to a superior, doing what he is told, when he is told and how he is told, and is not following his own will; the married person submits himself to the needs and desires of his spouse and to their children.

Recently, driving back to our monastery from a retreat at which we spoke regarding this topic, an unmarried friend who accompanied us commented, "those of us who are not married may not like what you said about the position of the single person, but it is very true. Who am I, as a single person, accountable to

since I have no abbes or husband? Where is the sacrifice when I do what I want, when I want and for whom I want? What impositions do I have in this single life?"

For many, it may be time to chose.

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*(Note: It may be more accurate to say that there is ONE path to the Kingdom of God, but there are recognized to be two courses along the same way: The monastic course which is perfectly narrow and strict, the very center of the way; and the married course, which, running alongside, approximates the monastic in every way that circumstances allow.)