

## Theological Musing on Marriage

Having recently lost my wife after a lengthy illness, I have time to reflect on both marriage and the afterlife. My question is “will I still be married in heaven?”. This is a complicated question and so I share my thoughts and reflections with you. There is no intention here of giving an answer but raising the questions for our more-learned theologians among us to answer. This is a controversial question but not a new one. We are an Eastern Church in communion with a Western one, which has a well-defined answer here. So let us begin in the West.

In the Roman Church the couple is the ministers of the sacrament. The priest or deacon is a witness. This resembles a contract. Two people make it and it is witnessed. Some may express it as a covenant. All divine covenants are from one party to another and are witnessed by yet another party. For example, the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17 had God proclaiming the covenant, what God will do and what will be required of Abraham. He is the witness to what God has done.

A covenant with God is eternal. A contract between two persons has to have a clause ending the contract. And hence, “until death do us part.”

Western scholars both Catholic and Protestant based it upon our Lord’s statement (Mark 12): “At the resurrection when they arise whose wife will she be? For all seven had been married to her.” Jesus said to them, “Are you not misled because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but they are like the angels in heaven.” Repeated again (Matthew 22:30): At the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven.”

First, let us look at this passage from another perspective. The purpose of the wife in the passage is to produce heirs for her first husband. This is a natural relationship. One could hardly call it sacramental or holy. The singular purpose of

marriage was procreation. So in heaven there is no need for procreation so there is no purpose for natural marriage.

But, what of marriages that God has joined together. As St. Paul in Ephesians writes, the two become one flesh. They are no longer two but one. The center of this relationship is love and God is love. So God joins together only to dissolve? For they are no longer two or three because a man and a woman are joined together in Christ. As St. John Chrysostom notes, “From the beginning God in His providence has planned this union of man and woman and has spoken of the two as one ‘male and female he created them’ and ‘there is neither male nor female for you are all on in Christ Jesus. (Homily on Ephesians, 20.)” He further notes that this love never fades.

Even before the coming of Christ, some marriages were brought about by God. The marriage of Adam and Eve was a divine institution. It is interesting to note that in the icon of the Resurrection our Lord is raising out from Hades Adam and Eve. God joined them together and our Lord leads them into paradise together.

Second, let us look at our glorified bodies. When Mary of Magdalene saw our Lord after the Resurrection, she did not think that he was a ghost but flesh and blood as seen by her desire to embrace Him. We have the story of Thomas, where he could touch the physical body of Jesus. Another time, our Lord is on the shore and shares food with the Apostles.

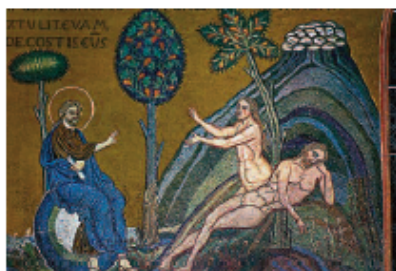
Seemingly, there are some things that continue in the afterlife and some that are different. Our Lord walks into rooms that are locked.

Heavenly images do contain earthly elements. Christ our God tells us that (Luke 13:29) “people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God.” Reclining at table is a description of the Last Supper, of a shared meal. This meal will mean that the bodies will never hunger again (See Revelation

7: 16).

Another scriptural reference describing heaven as accommodating bodied creatures is found in John 14:2: “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?”

Even our prayers for the deceased have this earthly imagery, “a place of light, a place of green pasture, a place of repose, from whence all sickness, sorrow and sighing are fled away.”



*Adam and Eve Created and Redeemed*



In my thinking, not is our Lord trying to use images that would give us comfort, but rather giving us an understanding of heaven that maintains physical comfort. This is not to say that heaven is a created place, but rather a state or way of living. The difference is our experience. We bodied creatures will experience either pleasure or pain based upon the life we created on earth. It will be based upon how we experience God, as the good and radiant light or as the “consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29).” So heaven is not a reward for good works but a gift of grace from the Holy One, which we accepted or rejected

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while living on earth.

The human body is divinely created. This is why we are obligated to take good care of the instrument God gave us as a gift to be used for helping us attain theosis. Just as physical sins can cause us to stray away from our goal of an eternal union in love with God, so our bodies can help us through spiritual disciplines to attain oneness with the divine nature. We see in the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man that he experiences thirst (Luke 16:24). This is a bodily function. In the Rich Man's life, he pampered his body with the finest foods and dressed in luxurious garments ignoring Lazarus, Christ at his gate. His torment is seeing Christ as a consuming fire, which is expressed in physical terms.

Thirdly, divinely created relationships do not end with death. Relationships created by God out of His divine love seemingly continue into the next life. Why else would there be in Catholic and Orthodox traditions such as devotion to Mary as the Theotokos. The relationship between Jesus and His mother carries forth into the afterlife. Our Lord told John to "behold your mother (John 19:27)" It has been a tradition of the Church that Mary becomes the Mother of the Church. This relationship is not biological but is divinely created.

These relationships like marriage are built upon the divine gift of love. As St John Chrysostom writes to a young widow, (italics are from author) "For such is the power of love, it embraces, and unites, and fastens together not only those present, and near, and visible but also those who are distant, and neither length of time, nor separation in space, nor anything else of that kind can break up and sunder in pieces the affection of the soul.

... then assuredly thou shalt depart one day to join the same company with him, not to dwell with him for five years as thou didst here, nor for 20, or 100, nor for a thousand or twice that number but for infinite and endless ages. ... If thou wilt exhibit the same manner of life as his, and then thou shalt receive him back again no longer in that corporeal beauty which he had when he departed, but in the luster of another kind, and splendor outshining the rays of the sun." It does sound as if she will see him in his glorified body and be in a relationship with him.

God is love and therefore love is eternal. Love does not occur in time but rather outside of time. This is why ideally marriage should be celebrated with the Divine Liturgy. Showing that this marriage is the action of God not of man. God creates every marriage differently like every person is created differently in the infinity of God's image.

What God has joined together, let no man put asunder. The focus is on the divine activity. This is expressed liturgically in the Byzantine marriage ceremony. The priest marries the couple, as God creates the covenant union and the husband and wife witness the divine action. The indissolubility of this union is not mentioned in vows but rather in the prayer that they bring their marital crowns undefiled into heaven. Implied seemingly that they enter heaven as a married couple. In traditions that

use vows, a western influence, the older tradition does not contain "until death do us part." Further implying marriage in the life to come.

These are my musings as I go through the grieving process. I share them in the hope that maybe in my lifetime, the Church will make a statement on this question.

*Fr Jonathan Morse*



*The Crowning  
in Marriage may be  
with metal  
or floral wreaths*