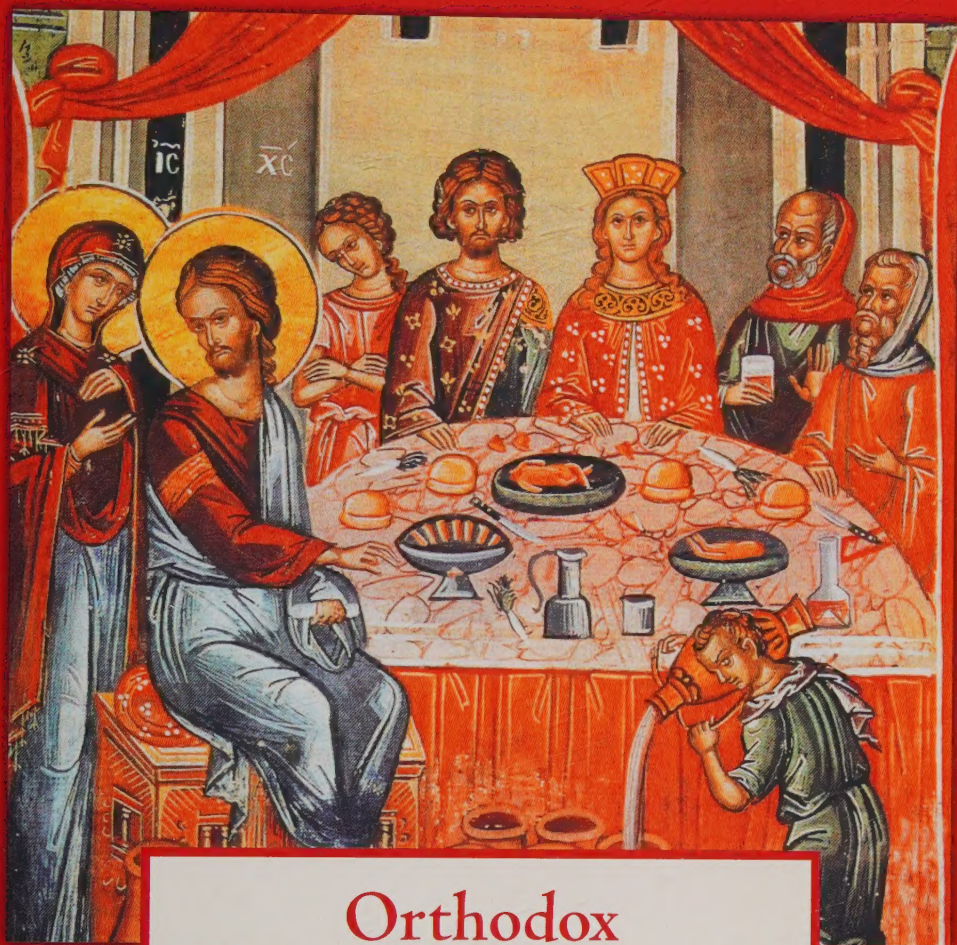




Orthodox Christianity, Marriage & Contraception

UNDERSTANDING THE MYSTERY
OF MARRIAGE AND THE PROBLEM
OF CONTRACEPTION FROM WITHIN
THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN
DOGMATIC TRADITION

ANTHONY STEHLIN



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation



**Orthodox Christianity,
Marriage
&
Contraception**

By

Anthony Stehlin

**Orthodox Christianity,
Marriage
&
Contraception**

*Understanding the Mystery of Marriage and
the Problem of Contraception from within the
Orthodox Christian Dogmatic Tradition*

By

Anthony Stehlin

Copyright 2013

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Orthodox Patristic Tradition Opposes Contraception

Chapter 3: Applying Orthodox Dogma to New Problems

Chapter 4: Uncreated Energies: The Mystical Root of Theology

*Chapter 5: Apostolic and Patristic Witness Confirms
Essence/Energies Distinction in God*

*Chapter 6: The Body as Male and Female Reveals the
Meaning of Existence*

Chapter 7: Trinity and Marriage

Chapter 8: Incarnation and Male/Female Imagery

Chapter 9: Trinity, Incarnation and Contraception

Chapter 10: The Friend of the Bridegroom

Chapter 11: The Immaculate Flesh of the Theotokos

Chapter 12: Conclusion: The Marriage Supper of the Lamb



The Conception of the Theotokos

Chapter 1 Introduction

*"Artificial methods of birth control are forbidden
in the Orthodox Church."*

+ Kallistos Ware¹

The Orthodox Church has not yet reached a definitive, unanimous decision on the issue of contraception. While the Church is very explicit regarding the condemnation of abortion, the issue of whether or not it is always immoral to intentionally impede the natural process of conception has been approached in various ways, and various conflicting conclusions – at every level of the Church – have been expounded. In 1968, when Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*, the Roman Catholic Church had a very definitive condemnation of all forms of contraception laid down for them. Pertinent for us is the fact that the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras responded with affirmation, agreement and

¹ Ware, Timothy, *The Orthodox Church*, pg. 296, Penguin Books, London, England, 1997.

*This was the original statement concerning contraception made by Bishop Ware in the 1963 publication of *The Orthodox Church*.

congratulations in a response which he sent to the Pope a prompt two weeks after the release of the encyclical on July 25th. The following statement was made in the letter from Patriarch Athenagoras:

“We assure you that we remain close to you, above all in these recent days when you have taken the good step of publishing the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. We are in total agreement with you, and wish you all God’s help to continue your mission in the world.”²

Certainly, the Ecumenical Patriarch was well aware of the main message contained in the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*. When he stated that he was “in total agreement” with the Pope, he was clearly agreeing with his condemnation of contraception. Neither was Patriarch Athenagoras alone in his agreement with the Roman Pontiff. The Archbishop of Athens and all of Greece, among others, also gave his endorsement to the message contained in *Humanae Vitae*. Unfortunately, both the encyclical letter and the glowing response by the Ecumenical Patriarch met with firm opposition and, more often than not, with rejection by the members of both Churches.

As late as 1963 the general consensus among Orthodox Christians was that contraceptives were altogether forbidden by the Church. But after this it seems that the firm rejection of artificial forms of birth control began to be compromised in various ways. This phenomenon of a fundamental change in the conscience of the Church has been recognized by Fr. Laurent Cleenewerck, a priest who currently serves in the Orthodox Church in America. Here he identifies three distinct positions, which correspond to revisions made with regards to contraception in the book *The Orthodox*

² As quoted in: Cleenewerck, Laurent A., *His Broken Body*, pg. 398. Euclid University Consortium Press, Washington D.C. 2007.

*Church*³ by Bishop Kallistos Ware. If the reader would pardon the lengthy quotation, it will prove to be quite revealing in its contents:

“It should be clear,” states Fr. Cleenewerck, “that the greater part of the Orthodox Communion has indeed modified its older stance on the overall issue of birth-control. A striking illustration of this phenomenon can be seen in the successive revisions of *The Orthodox Church* by Timothy (Bishop Kallistos) Ware, a widely-cited and authoritative source on Eastern Orthodoxy. In his 1963 edition, the author wrote:

‘Artificial methods of birth control are forbidden in the Orthodox Church.’

“However, the revised 1984 version was amended to read:

‘The use of contraceptives and other devices for birth control is on the whole strongly discouraged in the Orthodox Church. Some bishops and theologians altogether condemn the employment of such methods. Others, however, have recently begun to adopt a less strict position, and urge that the question is best left to the discretion of each individual couple, in consultation with the spiritual father.’

“Finally, the 1993 version declares:

‘Concerning contraceptives and other forms of birth control, differing opinions exist within the Orthodox Church. In the past birth control was in general strongly condemned, but today a less strict view is coming to prevail, not only in the west but in traditional Orthodox countries. Many Orthodox theologians and spiritual fathers consider that the responsible use of contraception within marriage is not in itself sinful. In their view, the question of how many children a couple should have, and at what intervals, is best decided by the partners themselves, according to the guidance of their own consciences.’”⁴

³ Ware, Timothy, *The Orthodox Church*, pg. 296, Penguin Books, London, England, 1997.

⁴ Cleenewerck, *His Broken Body*, pg. 397.

The obvious change of position on the issue of contraception begs the question: was the Church correct *then* or are they correct *now*? Of course, it is clear that even Bishop Ware is tentative about giving an authoritative response to the problem at hand. There are really only two possibilities: either the Church has been flagrantly mistaken about this matter up until this point in her history, or contraception truly is sinful and destructive, in which case it ought rightly be forbidden in any and all circumstances. If the former is indeed the case then, as we will see, the persuasive arguments of numerous fathers of the Church who spoke directly on the issue of intentionally sterilized acts were fallacious. This is not impossible. However, this would mean that, in the midst of a very confusing time for the Church, some enlightened minds would be gifted with a brighter illumination in regards to the issue of contraception than, for instance, a St. John Chrysostom or St. Augustine. Again, not altogether impossible. In fact, as is evident from the history of the Church, it is precisely at those crucial moments that the greatest pillars of faith emerge from the shadows, always zealous for the Lord and with singular love for the truth. Unfortunately, that is not what has occurred in the past fifty-years in the case of contraception. As we will see, contraception is not a gift given to man to help him at a very difficult time in his sojourn through this passing age. Rather, it is a deception, appearing to solve a very basic problem, giving man a bit more control over his destiny. In this it is not unlike the forbidden fruit: it *appeared* to be a good thing, too.

We are now over forty years into the sexual revolution brought about by the legalization and proliferation of contraceptives in the United States. A little-known fact is that up until a 1965 ruling by the Supreme Court, all forms of contraception were *illegal in the United States!* A mere eight years later the gates of hell opened with the Roe vs. Wade decision. Perhaps we can consider a truly prophetic insight made by Pope Paul VI in his letter on the regulation of birth, *Humanae Vitae*. There were four consequences which he warned would inevitably come to pass if contraception were to become an accepted part of

any culture. First, he warned that the abortion rate would dramatically increase. This certainly has occurred, despite the claims that were made to justify the use of contraception stating that unwanted pregnancies would be less likely to occur if contraceptives were readily available. Secondly, the Pope said that there would be a general lowering of morals. In this case the decline in morality follows upon a hedonistic view of sexuality based upon the newly found ease with which fertility could be avoided. This idea can be formulated in the question, “Why is marriage important if the procreation of children is no longer a necessary consequence of the sexual act?” Of course, the answer is already a given: sexuality is no longer in need of the shackles of the marriage bond since the burden of children can, in a socially acceptable way, be avoided. Thirdly, Paul VI said that the divorce rate would drastically rise with the introduction of contraceptives. This occurs not only because the partners may feel liberated from their fertility, and hence may feel encouraged to indulge in extramarital affairs, but primarily because of *the effect that the use of contraception within marriage has upon the spouses*. There is a denial of the total mutual gift between husband and wife, and a mutual rejection of one another’s fertility. *Contraception pits rejection at the heart of marriage*. This causes a deep spiritual wound that the couple may not even begin to be consciously aware of. And lastly, the Pope foresaw that contraception would degrade the image of woman in society. She would no longer be seen by her husband as a person to be surrounded with care and affection, but rather as an instrument to use in order to satisfy his lust. With the increasing cultural acceptance of contraception, the loss of any sense of the value of motherhood and authentic femininity, would unavoidably concur. The image of the harlot would take precedence as the “attractive” form of femininity. Motherhood would be, to a large degree, shunned, profaned and degraded, and extramarital sexual affairs would become the norm in society, while the marriage covenant would be looked upon as *passé*.

Could anyone object that Paul VI’s warnings have all come to pass? In particular I would like to bring attention to the increase

in the percentage of marriages ending in divorce today in comparison to the times prior to 1965. Before the sexual revolution, divorce was viewed as a contemptible word not to be mentioned in good company. Its destructive effects were known, not so often from experience, but from a certain sensitivity of the human heart. People knew that divorce was tragic, no less for the children of a couple than for the husband and wife themselves. Less than five-percent of marriages ended in divorce prior to 1960. By the time contraception was part of the mainstream in the early to mid-1970's half of all marriages ended this way. And today our society is feeling the agonizing effects of a *nearly sixty-percent divorce rate*.

Of course someone might object that the increase in the divorce rate is due to factors other than contraception: the proliferation of pornography through all the various forms of media, the pressures of the modern way of life, etc. The point I wish to make is that it is precisely contraception that is the proverbial Pandora's Box. Once it had become socially acceptable, all manner of evil flowed out from it, as from a headwater. It is the cause of the increase in the divorce rate, just as it is the cause in the increase in abortions. It is also the cause of the general lowering of morality that is so very evident all around us. But really, where it has had an especially evident effect is in the life of women and the way they are viewed within society.

Consider woman as fundamentally mother and bride and it becomes possible to catch a glimpse of the beauty of what has been so profaned and degraded by our culture. The priceless value of a mother with her children, the helpmate of her husband – this has been shunned and replaced. Who is the successful woman now? The self-sufficient, self-realized woman in a position of power. She is *liberated* from the patriarchal presuppositions of a passing age. She is *enlightened* with a modern, cosmopolitan outlook. She is *above* the old way of things that so trapped and encaged her – a slave to her husband, to her home and to her fertility which was a constant threat ever pulling her down. Indeed, one can imagine a mysterious hand offering to woman a gift of great price: a little pill, a panacea for all of life's problems. Perhaps someone

eavesdropping on the conversation might even hear the strangely familiar words, “Don’t believe what you’ve heard! If you eat it, you’ll be like God...”

2

We will first look at the witness of the Church fathers with regards to contraception. Admittedly, there are forms of contraception that we are familiar with which were unknown in their day. But the existence of various means that could be taken in order to avoid the conception of children was not at all unknown to them. It will become clear to us that there was a consensus among the fathers of the early Church that any means taken by spouses in order to render sterile an act of sexual intercourse *was intrinsically evil and could not be justified under any circumstances*. We will see that, for them, marriage was a profoundly unified reality. The conjugal union of husband and wife was the act through which the couple becomes one flesh, and it was through this union that new human beings were conceived and brought into the world. For them there was never a compartmentalization of the unitive and procreative aspects, nor an ordering of these ends as primary and secondary. The fathers of the early Church understood the truth about marriage in a simple and profound way. Without ever thinking of categorizing various aspects of the spousal union in one flesh, they perceived through an impeccable instinct for the truth that it would truly nullify the meaning of conjugal union if the couple were to engage in an intentionally sterilized union.

After having read the testimony of the fathers with regards to contraception, we will then examine the fundamental dogmas of the Church and their development in response to various heresies. We will see how the dogmas of the Trinity and incarnation came about in order to safeguard the final goal of Christianity which is union with God or deification. We will look at the development of the dogmatic distinction between the divine essence and uncreated energies, and the way in which this dogma, like that of the Trinity and the incarnation, came about in response to a heresy

inadvertently aimed at rendering mystical union impossible. In this context, we will come to see that it is possible to view the current problem of contraception from within the spectrum of the entire dogmatic tradition of the Orthodox Church.

We will then focus more intensely upon the reality of the uncreated energies. We will see that this teaching of the Orthodox Church concerning the uncreated character of divine grace is the foundation or “mystical root” of theology. We will examine the way in which the fathers of the early Councils chose to express and define realities of the Christian faith in order to safeguard these mysteries. This is important for us if we are to comprehend the way in which the Church sought to protect the orthodox teaching regarding our knowledge of and participation in God.

St. Gregory Palamas defended the authentic tradition of the Church against the onslaught of a rationalizing philosophy which refused to recognize in God any reality other than an absolutely simple essence. The great Archbishop of Thessalonica elucidated upon the teachings of the fathers before him, showing that there is in God an ineffable distinction between His unknowable essence and participable energies. This teaching is of the greatest importance if we are to comprehend the final goal of man’s existence: deification. We will see that the mystery of our deification through the divine energies is the archetypal reality signified by all of the images and symbols of Scripture. This is why this teaching of the essence/energies distinction is of such central importance for us in our discussion concerning contraception. If the body speaks a language, and that language refers ultimately to the relationship between God and man, then the contracepted marital act will be seen to symbolize a rejection by man of the penetrating energy of the Spirit.

After coming to an understanding of why it must be that the Christian God is not identical to the God of the philosophers, we will look at the apostolic and patristic witness to the distinction between the divine essence and uncreated energies. We will see that the New Testament authors and early Church fathers are in full agreement with the theology of St. Gregory Palamas, even if the

terminology used by the early Christians was not always identical to that employed by the Orthodox fathers of later centuries.

In the following chapter we will come to see the way in which the human body, created male and female and called to conjugal union, speaks a “language.” This language of the body reveals the very meaning of human existence. The masculinity and femininity of husband and wife shows, in the visible creature, the reality of the relationship of God and man. The marriage of husband and wife and the one-flesh union brought about through the marital embrace reveals the mystical marriage of Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church. This union of Christ with His bride the Church is signified by and accomplished through the whole sacramental life of the Church, but finds its most perfect fulfillment in the one-flesh union of the Eucharist. The marriage of Christ and the Church is then seen as the means by which each person is “made a partaker of the divine nature.”⁵ Here we see that the Eucharistic communion in the body and blood of Christ is ordered towards the final goal of deification through the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit. Christ made it clear that this was the final goal of the divine economy when He said, “I came that I might cast fire upon the earth.”⁶ He speaks of the fire of divinity cast upon the “earth” of our hearts: the grace of the Spirit poured into the souls of believers.

If we were to simplify this system of imagery we would find this order: 1) one-flesh union of husband and wife is an image of - 2) marriage of Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church accomplished through Eucharistic “one-flesh union,” which has as its final end - 3) the deification or theosis of man through permeation by the divine energies of the Holy Spirit. And so, the notated version could read: marriage > Eucharist > deification. We can see why this is so important if we consider that *marriage constitutes the foundation of sacramental imagery*, and that the one-flesh union of husband and wife forms the basis for

⁵ 2 Peter 1:4

⁶ Luke 12:49

understanding the Eucharistic communion of Christ and the Church in the sense of a “marriage.” It is because the sexual union of husband and wife forms the foundational imagery for the Christ/Church union that contraception is shown to be so diabolical. If the body speaks a language, in this case it verbalizes a clear rejection of communion with Christ. Finally, in this same language of rejection, the contracepted act signifies a lack of receptivity to the deifying grace of the Holy Spirit. This is precisely a refusal to submit to the loving plan of God taken to the extreme of closing oneself off from the divine light of the Spirit of the Lord.

In the next chapter we will address the mystery of marriage in its relation to the mystery of the Trinity. Here we will examine the traditional understanding of the four marks of marriage and the three ends of marriage with special emphasis upon the ways in which each of the marks and ends are contradicted through the intentional use of contraception by the spouses. We will then see that, in the language of the body, the intentionally sterilized sexual act is not only destructive of the relationship of husband and wife, but it reflects a rejection of Trinitarian communion, as well.

Following the discussion on the Trinity and marriage, we will look at the mystery of marriage in its relation to the incarnation. Here it will become clear that a great wealth of imagery in the Old Testament can be seen, in retrospect, to find its fulfillment in the incarnation and in the mystical marriage of Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church. Just as in the case of the previous chapter, contraception in the language of the body also contradicts the meaning of the incarnation.

We will then take a more in-depth look into the division brought about through the insertion of contraception into the one-flesh union of husband and wife. This intentional act of sterilization renders void all of the symbolism referring to the incarnation of Christ, as well as the way in which husband and wife are called to image the Trinity through their marriage.

In the final two chapters we will consider the problem of contraception from the perspective of the two most venerated saints of the Orthodox tradition: St. John the Forerunner and the Most

Holy Theotokos. We will look at the ministry of St. John, “the friend of the bridegroom,” and see that his very martyrdom was the response of Herod and his brother’s wife, Herodias, to the Precursor’s summons to chastity. Seen from the vantage point of our own day, the Prophet’s work would include calling people to live chastely *within* marriage: a challenging task for those accustomed to having control over the sources of life through artificial contraceptive techniques. We will look at last at the mystery of the Theotokos in her participation in the work of Her divine Son. We will see that it was necessary for both the male and female aspects of human nature to be regenerated, and that this was brought about through the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos. By following the thought of St. Symeon the New Theologian on this topic, we will come to understand that the fullness of regenerated, resurrected humanity, in both male and female aspects, is granted to every Christian through the sacramental life of the Church, and particularly through the Eucharist.



Saint John Chrysostom

Chapter 2

Orthodox Patristic Witness Opposes Contraception

*"Why do you sow where the field is eager to destroy the fruit?"*⁷

+St. John Chrysostom

The patristic witness is very clear in its univocal condemnation of contraceptive practices. Some of the fathers equated intentionally sterilized sexual acts with abortion, and some considered contraception to be even more sinister since the parties involved went so far as to ensure that no new human being would be conceived through their sexual act. Here St. John Chrysostom pleads with those who would consider such things:

"Why do you sow where the field is eager to destroy the fruit, where there are medicines of sterility [oral contraceptives], where there is murder before birth? You do not even let a harlot remain only a harlot, but you make her a murderess as well... Indeed, it is something worse than murder, and I do not know what to call it; for she does not kill what is formed but prevents its formation. What then? Do you condemn the gift of God and fight with his [natural] laws? Yet such turpitude... the

⁷ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 24, A.D. 391.

matter still seems indifferent to many men – even to many men having wives. In this indifference of the married men there is even greater evil filth; for then poisons are prepared, not against the womb of a prostitute, but against your injured wife. Against her are these innumerable tricks.”⁸

In this excerpt, Chrysostom eloquently shows the depth of his insight into the most searching of problems. He definitively and authoritatively condemns contraceptive practices of all types as, “something worse than murder.” And that because it, “does not kill what is formed but prevents its formation.” St. John includes in this comprehensive rejection of contraception another very important point: it is precisely when contraception is used in marriage that it is most sinister and morally reprehensible. He says, *“In this indifference of the married men there is even greater evil filth; for then poisons are prepared, not against the womb of a prostitute, but against your injured wife.”* This single citation of St. John Chrysostom should be sufficient to fortify the doubtful conscience of anyone considering the use of contraception. But it is only one of many quotes from the fathers who were in agreement with Chrysostom.

Clement of Alexandria states clearly that, “Because of its divine institution for the propagation of man, the seed is not to be vainly ejaculated, nor is it to be damaged, nor is it to be wasted.”⁹ And he also states simply that, “To have coitus other than to procreate children is to do injury to nature.”¹⁰ Several points here are worth mentioning. First, Clement states that sexual intercourse is of “divine institution for the propagation of man.” That is its purpose and to remove it from this context is sinful. He also states specifically the different ways in which a man might attempt to avoid the conception of a child: “the seed is not to be vainly ejaculated, nor is it to be damaged, nor is it to be wasted.” In the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor of Children* 2:10:91:2, A.D. 191.

¹⁰ Ibid. 2:10:95:3.

second citation we see that Clement considers any form of sexual union that is not for the purpose of having children to be unnatural and, therefore, sinful.

An important point to keep in mind, however, is that both Clement and Chrysostom were preoccupied with making sure people understood that the natural context for sexual union is within marriage, and that the union of the spouses serves the purpose of procreation. Therefore it is imperative that the couple remain open to the gift of life. Of course, it goes without saying that there are numerous situations that one could imagine in which marital union would be perfectly permissible although the conception of a child would not be at all likely through that union. For instance, if one or both the spouses were infertile, or if they were beyond childbearing years, etc. But in these cases contraception would not be necessary anyhow. Nonetheless, for the Church fathers it is imperative that *every act of marital union, without exception, be open to the gift of life*. Or one might say that every act of sexual intercourse must remain unimpeded by the introduction of artificial methods of birth control. Only in this way can the natural law be held in reverence and respected. Even in cases where the intention is to reduce the possibility of transmitting a deadly disease, i.e. AIDS, it is not contraception that is the answer but chastity, abstinence and self-control.

It is interesting that today there are so many excuses for people not wanting to have children – either within marriage or otherwise. Often times, couples consider themselves prudent to limit their family size to two or perhaps three children. They usually have economic reasons for this. John Chrysostom was not unaware of such scenarios in his own day:

“In truth, all men know that they who are under the power of the disease of covetousness are wearied even of their father’s old age [wishing him to die so they can inherit]; and that which is sweet, and universally desirable, the having of children, they esteem grievous and unwelcome. Many at least with this view have even paid money to be

childless, and have mutilated nature, not only killing the newborn, but even acting to prevent their beginning to live.”¹¹

Here again, as we saw above, Chrysostom is very direct in his condemnation of any means directed at rendering the sexual act sterile. He appears to have been aware of situations in his day of people paying to have themselves rendered permanently sterile, and he is taken aback by the brazen disregard for the natural law of God evident in such acts of violence.

St. Augustine was equally clear and definitive in his condemnation of contraception. Like Chrysostom, he sees the intentionally sterilized sexual act between spouses to be even more worthy of condemnation than that between unmarried persons:

“I am supposing, then, although you are not lying with your wife for the sake of procreating offspring, you are not for the sake of lust obstructing their procreation by an evil prayer or an evil deed. Those who do this, although they are called husband and wife, are not; nor do they retain any reality of marriage, but with a respectable name cover a shame. Sometimes this lustful cruelty, or cruel lust, comes to this, that they even procure poisons of sterility... Assuredly if both husband and wife are like this, they are not married, and if they were like this from the beginning they come together not joined in matrimony but in seduction. If both are not like this, I dare to say that either the wife is in a fashion the harlot of her husband or he is an adulterer with his own wife.”¹²

Augustine actually goes so far as to say that those who intentionally obstruct conception, “although they are called husband and wife, are not; nor do they retain any reality of marriage.” This is a step further than even Chrysostom went in his rejection of contraception. Really, all Augustine does is follow the act to its logical conclusion. Marriage is for the procreation of offspring. If the union of husband and wife is intentionally rendered infertile by one or both of the spouses, the act is no longer a marital act of union. Rather, for Augustine, the wife assumes the “fashion

¹¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies On Matthew* 28:5, A.D. 391.

¹² St. Augustine, *Marriage and Concupiscence* 1:15:17, A.D. 419.

of a harlot,” and the husband “an adulterer with his own wife.” This is because of the fundamental character of the natural law: the only licit form of sexual intercourse is that which occurs within marriage and is open to the procreation of offspring. The pleasure that accompanies the marital embrace is a natural gift of God the Creator, and it is even morally acceptable to seek that pleasure *within the proper context*. However, when the pleasure of sexual union is sought but the procreation of offspring is willfully obstructed in any way, the act is no longer an act of loving union but becomes a perverse counterfeit.

Augustine sees the pleasure that accompanies the sexual act as a sort of divine impetus, designed by the wisdom and providence of God in order that man might be drawn strongly along by the natural desire to procreate:

“For thus the eternal law, that is, the will of God the creator of all creatures, taking counsel for the conservation of natural order, not to serve lust, but to see to the preservation of the race, permits the delight of the mortal flesh to be released from the control of reason in copulation only to propagate progeny.”¹³

From the witness of the early fathers, of which we have only glimpsed a representative few, it is obvious that there was no question in their minds that contraception and sterilization were deeply sinful and harmful practices and perverse measures for anyone to take. Unfortunately, it seems that this abundantly clear perspective of the Church fathers was overlooked by some of the eminent Orthodox theologians of our day in their treatment of this issue. One example of this theological “blind spot” occurs in the book by Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*.¹⁴ In the section

¹³ St. Augustine, *Against Faustus* 15:7, A.D. 400.

¹⁴ I am quite aware that this work by Paul Evdokimov is rightly regarded as one of the most insightful modern Orthodox books on marriage. I do not mean to demean the book, *The Sacrament of Love*, in any way. Nonetheless, with regards to the issue of contraception, he failed to witness to the authentic Orthodox patristic tradition.

entitled, "Birth Control: The Problem of Limiting Birth," Evdokimov states:

"In the age of the Church Fathers, the problem of birth control was never raised. There are no canons that deal with it...To invoke Old Testament texts (for example, the case of Onan, Gn 38:9-10), is to make an exegetical blunder and to be unmindful of the context of ideas of the epoch about the sacred and taboo, of the Law, and of the messianic expectation. One must start from the *patristic spirit* and not from a precise inexistent teaching."¹⁵

One could not agree more with Evdokimov regarding the importance of beginning our analysis of the problem from the perspective of the "patristic spirit." However, his claim that, "In the age of the Church fathers the problem of birth control was never raised," and that the patristic teaching on this matter is "inexistent," is simply untrue. From the direct quotations we have already cited, it ought to be quite obvious to any honest reader that the patristic witness regarding birth control, contraception and sterilization most certainly does exist. And, what is more, the fathers are of one mind and decisively univocal in their condemnation of these practices.

The temptation might arise in some hearts already partially blinded by the incredible proliferation and widespread social acceptance of these practices in the modern cultural landscape, to think that perhaps the words of these fathers are those of noble savages: noble, yet savage, nonetheless. We might be tempted to consider ourselves more up-to-date, more modern, more enlightened than these men from so many centuries ago. But these temptations should not obstruct our view if we realize that these insights of the saints of ages past are apprehensions of realities of a timeless, changeless realm. Indeed, all that we have in the beautiful Orthodox faith is a gift we have received from these very men, and other men and women like them.

¹⁵ Evdokimov, Paul, *The Sacrament of Love*, pg. 174. SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 2001.



Saint Gregory Palamas

Chapter 3 **Applying Orthodox Dogma to New Problems**

*"Personal theological reflection must be animated not by the desire for originality at any price, but by the need to explain what constitutes a common inheritance and ministers to the salvation of the Church's faithful in that age."*¹⁶

+Dumitru Staniloae

In every age of the Church's life on earth there have been human problems that require an answer that is derived from the tradition of the Church. Indeed, the Church is an expert in humanity far more so than any of the "humanist" trends, which pit man against God. This expertise of the Church on all issues pertaining to man is what I intend to bring to bear upon the matter of contraception. In order to do this, we must first recall the dogmatic teachings of the Church and the reason for their formulation. These dogmas, as we will see, developed in an organic way over the

¹⁶ Staniloae, Dumitru, *The Experience of God*, pg. 86, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, MA, 1998.

course of many centuries. Each of the dogmas was proclaimed in order to defend the Orthodox tradition in the face of one heresy or another. Our purpose here is to show that it is perfectly in keeping with the historical development of dogma to view the entire tradition from the perspective of a single problem. This is, in fact, the surest test of whether a teaching is orthodox or not. In this case, we intend to bring the dogmatic tradition to bear upon contraception in order to show that to have recourse to it is never justifiable.

The Orthodox Church has known from the time of its founding by Christ that man is made “in the image and likeness of God,”¹⁷ and that we are called to become “partakers of the divine nature.”¹⁸ In fact, the Seven Ecumenical Councils were each held in order to safeguard some particular teaching that was necessary to the salvation and deification of each human person within the Church. As Vladimir Lossky puts it,

“All the development of the dogmatic battles which the Church has waged down the centuries appears to us, if we regard it from the purely spiritual standpoint, as dominated by the constant preoccupation which the Church has had to safeguard, at each moment of her history, for all Christians, the possibility of attaining to the fullness of the mystical union.”¹⁹

And so, the dogmatic formulations of the Seven Councils ultimately form the two great dogmas of the Church: the Trinity and the incarnation. Knowledge of the Trinity was necessary so that the Church would understand who Christ is in His relationship to God. We know, thanks to the First Council at Nicaea, that He is the eternal Son of God the Father, *homoousios*, of the same essence as God. The Second Council at Constantinople teaches us that the

¹⁷ Gen 1:26,27

¹⁸ 2 Peter 1:4

¹⁹ Lossky, Vladimir, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, pgs. 9, 10. SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 1976.

Holy Spirit is also co-equal with the Father and the Son. This is important because it is the Person of the Holy Spirit that imparts to each human person the deifying grace of Christ. The Third through the Sixth Councils formulate the teaching that the incarnate Logos is both fully God *and fully man*. This is central because if Christ were not fully human our deification would not be possible through Him. Finally, the Seventh Ecumenical Council upholds the orthodox teaching on the veneration of holy icons. When the Church commemorates the Triumph of Orthodoxy on the first Sunday of Lent, it is precisely her teaching on the veneration of icons that is the focal point of the celebration. This is because the holy icon is a pledge, a promise and first-fruit of the final deification of the cosmos which will come about at the end of the age. The icon proclaims, by its very existence, that the resurrection which the saints experience interiorly in their souls will, at the general resurrection, find its final triumph in the complete deification of both the spiritual and material realms.

Mystical union with God, or deification is, then, the goal of human existence. The incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, as well as the sending of the Holy Spirit upon the Church all have as their purpose the deification of man and, through him, of the whole cosmos. The dogma of the Church gives the framework, if you will, of this deification. Our integration into Christ is the means as well as the goal of our existence as human persons. The Word and the Holy Spirit, the “two hands of the Father,” as St. Irenaeus of Lyons refers to them, bring about this union of men with God through their activity within the Church. The sacraments are the primary means by which each human person is united to Christ through the energies of the Holy Spirit. The ascetical life of Christians is the tension brought about by the two poles of human existence in this age. Using the vocabulary of St. Paul we could say that our “old man” is perishing, while we are being united and integrated into the “new man,” or “second Adam,” our Lord Jesus Christ, through the grace of His Spirit. We must die to the flesh, i.e., to the impassioned fallen nature we were born with and inherited from our first parents, while we are simultaneously

being renewed in the “inner man,” i.e., through our spiritual communion with the divine Spirit of Christ.

In the 14th century, a new attack was waged against Orthodoxy by a Calabrian monk named Barlaam who had been influenced by a Greek translation of the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. The great hesychast monk of Mt. Athos and Archbishop of Thessalonica, St. Gregory Palamas, rose to the defense of Orthodoxy. He looked to the fathers before him for answers to the problems posed by Barlaam and Akindynos, the antagonists of hesychasm (“inner silence and peace”) and Orthodoxy. He found in fathers such as St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. Macarius of Egypt, St. Maximus the Confessor and St. John Damascene firm support for what was to become a dogmatic teaching for the whole of the Orthodox world. His detractors accused him, as well as the other monks of Mt. Athos, of heresy because they claimed to experience the vision of God as a divine light revealed to them as they practiced the Jesus prayer. For Barlaam and his companion there could be no such vision of God, nor union with Him directly, because He was an absolutely simple essence. To participate in the least degree in the divine essence one would have to become an additional person hypostasizing the divine essence. In this case, we would no longer be able to refer to God as “Trinity,” since God would not be limited to three Persons but would have as many persons as there were participants in the divine essence. Following the fathers before him, and elucidating their teaching upon the issue at hand, Palamas argued that the essence of God was indeed utterly transcendent to all men and angels alike, and would remain so for all eternity. Yet, he argued, union with God, deification, was not simply a state of human nature raised to a level analogous to that of God. Rather, there was another reality, distinct yet inseparable from the divine essence, which was participable, and that St. Gregory referred to as the “uncreated energies.”

The distinction between the absolutely transcendent essence of God and the uncreated energies is very important in reference to our topic of contraception. As we will see, the one-flesh union in

the language of the body finds its ultimate counterpart and fulfillment in the deification of the cosmos by the divine energies. In order for this union with God, this theosis of the created world, to be a possibility, there must be an aspect of the divine Reality that is *participable*. But if God were to become *absolutely* one with His creation, the created order would, at that moment, cease to exist as creature. God would be “all in all,” because there would no longer be anything but the divine essence. Here is where the ineffable distinction in God of essence/energies reveals its profound significance. There must be a reality in God that is utterly beyond comprehension and participation by any creature, and that for all eternity. This is the unknowable essence of God, Whose very unknowability renders Eastern theology “mystical.” The eternal transcendence of the divine essence also makes possible the reality of eternal growth in the coming age. One can grow eternally in the acquisition of grace, whereas the divine essence remains forever transcendent.

Vladimir Lossky here identifies, with wonderful clarity and conciseness, the reality in God which makes the mystical union possible:

“What is the nature of the relationship by which we are able to enter into union with the Holy Trinity? If we were able at a given moment to be united to the very essence of God and to participate in it even in the very least degree, we should not at the moment be what we are, we should be God by nature. God would no longer be Trinity, but ‘of myriads of hypostases;’ for He would have as many hypostases as there would be persons participating in His essence. God, therefore, is and remains inaccessible to us in His essence. But can we then say that it is with one of the three divine *Persons* that we enter into union? This would be the hypostatic union proper to the Son alone, in whom God becomes man without ceasing to be the second Person of the Trinity. Even though we share the same human nature as Christ and receive in Him the name of sons of God, we do not ourselves become the divine hypostasis of the Son by the fact of the Incarnation. We are unable, therefore, to participate either in the essence or the hypostases of the Holy Trinity. Nevertheless, the divine promise cannot be an illusion: we *are* called to participate in the divine nature. We are therefore compelled to recognize in God an ineffable distinction, other than that between His

essence and His persons, according to which He is, under different aspects, both totally inaccessible and at the same time accessible. This distinction is that between His nature, properly so-called, which is inaccessible, unknowable and incommunicable; and the energies or divine operations, forces proper to and inseparable from God's essence, in which He goes forth from Himself, manifests, communicates, and gives Himself."²⁰

And so, it is the divine energies that are poured forth into the human heart by the Holy Spirit, bringing about the deification of man and, through him, the cosmos. We will see that all of the imagery in Scripture, including the incarnation and the Eucharistic body and blood of Christ, all find their fulfillment in this penetration of the created world by the divine energies. Any theological perspective that refuses to recognize this ineffable distinction between the divine essence and uncreated energies renders authentic union with God and the resulting deification of the creature impossible. If one chooses to accept the Aristotelian metaphysic of the absolute simplicity of the divine essence, deification becomes a term to be understood in the sense of an *analogy*. A person becomes *like* God in the sense of reflecting His perfections as in a mirror, but there is no authentic theosis, no "becoming God by grace." This is the grave danger, into which, sadly, much of western theology has stumbled. When the absolute simplicity of the divine essence is asserted and insisted upon, the whole spectrum of created reality becomes a sort of hopeless conundrum. The very reality towards which the entire created world silently witnesses – the total deification of the whole created order through a complete permeation in the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit – the very possibility of this reality is denied by the assertion of the absolute simplicity of God's essence. A certain temptation to deism and agnosticism arises in the human consciousness as the logical consequence of a God that remains - because of His absolute simplicity - utterly incomprehensible. Here, even the relationship between God and His creation takes on a contraceptive character. If God is absolute simplicity of essence, He

²⁰ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pgs. 69,70.

and man remain *outside of each other*. There is no possibility of a “perichoresis,” of mutual interpenetration. The distinction in God between the unknowable divine essence and the participable uncreated energies is of such fundamental importance that we will devote considerable time to this matter in the following chapter. When we recognize the ineffable distinction between the unknowable essence and participable energies, we see that every image in Scripture taken from the created world finds its true fulfillment in the ultimate reality of authentic deification.

It is no coincidence that the Orthodox Church celebrates the feast of St. Gregory Palamas, “Light of Orthodoxy and Teacher of the Church, its Confirmation,”²¹ on the second Sunday of Lent. This placement on the Liturgical calendar of the commemoration of the great defender of Orthodoxy against the humanizing philosophers shows that the teaching which Palamas successfully defended represents a second “Triumph of Orthodoxy.” The distinction between the essence of God and His uncreated energies is of such great importance that it is placed on the same level as the defense of the veneration of icons, and of the decisions of the fathers of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. Even today, perhaps now more than ever, this teaching is a touchstone and measure of the trajectory of modern Orthodox theologians.

2

There are numerous current issues that the Church is faced with in this secularized time in which we live. The discussions concerning the nature of the Church perhaps are at the top of the list, receiving the greatest amount of attention. But there can be no real decisive categorization of the various issues because, just as the garment worn by the Lord in His sojourn upon earth was seamless, so is the truth that we profess. Any particular problem within the Church will inevitably involve many other aspects of the Church. The issue of contraception is a very important one. Indeed, it grows more pressing with every passing day. The birth rate has declined

²¹ Troparion for the Feast of St. Gregory Palamas, Tone 8.

far below replacement rate in many countries. The divorce rate has left more broken families in its wake than there remain ones still intact. Abortion may seem to be a separate matter, not at all connected with our topic of contraception. And yet, contraception is at the very root, not just of abortion, *but of all the basic cultural maladies surrounding us today.*

A Romanian Orthodox theologian of the last century, Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, explains very well the justification for the continuing work of theologians in every age:

“Progress takes the form of an emphasis placed more strongly now on one aspect of the inexhaustible richness of dogmas, and now on another, according to the preoccupations and the spiritual development of the faithful at a particular time. But the aspect that receives this greater emphasis opens up an increased understanding of the whole content of the dogmas and gives promise of future advancement in understanding it. The history of theological thought is composed of different periods or doctrinal cycles in which one aspect of the Christian tradition takes precedence over others, in which all doctrinal themes are treated to a certain extent as a function of the *one question which has become central in the dogmatic consciousness.*”²²

Considering contraception from the perspective of the fullness of the Orthodox tradition is the aim of the chapters that follow. This may seem an odd endeavor, unless you consider all that has been said up to this point. Both St. John Chrysostom and Augustine were surprisingly harsh in their condemnation of intentionally sterilized acts. They even agreed that these acts, when contrived by spouses, were even more sinister and perverse. And Augustine went so far as to say that, “those who do this, although they are called husband and wife, are not; nor do they retain any reality of marriage.” This is precisely where we can get a glimpse of where we will be going. If contraception is so destructive of the relationship between husband and wife, what will this signify with regards to the union of Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church?

²² Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, pg. 92. Emphasis added.



The Transfiguration of Christ

Chapter 4 Uncreated Energies: The Mystical Root of Theology

*"We heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."*²³ + St. Peter the Apostle

The teaching of the Orthodox Church on the uncreated nature of divine grace is of central importance to our discussion on Orthodoxy and contraception. It is necessary for us to first come to an understanding of the mystical union to which each human person

²³ 2 Peter 1:19

is called before we can enter into a discussion of various realities pertaining to this union. In the Orthodox tradition, the experience of mystical union with God, so the saints tell us, is one of light-filled joy, exuberant and inexhaustible life, peace and intimate love. Our rational knowledge of God is sometimes seen as an obstacle to this union with God, but that is only because we are prone to getting caught-up in a conceptual type of knowledge that is merely human. When theological insight is expressed in words it is usually better to understand from the outset that we cannot adequately express the experience of God with our intellectual concepts. We cannot “trap” Him in our words and “pass Him on” to others as we can do with the various topics of academic knowledge. God desires to initiate and consummate an authentic union with each human person in a way that is unique and particular.

The various inspired books which constitute the Bible bear witness to the fact that the Lord does indeed wish for us to receive His message in the form of rational words and concepts. The Lord Jesus spoke in parables precisely because of his humility and condescension to our level in a fallen world. Bereft of the vision of God “face to face,” in this passing age we begin to find our way to God through these various images and analogies borrowed from our sensory experience. And so, the words of Scripture, the words of the fathers of the Church and of the saints of all ages are not wasted because of their incapacity to reveal to us God as He is in Himself. Rather, these inspired words are, as St. Peter the leader of the apostles says, “a light shining in a dark place which we do well to heed until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts.” The words of the God-bearing apostles and saints bear within themselves the mystery of the Spirit and if we are illuminated by the grace of the same Spirit these words will be light and life for us. Through their witness we will grow in the knowledge of God through a personal and intimately spiritual communion.

At various times throughout history the Church has had to safeguard the purity of her faith against the encroachment of ideas that were potentially harmful to Orthodoxy. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Seven Ecumenical Councils were all held in

order to safeguard some aspect of the Christian faith which was under attack by one heresy or another. The difficulties with which the Church was faced gave rise to a certain creativity on the part of the bishops and theologians present at each particular Council. The problems were dealt with in ways that the members of the Council agreed upon and considered to be a fitting and adequate response. Hence, St. Athanasius is credited with the application of the term “homoousios” to the reality of the unity of the three divine Persons. St. Cyril of Alexandria was present at the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431. He is remembered for defending the orthodox veneration of the Virgin Mary as the “Theotokos.” Neither of these words, homoousios and Theotokos, occur in the Bible and yet they were seen as the most adequate means of safeguarding the true faith of the Church.

Sometimes, however, the doctrinal formulations were not acceptable throughout the entire Church. The Council of Chalcedon in 451, for instance, was held in order to protect the teaching of the Church with regards to the Person of Christ. Pope St. Leo the Great is remembered as a defender of orthodoxy because of his *Tome* which states that Christ is one divine Person with two natures and two energies. Unfortunately, this way of understanding the reality of the God-man Jesus Christ was and still is, at least to some degree, unacceptable by the Coptic Orthodox Church. Some people might label them as “monophysites” because of their rejection of the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon, but they would consider this title undeserved. The Coptic Orthodox Church would say that it is too much on the level of philosophical concepts to refer to the Person of the God-man in the way that Pope Leo and the Council of Chalcedon chose to do. The dogma of the “hypostatic union” was necessary in a particular situation, at a particular place and time in order to overcome the views of those who wished to reject the full humanity of Christ. The Coptic Orthodox Church, while rejecting the formulation of the Council of Chalcedon, does not, however, reject the teaching that Christ is both fully God and fully man. They simply do not consider the dogmatic formulation of Chalcedon an adequate expression of this mystery. By recognizing Christ as fully

God and fully man – as the unique “God-man” – the Coptic Orthodox Church bears witness to the orthodoxy of their faith, regardless of whether or not they accepted the formulation decided upon at Chalcedon.

2

We have considered the dogmatic formulations of these Ecumenical Councils in order to bring into a clearer light a related point. The fathers of the Ecumenical Councils often relied upon philosophical terminology borrowed from pagan Greek antiquity in order to express divine mysteries. They were very aware of the dangers involved in so doing, but after weighing the matter decided that this was the best approach to take in order to safeguard the fullness of the Christian mystery. And so, they carefully selected words that would convey a meaning that, they hoped, would not easily be misunderstood. The word(s) used, while at times borrowed from the context of pre-Christian Greek philosophy, would not have the character of a philosophical concept, but would be emptied of its content and then used in order to signify a divine reality. The divine reality itself was recognized as transcendent to all philosophical conceptions, the latter of which existed only on the level of the human mind. The word chosen to signify the divine reality would have to have an analogous meaning in its former existence as a philosophical concept. For instance, the term *ousia* is a Greek word borrowed from a philosophical context. It means simply “substance” or “essence.” As used by the fathers of the First Ecumenical Council it is no longer understood as it once was: as a term referring to an idea formed by the human mind. Rather, the term *ousia* is first purged of its philosophical content. Then it is used to signify a reality in God that is utterly transcendent to the human mind. As a philosophical term, *ousia* signified the human idea of a simple essence. In its use by the fathers at Nicea, the term signifies the fact that Christ is what the Father is, but the content of the term as a human concept of “essence” is banished from the realm of theology. Henceforth, *ousia* conveys the “oneness” of

God, of that which each of the divine Persons has in common, but *what* the ousia is remains utterly beyond the realm of human thought.

Vladimir Lossky explains the way in which the fathers borrowed philosophical terminology in order to convey theological truth:

“It required the superhuman efforts of an Athanasius of Alexandria, of a Basil, of a Gregory Nazianzen and of many others, to purify the concepts of Hellenistic thought, to break down the watertight bulkheads by the introduction of a Christian apophaticism which transformed rational speculation into a contemplation of the Trinity.”²⁴

And so, some of the theologians who came after the Council of Nicea, being aware of the dangers of approaching the Christian God as if He could be identified with the philosophical concept of essence, preferred to refer to this reality as the *superessence*. Psuedo-Dionysius, for instance, uses this type of language extensively. St. Gregory Palamas also recognizes the tendency of the human mind to grasp for an understanding that is approachable on the merely human level. He, too, uses primarily this type of language, referring more often than not to God as “more than God,” and to the divine essence as *superessence* and “more than essence.” By the use of such language those theologians who were particularly sensitive to the divine mystery of which they spoke attempted to protect the reality of God’s transcendence from the slothful tendencies of fallen human nature. It seems easier for us to comprehend a God that is within our reach, but the price that is to be paid for translating the mystery of the God of revelation onto the plane of a rationalistic philosophical concept is, as we will see, very costly indeed. Palamas illustrates the profound difficulty involved in speaking of God with a terminology borrowed from pagan philosophy:

“Is there then anything of use to us in this philosophy? Certainly. For just as there is much therapeutic value even in substances

²⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pg. 50.

obtained from the flesh of serpents, and the doctors consider there is no better and more useful medicine than that derived from this source, so there is something of benefit to be had even from the profane philosophers – but somewhat as in a mixture of honey and hemlock. So it is most needful that those who wish to separate out the honey from the mixture should beware that they do not take the deadly residue by mistake. And if you were to examine the problem, you would see that *all or most of the harmful heresies derive their origin from this source.*”²⁵

The great Archbishop of Thessalonica continues:

“In the case of secular wisdom, you must first kill the serpent, in other words, overcome the pride that arises from this philosophy. How difficult that is! ‘The arrogance of philosophy has nothing in common with humility,’ as the saying goes. Having overcome it, then, you must separate and cast away the head and tail, for these things are evil in the highest degree. By the head, I mean manifestly wrong opinions concerning things intelligible and divine and primordial; and by the tail, the fabulous stories concerning created things. As to what lies in between the head and tail, that is, discourses on nature, you must separate out useless ideas by means of the faculties of examination and inspection possessed by the soul; just as pharmacists purify the flesh of serpents with fire and water. Even if you do all this, and make good use of what has been properly set aside, how much trouble and circumspection will be required for the task!”²⁶

3

The attacks waged upon the Orthodox faith did not cease after the time of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. As we already mentioned, sometimes the doctrinal formulations developed by the members of a council are simply unacceptable by other Churches. This problem occurs acutely with the *filioquist* Council of Toledo in Spain in the 5th century. An upsurge of Arianism – a heresy in which the Person of Christ is considered to be only the highest of

²⁵ St. Gregory Palamas, *Classics of Western Spirituality: The Triads*, pg. 28, Paulist Press, 1983. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Ibid. pg. 29.

creatures and not the eternal Son of God - led the bishops of this area in Spain to hold a council in which they sought to safeguard the true teaching regarding the divinity of Christ. They decided to adopt the idea that the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father *and the Son* (filioque) in order to defeat the Arian heretics. Their reasoning was simple: if the Holy Spirit is a divine Person, then we need only to teach that He proceeds not only from the Father *but also from the Son*, and in this way we will safeguard the true faith. This is so because if the Son is an eternal cause of the Holy Spirit's procession, together with the Father, then the Son *must be divine*. This is indisputable because only a divine Person can be the cause of the existence of another divine Person.

While it seemed to the members of the Council of Toledo that they were proclaiming the true Christian faith, they unwittingly began a series of events which eventually led to the division between the Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. In this case, the doctrine of the filioque spread far and wide throughout Western Europe before being adopted by the Pope of Rome and inserted into the Liturgical recitation of the Nicene Creed in the 11th century. Simply put, the Greek Orthodox mind was very dissatisfied with the doctrine of the filioque. They considered this teaching erroneous and damaging to the spiritual life of the faithful. When pressed to accept the filioque by the Church of Rome, they remained steadfast in opposition to what was, from their perspective, a very alien and unorthodox innovation. This led to the schism between Rome and Constantinople which still exists to this day.

4

Hopefully, what we have said so far in this chapter will help us to understand a matter that is very central to our discussion. In the 13th century, St. Thomas Aquinas brought together the Roman Catholic theology of his day (already deeply influenced by the filioque) and the philosophy of Aristotle. In adopting the metaphysical viewpoint of the Greek philosopher, Aquinas came to

understand God as an absolute simplicity, as pure act. For St. Thomas, as for Aristotle, there was no room for any distinction in God. The three Persons of the Trinity come to be understood as relations within the divine essence. The God of the philosopher is an absolutely simple essence. There is, then, no place in this type of theology for what St. Gregory Palamas refers to as the “uncreated energies.”

For St. Thomas, as well as the dominant Roman Catholic tradition which followed him in these regards, the entire spectrum of theology and spirituality takes on a different light. The experience of the saints in the Roman Catholic Church becomes very different from the experience of the saints of both east and west prior to the filioque controversy and the theology of St. Thomas. All of this follows from the theological disparity which developed between the Greek and Latin worlds. Or rather, the fact that the God of St. Thomas and the God of the Orthodox tradition is one and the same God became hidden beneath the dark veils of a philosophy which is ignorant of the uncreated nature of divine grace.

The very same philosophical conception of God which was held by St. Thomas was also brought to bear against the God-seeing monks of Mt. Athos in the 14th century. St. Gregory Palamas, the doctor of grace for the Orthodox Church, confronted this philosophy with the witness of the fathers before him and he was victorious. Here Lossky explains the situation with which Palamas was faced:

“The opponents of St. Gregory Palamas – eastern theologians who had been strongly influenced by Aristotelianism (in particular the Calabrian monk Barlaam who had received his theological training in Italy, and Akindynos, who quotes the Greek translation of the *Summa Theologica*) – saw in the real distinction between the essence and the energies a derogation of the simplicity of God, and accused Palamas of ditheism and polytheism. Having become alienated from the apophatic and antinomic spirit of eastern theology, they set up against it a conception of God which saw Him, primarily at any rate, as a simple essence, in which even the hypostases assumed the character of relations within the essence. The philosophy of God as pure act cannot admit

anything to be God that is not the very essence of God. From this point of view God is, as it were, limited by His essence; that which is not essence does not belong to the divine being, is not God.”²⁷

Indeed, for St. Thomas, faithful to his Aristotelian metaphysical presuppositions, the grace of God *cannot* be an uncreated reality. This is so because the only uncreated reality is the divine essence, absolutely simple and closed to participation by the creature. The Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysic of the absolute simplicity of the divine essence was wielded by the hands of Barlaam and Akindynos against an experience and knowledge of God completely alien to them – although *not at all alien* to the authentic hesychast tradition dating back at least to the 4th century desert fathers. The monks of Mt. Athos claimed to see God! They said that He could be seen and participated in even in our lives upon this earth. This claim could not be true if the opponents of St. Gregory were correct about the divine simplicity. For them, God could only be known through the mediation of His creatures. Any vision of divine light, any experience of divine grace could only be a participation in a *created* gift.

“In his reply to their strictures,” Lossky relates, “the Archbishop of Thessalonica confronted his opponents with the following dilemma: either they must admit the distinction between the essence and the operations, in which case they must needs, in obedience to their philosophical conception of essence, relegate the glory of God, the light of the Transfiguration, and grace, to the status of creatures; or, on the other hand, they must deny this distinction, in which case they would be forced to identify the unknowable and the knowable, the incommunicable and the communicable, essence and grace. In either case real deification would be impossible. So this defense of the divine simplicity, starting from a philosophical concept of essence, leads finally to conclusions which are inadmissible for practical piety and contrary to the tradition of the Eastern Church.”²⁸

²⁷ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 76, 77.

²⁸ Ibid. pgs. 77, 78.

Now that we have established an authentically Orthodox perspective with regards to the distinction in God between His essence and uncreated energies, we are prepared to understand how this is pertinent to our problem of contraception. As we have seen, the philosophical understanding of God as an absolutely simple essence renders authentic communion with Him – authentic deification – impossible. This means that the very purpose of human existence, the reason for God having created us, is unattainable within a theological perspective which adopts the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysic. In this way of viewing God, He remains utterly transcendent because there is no reality in Him in which it is possible for a creature to participate. If one speaks of a “beatific vision,” this vision will not be, at any rate, a communion with God. We will never be able to transcend the vision which St. Paul refers to as being “in a mirror, dimly.”

Robbed of His divine and uncreated energies, God becomes an unknowable and incomprehensible being, closed-in upon Himself and incapable of sharing His own being with His creatures. Lossky refers to this God of the textbooks as “sterile.” One might wonder how it is that this God could “espouse us to Himself forever,” as He indeed claims to do in the Holy Scriptures of both Old and New Testaments. When God remains so remote from His creature, it seems that a deistic perspective of God in relation to His creation is inevitable. Here God is not so much “everywhere present and filling all things” as we sing in the Orthodox prayer to the Holy Spirit, as He is utterly beyond and transcendent to all He has made.

As we have come to understand, the God of the philosophers, the absolutely simple essence, cannot gift His creatures with uncreated grace. He cannot share His “very life” with man because this life can only be a created grace and is, therefore, not truly God but something symbolic of Him. St. Gregory Palamas saw in the rationalistic attempt to contemplate the

divine essence a similarity with the original sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden:

“Adam was given authority by God to eat from every tree in paradise but he was not satisfied with them all. Once he had been convinced by the counsel of the serpent, the originator of evil, he ate from that one tree which he had been commanded not to touch. In the same way God sets before us all His riches and truly beneficial gifts to share as we wish, in accordance with the words, ‘The person who has been deified by grace will be in every respect as God is, except for His very essence.’ There are, however, people who teach that we can also share in God’s superessential essence and proclaim that this essence can be authoritatively named. They imitate the serpent, the originator of evil, by misinterpreting and distorting the words of the saints just as he did to the words of God.”²⁹

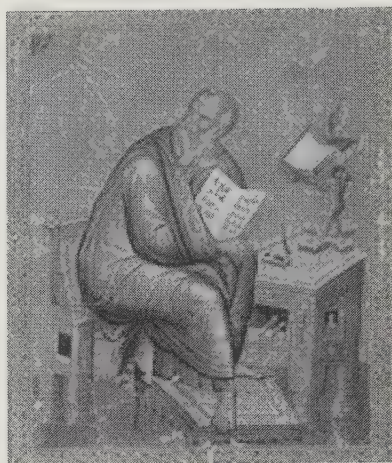
For St. Thomas there could be no uncreated grace. The terms “grace” and “life” when used to refer to the gifts imparted to man by His Creator do not retain the same meaning for Aquinas as they do in the dynamic theology of Orthodoxy. Due to a rigid understanding of the divine simplicity, St. Thomas was obliged to relegate the realities of the grace and life of God to the realm of creatures. This is the logical consequence of an Aristotelian metaphysical conception of God. The “grace” and “life” of God can only be created realities if one is to remain faithful to this philosophical idea of the absolute simplicity of God’s essence. One consequence of this misunderstanding in the western theological mindset is the loss of the understanding of deification as the final goal of man. Deification is always understood by the Orthodox tradition to be the final purpose of existence and of the striving for God by His rational creatures. For Aquinas, and for the school of theology which follows in his footsteps, the conscious experience of this wonderful and captivating reality, which gives untold meaning to every aspect of existence and immeasurable hope to man on his earthly pilgrimage is, tragically, lost.

²⁹ St. Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, #8, pg. 59, Mount Tabor Publishing, 2009.

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann considered the uncreated energies to be the “mystical root of theology.” One can only imagine what would happen to a theology that has attempted to formulate all sorts of ideas about God when the root has been severed and rejected. You could say that the theology of St. Thomas is a theology *without roots*, not only in the sense of not being in keeping with the patristic witness, but precisely because of this fatal flaw of being ignorant of the divine energies. Without the distinction between the unknowable essence and the participable energies God becomes incomprehensible and the meaning of human existence – deification through the divine and deifying energies of the Spirit – is unattainable.

As we will see in the coming chapters, the reality of the uncreated energies is of the utmost importance in understanding the language of the body. A God without energies is a *neutered God!* Instead of a spiritual marital union between God and His bride the Church, we have two realities which remain *outside of one another*. In this case, the relationship between God and man reflects the character of a *contracepted* marital act. If deification is spoken of in this context, it can only mean that God causes man to reflect His perfections as in a mirror, that is *analogously*, but there can be no perichoresis, no mutual interpenetration of God and man. This sort of relationship then appears to reflect more of a *homosexual* or *asexual* relationship in that the two terms do not ever in fact unite but remain closed-in each upon himself.

The uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit deify man and bring him into perfect, intimate union with God, the divine bridegroom. Man and woman, created in His image and likeness, are meant to reveal this ultimate goal of human existence. As we will see, this relationship of husband and wife, male and female, forms the foundation for an understanding of the final mystical marriage of Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church, and expresses the deification of man and the world through the energies of His Holy Spirit.



Saint John the Theologian and Evangelist

Chapter 5

Apostolic and Patristic Witness Confirms Essence/Energies Distinction

“We accept the hardships in order to reap the fruits. If the fruits of love are not in us, our labor is useless. In such a case we differ in nothing from the five foolish virgins: because their hearts were not filled here and now, in this present life, with spiritual oil – that is to say, with the energy of the Spirit, they were called fools.”³⁰ + St. Macarius the Great, 4th Century

The life of the Orthodox Christian is an unceasing effort to become an ever more perfect vessel for the grace of the Holy Spirit. All that we do in the way of ascetical discipline, vigils and prayer is ordered towards a deeper share in the “very life of God.” The acquisition of the energies of the Holy Spirit is the goal of the

³⁰ St. Macarius, *The Philokalia*, Vol. 3, pgs. 293, 294. Faber and Faber, 1984.

Christian life. If we mistakenly believe that a life of virtue and of following the moral law is the meaning of life for the Christian, “we differ in nothing,” as St. Macarius says, “from the five foolish virgins.” In simple terms, the work of the Christian is to become an “honorable vessel” in order that he may be a “temple of the Holy Spirit,” according to the great St. Paul. The place occupied by the energies of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Orthodox Christian is of such central importance that we will devote ourselves now to the apostolic and patristic witness to this glorious reality in God – the reality which constitutes the eternal inheritance of the Christian.

The debate between St. Gregory Palamas and his antagonists, Barlaam and Akindynos, was focused primarily upon the nature of the light which shown forth from Christ at the moment of the transfiguration. St. Gregory insisted, together with the choir of monks on Mt. Athos, that the glory which radiated from Christ when “His face shown like the sun and His garments became as white as light,”³¹ was not a created symbol of divinity. Rather, this light was the eternal glory of God, the energies ineffably distinct from the divine essence, in which God “wraps Himself as in a cloak.”³²

St. Gregory was not a theological innovator. The distinction between the essence and energies of God is very present in the teachings of many of the Church fathers. St. Basil the Great witnesses to this reality in God: “It is by his energies that we say we know our God; we do not assert that we can come near to the essence itself, for His energies descend to us, but His essence remains unapproachable.”³³ This is a very concise teaching that has come down to us from the great Basil of Caesarea. The terminology is even identical with that used by Palamas nearly a millennium later. He says quite clearly that it is through the energies and not the

³¹ Matthew 17:1,2

³² Psalm 103:2

³³ As quoted in: Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pg. 72.

essence that we know God. And he states with forthrightness that “the essence remains unapproachable.” Of course, someone from a Thomistic theological mindset might argue that Basil is simply saying that the vision of the divine essence is not possible in *this* life, but in the age to come the saints will enjoy the beatific vision of God’s essence. But this would be problematic for a number of reasons. First, the Orthodox tradition has known countless saints that have seen God *in this life*. For the Orthodox Church, the vision of God face to face can begin in this age. Just as Christ appeared in glory to the chosen disciples on Mt. Tabor, so He shows Himself shining forth inseparably within the hearts of those who love Him with all their being and reveals in them a foretaste of the glory of the age to come. And secondly, as we have already seen, there can be no participation in and no vision of the divine essence – neither in this life, nor in the age to come.

2

We will now embark upon a general overview of the witness given in several New Testament and patristic texts to the distinction in God between His unknowable essence and participable energies. It is important to keep in mind that the terminology used by the fathers of later centuries was not used in the context of Christianity at the time the New Testament texts were composed. This explains why there is no mention of either the “essence” or the “energies” of God in the New Testament. And so, it will require of us an understanding that is open to the mystery of God’s grace and illumination if we are to discern in the writings of St. Paul or St. John the Theologian a testimony that is consistent with that of later fathers and with St. Gregory Palamas.

The witness of the fathers with regards to the uncreated nature of divine grace is very clear. We could go on for many pages referencing hundreds of quotations from dozens of Church fathers - as Palamas, in fact, does - bearing witness to the distinction between the unknowable character of the divine essence and the

uncreated yet participable character of God's energies. While the language employed by many of the fathers is not identical to the terminology used by St. Gregory Palamas ("essence, energies"), the clear recognition of the concurrence in God of an absolutely transcendent reality as well as a communicable reality is very present.

St. Paul

In his epistle to the Romans, St. Paul writes: "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."³⁴ St. Paul makes a distinction between the Holy Spirit and the gift that He bestows; in this case "the love of God." This distinction between the Person of the Holy Spirit and the various gifts which He imparts will become a very common way of describing our participation in God's grace and energy. St. Macarius, in particular, is profoundly influenced by the terminology and theology of the great Apostle to the Gentiles. Later on in the epistle to the Romans, St. Paul refers to another energy of the Holy Spirit: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."³⁵ As we saw in the previous chapter, if the gifts imparted by the Holy Spirit are distinct from the divine essence, they must either be the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit or else they must be merely creatures. The way in which St. Paul speaks of these things leaves no room for doubt. The gifts imparted by the Spirit are divine and are, therefore, the manifold energies of God's transcendent essence.

³⁴ Romans 5:5

³⁵ Romans 15:13

In Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians he asks: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you... Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?"³⁶ And in his second epistle to the Corinthians Paul adds: "Now he who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who has also sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee."³⁷ St. Paul continually returns to the mystery of God indwelling the human heart through His Spirit. As we know, it is the energetic presence of God's Spirit within the human heart that is the final goal of human existence.

A little further on in the same epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul reveals the indwelling presence of the Lord as the glorious countenance of Christ shining within the human heart:

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord... For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."³⁸

The "light of the knowledge of the glory of God" which has "shown in our hearts" is none other than the uncreated energy of the Spirit of the Lord. Again, in his epistle to the Galatians, St. Paul speaks of the Spirit being sent by God and coming to dwell in our hearts: "And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'"

And so, St. Paul was very clear about the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian. He says time and again that the gift of God is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19

³⁷ 2 Corinthians 1: 21, 22

³⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:6, 7

of man, and he sometimes makes the distinction quite clearly between the gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit and the Spirit in itself.

St. Peter

St. Peter referred to the reality of our participation in the life of God in a very striking and bold manner. In his second epistle he writes:

“As His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature...”³⁹

The only possible interpretation of this proclamation by the apostle Peter is that God has made us “partakers of the divine nature” by granting us a share in His eternal “glory and virtue,” that is, in the eternal energies of His uncreated and transcendent essence. As we have already seen, this is the only way that a creature can participate in the being of God.

St. John the Theologian and Evangelist

St. John refers time and again to the “living water” that is given to the faithful Christian. He first bears witness to this reality in his account of Christ’s meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well:

³⁹ 2 Peter 1:4

“Jesus said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘give me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water... Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”⁴⁰

St. John continues with this theme when he recounts the words of Christ at the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”⁴¹ And finally, at the end of the book of Revelation: “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts... And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb.”⁴²

In all of these accounts of the “living water” and the “water of life” which St. John saw “proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb,” one can clearly discern a description of the “processions” of God: the divine energies, ineffably distinct from the transcendent essence.

St. Macarius the Great

St. Macarius of Egypt usually bears witness to the distinction between the divine essence and uncreated energies by speaking of the communion we have with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He uses many different terms to express the reality of our

⁴⁰ John 4:10,13,14

⁴¹ John 7:37-39

⁴² Revelation 21:6; 22: 1

participation in God. At times, he does employ the term “energy” when referring to the uncreated gifts of the Holy Spirit:

“There are times when, simply after kneeling down, we find our heart filled with divine energy and our soul delights in the Lord as a bride with the bridegroom: in Isaiah’s words, ‘As the bridegroom delights in the bride, so will the Lord delight in you.’”⁴³

St. Macarius also says that, “The energy and power of the Spirit of light...dwell in the saintly man,”⁴⁴ and that, “Since Christ’s coming the door of grace has been opened to those who truly believe, and they have been given the power of God and the energy of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁵

This 4th century desert father, St. Macarius the Great, recognized the danger even in his day of attempting to grasp the incomprehensible God through rational human concepts:

“St. Paul most accurately and lucidly revealed to every believing soul the perfect mystery of the Christian faith, showing to all how to attain experience of it through grace. This mystery is the effulgence of celestial light in the vision and power of the Spirit. He did not want anyone to think that the illumination of the Spirit consists simply in enlightening us through conceptual knowledge, and so to risk falling short of the perfect mystery of grace through ignorance and laziness.”⁴⁶

St. Macarius, rightly given the title of “Spirit-bearer,” uses a very tangible image when speaking of our participation in the energies of the Holy Spirit: “If the sight of a mortal king is so

⁴³ St. Macarius, *The Philokalia*, Vol. 3, pg. 325, Faber and Faber, 1984.

⁴⁴ Ibid. pg. 341.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. pg. 347.

important to worldly people, how much more desirable must the sight of the immortal king be to those into whom some drops of the Holy Spirit have fallen and whose hearts have been smitten by divine love?”⁴⁷ And here he bears witness to the fact that the divine gifts bestowed by the Spirit are not inherent in human nature: “The five watchful virgins who bore in the vessels of their hearts the oil that was not inherent in their nature – for it is the grace of the Holy Spirit – were able to enter with the bridegroom into the bridal chamber.”⁴⁸ Macarius explains that,

“Evil is foreign to our nature; but, given admittance by us through the transgression of the first man, it has with time become as though natural to us. Yet through the celestial gift of the Spirit, that is also foreign to our nature, this nature can once more be completely purged of evil and we can be restored to our original purity.”⁴⁹

Finally, the great desert father reveals the mysterious purpose of the divine economy of salvation: “What is the purpose of Christ’s advent? The restoration and reintegration of human nature in Him. For he restored to human nature the original dignity of Adam, and in addition bestowed on it the unutterable grace of the heavenly inheritance of the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁰ St. Macarius expresses this mystery with amazing precision and clarity. The work of Christ pertains to the regeneration of our nature. He becomes incarnate in order to repair the broken vessel of our fallen nature. After fulfilling this task and returning to the throne of the Father in heaven, He bestows upon His bride the Church the “unutterable grace of the heavenly inheritance of the Holy Spirit.”

⁴⁷ Ibid. pg. 307

⁴⁸ Ibid. pg. 313.

⁴⁹ Ibid. pg. 314.

⁵⁰ Ibid. pg. 353.

St. Mark the Ascetic

This 5th century desert father refers to the energies of the Holy Spirit: "He who seeks the energies of the Spirit, before he has actively observed the commandments, is like someone who sells himself into slavery and who, as soon as he is bought, asks to be given his freedom while still keeping his purchase money."⁵¹ And he goes on to say that, "It is necessary in the first place to have the grace of the Holy Spirit energizing the heart and so, in proportion to this energizing, to enter into the kingdom of heaven."⁵²

St. Diadochos of Photike

St. Diadochos, another 5th century hesychast father who speaks of the place of the energy of the Holy Spirit in the life of prayer and asceticism, has this to say: "Fear and love are found together only in the righteous who achieve virtue through the energy of the Holy Spirit in them."⁵³ He goes on to say that, "Perfect love, on the other hand, is found only in those who have already been purified and in whom there is no longer any thought of fear, but rather a constant burning and binding of the soul to God through the energy of the Holy Spirit."⁵⁴ Finally, St. Diadochos

⁵¹ St. Mark the Ascetic, *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, pg. 130, Faber and Faber, 1979.

⁵² Ibid. pg. 138.

⁵³ Ibid. pg. 257.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

speaks of the quenching of the passions through conscious and unceasing participation in the energy of the Holy Spirit:

“We should fight the first of these demons by means of great humility and love, and the second by means of self-control, freedom from anger, and intense meditation on death, until we come to perceive unceasingly the energy of the Holy Spirit within us and rise with the Lord’s help even above these passions.”⁵⁵

St. Thalassios the Libyan

This 7th century saint and personal friend of St. Maximus the Confessor bears witness to the incommunicability of God’s essence and the “infinite majesty” of His energetic revelation: “As God is unknowable in His essence, so is He infinite in His majesty.”⁵⁶ He goes on to clarify this distinction: “The divine principles contemplated by the saints do not reveal God’s essence, but the qualities that appertain to Him.” And he adds that, “Since the inmost divinity of the Holy Trinity is a single essence transcending intellect and thought, what has just been said, and other similar statements, refer to the qualities that appertain to the essence, and not to the essence itself.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid. pg. 295.

⁵⁶ St. Thalassios, *The Philokalia*, Vol. 2, pg. 310, Faber and Faber, 1981.

⁵⁷ Ibid. pg. 330.

St. Maximus the Confessor

St. Maximus the Confessor speaks very often of the incommunicability of God's essence, as well as the uncreated energies in which we are offered a share in His divine life. Here St. Maximus expresses this distinction neatly: "Divinity and divine realities are in some respects knowable and in some respects unknowable. They are knowable in the contemplation of what appertains to God's essence and unknowable as regards that essence itself."⁵⁸ And he goes on to say, "God, in whose essence created beings do not participate, but who wills that those capable of doing so shall participate in Him according to some other mode, never issues from the hiddenness of His essence."⁵⁹ In both of these quotations from St. Maximus he shows himself to be a witness to the Orthodox tradition regarding the unknowable essence, participable energies distinction.

St. Maximus expresses the limitation of the creature with regards to our capacity for knowledge of the Logos: "Perhaps St. Paul says that he has but a partial knowledge of the divine Logos because the Logos is known from His energies only to a limited degree, while knowledge of Him as He is in essence and person is altogether inaccessible to all angels and men alike."⁶⁰ He goes on to explain what St. Paul means when he speaks of "different gifts of grace:"

"St. Paul refers to the different energies of the Holy Spirit as different gifts of grace, stating that they are all energized by one and the same Holy Spirit. The 'manifestation of the Spirit' is given according to the measure of every man's faith through participation in a particular gift of grace. Thus every believer is receptive to the energy of the Spirit in a

⁵⁸ St. Maximus, *The Philokalia*, Vol. 2, pg. 101, Faber and Faber, 1981.

⁵⁹ Ibid. pg. 165.

⁶⁰ Ibid. pg. 156.

way that corresponds to his degree of faith and the state of his soul; and this energy grants him the capacity needed to carry out a particular commandment.”⁶¹

St. Dionysius the Areopagite

St. Dionysius is yet another authoritative witness to this distinction in God between the unknowable and communicable. St. Dionysius (Pseudo-Dionysius, if you prefer) uses at times the term “energy” when referring to this reality in God ineffably distinct from the divine essence: “For all sorts of reasons and because of all sorts of dynamic energies they have applied to the divine Goodness, which surpasses every name and every splendor, descriptions of every sort.”⁶² Usually, though, Dionysius refers to the reality of the divine energies as “processions,” “differentiations” or “rays” ineffably distinct from the absolutely transcendent “superessence.” Here he brings these terms together in order to show that while God remains a unity beyond all division, He nonetheless reveals Himself through the divine processions:

“As I said elsewhere, those fully initiated into our theological tradition assert that the divine unities are the hidden and permanent, supreme foundations of a steadfastness which is more than ineffable and more than unknowable. They say that the differentiations within the Godhead have to do with the benign processions and revelations of God.”⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid. pg. 186.

⁶² Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality, pg. 57, Paulist Press, NY, 1987.

⁶³ Ibid. pg. 61.

The “divine unities” spoken of here by Dionysius refer to that which is “more than ineffable and more than unknowable.” Here he is expressing the fact that there is in the divine being an utterly transcendent reality. He makes a very clear distinction between this imparticipable and unknowable reality and the “differentiations within the Godhead” which, he says, refer to the “benign processions and revelations of God.” In the language that is commonly used in the Orthodox Church since the Palamite councils of 14th century Byzantium we would say that the “divine unities” refer to the unknowable *essence* of God, while the “differentiations” and “benign processions” correspond to the *uncreated energies* ineffably distinct from the divine essence.

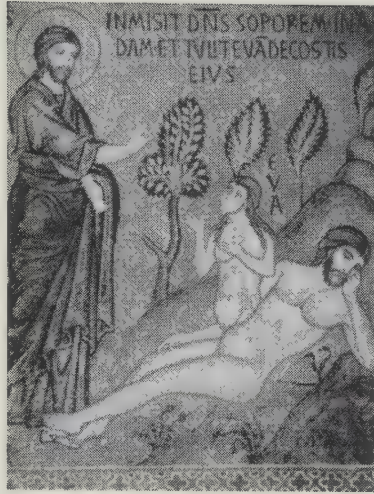
St. Dionysius often uses the image of the sun to convey his understanding of the divine energies. He likens the rays of light which pour forth from the sphere of the sun to the outpourings of the divine nature:

“Think how it is with our sun. It exercises no rational process, no act of choice, and yet by the very fact of its existence it gives light to whatever is able to partake of its light, in its own way. So it is with the Good. Existing far above the sun, an archetype far superior to its dull image, it sends the rays of its undivided goodness to everything with the capacity, such as this may be, to receive it. These rays are responsible for all intelligible and intelligent beings, for every power and every activity. Such beings owe their presence and their uneclipsed and undiminished lives to these rays...”⁶⁴

The image of the sun serves the purpose of describing the essence/energies distinction quite well. Just as the sun is utterly transcendent in itself, in its *essence*, so is God entirely unknowable and incomprehensible in His essence. Likewise, just as the light and warmth and all of the *energies* of the visible, created, material “star of the morning” pour forth from the sun, giving to all a share in its goodness and revealing itself to all who “have eyes to see,” so it is with God. He remains beyond all knowledge and participation in

⁶⁴ Ibid. pg. 72.

His transcendent essence, and yet He, “the Dayspring from on high,” shares His eternal, divine and uncreated energies, the “rays of undivided goodness,” with all of His manifold creatures. These divine rays of God’s grace reveal all that God is in His essence without conveying a share in the transcendent essence itself. When we say that we “see the sun,” what we mean is that we see the sun’s *rays*. Likewise, if one says that he “has seen God,” this is clearly not a reference to a “beatific vision” of the divine and incomprehensible essence, which remains transcendent to all forever. Rather, when an apostle or God-seeing father of the Orthodox tradition humbly bears witness to their having seen God, they speak of a vision of the “rays of divinity,” of the “light of Tabor.” For these saints the “prophetic word has been confirmed.” They have come to see for themselves the light with which God “clothes Himself as with a cloak.” And so, for them “the day has dawned” and “the morning star has risen in their hearts.”



Adam & Eve

Chapter 6 The Body as Male and Female Reveals the Meaning of Existence

*"The ladder of cataphatic theology which discloses the divine names drawn, above all, from Holy Scripture, is a series of steps which the soul can mount to... the contemplation of that which transcends all understanding."*⁶⁵

+Vladimir Lossky

The human body as male and female shows forth the mystery of God and His relationship with mankind. Reflecting upon the analogy of St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, we can get a clear sense of the mystery of the union of God and man. In the Pauline letter, we see that the love of husband and wife is an image

⁶⁵ Ibid. pg. 40.

of the relationship between Christ the bridegroom and His bride, the Church. This analogy can be understood most clearly in the very masculinity and femininity of the bodies of the spouses in the marital embrace. Here, the bride is revealed as receptive to her husband. This is the one-flesh union referred to by Christ when He quotes the passage from Genesis in His conversation with the Pharisees.⁶⁶ This mystery of human marriage is a sacramental icon of the one-flesh union accomplished between Christ and the Church through Eucharistic communion in His body and blood.

As we will see, the imagery of Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church, which is grounded, so to speak, in the mystery of marriage and the one-flesh union of husband and wife, finds its definitive fulfillment in the penetration of created nature by the energies of the Holy Spirit. After reaching this point, we must consider what it signifies in the relationship between Christ and the Church, and between the Holy Spirit and each human person, when husband and wife choose to insert contraception into the one-flesh union. Here we can speak of a “language of the body.” In this language, the use of contraception signifies a rejection and a denial of the gift. We will return to this language of the body later on.

Both the Bible and the Divine Liturgy are filled with images that are meant to reveal to us something of God, as well as something of man: the two terms of the mystical union accomplished through the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos. Ultimately we must always keep in mind the final goal of the Christian life: deification through a complete permeation of the soul and body by the divine energies of the Holy Spirit. When we begin with this understanding we find ourselves in a privileged position with regards to understanding the imagery used by the inspired authors of both the Old and New Testaments.

If the whole history of the chosen people can be seen from the perspective of God preparing for the incarnation of His Son in

⁶⁶ Matthew 19:5

the womb of a sinless Virgin, the various events of the Old Testament can also be understood from within the context of the mystical marriage between God and humanity founded upon and begun with the incarnation. The Biblical account of creation begins with a marriage and with the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.”⁶⁷ The Bible also ends with the marriage between Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church: “Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.”⁶⁸ *The imagery of marriage can then be seen as a key to understanding the world and God’s relationship to it.*

It is of central importance that we understand the way in which God has created mankind in a complementary fashion by making us male and female. This is a reality that is stamped in the very physical structure of every human being. The fundamental vocation of each person is already given in the fact of their being either male or female. In fact, marriage only makes sense, and the spousal imagery is only intelligible, because every human being has the experience of being created either as a man or as a woman. When we overcome that insidious cultural conditioning that attempts to blur the distinction between the two sexes, we begin to find the natural law, or the Logos.

Man as male and female only makes sense when the complementarity of the sexes is understood. Man and woman only make sense with reference to each other. Once again, masculinity and femininity are expressed precisely in and through the body. It is as though God knew that we would need as many helps as possible in order to keep to the path which leads to our final destination: union with God, deification. It is for this reason that He created us male and female: in order that we, in our bodily union with one

⁶⁷ Gen 1:28

⁶⁸ Rev 19:7

another, might be a living, visible icon of His relationship to each of us, and to the cosmos as a whole.

St. Paul reveals in his letter to the Ephesians the meaning of masculinity and femininity and of marriage:

“Wives submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the Church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the Church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present Her to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the Church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. *‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’* This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”⁶⁹

There are two particular aspects of this passage I wish to bring to our attention. First, Paul mentions the fact that we are members of the body of Christ, “of His flesh and of His bones.” Secondly, he refers to the passage from Genesis, “... the two shall become one flesh.” The second is an image of the first; marriage and the one flesh union of husband and wife is an icon of the one flesh union of Christ and His bride, the Church. The union of husband and wife is brought about through the sacrament of matrimony and its consummation: the marital union in one flesh. The union with Christ “in one flesh” is accomplished through all of the sacraments, but particularly through the Eucharist, where we receive the body and blood of the risen Christ and become one flesh and one spirit with Him.

⁶⁹ Ephesians 5:22-33

Baptism unites us to Christ, making us partakers of the renewed, glorified human nature that He won for us through His incarnation and resurrection. Our life in Christ is a continual struggle against the passions that war against us because, although we are made partakers of the deified humanity of Christ, which is beyond all possibility of temptation, and, indeed, beyond death itself, we still carry with us the rebellious nature of fallen Adam. The work accomplished for our sake by Christ pertains to our nature, but the personal aspect of our encounter with God is accomplished through communion of our spirit with the grace of the Holy Spirit. This is the meaning of the sacrament of chrismation: through this holy anointing we receive a unique and personal relationship with the Person of the Holy Spirit. He descends upon us invisibly just as He came upon the fearful apostles in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost. Chrismation, then, relates to our personhood, which is always unique, mysterious and unrepeatable. Baptism relates to our nature: one in the Person of Christ, one when hypostasized within each human person. The Eucharist, in turn, nourishes both our “one-flesh union” with Christ, and bestows upon the communicant the grace of the Holy Spirit in a personal way.

The fathers of the hesychast tradition, which is the Orthodox spiritual tradition *par excellence*, recognize a three-fold make-up of human nature: spirit (nous), soul and body. Our highest faculty, our spirit, has direct communion with God the Holy Spirit through the uncreated energies, which He imparts to us through our lives of communion in the sacraments, through the keeping of the commandments and through prayer. The “Jesus Prayer” occupies a central position in the Orthodox hesychastic spiritual tradition. It reads thus, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” A great elder of the Orthodox hesychast tradition who lived

in 19th century Russia, St. Seraphim of Sarov, summed up the meaning of human existence thus:

“The true aim of our Christian life consists in the acquisition of the HOLY SPIRIT OF GOD. As for fasts, and vigils, and prayer and almsgiving, and every good deed done for Christ’s sake, they are only the means for acquiring the Holy Spirit of God.”⁷⁰

The human person is composed of two aspects, which make the paradox of absolute unity and no less absolute diversity possible in the Church. The work of Christ pertains, as we have already mentioned, to human nature, i.e., to that which all men and women have in common. Therefore, the work of Christ pertains to the unity of the Church “in Christ.” The work of the Holy Spirit pertains to the diversity of human persons, each unique and unrepeatable. Vladimir Lossky puts it this way: “The work of Christ concerns human nature which He recapitulates in His hypostasis. The work of the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, concerns persons, being applied to each one singly.”⁷¹

Of course, the work of Christ and that of the Holy Spirit cannot be seen apart from one another. There are, in fact, two distinct functions of the Holy Spirit in the Church. On the one hand, the Holy Spirit builds up the body of Christ by granting to each human person a share in the renewed humanity of Christ. And on the other hand, the Holy Spirit is imparted in a unique way to each hypostasis of the one renewed nature. Lossky explains the complementary work of each divine Person:

“Indeed, it is possible to distinguish two communications of the Holy Spirit to the Church: one was effected by the breath of Christ when He appeared to His apostles on the evening of the day of His resurrection; the other by the personal coming of the Holy Spirit on the

⁷⁰ Little Russian Philokalia, *Vol. 1: St. Seraphim*, pg. 79, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1996.

⁷¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pg. 166.

day of Pentecost... Quite distinct is the communication of the Holy Spirit at the time of His personal coming, when He appeared as a Person of the Trinity, independent of the Son as to His hypostatic origin, though sent into the world 'in the name of the Son.' Then He appeared under the form of divided tongues of fire which rested upon *each one* of those who were present: upon each member of the body of Christ."⁷²

3

The uncreated energies, ineffably distinct from the transcendent essence of God, are poured forth by the Holy Spirit through the synergy or cooperation of our human will with the will of God, which is itself an energy of the Spirit. Our personhood transcends all positive affirmation because it is *not an aspect of human nature*. The person contains the nature, including the human will, and goes beyond it. Lossky defines personhood as "the irreducibility of nature to itself." Any description we use to describe a person ultimately applies to some aspect of the nature that is common to all. A person can only be known *directly*, and cannot be defined or limited by a concept. In fact, just as Christ is a divine Person in two natures, human and divine, the human person is called to become a created person in two natures through the acquisition of the divine and deifying energies. This permeation of our created human nature by the divine energies is what we refer to as deification, or becoming God by grace. Through the deifying energies of the divine Spirit each human person enhypostasizes both his own created human nature and the energies of the divine nature.

The energies of the Spirit of God are poured into the human person through the highest faculty of human nature the spirit or nous. The energies then pour into the soul, which vivifies and gives life to the material body. The transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor reveals the destiny of mankind in that He shows the energies of the Holy Spirit pouring forth visibly into this world as the divine light:

⁷² Ibid, pgs. 167, 168.

the glory of the age to come. The royal priesthood of the baptized is precisely fulfilled in this: that all of the cosmos finds its fulfillment in and through man. The permeation of the entire cosmos - spiritual and material - by the divine energies occurs through the new humanity of Christ, and therefore through the Church, and this will come to pass progressively until the end of the age, the general resurrection and the last judgment. Following this we only know that "God will be all in all," and that there shall be no more death, nor suffering for those who attain to the kingdom of God.

The transfiguration of Christ reveals the end for which man was created. It shows forth the transparency to the divine energies, or divine light, to which human nature is called. The permeation of created human nature by the divine energies reveals the fundamental *receptivity* and, therefore, *femininity* of created nature in relation to God, the divine bridegroom. The great Russian elder, St. Seraphim of Sarov, once appeared thus, transfigured before one of his spiritual followers, Nicolas Motovilov, on the outskirts of a Russian forest:

"Fr. Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said: 'We are both in the Spirit of God now, my dear. Why don't you look at me?' I replied: 'I cannot look, Batiushka [father], because lightning is flashing from your eyes. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and my eyes ache with pain.'"⁷³

In this case, strikingly similar to the account of Our Lord's transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, we witness the visible glory of the Holy Spirit, the light of the coming age, shining forth, not from a divine Person, but from a human one. In both cases, the body acts as a vessel, which the energies of the Spirit pass through into the rest of the cosmos. The penetration of the human nature of both Christ and of St. Seraphim by the divine energies reveals the *receptivity that is required on behalf of humanity in order for deification to come to pass*. In this schematization, human nature,

⁷³ Little Russian Philokalia, pg. 99.

the human body in particular and, through the deified humanity, all of creation, receives the penetrating outpouring of the divine energies of the Holy Spirit. Creation, and humanity in particular, is then understood as fundamentally receptive or feminine in relation to God. And God, through the uncreated light of the Holy Spirit is seen to be the masculine counterpart in relation to humanity and creation, which He deifies.

It is precisely the reality of the penetration and permeation of the cosmos, through man, by the divine energies that is the archetypal reality signified and symbolized by all of the rich variety of imagery of Scripture. In other words, much of the imagery of Scripture, the imagery of marriage included, is a visible representation of the fundamental goal of existence: deification of the cosmos by the divine energies. These are the two terms of the union: mankind and a humanized cosmos, as receptive and feminine in relation to God the Holy Spirit, the male principle, who permeates and fills all things eternally with His uncreated light.

It should not be difficult to see the direct correlation between the use of contraception and a rejection of the grace of God. As we have seen in this chapter, the human body “speaks a language.” This was clearly something intended by God, Who created the great variety of beings through His Logos or Word. The one-flesh union of husband and wife reveals, in turn, the Eucharistic “marriage” of Christ and the Church. This union of Christ and His bride the Church, accomplished through communion in His body and blood, finds its ultimate goal in the deification of those who partake worthily of the holy gifts. Those who receive the Lord are filled with His grace through the gift of the divine Spirit.

We can now understand how the intentional insertion of contraception into the union of husband and wife “speaks” of division: first, division between husband and wife; following from this, division between Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church; and finally, the frightful rejection of the grace and life of the Holy Spirit. In very concise terms, the intentional use of contraceptives by human spouses signifies a complete rejection of

the divine economy. The gifts of Christ's body and blood are symbolically shunned, as is the Gift of the Spirit – the very goal of human existence.



The Holy Trinity

Chapter 7 Trinity and Marriage

*"Christianity is an imitation of the nature of God."*⁷⁴

+ St. Gregory of Nyssa

The language of the body speaks profoundly of the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Husband and wife, in their union with one another, image the unity and diversity of the three divine Persons, whose existence is an eternal act of love and mutual indwelling. This is why it is important to understand some of the fundamental characteristics of Trinitarian dogma when we wish to contemplate the mystery of marriage. After reflecting upon these two mysteries, we can then try to understand what the language of contraception

⁷⁴ 'De professione christiana', *P.G.*, t. 46, 224 C.

As quoted in: *Mystical Theology*, pg. 124.

says in relation to the Holy Trinity. Once again, *the language of contraception is fundamentally one of division* and denial of the gift. Already we can perhaps catch a glimpse of the way in which a contracepted marital act fails to image the utter kenosis of Trinitarian existence. In this way, contraception becomes an anti-sign in that it seems to say, "I refuse to image the Trinity."

The dogma of the Holy Trinity is the first and most fundamental of all Christian dogmas. The first two Ecumenical Councils were called precisely to confirm the divinity of the Son of God, "homoousios with the Father,"⁷⁵ and the divinity of the Holy Spirit, "who, together with the Father and the Son, is worshipped and glorified, who spoke through the prophets."⁷⁶ This teaching confirms the absolute unity of the divine essence, as well as the no-less absolute diversity of the three Persons or Hypostases.

The unity and diversity within the Trinity is reflected in the creation of man "in the image and likeness of God."⁷⁷ The work of Christ, as we have seen, pertains to the unity of nature brought about through our integration into Christ through baptism and the Eucharist. The work of the Holy Spirit pertains to the diversity of human persons called to enter into a unique relationship with God through the Personal gift of the Holy Spirit received at chrismation. These "economic" relationships of Christ and the Holy Spirit to the Church are necessary in order that mankind, and through man, all of the cosmos, might reach its destination of deification. In this case, deification refers to the perfect unity of human nature reached at the end of time, at the general resurrection. This unity will not, however, be at the expense of the virtual infinity of human persons: the person is an absolute reality, referred to as the "image of God" in which man was made, according to the Genesis account. The

⁷⁵ Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Gen 1:26, 27

“likeness” referred to in this same narrative, however, can be lost or regained and can exist at different levels.

And so, while the image refers to the reality of being a nature found within a hypostasis or person, an “enhypostasized” nature, the likeness is realized through the unity of nature in a multiplicity of persons. The more unified humanity becomes, the more perfectly we become “like God” in the unity of His essence. We have spoken of how the Holy Spirit grants a holy diversity to the multitude of persons within the Church. This diversity, however, is at the service of the Body of Christ, and, therefore, serves the unity of the Church, although it remains still an absolute diversity.

There is, however, a counterfeit diversity as well as a counterfeit unity. The false diversity that the secular world proclaims to be of inestimable worth is, in fact, nothing other than the self-assertion of the rebel fallen nature, and the counterfeit unity is accomplished through a communal abandonment of the natural law or the Logos. This anti-unity and anti-diversity can be seen as corresponding to each other in an analogous way to the relationship of authentic unity and diversity through Christ and the Holy Spirit. The anti-unity is accomplished through the communal refusal to make an authentic gift of self through the Logos, the natural law, the Tao or Way of all things. It is only through living according to Christ, “the Way,” that mankind attains to unity of nature. The unity that is accomplished without the Christ is just another attempt of the fallen Adam to build the City of Man or the Tower of Babel, symbols of man’s futile attempts to exist and prosper without God.

If the human person can only realize himself through a sincere gift of himself, and in this way imitates the perfect kenosis of Trinitarian existence, then it is not an authentic expression of diversity when the protagonists of the “zeitgeist,” or “spirit of the age,” proclaim a panoply of sinful “lifestyles” and “choices” to be worthy expressions of personality. In other words, personal diversity is not reached through an individual striving to express his “I” in a particularly striking manner. Rather, it is only through

authentic divine/human communion that a person realizes the highest potential of his existence. It is interesting to consider that it is always those members of society who wish to find social acceptance for a clearly perverse “lifestyle,” or “choice,” that are so adamant about asserting their right to choose to live as they wish. But, as Lossky explains:

“According to Maximus, this freedom of choice is already a sign of imperfection, a limitation of our true freedom. A perfect nature has no need of choice, for it naturally knows what is good. Its freedom is based on this knowledge. Our free choice indicates the imperfection of fallen human nature, the loss of the divine likeness. Our nature being overclouded by sin no longer knows its true good, and usually turns to what is ‘against nature;’ and so the human person is always faced with the necessity of choice; it goes forward gropingly. This hesitation in our ascent towards the good we call ‘free will.’”⁷⁸

The eternal mode of existence within the Trinity is oblation, perfect kenosis or self-emptying. The Three divine Persons have everything - their very essence - in common, and each Person *is* the divine essence in its fullness. The human person cannot claim an aspect of his nature for himself and expect to achieve fulfillment any more than any one of the Persons of the Trinity possesses for Himself some aspect of the essence for Himself alone. Vladimir Lossky explains it this way: “...a human person cannot realize the fullness to which he is called, that is to become the perfect image, if he claims for himself a part of the nature, regarding it as his own particular good. For the image reaches its perfection when the human nature becomes like the divine...”⁷⁹

In this age, we only know human persons in a limited sense. The perfection of the person depends upon a unity of human nature that will only be possible beyond the veil of this passing age. We know that personhood is a reality, and we sense that it has

⁷⁸ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pg. 125.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 120, 121.

something to do with the most essential, mysterious aspect of a human being. But our experiences of people in this age are a strange mixture of the natural traits that seem to define a person's existence, and the mystery of the inexhaustible preciousness of every human life. Lossky speaks here of this admixture of persons and individuals:

"We commonly use the words 'persons' or 'personal' to mean individuals, or individual. We are in the habit of thinking of these two terms, person and individual, almost as though they were synonyms. We employ them indifferently to explain the same thing. But, in a certain sense, individual and person mean opposite things, the word individual expressing a certain mixture of the person with elements which belong to the common nature, while person, on the other hand, means that which distinguishes it from nature. In our present condition we know persons only through individuals, and as individuals."⁸⁰

And so, the human person realizes his fulfillment as person when he refuses to cling to any particular aspect of his nature. He is ready to make the gift of himself to both God and his fellowman in a way that accords with his own nature and vocation. Through the gift of himself to God, he receives the outpouring of grace by the Holy Spirit, which simultaneously confirms His unique personhood and integrates him into the renewed humanity of Christ. In this way, he accomplishes the perfection of the two aspects of his being: unity of nature and personal diversity.

2

Through the mystery of holy matrimony, husband and wife image the Trinity in a very beautiful and profoundly fruitful way. The Trinitarian mode of existence is kenotic, or self-emptying, love and gift through which the Persons of the Trinity are absolutely one in the divine essence. This unity within the Trinity is also explained as "perichoresis," or mutual indwelling. Through perichoresis, each

⁸⁰ Ibid. 121.

of the divine Persons dwells within the others through the kenotic gift in the one essence. This absolute unity of essence shows forth ever more profoundly the absolute diversity of the three Persons. The natural vocation for every man and woman is to marry and have children: “be fruitful and multiply,”⁸¹ as Scripture has it. This natural vocation to marriage can, of course, be sacrificed in exchange for a greater share in the mystical union with God, even in this age. In this way, men and women who choose the monastic way of life become eschatological signs of the coming age where “they neither marry, nor are given in marriage but are like the angels of God in heaven.”⁸² Through an understanding of the monastic vocation, marriage is seen to reflect the eternal destiny of the union, the marriage, of God and man.

We will approach the mystery of marriage and its relationship to the Trinitarian mode of existence through an examination of two traditional models pertaining to the marital covenant. First, we will look at the “four marks” of marriage, and then we will consider what are referred to as the “three ends” of marriage. The four marks refer to the fact that, in order to have an authentic marriage, the intention of both spouses must be to contract a relationship under certain prerequisite terms. These terms require the marriage to be: 1. *Freely contracted* – the couple enters willingly into the covenant, without being coerced by a third party to do so against their will. 2. *Total in scope* – the gift is a complete gift. Not only all that each of the spouses possess belongs to one another through marriage, even the very bodies of each become the property of the other. 3. *Faithful until death* – marriage is indissoluble. Only death ought to separate husband and wife. This also excludes any relations outside of marriage. The marital union is between one man and one woman, until the death of one or both spouses. 4. *Fruitful* – this means that the couple must remain open

⁸¹ Gen 1:22

⁸² Matthew 22:30

to the gift of life, and must not attempt to impede the possible conception of children through their marital union.

Each of the four marks stands or falls together. In other words, because the marks of marriage are so interrelated, if you fail to uphold one aspect of the marital covenant, you inevitably fail in other ways, and perhaps even in every way. This can be illustrated by several examples. If, for instance, a woman were coerced to enter into a marriage which she did not desire but her parents insisted upon for political reasons, she would not be *freely* consenting to the marriage. This lack of her freedom would also negate the *totality* of the gift required by the second mark since her will would be lacking – a rather crucial aspect, indeed! This marriage (so-called) could not bear the mark of *faithfulness*, either, since fidelity requires that one is steadfast in purpose, and if the will of the bride was not involved in the marriage itself then there would be nothing to remain faithful to.

Now, let us consider the outcome of a decision made by the couple to use the birth control pill from the perspective of the four marks of marriage. Perhaps they had “good reason” for choosing to use contraception. Maybe they already had five lovely children, or perhaps hard economic times made putting food on the table a bit more of a stretch than either husband or wife were comfortable with. They began to view their fertility as an obstacle, or worse, as an enemy. So they decided to use the pill. In this case, the decision is leveled against the forth mark – *fruitfulness*. The couple had been fruitful: five times over! However, the natural law does not make exceptions. Openness to life must always be expressed in the bodily language of marital union. The decision to obstruct the possibility of conceiving new life directly contradicts the fourth mark, but it also nullifies *all of the other marks*, as well.

Let us bring to mind again the words of St. Augustine concerning those who choose to use contraceptive methods:

“I am supposing then, although you are not lying [with your wife] for the sake of procreating offspring, you are not for the sake of

lust obstructing their procreation by an evil prayer or an evil deed. Those who do this, although they are called husband and wife, are not; nor do they retain any reality of marriage, but with a respectable name cover a shame.”⁸³

Why would Augustine use such harsh words in his condemnation of contraceptive methods? Obviously, he saw with much clearer vision than we do today the destructive effects of trying to remove the “obstacle” of fertility from the language of marital intercourse. He leaves no room for any excuses. One can imagine him chiding the poor parishioner: “If you wish to avoid having offspring, then why did you marry?” and moreover, “If you don’t want to have children, then practice abstinence and self-control. Or, better yet, become a monk!”

Let us return to our poor couple, which has chosen to sterilize their marital union through the use of the birth control pill. We know that they directly went against the fourth mark of marriage – fruitfulness. But this decision also nullified the *freedom of the gift*. Since the couple chose to withhold the gift of fertility, it was clearly not freely given. The *totality* of the gift, the second mark of marriage, was rendered void because of that which the couple withheld, namely, their fertility. And finally, the *faithfulness* of the gift was also, sadly, lost. When the couple chose to use the birth control pill, they were no longer coming together in marital union, but in the words of Augustine, “...they come together not joined in matrimony but in seduction.”⁸⁴

We have considered the four marks of the marriage covenant, now let us bring to light the three ends of marriage. Traditionally, the first end of marriage is the *procreation and education of children*. This goal is accomplished through the one-flesh union of husband and wife, and, of course, through the providence of God, the Creator of life. The second end of marriage

⁸³ St. Augustine, *Marriage and Concupiscence* 1:15:17, A.D. 419.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

is the *union of the spouses*. This is the goal of the persons of husband and wife in their relation with one another. And finally, the third end is traditionally referred to as the *remedy for concupiscence*, and can be understood as the ascetical aspect of conjugal union. The couple overcomes the enslavement to the passions through mutual self-donation, and through living a life of prayer and communion. This is the meaning of the domestic church. Again, in a similar way to the four marks of marriage, the three ends are deeply interconnected. The procreation of children is dependent upon the union of the spouses, and progress towards dispassion is made within the context of communal life in the family. We should consider again in this context that it is *only through the sincere gift of self that the human person finds fulfillment*. In this way, the family forms the paradigm and foundation of civilization. This brings to mind the Christian community of the first Church spoken of in the Acts of the Apostles, “Now all who believed were together, and *had all things in common...*”⁸⁵

Just as we applied the scenario of the couple, which decided to use the birth control pill, to the four marks of marriage, let’s see what will happen with this same scenario to the three ends of marriage. Consider this time that the couple decided upon using the condom, rather than the birth control pill. The condom renders the *language of the body* much more apparent in this case. First, the union of the spouses is directly attacked by the insertion of the condom into the marital embrace. In fact, the one-flesh union becomes nothing more than a union *of the flesh*, of the fallen humanity, since the *will* of each spouse is not included in the union. Rather, you could say that the couple has willed that their bodies have intercourse, although not in a way that is in accord with nature. They desire union, which is natural, but they reject the natural purpose of the one-flesh union. This decision contradicts the natural law. St. Maximus recognizes two ways of willing: one

⁸⁵ Acts 2:44

which is natural and in accord with nature, and another which is characteristic of fallen human nature, enslaved to the passions, and always willing that which is contrary to nature.

3

An explanation is in order at this point regarding what we mean by the term, “natural law.” The natural law is synonymous with “the Logos.” The commandments of the Old Testament were meant to reveal to the Hebrews this divine paradigm ordering the will of man towards its proper end. As St. Paul says, “the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ.”⁸⁶ Now, of course, in Christ we are “no longer under the law, but under grace.” But this freedom from the law is not a license to “sin boldly,” as Luther has been credited with saying. It is a freedom given us by Christ not in order to break the law, but so that we might *fulfill the law*, because the truth of God sets us free from our impassioned fallen nature. This natural law is the Logos, inasmuch as it governs the will of man according to nature, that is, according to the divine paradigm existing eternally in the mind of God.

When man follows the guidance of the natural law in reference to his sexuality, this is called *chastity*. This beautiful virtue is not, however, limited to the sphere of sexuality. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann explains this wonderfully:

“*Chastity!* If one does not reduce this term, as is so often and erroneously done, only to its sexual connotations, it is understood as the positive counterpart of sloth. The exact and full translation of the Greek *sofrosini* and the Russian *tselomudryie* ought to be *whole-mindedness*. Sloth is, first of all, dissipation, the brokenness of our vision and energy, the inability to see the whole. Its opposite then is precisely *wholeness*. If we usually mean by chastity the virtue opposed to sexual depravity, it is because the broken character of existence is nowhere better manifested

⁸⁶ Galatians 3:4

than in sexual lust – the alienation of the body from the life and control of the spirit.”⁸⁷

And so, chastity is the integration of all of the powers of the human organism according to nature, or to the natural law. To act in a way that is not in accord with the natural law is unchaste. This is especially the case with regards to the sexual faculty. This ordering principle, the Logos, or the natural law was perceived by the ancient Chinese mystic and philosopher Lao Tzu as the *Tao*, which is translated as “*the Way*,” a name which Christ uses when referring to Himself.⁸⁸ The depiction of this reality was rendered as a pictogram of a pair of feet at the bottom of a ladder, with the crowned head of a general at the top. The literal meaning of this is, “following the leader on the way,” or simply, “the Way.” I mention this here to show that this ordering principle has been recognized throughout the world by different cultures and peoples. If the cultural milieu of the west encouraged an understanding of this reality in a legalistic sense, i.e., as the “natural law,” while Lao Tzu understood the Tao in a more mysterious way, and the Greeks marveled at a luminous ideal which they named the Logos, this should not scandalize us or cause us to doubt that *these were all one and the same reality*. The emphasis was peculiar in each case, due to the inevitable influence of all sorts of cultural factors, but the reality was one and the same: an ordering principle that governs the

⁸⁷ Schmemmann, Alexander, *Great Lent*, pg. 36, SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 1974.

⁸⁸ A fascinating, in-depth study on this topic is the book, *Christ the Eternal Tao* by Hieromonk Damascene. There should be no room for doubt after reading this book that the reality that was perceived by the ancient Chinese mystic Lao Tzu as the Tao was the same as the Logos. Furthermore, in the book by C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, in an appendix at the end of the book, C.S. Lewis witnesses to the fact that the Tao is the same reality as the Natural Law. And so, if the authors of these works were correct in their conclusions, then we can conclude that: the Tao = the Logos = the Natural Law.

actions of man and the world. If we live in accordance with this reality, we shall prosper. If we reject the Way, we will suffer the consequences of our sin.

From what we have said, it is possible to gain a clear understanding of the ways in which chastity is lived-out in the vocations of men and women. A chaste marriage will always remain open to the gift of life as long as the partners come together in conjugal union. If they desire to practice abstinence for a period of time mutually decided upon, that is perfectly in accordance with the natural law, so long as the couple maintains fidelity towards each other. A chaste monastic will, of course, remain celibate, witnessing to the transcendent glory of the eternal marriage between God and man in the heavenly mansions of the coming age. The virtue of chastity integrates all of the souls powers in order that the whole person, spirit, soul and body, will be directed, through his particular vocation, towards the final common destiny of deification.

Now, we return to our couple. The procreation of children is rejected by the couple's decision to use contraception. The intentional rejection of fertility is precisely the reason of their resorting to "birth control." The intention of the spouses, in other words, is witnessed to by the language of the body in their decision to avoid the conception of a new life. The couple directly rejects the primary and natural end of marital union when they take measures to reject the conception of offspring. When they go against the natural law they go against Christ inasmuch as He is the Logos, the paradigm of the marital embrace. There is a prevalent opinion in the Orthodox community that contraception only renders the one-flesh union of husband and wife "imperfect," and that to use contraception within marriage is not sinful as long as there is no possibility of an unintentional abortion occurring. Some Churches actually *officially* teach this erroneous and harmful opinion. Here is an excerpt from the statement by the Orthodox Church in America on *The Procreation of Children*: "Married couples may express their love in sexual union without always intending the conception

of a child, but only those means of controlling conception within marriage are acceptable which do not harm the fetus already conceived.”⁸⁹ Certainly, it is an excellent thing for a Church to publicly affirm the presence and dignity of human life from the moment of conception. Thank God that the entire Orthodox community recognizes the grave evil of abortion! But it is sadly erroneous and truly self-defeating to defend the use of contraception within marriage.

The natural law, in its relationship to humanity, governs our thoughts, words and deeds according to the Logos, the paradigm or model of all created beings. As we learned from St. Maximus, fallen man is able to will in two different ways: according to nature or against nature. “Sin” is the name given to whatever our will gives into that is against nature, that is, anything against the *natural law*. In other words, *what makes an action imperfect is the same thing that makes it sinful!* If a given action, such as the use of contraception in the context of marriage, is “imperfect,” this can only be because it is not in accord with nature. If the action is not in accord with nature, or the natural law, then it is sinful. It is that simple.

St. John the Evangelist is perfectly lucid in his explanation of sin: “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.”⁹⁰ If “sin is lawlessness,” as St. John says, then anything that an individual wills that is not in conformity with the natural law is sinful and injurious to the person and, indeed, because of the ontological unity of humanity, it is injurious to all people. And so, this “wishful thinking” with regards to contraception on behalf of some admittedly well-intentioned Orthodox, is a sad mistake and a gross blotch upon the garment of

⁸⁹ www.oca.org - From the article entitled, *The Procreation of Children*.

⁹⁰ 1 John 3:4

the bride of Christ. I sincerely hope that this tragic error will soon be corrected throughout the Orthodox world.

Lastly, the couple, in failing to make the mutual gift of self required in the act of marital union, fails to remedy their concupiscence. We have seen that a person only realizes his vocation and becomes truly personal when he refuses to possess any aspect of the common nature for himself. Indeed, it is the impassioned fallen nature that is self-possessed, self-centered and incapable of living as gift. When the married couple chooses to use contraception, they each identify with the fallen will and nature, which is present to them, and is a constant source of temptation. St. Paul calls this “being carnally minded.” Here he elucidates the matter, “the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.”⁹¹ In choosing to use contraception, the couple ceases to come together as husband and wife, as St. Augustine explained quite directly. Instead they objectify one another. This situation will certainly devolve into a bleak picture if the use of contraception becomes deeply rooted in the marriage. This is only the logical consequence of a situation in which, through the use of contraception, *mutual rejection is placed at the heart of the marriage*.

And so, through an evaluation of the meaning of the four marks and three ends of marriage, we come to understand that marriage was instituted by God as a sacramental mystery: i.e., it is meant to be an image of God in both His Trinitarian existence, as well as the divine economy. The mystery of absolute unity of nature and no-less absolute diversity of persons in the Trinity is meant to be reflected, not only in humanity as a whole, but in the sacrament of marriage, the only possible model for and foundation of civilization. We also witnessed the deeply destructive character of the intentional use of contraception by the married couple. Inserted into the bodily union of husband and wife, the contraceptive becomes a divisive wedge. Beginning with the identification with

⁹¹ Romans 8:7

the fallen nature and will that it brings to pass through the decision of the spouses, and the division between the physical bodies of husband and wife which results, it ultimately renders void the entire meaning of marriage, in no uncertain terms.



Virgin of the Sign

Chapter 8

Incarnation and Male/Female Imagery

*"The name of the Theotokos contains the whole history
of the divine economy in the world."⁹²*

+ St. John Damascene

As we already stated above, the human body in its masculinity and femininity reveals the meaning of human existence and the end for which all created reality was brought into being out of nothing by God. This goal is deification. The incarnation is the

⁹² St. John Damascene, *On the Orthodox Faith*, III, 12, P.G., t. 94, 1029 and 1032.

As quoted in: *Mystical Theology*, pg. 140.

first stage of this recapitulation of all things in Christ, and in it, as in seed-form, the whole mystery of the universe is contained. "By his birth of the Virgin," as Lossky says, "He suppressed the division of human nature into male and female."⁹³ This perfect union of masculinity and femininity we will not know in this age. We are given signs and foretastes of this through the mystery of marriage - the one-flesh union, in particular. But ultimately, this reunion of the male and female aspects of humanity will only reach its perfect fulfillment in the age to come. Our purpose here is to reach some understanding of this profound mystery of the male/female union brought about through the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos. We will see that this mystery is proclaimed throughout Scripture in all sorts of signs and enigmas, as well as throughout the material and spiritual realities which surround us. Finally, since man is at the center of the world created by God, we will come to understand, through the language of the body, why the use of contraception is so destructive to man and the world in which he lives.

The Old Testament is filled with images which the Church fathers understood to be foreshadowings of the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos. Two of the most prominent of these manifold images are the burning bush on Mt. Sinai, where God first revealed His Name to Moses, and the ark of the covenant, containing the tablets of the law, the rod of Aaron that blossomed and the golden jar containing the manna. The ark itself was contained in the Holy of Holies in the temple constructed by Solomon, which is an image of the place where God "has pitched His tent among men:" the most pure womb of the Theotokos. These images were intended to lead the Israelites to an understanding of the manner in which the expected Messiah would come.

The incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos presents itself as an icon and example of what every Christian is

⁹³ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pg. 137.

called to become: a “God-bearer.” St. Symeon the New Theologian expresses this mystery in this way:

“When we believe wholeheartedly and fervently repent, we conceive the word of God in our hearts, like the virgin – given, that is, that our souls, too, are virginal and pure. And just as the fire of divinity did not consume her who was all-undefiled, so neither will it burn us up who keep our hearts pure and clean. Instead, that fire comes to us as dew from heaven, and as springs of water unto everlasting life. For proof that we indeed receive ourselves the unbearable flame of divinity, we point to the Lord Who says, ‘I have come to cast fire upon the earth [Lk 12:49]. What other fire can He mean than the Spirit co-essential in divinity with Him, together with Whom He enters within us and is beheld there in our heart with the Father?’”⁹⁴

This reception, or “conception,” of Christ in the heart of the Orthodox Christian is, as St. Symeon says, analogous to the bodily conception of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos. The reception of Christ, however, is, in a sense, instrumental: it is ordered toward a further end. We receive Christ so that He might “cast fire upon the earth” of our hearts. That is, Christ comes to us in order that we might be made partakers of the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit. In this understanding of the divine economy, we once again encounter the final goal of deification. Vladimir Lossky explains that the work of Christ is a prerequisite in the divine order of things. As was mentioned earlier, the work of Christ pertains to our nature and the work of the Holy Spirit, in His Personal descent at Pentecost, to human persons. In order for each person to be prepared to receive the Holy Spirit, the nature of each had to first be purified and renewed. We see this sequence of things in the sacramental economy: baptism, which renews our nature and incorporates each person into the one nature of Christ, precedes the sacrament of chrismation, in which each human person is sealed

⁹⁴ St. Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*, Vol. 1: The Church and the Last Things, pg. 56. SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 1995.

with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Lossky explains it in this way: “One can say that in a certain sense the work of Christ was a preparation for that of the Holy Spirit: ‘I came to cast fire on the earth; and what will I, if it is already kindled?’ Pentecost is thus the object, the final goal, of the divine economy upon earth.”⁹⁵

2

It is important that we understand clearly that the final goal of union between God and man, the final deification of the created order, is always the hidden meaning contained in the incarnational imagery of Scripture and in all of reality. St. Maximus explains it thus: “The mystery of the incarnation of the Word contains in itself the meaning of all the symbols and all the enigmas of Scripture, as well as the hidden meaning of all sensible and intelligible creation.”⁹⁶ The two terms of this union, this deification, are God, Who is the masculine, penetrating principle, and His creation, which is feminine, receptive in relation to God. This male/female duality is at the very foundation of creation, which receives its very existence from God and is destined to be fully penetrated and permeated by the divine principle, the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit, in its final state of deification, when “God will be all in all.” Within the created order itself, everything bears the stamp of the Creator’s hand, everything reflects, in a more or less perfect way, the Logos, through Whom, as St. John tells us, “all things were made.”⁹⁷ The title of Logos refers to Christ inasmuch as He is the ordering principle of the cosmos, the natural law, which governs all created realities. When St. Paul speaks of “justification,” he is

⁹⁵ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pg. 159.

⁹⁶ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Gnostic Centuries*, I, 66, P.G., t. 90, 1108 AB.

As quoted in: *Mystical Theology*, pg. 138.

⁹⁷ John 1:3

referring to the renewal of human nature and its integration into the ideal model of the Logos. Each particular being was created by and has its end in the Logos, the "Alpha and the Omega" of all things. The particular model or "reason," as Staniloae calls it, of each created being is its own logos. In the plural they are called "logoi," or "inner essences," as the translators of the Philokalia render it. These logoi, as St. Maximus explained above, are ultimately understood through the reality of the incarnation, and are meant to render the understanding of men open to this fundamental reality of God-made-man. In this way, every hidden mystery in the totality of the cosmos, the meanings of all spiritual and material realities, are to be unlocked through the logos of the incarnation.

If the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos is the archetypal reality signified and foreshadowed by all of the imagery of the Old Testament, revelation did not, however, find its ultimate goal in the incarnation. Lossky paraphrases St. Maximus in relating this point:

"For St. Maximus the incarnation and deification correspond to one another; they mutually imply each other. God descends to the world and becomes man, and man is raised towards divine fullness and becomes god, because this union of two natures, the divine and the human, has been determined in the eternal council of God, and because it is the final end for which the world has been created out of nothing by God."⁹⁸

The male/female imagery of the incarnation of the Son of God in the most pure womb of the Theotokos is ultimately ordered toward the final end of the mystical marriage of Christ the Lamb and His bride the Church.⁹⁹ Again, even this imagery of the marriage of Christ and the Church can be understood as a means of

⁹⁸ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, (60)', P.G., t. 90, 621 AB.

As cited in: *Mystical Theology*, pg. 136.

⁹⁹ Revelation 19:7

understanding the transcendent mystery of the perfect union of God and man through deification. God the Holy Spirit will be the eternal bridegroom of the Church in the age to come through the penetration of the cosmos by His divine and deifying fire. The whole universe will participate in the incarnation of Christ and in an eternal Pentecost.

3

The appearance of the “angel of the Lord” in a flame of fire, which caused a bush to burn and yet remain unconsumed, is used extensively in the Liturgy of the Orthodox Church. The fathers of the Church and the Liturgical hymnographers saw in this illustration of the burning bush on Mt. Sinai a distinct image of the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Virgin Theotokos: “The bush and the fire on Sinai revealed a marvelous wonder to Moses, the divine prophet. Seeking its fulfillment in the course of time, he said: I shall see it come to pass in the all-pure Virgin when they shall greet her as the Theotokos and say: Rejoice, O woman full of grace; the Lord is with you!”¹⁰⁰ Here, one can see the male/female imagery quite clearly portrayed. The penetrating fire, an image of the divinity, is seen burning the bush, which contains the other-worldly fire and miraculously remains unconsumed. The male principle of the divinizing fire of God’s Spirit fills the humble bush, which, as the feminine principle, receives the fire of divinity. And, later on in this account of the appearance of the burning bush to Moses, God will reveal His name, spoken through the midst of the burning bush itself. This revelation of the name of the LORD to Moses is a prefigurement of the moment of the annunciation, when the archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that the name of her divine Son would be Jesus.

The ark of the covenant is another prominent Old Testament image, seen by all of the fathers and hymnographers of the Church

¹⁰⁰ Canon for the feast of the Annunciation, March 25th.

as a prefigurement of the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos. The account given in the epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews recalls the ark and its dwelling place quite well:

“Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot containing the manna, Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.”¹⁰¹

The Liturgy for the feast of the Annunciation takes up this theme, recognizing the Theotokos as the true ark: “O all pure Virgin, I acknowledge you as a brightly burning lamp and as a bridal chamber made by God. Receive now, as a golden ark, the Giver of the Law who has been pleased to deliver our corrupted nature through you.”¹⁰² In his homily on the Dormition, St. Gregory Palamas alludes to Psalm 131, applying the language of the psalmist concerning the ark to the assumption of the Theotokos: “It was right, therefore, that the body which brought forth the Son should be glorified with Him in divine glory, and that the ark of Christ’s holiness should arise with Him who rose on the third day, as the prophet sang.”¹⁰³

The image of the ark, as well as the rest of the Old Testament imagery foreshadowing the incarnation, is, in a sense, twice removed from the final mystery signified. In other words, the ark foreshadowed the incarnation of Christ in the womb of His all-pure mother. And, in turn, the dwelling of Christ in the womb of the

¹⁰¹ Hebrews 9:1-5

¹⁰² Canon for the feast of the Annunciation, March 25th.

¹⁰³ Palamas, *Homilies*, #37, pg. 293.

Theotokos is an image of the dwelling which He wishes to accomplish in each of the baptized. Yet, as we have already seen, the dwelling of Christ in the hearts of the faithful finds its ultimate fulfillment in His “casting fire upon the earth” of our hearts: the fire of the deifying grace of the Spirit, the mystery of the age to come, already breaking into this age. We will have reason to return to this type of imagery in which each “layer” of the mystery contains yet another, even more profound, mystery.

Now, in the imagery of the ark, we must discern the male/female relationships presented to our understanding. Clearly, the ark, being an image of the Theotokos, is feminine in relation to the contents, which, as we will see, represent Christ. The manna is clearly a foreshadowing of the bread of the Eucharist, the rod of Aaron signifies the priesthood of Christ, while the tablets of the Law signify the divine Lawgiver, or rather, the living Law (Tao, Logos) incarnate. How beautiful it is when we come to realize that the contents within the ark are each of them a combined male/female duality, as well. The manna, an image of “the true bread which came down from heaven,” was contained in the golden jar, an image of the womb of the all-holy Theotokos. The rod of Aaron was special because it blossomed forth - and the blossom was Christ, and the tablets of the Law bore upon them the inscribed Word of God, just as the womb of Mary held the divine Lawgiver, the Word made flesh. Here we see, again, a layered sequence of male/female imagery, with each level communicating a deeper aspect of the mystery.

4

A whole book could be written on the rich variety of images contained in the Old Testament prefiguring the incarnation. But our goal here is to show, as we did with regards to the mystery of the Trinity, how the incarnation of Christ is related to the mystery of marriage, and, particularly, with regards to the male/female reality of the one-flesh union of husband and wife. Now, as St. Maximus

said, “The mystery of the incarnation of the Word contains in itself the meaning of all the symbols and enigmas of Scripture, *as well as the hidden meaning of all sensible and intelligible creation.*”¹⁰⁴ For Maximus, all of creation, material and spiritual, was to be understood in the context of the incarnation. The fundamental logoi of all things bears witness to this male/female duality. If we take a moment to consider the realities of the world in which we live, we, too, can reflect upon the “inner essences” of created things. For instance, people live in a home. The home is feminine, the people who dwell in the home – in this mode of imagery - are masculine in relation to the home in which they dwell. The bookshelf contains the books: bookshelf = feminine, books = masculine. The book contains the pages: book = feminine, pages = masculine. Upon the pages of the book words are written: pages of the book = feminine, words = masculine. In the soil the seed is planted: soil = feminine, seed = masculine. The glass contains the water: glass = feminine, water = masculine, etc. The male/female duality is seen even more profoundly when one considers the whole array of plant and animal life participating in this fundamental reality of masculinity and femininity in a living way.

A word must be said, however, about this system of imagery. The male or female characteristic of any given thing – not, of course including living beings that are sexually male or female – is only such in relation to its counterpart. For instance, in the example above, water filled the glass. In this imagery, water served as the male aspect of the image. However, water could just as easily serve as a feminine symbol, i.e., in the case of water in the baptismal: the water is here the womb of rebirth, and is, therefore, clearly feminine in relation to the person being baptized. Furthermore, the person being baptized receives the grace of the Holy Spirit: heart of the baptized = feminine, grace of the Spirit = masculine.

¹⁰⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pg. 138. As quoted above, with emphasis added.



The Annunciation

Chapter 9 Trinity, Incarnation and Contraception

*"By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world."*¹⁰⁵

—St. John the Theologian and Evangelist

We are now prepared to examine the relationship between the core dogmatic teachings of the Orthodox Christian faith and the issue of contraception from the perspective of the language of the body. First, we will consider the mystery of the Holy Trinity from this perspective. As we have already seen, when contraception is

¹⁰⁵ 1 John 4:2,3

inserted into the marital union of husband and wife, this “says” something different than what is spoken by the one-flesh union when it is open to the gift of life. The bodily union of husband and wife, when unimpeded by the intentional rejection of fecundity, is a worthy reflection of the kenosis (self-emptying), and perichoresis (mutual indwelling) of eternal Trinitarian existence. This marital union of husband and wife is an image of the perfect unity of essence in the mystery of the Trinity. The two “become one flesh” in the language of Holy Scripture.

When contraception is inserted into the marital union of husband and wife, the language of the body is no longer a witness to the Trinity. Indeed, far from imaging the kenosis and perichoresis of eternal Trinitarian existence, the contracepted sexual act follows from an intentional mutual rejection of their fertility by the spouses. When we recall the four marks of marriage, we see that the intentionally sterilized sexual act, no longer worthy to be called “marital,” causes a complete breakdown of all of the characteristics, the four marks as well as the three ends, of marriage. As for those couples that practice contraception, in the words of St. Augustine, “although they are called husband and wife, are not; nor do they retain any reality of marriage, but with a respectable name cover a shame.”¹⁰⁶

When a married couple chooses to use contraception they are intending to avoid the conception of a child through their act of intercourse. This, as we saw above, is a direct rejection of the forth mark of marriage, fruitfulness. But this rejection of fertility speaks a language of complete rejection since *marriage is a divine institution aimed at the procreation of new human beings*, no less than it is ordained for the sake of the union of the spouses. The freedom of the gift between the spouses is negated because there is no gift of fertility given. Freedom is only possible within the boundaries of the natural law, the paradigm established by God to govern human acts. Any act which contrives to go beyond these

¹⁰⁶ St. Augustine, *Marriage and Concupiscence* 1:15:17, [A.D. 419]

limits established by God through the natural law, is no more “free” than the licentious act of our first parents. They *chose* to disobey the commandment of God forbidding them to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Lord has so ordered marriage that the mutual gift of the spouses rendered through the one flesh union must include mutual openness to new life. Insofar as the marital union includes the mutual gift of fertility it is in accord with the natural law, and is therefore a chaste and free act. But when the couple chooses to use contraception, they are unchaste and no longer free in their union.

The totality of the gift is negated because, by withholding the mutual gift of fertility, the gift is clearly incomplete. The fidelity of the marriage is broken because, in refusing to be open to the gift of life, the partners also reject the purpose of their marriage and, in so doing, reject the very reality of the marriage itself. The four marks of marriage: freedom, totality, fidelity and fecundity are thus all rendered void when the couple chooses to use contraception.

The three ends of marriage: union of the spouses, procreation of children and remedy for concupiscence, are also nullified by the insertion of contraception into the language of the body. Once again, the decision to use contraception is leveled against the procreation of children, but this is accomplished by *creating a wall of division between the wills, and subsequently, the bodies* of the spouses in that they refuse the mutual gift of fertility. Thus the first two ends of marriage are negated: the procreation of children and the union of the spouses. Finally, because there is no mutual gift, there is no remedying of concupiscence. This is because, as we have seen already, the overcoming of our fallen, broken state of existence is accomplished through the sincere gift of self, both to God and to one’s fellowman, in accordance with the natural law and one’s particular vocation. This is, of course, especially true when one is speaking of the one-flesh union of husband and wife. In the union of husband and wife, the totality of the gift – fertility included – is required, at least through passive

consent or “openness,” in order for the marital act to be truly an act of love. This is the union of spouses that overcomes the division of human nature into male and female. As the Lord Himself says, “What God has joined together, let not man separate.”¹⁰⁷

A particularly distressing consequence of the use of contraception is seen in the lack of mutual gift between the spouses. As we have seen, the contracepted act fails to image the perfect self-emptying of the three divine Persons in the eternal existence of the Trinity. Husband and wife are seen here to close in each upon him/herself. There is no transcendence of self, no one-flesh union, but rather a re-absorption of each of the spouses into him/herself. The unity of nature that was to be accomplished through the chaste, kenotic one-flesh union of the spouses becomes, instead, a definitive proclamation of division and disunity. Earlier we spoke of the way in which a human person fully realizes his personhood only through the sincere gift of himself. When an individual attempts to affirm his own worth or meaning by identifying himself with some aspect of his human nature – a nature that is reunified only in Christ – this individual, far from realizing his personal potential, ends up diminishing his own existence, clutching desperately for some stability in the nature of fallen Adam – a nature that is passing away. *This identification of the individual with the impassioned fallen nature inherent in him represents the perfect antithesis of the whole meaning of life for the Orthodox Christian.* Indeed, it is precisely this self-sufficient, prideful identification with and enslavement to our passions that we seek to overcome, with the help of God’s grace, through all ascetical labor.

The language of contraception, inserted into the one-flesh union of the spouses, pits rejection at the heart of marriage. Husband and wife, failing to give the gift of themselves to one-another, end-up utilizing each other for the gratification, emotional or physical, desired by each. They fail to overcome the male/female division because of their refusal to intentionally remain open to the

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 19:6

gift of life. The pleasure of marital union is no longer sought within the context of the natural order of things. Rather, the fecundity of husband and wife is seen as an evil to be avoided. When the couple intentionally seeks the pleasure of the marital embrace, while simultaneously taking measures to reject the fruit of the union in one flesh, they sin, not accepting the natural law of their Creator. For the rejection of the natural law is always sinful, as St. John tells us, "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness."¹⁰⁸

2

The incarnation of Christ is the central mystery of the divine economy, the focal point of the union of God and man. As we saw above, this reality contains within it the hidden meaning of all of the images and symbols of Scripture. The material and physical universe is also composed of analogies and all sorts of various representations of this key mystery of the Christian faith. This is true because the universe was created in its entirety by the Logos of God, and the work of the Craftsman contains within it the imprint of His own being. If the Logos, or the Word of God contains within Himself the paradigm for all of His creatures, then it is also true that each of the particular creatures has its own logos. Lossky states this clearly,

"Every created being has its point of contact with the Godhead; and this point of contact is its idea, reason or *logos* which is at the same time the end towards which it tends. The ideas of individual things are contained within the higher and more general ideas, as are the species within a genus. The whole is contained in the Logos, the second person of the Trinity who is the first principle and the last end of all created things."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ 1 John 3:4

¹⁰⁹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pg. 98.

There is much that could be said about this archetypal mystery of the Logos, containing within itself the secret of the cosmos. In order to remain true to the scope of our topic, however, we will limit ourselves here to two fundamental aspects of this mystery. As we have already seen,

“For St. Maximus the incarnation and deification correspond to one another; they mutually imply each other. God descends to the world and becomes man, and man is raised towards divine fullness and becomes god, because this union of two natures, the divine and human, has been determined in the eternal counsel of God, and because it is the final end for which the world has been created out of nothing.”¹¹⁰

These two mysteries, the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos, and the deification of human nature are two aspects of the same reality. If we consider the mystery of the transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor we see the fullness of the eternal destiny of all Christians displayed in Christ as a prototype, as an example of what we are all meant to become. The mystery of the incarnation of Christ serves as a visible key given to the understanding of man that through this mystery he may come to understand that he is also meant to become a “God-bearer.”

We may recall the words of St. Symeon the New Theologian, “we conceive the word of God in our hearts, like the Virgin...And just as the fire of divinity did not consume her who was all un-defiled, so neither will it burn us up who keep our hearts pure and clean.”¹¹¹ For St. Symeon, the incarnation of Christ in the most pure womb of the Theotokos is the prototype for the reception of Christ in the heart of the believer. Here he is referring precisely to the Eucharistic communion in the body and blood of Christ. As we will see in the following excerpt from the same passage, the reception of the body and blood of Christ is the means by which the

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 136.

¹¹¹ St. Symeon, *Mystical Life*, Vol. 1, pg. 56.

communicant is made a partaker of deifying grace. “He is no longer among us as an infant, and so known only according to the flesh. Rather, He is present in the body bodilessly, mingled with our essence and nature, and deifying us who share His body, who are become flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone.”¹¹²

And so, the incarnation is the starting point and foundation for the mysteries that follow. It was “for us and for our salvation” that Christ became incarnate. He had in view the deification of our humanity when He took flesh from the sinless Virgin. He first showed in Himself the final goal of deification to which He wished to lead us, fallen and without hope as we were. This He showed to the holy apostles Peter, James and John at the mount of His transfiguration. Now, it was necessary that He pass on to us the deification that He revealed when “His face shown as the sun.” This He accomplished through the gift of His body and blood in the Eucharist. Through this mystery, we become, ever-increasingly, “partakers of the divine nature.”¹¹³

We first spoke of two mysteries that correlate to each other: the incarnation and the transfiguration. Referring back to the male/female distinctions we spoke of earlier, we can see that the incarnation shows forth the indwelling of God in the womb of the Theotokos. Clearly, in the language of the body, the Theotokos represents, or rather *is*, the female principle while Christ embodies and is the male principle. This mystery is the prototype of the final deification of all things, and so it reveals to us the perfect penetration of the cosmos by the energies of the Holy Spirit. You could say that, in this perspective, the cosmos takes on the form of a “macro-incarnation.” St. Paul refers to this final goal of history and of the divine economy as God being “all in all.”

Although we spoke of two mysteries (incarnation, transfiguration), or, rather, of two aspects of the mystery of the

¹¹² Ibid. 57.

¹¹³ 2 Peter 1:4

incarnation, we must also understand the mystery of the union of Christ with each human being, accomplished through partaking of His body and blood. Although there are certainly other crucial aspects of the mystery of the Eucharistic sacrifice, for the sake of clarity we will focus only on this pertinent reality of His union “in one flesh” with the communicant in His body and blood.

3

And now we are prepared to contemplate the crowning mystery: the one flesh union of Christ the bridegroom with His bride the Church accomplished through communion in His body and blood. First, it is important to recognize the order involved in the symbolic representation of the union of Christ and the Church. In other words, harking back to Ephesians, Paul sees the union of husband and wife as an image of Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church. Here, the prototype is Christ = bridegroom, Church = bride. The analogous relationship is that of the husband and wife, while the archetype is Christ and the Church. But it is only possible to understand the relationship of Christ the divine bridegroom to His bride the Church because on the human level we are so familiar with the relationship of husband and wife. This is important because the relationship of God and mankind is continually spoken of throughout the Old and New Testaments as a spousal relationship. The final wedding feast is, of course, the eschatological marriage of Christ and His Church referred to at the very end of the book of Revelation.¹¹⁴

And so, the foundational imagery, used so prolifically throughout all of Scripture to convey the union of God and man, is the simple marriage of husband and wife. This union of spouses in marriage is the basis for all of the language referring to God espousing His chosen people of the Old Covenant, as well as the fulfillment of this divine/human union accomplished in Christ

¹¹⁴ Revelation 19:7

through His incarnation. We know that marriage is a divine institution – indeed, a sacrament – of the Church. As is often pointed out, the Bible begins and ends with a marriage. If we recall the three ends of marriage, we can understand precisely what it is that makes the union of husband and wife the perfect image of the union of Christ and the Church. Traditionally, the first end is the procreation (and education) of children. But this is only accomplished through the union of the spouses *in one flesh*. Here we see the key to the primordial mystery of the mystical marriage of God and man accomplished through the *one-flesh union* of Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church through the sacrament of His body and blood.

It is the one-flesh union of husband and wife that forms the symbol of the Eucharistic union of Christ and the Church. Now, if we consider this reality in the language of the body. The husband gives himself to his wife, who is open and receptive to the gift of himself – of his very body. The wife, in turn gives herself, in and through her body, to her husband. In this way, the “two become one flesh.” A very important point to consider is that this one-flesh union must remain open to the gift of life. If the couple attempts to impede the conception of a new human being, the language of the body *becomes a lie*. This is clearly the case if you consider the language of the body in the one-flesh union to communicate a *complete, mutual gift of self*. This must be the language spoken by the body in the one-flesh union of the spouses. If the couple chooses to contracept, then the one-flesh union becomes a union only of the flesh and not of the intentions of the spouses. They mutually reject one-another’s fertility, and so close-in each upon him/herself. The union accomplished, in this case, is only on the level of the material body. The will of each spouse, however, is communicating a very different message: “I reject your fertility. I don’t want there to be more people like you or like me in this world.” And so, the language of the body becomes a lie when the couple rejects the fertility of their union, which, as Augustine makes so clear, is no longer worthy of the name “marital.”

This mutual rejection by the spouses of their own fertility contradicts the language of the body. The one-flesh union of husband and wife was particularly instituted in order that the spouses could both bring new children, like themselves, into the world, and so that they *could overcome the division of human nature into male and female*. This union of husband and wife was to be a dynamic image of the perfected human nature of all mankind realized only eschatologically. But, as Lossky describes with the clarity characteristic of this great twentieth century theologian, “a human person cannot realize the fullness to which he is called, that is to become the perfect image, if he claims for himself part of the nature, regarding it as his own particular good. For the image reaches its perfection when the human nature becomes like the divine...”¹¹⁵ We recall here the perfect perichoresis (mutual indwelling) and kenosis (self-emptying) of the Persons of the Trinity. The Trinity exists as “gift.” There is nothing withheld in the absolute unity of the Trinity, and, since marriage is supposed to be an image of the Trinity, the spouses *must respond with a complete, mutual gift of self*. The human spouses, as Lossky has shown us, cannot realize their vocation of love unless they *withhold nothing* in the one-flesh union.

4

Now we have only to reflect upon the points we have made in this section in order for the language of the body to appear with pristine clarity. We saw that the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos is the central mystery in the history of salvation. The purpose and outcome of the incarnation is then seen in full bloom at the revelation of the glory of Christ in His transfiguration. In this mystery we see the truth of the well-known patristic phrase, “God became man that man might become God.” In the transfigured Christ it is clear that, just as God became man through

¹¹⁵ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pgs. 120, 121.

the incarnation, man has become God in Christ. However, at this moment it remains a work that must be applied to the whole human race. This Christ accomplished through the gift of His body and blood in the Eucharist. This is the consummation of the mystical marriage of Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church.

The Eucharistic communion in the body and blood of Christ is truly a “one-flesh” union. Each human person becomes a partaker of the deified humanity of Christ, becoming one flesh with Him. Scripture refers to the union of God and man accomplished through Christ in terms of a marriage. In this way, the foundational image conveying the very meaning of existence is seen to be the marriage of husband and wife. Now, this marriage of husband and wife finds its own consummation in the one-flesh union of husband and wife. This one-flesh union, then, becomes the vantage point from which it becomes possible to speak of a mystical marriage of God and man accomplished through Christ by the gift of His body and blood to the Church. Simply stated: the one-flesh union of husband and wife correlates directly to Eucharistic communion in the body and blood of Christ.

And so, if the one-flesh union of husband and wife is so vital to the analogy of Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church, we must come to understand how destructive it must be if a couple chooses to contradict the language of their bodies through the use of contraception. In the language of the body, contraception speaks not only a message of rejection between the spouses, but *goes beyond the scope of the spouses and refers analogously to every aspect of the Christian faith*. In this comprehensive view of the language of the body, contraception speaks a *language of division*. Contraception signifies a rejection of Eucharistic communion in the body and blood of Christ. It speaks a message of rejection of the very fabric of created reality: the distinction between male and female, the penetrating and the receptive. In this line of thought, contraception signifies rejection of the goal of life: deification through the grace of the Holy Spirit. As we have seen already, it speaks of a rejection by the spouses to the vocation of

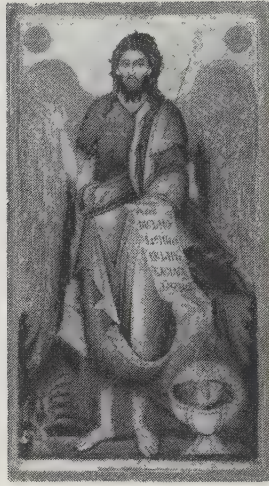
imaging the Trinity through total self-gift. It goes so far as to reject the very incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos.

In this pattern of thought, contraception has a distinctive “antichristic” character. As St. John relates to us, “every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.”¹¹⁶ Contraception here takes on a particularly diabolical (*diabolos* = “division”) appearance. It is the great tool of deception, insinuated by the devil himself into the very core and foundation of human existence: the marriage of husband and wife. Obviously, the devil cannot attack God directly. However, he can attack the creature created in God’s image, and we know from Scripture that this is precisely what he has done from the very beginning. Consider the promising possibilities offered to mankind through the “gift” of contraception. If childbirth is painful, it can be avoided. If the sacrifice of raising children is too much to bear, we can avoid having them altogether. And of course, the more modern dilemmas of overpopulation and global warming come to mind. Contraception is, then, a tremendous gift, no? Indeed, a virtual Panacea for all of life’s problems.

Beneath this façade lies a much different message. The deceiver was successful in alluring fallen man and fallen woman into the trap of rejecting new life – just as their first parents rejected divine life in the beginning - but this very “success” of the “liar and murderer from the beginning” reveals all. “The answer to our world’s problems,” contraception proclaims, “is to eliminate the root cause of all suffering: human life!” Of course, there are always very “reasonable” arguments for postponing children. We needn’t enter upon the list of excuses here. If the reason is truly pressing there is always a very simple solution: abstinence. Sleep in different rooms if you must, live as brother and sister, but it is certainly not beyond human strength to practice self-control. We must recognize the proper limitations of our freedom. This is what Adam and Eve

¹¹⁶ 1 John 4:3

failed to do in the Garden of Eden. Has anything changed? We must trust the providence of God, not grasp for those things that are not for us to decide, and recognize Him as the only “Lord and giver of life.”



Saint John the Forerunner

Chapter 10 **The Friend of the Bridegroom**

"Love does not depend on the 'order of the day,' but on the order of the last day... To Salome's question, 'When will the Kingdom of God come?' the Lord said, 'When you will destroy the vestment of shame, when the two shall be one, and the male with the female neither male nor female.'"¹¹⁷

St. John the Forerunner was martyred for witnessing to the natural law. Herod had taken his own brother's wife, Herodias, for himself and was persisting in this uncouth relationship. St. John rebuked Herod for his licentious behavior, but to no avail. Herodias had her way and John was beheaded. Among the list of titles the Church applies to this unique figure in the plan of salvation is "the

¹¹⁷ This agraphon is found in chapter 12 of II Clement
As quoted in: Evdokimov, *Sacrament of Love*, pg. 46.

friend of the bridegroom.” Indeed, this title was actually used by the Great Prophet in referring to himself.¹¹⁸ St. John was the friend of the bridegroom because he did not hesitate to “prepare the way of the Lord,” and to “make straight His paths.” This he did by calling his people to repentance and trust in God. Here at the “end of all things,” John, “who is Elijah, if you are willing to receive him,” returns in order to “restore all things.”¹¹⁹

In our day, we are once again in need of the presence of the Forerunner in our midst. If it was true then that St. John went forth courageously calling the chosen people of God to repentance, it is certainly no less necessary today for the Church and the world to experience a profound metanoia. The problems of our day are many – too many to number. But at the root of all these pitfalls and errors of every possible pedigree, there is the situation of the family: mankind, still male and female, still created in the image of God. In essence, nothing has changed, and nothing can. Marriage between one man and one woman is still the foundation and heartbeat of civilization. The world is peopled through the love of husband and wife, or at least through the union of man and woman. Just as St. John rebuked Herod in the hope that he might perhaps save him from a terrible snare, so it is the place of the “St. John’s” of the Church in every age to call mankind back to the simple truth of his being created male and female, and to God’s plan for him.

In the Jewish tradition, Moses and Enoch return at the end of time in order to prepare the world for the coming messiah. In the Christian tradition, Elijah is usually substituted for Enoch – who, like Elijah did not die but “walked with the Lord, and was seen no more, for God took him.” It was Elijah who appeared together with Moses at the glorious transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor. The Orthodox tradition recognizes the transfiguration as an eschatological revelation of the Lord as He will appear at His

¹¹⁸ See: John 3:29

¹¹⁹ Mark 9:12

glorious second coming. This event occurred in time, but it was an eternal reality “breaking into” our present age. According to many Church fathers, the Lord will return in glory at the end of time in the same manner in which He appeared on Mt. Tabor. It is pertinent to our own topic that the Lord appeared on the holy mountain speaking with Moses and Elijah, who represent the law and the prophets, respectively. The presence of these two figures alongside that of the glorified Lord on Mt. Tabor can be compared to the presence of the “two witnesses” referred to in the book of Revelation.¹²⁰ These two witnesses prophesy against the Antichrist, who will be in the world at that time, as well as act in such a way so as to “prepare the way of the Lord” for His glorious return, when “the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.”¹²¹

The point is this: although “nobody knows the day or hour” of the Lord’s glorious return, there are signs that He gives in order to indicate His proximate coming. Our purpose, however, is not to venture an informed estimation of how much longer we have until that day. Rather, what we need to understand is that before the Lord comes in glory, the bride, that is the Church, must “make herself ready” for His return. There are many evident flaws in the current manifestation of the bride of Christ on Earth; the evil of contraception is among them. We ought to earnestly desire that the Church grow in holiness and beauty. The disunity of Christians is, of course, the most obvious and inescapable obstacle in the way of the Church becoming “without stain or wrinkle or any such thing.”¹²² But the truly destructive influence of contraception can be seen as the “root” of our cultural malaise and ever-increasing degeneration.

¹²⁰ Revelation 11

¹²¹ 2 Thessalonians 2:8

¹²² Ephesians 5:27

It is in this sense that witnessing to the incompatibility of contraception with Christianity makes one a true “friend of the bridegroom.” Just as St. John the Forerunner prepared the way for the first coming of Christ, “Elijah” must return in order to “restore all things,” making the Church a fitting bride for the Son of God. The Baptist was martyred for bearing witness to the need to “keep the marriage bed undefiled.” It is interesting to note that the Forerunner who was sent by God in order to “prepare the way of the Lord,” *was martyred for his insistence upon recognizing and respecting the sanctity of marriage*. He reveals himself here as the “friend of the bridegroom” in the analogous sense of a “defender of the sacredness of marriage.” These two complementary realities appear as two distinct aspects of the same mystery. St. John prepares the way of the Lord by calling men to repentance. This is the same thing as to say that he called men to return to a way of life in accord with the natural law so that they would be able to accept the Savior at the moment of His revelation. In a sense, the Great Prophet and Forerunner, although referred to as “Elijah who is to come,” reveals himself as witness to both Christ, “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,” and to the virtue of chastity, in particular. Here he fulfills the mission of Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets – both of which ultimately are witnesses to Christ. In our own day, the ministry of the Forerunner – “Elijah” – is the same as it was at the time of Christ’s first coming. “The friend of the bridegroom,” “prepares the way of the Lord” *by calling men to live the virtue of chastity*, whether in marriage or in the monastic state of which St. John is the prototype.

We must recognize the grave importance of authentic chastity in marriage. We have seen the way in which the one-flesh union of husband and wife is a foundational icon of the whole sacramental order, and particularly with regards to Eucharistic communion in the body and blood of Christ. The understanding of Christ as bridegroom and Church as bride is entirely dependent upon an adequate understanding of the one-flesh union of husband and wife. If, therefore, the meaning of this foundational symbol is

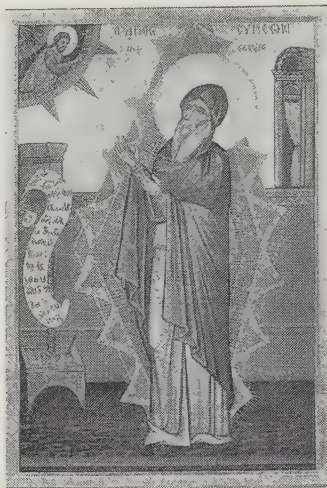
contradicted through the use of some form of contraception, this rupture in the divine order - this "sin against chastity" - is manifested in the analogous rejection of Christ the bridegroom. A true friend of the bridegroom is, then, one who recognizes the need to overcome this grave obstacle to authentic spousal communion - both human and divine - the obstacle of contraception.

2

If we consider the quotation at the heading of this chapter in the context of understanding contraception as an impediment to communion, we find a profound significance involved in overcoming the "heresy" of contraception. The quote is as follows: "Love does not depend on the 'order of the day,' but on the order of the last day...To Salome's question, 'When will the Kingdom of God come?' the Lord said, *"When you will destroy the vestment of shame, when the two shall be one, and the male with the female neither male nor female."* This could be understood in the sense of contraception, particularly barrier methods, i.e. condoms, being spoken of as a "vestment of shame." Without further qualification this interpretation may seem a bit overreaching and, perhaps, unconvincing. However, when we take into consideration the words that follow, one must at least entertain this speculative insight: "...When the two shall be one, and the male with the female, neither male nor female." Clearly, the Lord is revealing the eschatological victory of the incarnation over the division in human nature between male and female. Lossky says that this division of human nature into male and female persons is overcome at the same time as the division of created and uncreated is superseded through the final deification of the cosmos. This understanding of things renders the union of husband and wife in one-flesh profoundly eschatological, and makes the mysterious phrase in the above quotation intelligible. In this scheme of things, the "vestment of shame" is indeed contraception, the removal of which renders the one-flesh union an authentic icon of the archetypal reality of Christ

the bridegroom and His bride the Church. It follows that, in this line of reasoning, *contraception is the final obstacle to be overcome in order for the fullness of the kingdom to be made manifest.*

The full manifestation of the kingdom of God, the revelation of which was the reason given by St. John for the need of repentance, is accomplished simultaneously with the overcoming of the division between male and female. What this will be like is beyond our grasp. However, we do have some experience of this reality. The marriage of husband and wife is a sign and foretaste of this surpassing of the male/female division. The incarnation of Christ in the Virginal womb of the Theotokos is the foundation and first fruits of this eschatological reality. Through the incarnation, the division of human nature into male and female persons is entirely overcome, since the Theotokos gives Her divine Son the fullness of His humanity. We recall Adam in his unified state, before the creation of Eve from His rib, in which he contained within his person the fullness of human nature. In fact, we can truly say that Christ and the Theotokos share, or *enhypostasize*, the very same human nature.



Saint Symeon the New Theologian

Chapter 11 The Immaculate Flesh of the Theotokos

“Just as we all receive of His fullness, so do we all partake of the Immaculate flesh of His all-holy Mother which He assumed.”¹²³

+ St. Symeon the New Theologian

The Virgin Mary became the Theotokos through her faith in God and obedience to His divine will: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”¹²⁴ Through the total gift of herself, through her kenotic love and obedience to the message of the angel Gabriel, she becomes the Virgin mother of

¹²³ St. Symeon, *Mystical Life*, vol. 1, pg. 59.

¹²⁴ Luke 1:38

God's only Son. "Woman will be saved through child-bearing."¹²⁵ This is true in a sublime sense with the Theotokos. Through her receptivity to the "overshadowing" of the Holy Spirit, she becomes the "cause of salvation for herself and for all mankind." The Theotokos is the archetypal Christian and human being. She opens herself to the will of God, making a perfect and total gift of herself, and in return she becomes, "the ladder raised on high that Jacob saw," and "the bridge leading earthly ones to heaven."¹²⁶

She is Virginal in the fullest sense of the word. Not only has she "not known man," she is the Panagia, the "all-holy," and the "unhewn mountain." Mary is the "sinless Virgin." She is the most perfect model of chastity and conformity to the natural law. In an unfathomably mysterious way, she is the prototype of all mothers *and* of all virgins. Through her divine maternity, she becomes *the* God-Bearer, in order that, through her own gift, we may become God-bearers, as well. We realize this supreme calling through our own integration into the renewed humanity brought about through the incarnation.

The holy Theotokos is, then, an icon of what it means to be truly human. Her humble obedience to God's will at the greeting of the archangel reveals her as the "New Eve," a favorite term of the fathers applied to her precisely because of her obedience. Whereas Eve disobeyed the divine command and brought death to the human race, the Theotokos, through her "yes" to God, brings the Son of God – Life itself – into the world. Contraception can be seen as a repetition of the sin of Eve. In the Garden of Eden, Eve disobeyed God and this brought about spiritual death. The choice to resort to contraception is a refusal to participate in God's plan for bringing new human life into the world. The message of the Theotokos is as profound as it is simple. Just as she was obedient to God and became the mother of His only Son, so we must obey His plan for

¹²⁵ 1 Timothy 2:15

¹²⁶ Matins of the Annunciation, March 25th.

us and thus we shall inherit Life: the indwelling of Christ and the grace of His Spirit.

One can only venture a guess as to what the original sin actually entailed. Besides the fact that the choice to eat of the forbidden fruit was an act of blatant disobedience, we cannot say anything about what the “fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” actually was. There are, of course many speculative views in the writings of the fathers with regards to this “mystery of iniquity,” none of which make it any clearer what precisely is signified by the symbolism of Genesis. The repercussions of the original sin may, however, be able to allow us some insight into what the act itself was. Particularly interesting is the punishment placed upon Eve, upon “woman.” Her childbearing would be painful. Why would *this* be her reward for disregarding the divine command? Furthermore, what does the Scripture passage, “woman will be saved through childbearing” signify? Here we see that both the curse brought upon Eve by her disobedience, as well as the path to salvation for the “woman,” have everything to do with bearing children. Again, one can only speculate as to the nature of the actual sin committed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But if we take this information regarding woman, her salvation and the punishment of pain in giving birth into account, we could venture a guess that perhaps the original sin *had something to do with childbearing*.

It is interesting to consider that there was a positive command given by God to Adam and Eve *before* the command was given not to eat of the fruit of the tree. This command pertained directly to procreation: “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it.” Adam and Eve received first a positive command: “Be fruitful.” And then a negative command: “Do not eat of the fruit.” These commandments apparently pertained to two distinct realities: the first, a command to bear children; the second, a command not to eat “from the fruit of the tree in the center of the Garden.” We should notice that both commandments were in reference to “fruit.” Without drawing any further conclusions from this observation, we

should consider the connection between the first commandment given to the couple in the Garden and the curse leveled upon Eve in return for her disobedience. Here we can ask the question: What does it mean that both the original commandment and the curse brought upon Eve for her disobedience have to do with childbearing? Furthermore, it seems telling that the path to salvation for woman takes her through the way of bearing children: “woman will be saved through childbearing.” It seems likely from within this perspective that the original sin *had something to do with Eve’s refusal to submit to God’s plan for her to bear children*. This would be a logical counterpart to the obedience of Mary and her subsequent childbearing. In this line of reasoning, the contraceptive mentality would be a most ancient curse, first appearing in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve.

It makes sense that the devil would attack the woman in such a way as to tempt her to refuse to bear children. After all, only she can be mother. Only she can bring new human beings, new images of God, into the world. Satan, “a murderer and liar from the beginning,” would like nothing more than to bring about the destruction of God’s crowning creation. If we return for a moment to the language of the body and recall the system of imagery: the man symbolizes God, the woman symbolizes mankind in his receptivity to God’s life-giving Spirit. If the devil can convince Eve that God is not “Gift,” that He does not want what is best for her, he can tempt her to “be like God” in a radically different way. If the man symbolizes God as the penetrating, masculine symbol, then Eve will be tempted to be like God *by being more like the man*, who symbolizes God in the one-flesh union. Indeed, the man is capable of participating in an act of intercourse without the possibility of becoming pregnant. She has learned from the serpent that God is not trustworthy, and so she rejects her essential characteristic of receptivity, grasping for the fruit that was meant to show her the limitation of her freedom.

Eve was also called to be “like God” in the sense that she was given the ability, and was indeed commanded, to bear children

into the world. In this way she is “like God” because He is the *begetter* of His eternal Son. She was given a command to be “like God” through her begetting of children. When she refused to serve the plan of her Creator, her begetting of offspring became a painful experience, and her own life was doomed to end in “returning to dust.” Her vocation to motherhood, which existed for her from the moment of her being created as “woman,” came to be the way in which she would find her salvation. Of course, as we know, salvation means deification, and deification is precisely becoming “*like God*.” Paradoxically, woman lost her likeness to God through the rejection of her receptivity to His will for her life. His will for her consisted, in part, of the command to be “like God” through the begetting of offspring. The path to salvation is then opened again for woman if she is willing to be a mother, that is, if she is willing to be “like God” through childbearing. If “salvation” is understood as deification, or becoming “like God,” we will have this rather humorous conclusion: Woman was created “like God” in the beginning. Woman lost her likeness to God (divine grace) through her falling into the serpent’s temptation to become “like God” (autonomy from God) through eating the forbidden fruit. After becoming “*unlike God*” through her disobedience, the way to becoming “like God” (salvation/deification) was opened again to her if she were only willing to be “like God” (through childbearing).

And so, in this rendering of the account of the fall, Eve rejects her nature as fundamentally receptive in her relations with God and her husband. She rejects the gift of the grace of the Holy Spirit, which would have allowed her to remain immortal had she persevered in fidelity to God’s command. She also rejects the command to “be fruitful and multiply” bringing upon herself the curse of painful childbearing. Finally, the eating from the fruit of the tree may signify an act of sexual union *not in keeping with the plan of God*. If this were the case, then Adam and Eve would have been the first couple to fall into the temptation of uniting in such a way that childbearing would be avoided. This rupture between the

male and female aspects of human nature could only be fully healed through the incarnation of Christ in the womb of His all-pure mother.

2

The human nature that is common to the Lord and His blessed mother must be passed on to us, to the Church. The male/female duality and division was remedied and healed through the mystery of the incarnation, but this regenerated human nature is only passed on to mankind through the sacramental life of the Church, and particularly through the Eucharistic body and blood of Christ. St. Symeon the New Theologian explains this profound mystery:

“Just as we all receive of His fullness, *so do we all partake of the Immaculate flesh of His all-holy Mother* which He assumed, and so, just as Christ our God, true God, became her son; even so we, too – O, the ineffable love for mankind! – become sons of His mother, the Theotokos, and brothers of Christ Himself, as through the all-immaculate and ineffable marriage which took place with and in her, the Son of God was born of her and, from Him in turn, all the saints.”¹²⁷

St. Symeon expresses himself with forthrightness, “we all partake of the Immaculate flesh of His all-holy Mother which He assumed.” Here is the final outcome of the mystery of the incarnation in its application to mankind. As we have already seen, through the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos, the male/female division in human nature is overcome. This renewed humanity is granted to those who receive the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. But since both male and female aspects of human nature have to be renewed, so it is that the deified body and blood that we receive in Holy Communion is and must be that of

¹²⁷ St. Symeon, *Mystical Life*, vol. 1, pg. 59.

both Christ and His all-pure mother. In this way, as St. Symeon says, we become sons of the Theotokos in a very real manner:

“According to this reasoning, therefore, the mother of God is lady and Queen and mistress and mother of all the saints. The saints are all both her servants, since she is the mother of God, *and her sons, because they partake of the all-pure flesh of her Son – here is a word worthy of belief [1Timothy 1:15], since the flesh of the Lord is the flesh of the Theotokos.*¹²⁸

And so, the body and blood of Christ which we receive from the hands of the priest is, quite simply, also the body and blood of the Theotokos. This is perfectly logical since, as we have already seen time and again, the male/female division is overcome through the incarnation. This shared humanity of Christ and the Theotokos must be acquired and enhypostasized by every human person wishing to be saved and to enter into the fullness of the heavenly kingdom. If it is true that “in Christ there is neither male nor female,”¹²⁹ it is precisely because each person has overcome the sexual division of male/female in the eschatological kingdom through communion in the humanity of Christ, which He received from His mother. This is also the reason for the fact that, “in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels of God in heaven.”¹³⁰ In the age to come, strange and incomprehensible as it may indeed seem to us now, *every human person will enhypostasize the fullness of human nature*, both male and female aspects. Here we must certainly remember that “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”¹³¹

¹²⁸ Ibid. 60.

¹²⁹ Galatians 3:28

¹³⁰ Matthew 22:30

¹³¹ 1 Corinthians 2:9

“This is a hard saying. Who can bear it?”¹³² We cannot comprehend the reality of a human person that is neither male nor female, or rather, a person that enhypostasizes the fullness of human nature, both male and female aspects. But if we look at the one person in Scripture (prior to the incarnation) that represents this reality in a concrete way, perhaps our minds will at least be open to the possibility. Adam was created with the fullness of human nature. Before Eve was taken from his side, her nature was contained in his person. Christ, the New Adam, came forth from the “side” of the Theotokos in an analogous manner. The existence of Adam as both male and female – admittedly, a somewhat discomfoting reality – is, nonetheless, just that: a *reality*. It is possible that in the age to come those persons who were male in this passing age will retain some symbol of their masculinity, and likewise those who were female. This seems all the more likely since, although Christ appeared in various ways after His resurrection – often unrecognizable even to His closest kin – it is still never said that He appeared *as a woman*. And so, it seems quite possible that since Christ appeared always as a man after His resurrection, so too created persons will retain *in the resurrection* some manifestation of their having been a male or female person in this age.

3

We have already heard that Christ came so that He might “cast fire upon the earth” of our hearts. This “fire” of which He speaks is, of course, the uncreated energies or simply the “grace” of the Holy Spirit. This is the final mystery, the *telos*, or end for which all else in the divine economy has been done. If we consider this reality from within the current context of our understanding that the body and blood of the Eucharist is that of both Christ and His mother, we come to another insight about the role of the Theotokos

¹³² John 6:60

in the dispensation of divine grace. St. Symeon elucidates upon the manner in which grace is imparted through the holy gifts of the altar:

“While the grace of the Spirit, that is, the flame of the godhead, is of the one Savior and God, from His nature and essence, His body is not from that source but, on the contrary, is taken from the all-pure and holy flesh of the Theotokos and from her all-immaculate blood. This He took from her and made His own, according to the holy saying: “And the Word became flesh.” As we have said, *it is by means of this flesh that He who is Son of God and son of the Virgin communicates the grace of the Spirit.*”¹³³

Now we must consider this reality from the perspective of the *eschaton*. Both the Lord and His all-holy Mother are in heaven with the full constitution of their resurrected, deified humanity. And yet, each time we receive the holy gifts we are given this very same deified humanity of both Christ and His mother. The grace that is bestowed upon the recipient of the body and blood of Christ passes through both the humanity of Christ and that of the Theotokos. St. Gregory Palamas expresses this veiled mystery in these lofty terms in his homily on the Dormition of the Theotokos:

“Just as it was only through her that the Son came to us, was seen on earth, and lived among men, after previously being invisible to all, so from now on to endless eternity all progress towards the manifestation of divine light, every revelation of divine mysteries, and all forms of spiritual gifts are beyond everyone’s grasp without her. She was the first to receive the all-pervading fullness of Him who fills all things, and she brought Him within reach of all, distributing to each as he is able to receive, in proportion to the measure of his purity, such that she is both the treasure-house and Mistress of God’s riches.”

The “Defender of Orthodoxy and Teacher of the Church,” St. Gregory Palamas also states that it is not only mankind that receives all grace through the mediation of the Theotokos, but even

¹³³ St. Symeon, *Mystical Life*, vol. 1, pgs. 58,59.

the heavenly hosts are illumined by the light of the Trinity only through her luminous body:

“She will never cease doing good to the whole of creation, not just to the human race, but also to the immaterial supernatural hosts of angels. The fact that they, like us, partake of and touch the intangible divine nature only through her is clearly shown by Isaiah. For he did not see the seraphim taking the live coal directly off the altar, but picking it up with tongs, which he also used to touch his prophetic lips to purify them (Isaiah 6:6,7). This vision of the tongs is the same as that great vision which Moses saw of the bush burning with fire but not consumed (Exodus 3:2). Is there anyone who is unaware that the Virgin Mother is both that bush and those tongs, which held the divine fire without being burnt?”¹³⁴

And so, it is *through the flesh of the Theotokos* that the divine energies come to us. In fact, St. Gregory, “Archbishop of Thessalonica and Preacher of Grace,” does not refrain from speaking of the authority which the Theotokos has received in order to impart the grace of God as she sees fit:

“Through you our spirit is enlightened by the coming of the divine Spirit. You have become the treasurer of graces and their store, not so you might keep them for yourself, but that you might fill the universe with grace. For the trustee of inexhaustible treasures sees to their distribution. Why would never dwindling wealth be locked away? Therefore, O Lady, generously share your mercy and your graces with all your people, your inheritance.”¹³⁵

Through the Eucharist we are given “the fullness of the heavenly kingdom.”¹³⁶ We are made partakers of the regenerated humanity: both male and female aspects. Through our communion in the body and blood of both Christ and His mother, we receive the

¹³⁴ Palamas, *Homilies*, pgs. 295, 296.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 297.

¹³⁶ Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom

gift of the Holy Spirit. It is not difficult to understand how contradictory the use of divisive contraceptive techniques will be in the language of the body with reference to these realities. The male and female aspects of human nature are rent asunder through the intentionally sterilized act of intercourse. This is in direct opposition to the unification accomplished between the male and female aspects of human nature through the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos. The contracepted act of husband and wife also signifies a negation of the union of Christ and His mother, male and female, in the Eucharist. And, as we have seen, the rejection of fertility finally signifies a rejection of the grace of the Holy Spirit, “the Lord and giver of life.”

4

Any act of self-denial, any refusal to be dominated by the fallen nature we each bear within us in this age, is an ascetical feat. It is a “no” to something that is evil, and sometimes even something that is good, in order that a person might be sovereign and free to do the will of God. The will of God is always our highest good. It is never asked of us to go beyond the grace given by God in order to accomplish His plan for our lives. As we have seen, true freedom is only possible within the parameters of God’s will – that is, within the natural law.¹³⁷ Just as was the case with Adam and Eve in the Garden, when a person chooses to use the full scope of their freedom, going beyond the limits prescribed by the Lord, they end-up enslaved to a debased nature that is anything but free. And so, we must recognize the limits of authentic freedom and remain within these boundaries. As we now know, God did not will for

¹³⁷ Obviously, there are always instances in which God calls someone to a particular task, manifesting His will in a concrete way to a particular person. Here we refer only to that reality in God synonymous with the “Logos” or “Tao.” The natural law simply indicates His “thought-wills,” or “logoi” in reference to His created world.

man to have unlimited freedom over the sources of life. We were not meant to be able to have such a control over the mystery of God's bringing new human beings, new eternal icons of Himself, into the world. The choice to use contraception is always an act that enslaves man and woman, never a truly free choice. If we are compelled to resort to this clandestine form of control, we must recognize this as a temptation to sin. The suffering involved in refusing to use contraception is a manifestation of love for God and neighbor. The ascetical tradition of the Eastern Church is always clear about the need for such suffering in the course of a life in conformity to God's will. The meaning of the death of Christ on the cross and His rest in the tomb on the holy Sabbath is found here in this rejection of our fallen will. By refusing to be dominated by any sin, and indeed, by any created reality, we open ourselves to the indwelling gift of God's Spirit, and to a participation in the resurrection.

The passion and death of Christ are the sufferings that the Lord took upon Himself in order to renew the nature of fallen man. Evidently, the damage brought about through the original sin of Adam and Eve was irreparable save for these "drastic measures" taken by God on our behalf, helpless as we were. But if it is true that human nature had to be renewed in this way, and that Christ, as a man - that is, as a *male* - put to death the disordered nature of fallen Adam, how is it that the *female* aspect of human nature is renewed? It could be posited that Christ himself carried both aspects of this fallen nature to the cross in His Person and there renewed both male and female aspects of humanity. But this would seem to be contradictory in the sense that if He already bore in His divine Person the regenerated human nature, *what is it that is being crucified?* In other words, if it is true that Christ bore within Himself the reality of the resurrection - as is evidently the case if we consider His glorious state at the transfiguration - why is He going to the cross? The answer can only be that *He bore within Himself both realities*. He was at once a "new creation," and the "fallen Adam" with His age-old garment of flesh - sinless, though it

was. It is important to note that when we speak of the “fallen nature” of Christ or the Theotokos, we realize that this fallen state of human nature does not in the least infer a presence of “sin.” It is not “sin” that is passed on through the generation of Adam and Eve *but a broken humanity* – that is, one subject to death. Sin is always a *personal*¹³⁸ choice, the decision to will in accord with the fallen nature inherent in our make-up that is passing away with this age. And so, Christ and the Theotokos had to contain within themselves the reality of this fallen nature in order to be capable of putting it to death and, subsequently, making it participate in immortal life through the resurrection.

When we see Christ crucified, we are witnessing the visible manifestation of the fallen nature and its ultimate demise. But since the crucifixion of Christ is a putting to death of the old man, the fallen Adam, this fallen nature existed in the Person of Christ *in the same manner in which all human nature is enhypostasized in this age*. That is, although Christ contained within Himself the fullness of regenerated human nature, at the moment of the crucifixion only the fallen nature is visible and apparent. And since this is the case, *only the male aspect of fallen human nature was put to death on the cross*. On the other hand, the female aspect of fallen human nature was still in need of regeneration, and this could only be accomplished by a woman in perfect union of will with Christ - that is, by a person bearing the female aspect of human nature unto the cross with Jesus. This was brought about by the *synergy* of the Theotokos and her divine Son at the moment of His death on the cross.

In the west, there is an understanding of Mary as the “Co-redemptrix.” This word signifies her participation in the work of redemption performed by Her divine Son. Her suffering at the foot of the cross, in union with Her divine Son, brings about for her an entirely new form of motherhood – a maternity for all mankind,

¹³⁸ Sin is a possibility for a creature with free-will. Only created persons have a nature of this sort. Hence, sin can only be committed by a person. However, sin is always depersonalizing since it is a rejection to make the gift of self required by any truly personal act.

signified by the words of Christ, “Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.”¹³⁹ This motherhood, founded upon the incarnation of Christ in her all-pure womb, is manifested in a variety of ways, including her bodily presence in the Eucharist.

Ultimately, the sufferings of the Theotokos at the foot of the cross in union – in *synergy* of will – with her divine Son are functional in character: that is, the suffering of Christ and Mary serve an end which transcends all suffering. Authentic Orthodox theology never strays from the positive goal of deification. It was necessary, as we have now seen, that a human person, a woman, bear the female aspect of our nature through the pangs of death, in union with the Savior. Having as its very purpose the tearing-down of the fallen nature, the work of Christ and His mother at Calvary could only be accomplished in accordance with the laws which apply to humanity in its fallen state. Hence, Christ brings His fallen – yet, of course, sinless – male humanity to the cross and tomb. Mary brings her fallen, sinless female humanity to the foot of the cross, where she experiences what was foretold so many years before by the aged Simeon, “a sword will pierce through your own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”¹⁴⁰ As we have seen, the nature had to be brought in its fallen state, divided into male and female persons, in order to be regenerated through death and resurrection.

And so, the Theotokos is the “Co-redemptrix.” She is the woman chosen by God to both bear His Son into the world, and to participate with Him in the regeneration and recapitulation of mankind. She gives her humanity to her divine Son; she suffers and “dies” with Him in her mother’s heart on Calvary, thus regenerating the female aspect of human nature. She awaits the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in the Upper Room where the disciples were gathered, doors locked for fear of the Jews. Finally, she dies, is resurrected like her Son, and is taken-up into the heavenly mansions. From her abode in heaven, or rather, from her place in

¹³⁹ John 19:26,27

¹⁴⁰ Luke 2:35

the age to come, she intercedes on our behalf together with Her Son, and from thence she pours fourth abundant grace upon all God's creatures. She exists always in reference to God, to the Trinity, and to mankind through the divine economy in which she shares in an unrepeatable and absolutely unique way.

This understanding of the Theotokos as Co-redemptrix is important for us in relation to our topic of contraception. Just as she refused to live from her fallen nature - which is precisely what makes her sinless - and persisted in her union with her divine Son unto the suffering of the cross and died in her mother's heart through the piercing of the prophetic sword, so must women in our present day follow in her path. She is the "Hodigitria" for man and woman alike. This ancient title of Mary means "She who shows the Way." The refusal to use artificial contraception is bound to be difficult for some women. This free-will rejection of something that gives an illicit control over the sources of life - a power beyond the scope of what God intends for man (or woman) to have - is an *ascetical* act. Every time a person refuses to live according to the fallen, lawless nature, this is a death on the cross, a suffering in union with Mary through which we come to the new possibilities and horizons of a resurrected life. Ultimately, the rejection of artificial birth control is an ascetic calling addressed to women (and men) of our day. It is the life of obedience - the obedience of Christ and the Theotokos - that is chosen through the rejection of all forms of contraceptive techniques instead of the illusory "freedom" of a life according to the fallen Eve. This obedience leads to the freedom of the children of God, and to eternal life. Whereas the counterfeit, grasping "freedom" of fallen man and woman, a freedom in which the natural law is rejected, this "choice" of the modern, liberated woman, leads only to death. Authentic freedom is always found through obedience. This is the path which leads to perfect fulfillment because it brings about the renewal of our humanity and opens our hearts so that we might become "temples of the Holy Spirit."



The Wedding Feast at Cana

Chapter 12: Conclusion The Marriage Supper of the Lamb

"Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people.'"¹⁴¹

The final goal of man, the purpose of his existence is union with God. Man moves either towards this goal or away from it every moment of his life. Our actions can put us on a trajectory towards the kingdom of God, or they can cause us to be distanced from the presence of the Lord. We have been discussing over the course of these chapters whether the use of contraceptive devices by a married couple is compatible with their final destination of eternal life. And so, we began with a preview of where the Church has been and where she now stands with regards to the issue at hand. We saw

¹⁴¹ Revelation 21:2,3

that the early Church fathers such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine and St. Clement of Alexandria were very firm in their univocal condemnation of any act that would intentionally render the act of marital union sterile. Chrysostom placed the use of contraceptives by spouses at a level of moral depravity even below that of murder, since the couple conspired against the very coming into existence of a new human being. Whereas in abortion they intentionally kill a child already formed. And Augustine says that those couples that choose to intentionally sterilize their act of union are not even engaging in an act worthy of the name "marriage." He goes so far as to say that the husband and wife treat each other in the manner of harlots when they use contraception. The witness of the early fathers on the matter is, then, quite clear.

As we have seen, however, the present position of the Orthodox Church is anything but that of the early Church fathers we have cited. Beginning in the 1960's the conscience of the Church became clouded with respect to contraception, and the constant teaching of nearly two thousand years began to be called into question. At last, various Orthodox Churches have faltered under the pressure of a false-feminist agenda, which proclaims a liberty that goes beyond the natural law, presuming to decide good and evil according to one's own measure. The "keep the pope out of my bedroom" syndrome has been contracted by the Orthodox Church and many of her authoritative figures have stated that the problem of limiting births is better left to the choice of the spouses. This seems to be a refusal to adequately address the difficult problem of birth control since it does not appear to affect those who are the shepherds of the flock of Christ. But it is precisely in those situations which require a deeper insight that the teachers of the Church are utterly indispensable. Ideally, each person would no longer need to learn the truth from another man, but would be taught by the Lord Himself. It is, in fact, possible to be taught by God, but it is through the faith of others that we first receive our faith, and it is through the witness of those who have acquired the light of truth that each person is raised to the stature of the "fullness of Christ." From the many terrible repercussions of the proliferation

of contraception over the past fifty-years the Orthodox Church must deduce the need for a concise teaching on the matter of contraception. The time of leaving the matter to the decision of the spouses is over. A return, not just to “the spirit of the fathers,” but to their authoritative teaching on the matter of contraception is the only remedy for a world in the throes of total degeneration. Pope Paul VI was right on this point, and the fathers are in full agreement with him. Contraception has absolutely no place in the Church, and must be cast out once and for all.

The reasons why contraception is so destructive to society can be understood through an analysis of the intentionally sterilized union from the perspective of the language of the body. It is an established course of action in the history of the Church to view a particular problem from within the context of the fullness of the tradition. We recounted the development of dogma in the history of the Orthodox faith. Every dogmatic teaching was formulated in response to some particular heresy which threatened the Church at that time. The teaching on the Trinity was developed over the course of the first two Ecumenical Councils. The teaching which upheld the union of two perfect natures, divine and human, in the one divine Person of Christ was developed over the course of the next three hundred years, always in response to some heresy or another. The Triumph of Orthodoxy, which we celebrate every first Sunday of Lent, was accomplished in the eighth and ninth centuries. The doctrine confirmed by the Church in this case was the true teaching with regards to holy icons. And finally, the victory of the Orthodox teaching on grace was won through the efforts of St. Gregory Palamas. He defended the unbroken tradition of the Church pertaining to the ineffable distinction between the transcendent and unknowable essence of God and His uncreated energies.

After reflecting upon the development of the core dogmas of Orthodoxy, we focused on a particular problem that is crucial to our topic of contraception. We saw that the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysic of the absolute simplicity of the divine essence is inadmissible for a spiritual tradition that claims to have direct

knowledge and experience of God. If one were to accept the philosophical notion of God as simple essence, union with Him would not be possible because in order to participate in God one would have to enhypostasize the divine essence. In this case, there would no longer be three divine Persons, but as many as were made to participate in the essence of God. In this way we were able to see just how important the theological work of St. Gregory Palamas was for the whole of Christianity – Orthodox or otherwise! Without the essence/energies distinction, deification would be impossible and all male/female symbolism, so abundantly present in Scripture and throughout creation, would be an unsolvable riddle.

Before entering upon the relationship between marriage and the Orthodox dogmatic tradition, we looked more closely at the apostolic and patristic witness concerning the essence/energies distinction in God. We saw that the New Testament authors and the Church fathers were of one mind with regards to this ineffable distinction, even if, at times, they used different words to describe these realities.

We then came to understand the different aspects of Orthodox tradition through the language of the body. Here we saw that the human body, as male and female, reveals the very meaning of human existence. Through the union of husband and wife in one flesh, we are given an icon of the marriage of Christ the bridegroom and His bride the Church. Just as husband and wife become one flesh through their union, Christ and the Church become one flesh through Eucharistic communion. This union of Christ and His Church is ordered towards the final end of deification. Christ said that He “came to cast fire upon the earth.” In this we understand that He became incarnate in order to pour the energies of the Spirit into the earth of our hearts. This final goal of deification is contradicted in the language of the body through the insertion of contraception into the marital act.

We then evaluated the relationship between the mysteries of the Trinity and marriage. We saw that husband and wife are called to image the Trinity through perichoresis (“mutual indwelling”) and kenotic (“self-emptying”) love. Just as the Trinity is absolute

diversity of Persons and absolute unity and identity of essence, husband and wife are called to become fully personal through the mutual total gift of self, required of the one-flesh union. We approached the mystery of marriage through an understanding of the four marks and three ends of marriage. In this way we came to see that, through the intentional use of contraception, every aspect of marriage is nullified.

After looking at the relationship between the Trinity and marriage, we considered marriage from the perspective of the incarnation. Here we saw that Scripture and the Liturgy abound with imagery pertaining to the bringing together of complementary male and female qualities. Hence, the Old Testament images of the burning bush, the ark of the covenant, the temple of Solomon, etc. All of these were meant to show forth the mystery of the incarnation and the mystical marriage of God and man, which would be accomplished through Christ. Again, in the language of the body, contraception signifies a rejection of the bringing together of the male and female aspects of humanity, and hence an “antichristic” denial of the incarnation.

After a more in-depth approach to the Trinity/Incarnation/contraception problem, we then saw the portrayal of the two figures closest to Christ. Interestingly, St. John the Baptist appears in the context of our particular study as “The Friend of the Bridegroom.” He was, in fact, martyred for his witness to the virtue of marital chastity and fidelity. In a paradox that is perfectly fitting for Eastern Christianity, St. John, “the Friend of the Bridegroom,” is put to death for being an *enemy* of the unchaste relationship of Herod and Herodias – his own brother’s wife!

Finally, we approached the mystery of the Theotokos as the New Eve, the new and true “mother of the Living.” We saw that, because Christ received His humanity solely from her, they share an identical humanity. Through the incarnation the division of humanity into male and female is surmounted. The state of Adam before the creation of Eve from his rib confirms for us this mystery, which seems beyond our comprehension in this age. However

masculinity and femininity is to be lived out in the age to come, one thing is evident from what we have observed: the reunited male/female aspects of humanity are passed-on to each person through Eucharistic communion. As St. Symeon says, “the flesh of the Lord is the flesh of the Theotokos.” When we partake of the body and blood of Christ, “*we partake of the Immaculate flesh of the Theotokos.*”

The deified flesh of the Theotokos, which she gave to Her Son through His incarnation in her all-pure womb, becomes the vessel through which we reach the summit of our own deification. By enhypostasizing the humanity of Christ, which is the humanity of His mother, we overcome the division between male and female, as well as the division between created and uncreated. In this profound mystery, which brings us to the limit of our rational powers with regards to divine things, it becomes clear that there is no room for division of any kind whatsoever. The unity of human nature accomplished through the incarnation is perfect, as is the deification accomplished through the perfect obedience of Christ and the Theotokos to the divine will. The division brought about between husband and wife through the intentional use of contraception has no place in this plenitude of union. The marriage of husband and wife on the human level must not become an inaccurate icon of the union of Christ and the Church accomplished through the Eucharistic Liturgy. The love of husband and wife must be without any exceptions or withholdings. In this way the union of the spouses will not only be a reflection of Christ and his bride the Church, but will indeed allow the icon to participate in the final mystery of the marriage supper of the Lamb.



35417633R00080

Made in the USA
Middletown, DE
02 October 2016

This revealing book, *Orthodox Christianity, Marriage & Contraception*, relates to the reader the beauty of God's design and His purpose in creating man in His image and likeness as male and female. With copious references to the Bible, Church fathers and Liturgy, the author brings to light a lucid vision of Christian marriage and its significance in relation to the sacramental life and mystical vocation of every Orthodox Christian.

The problem of contraception is approached from this vantage point and is revealed to be a truly destructive force. Insinuated into the one-flesh union of husband and wife, contraception nullifies the mutual total gift of self. The language of the body reveals that this intentional rejection of fertility by the spouses signifies a rejection by the Church of her divine bridegroom, Christ, and of the penetrating and deifying energy of the Holy Spirit.

It is as though God knew that we would need as many helps as possible in order to keep to the path which leads to our final destination: union with God, deification. It is for this reason that He created us male and female: in order that we, in our bodily union with one another, might be a living, visible icon of His relationship to each of us, and to the cosmos as a whole.

- *Orthodox Christianity, Marriage & Contraception*

