

Sex, Marriage, and Theosis

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Theosis and Being Human

For the Orthodox tradition, theosis is not a far-off expectation, but a possibility realized in the everydayness of life. When thinking about theosis, the Fathers were attentive to the various parts of the soul, its rational and affective parts. For the rational, theosis has to do with seeing God's truth and wisdom embedded in creation and realized through contemplation. The other part of the soul is the affective, which concerns what we desire, but also is the region of fear, anger, and hatred. One of the great insights of the patristic tradition, particularly evident in St. Maximus the Confessor, is that what we know often depends on what we desire. In other words, it is difficult to see the truth of God through contemplation if our desire is always being drawn toward other things. These things are not bad in themselves, but can distract us from God, especially when we seem to desire them more than God. The hard work, then, of asceticism is doing the practices that help us direct our desire singularly toward God. When this starts to occur, the parts of the soul start to align with each other in a way that becomes mutually reinforcing—increased desire for God leads to less fear, anger, and hatred, which leads to deeper knowledge into the truth of the wisdom of God; and greater

knowledge of God further strengthens desires: eros for the divine (*theon pothos*) and love (*agapē*) for neighbor.

A Theology of Marriage

In Orthodox theology, marriage is identified as a sacrament, which means that the Church recognizes that the commitment between a man and a woman to live the rest of their lives together presences the life of God, and has the potential to increase this presence. As Alexander Schmemmann so beautifully puts it, “the word sacrament was never restricted by its identification with our current seven sacraments. This word embraced the entire mystery of the salvation of the world and mankind by Christ and in essence the entire content of the Christian faith.”¹ When thinking about sacrament, we think in terms of symbols; the symbols, however, do not simply point to something over there but make present that which is simultaneously something other. In relation to God, symbol, icon, and sacrament are where time and eternity converge. The ultimate icon of God is the human being, and in that sense, the human being is herself sacramental. This sacramentality has something to do with the alignment of the various parts of the soul, or dimensions of the human condition. The sacramentality of the

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2003), 217.

human beings, or even of all creation, is synonymous with the word theosis.

To identify marriage as sacrament, one cannot simply point to the marriage ceremony—this would not make sense. If sacrament means to presence iconically the life of God, then the sacramentality of marriage cannot be reduced to the ceremony. Marriage itself, much like created reality, is potentially sacramental, and the initial commitment consists of a presencing of God. The marriage ceremony, much like the Eucharist and baptism, should be considered an event of this presencing; but, again, much like the Eucharist and baptism, after the event, the ascetical struggle begins anew to return to that which has been given in Eucharist and baptism.

In light of the human telos to be defined, and not in terms of deontological categories of obligation, marriage becomes an ascetical struggle to learn how to love through attention to the various parts of the soul or dimensions of the human condition, and any movement in love cannot be anything but a movement in God. If a married

couple celebrates fifty years of marriage, adjectives used to describe such a love include “deep,” “profound,” and “authentic.” Such a love may have endured difficulties, including possible betrayals, which need not obstruct and may have actually contributed to what might be recognized as “growth” in love, understood in terms of both agape and eros. For such a love to exist after fifty years, such virtues as honesty, patience, openness, truth-telling, self-control, empathy, compassion, and, most importantly, humility must have been operative over time, lending credibility to St. Maximus’s claim that virtues can beget other virtues, and that virtues constitute the building blocks of love. St. Dorotheos of Gaza compares Christian life to building a house: “[T]he roof is charity, which is the completion of virtue as the roof completes the house. After the roof comes the crowning of the dwelling place [railings around the flat roof]. . . The crown is humility. For that is the crown and guardian of all virtues. As each virtue needs humility for its acquisition—and in that sense we said each stone is laid with the mortar of humility—so



Auguste Rodin,
L'Éternel Printemps,
ca. 1884. Musée
Rodin, Paris.

also the perfection of all the virtues is humility.”²

One of the reasons why marriage is an opportunity for the manifestation of virtues is because marriage is also an opportunity for self-knowledge. The opportunity for self-knowledge surfaces as one calls the other out of oneself in a relationship. One of the vices that gets in the way of this mutual calling of the other is pride. St. Maximus the Confessor defines pride as self-love, and indeed even a long-term commitment does not guarantee the tempering of selfishness. As a basic example, if one refuses to adjust a daily schedule in light of this long-term commitment, then pride obstructs the opportunity for learning how to love in this relationship. If, as a further example, one has been spoiled in family life and has never had to do household chores, always had food waiting and ready, laundry done, and so forth, then one’s body may physically resist—in the form of anger and frustration—entering a partnered situation where the other expects a sharing of these same responsibilities, or the virtue of justice to structure the relationship. That resistance could cause him to insist stubbornly on a situation familiar to him; or it could lead to self-awareness that his life has been shaped—albeit with good intentions—in such a way that does not make it easy for his body to accept easily a shared home life. It could result in the question: “Why am I feeling such frustration?” which becomes an opportunity for self-knowledge. Such self-awareness would constitute the first step toward overcoming pride and engaging in the kind of shared life that might eventually lead to a different kind of embodied experience of such a shared home life. At the very

least, a marital commitment makes possible a learning to love, which cannot be achieved by one isolated in a spoiled life of privilege.

Other vices that get in the way of love at the top of St. Maximus’s list are fear, anger, and hatred. Again, St. Maximus:

He knew well that this fear [of the Lord] is different from the *fear* which consists of being afraid of punishments for faults of which we are accused, since for one thing this [fear of punishment] disappears completely in the presence of love, as the great Evangelist John shows somewhere in words, “Love drives out fear” [1 John 4:18].³

When you are insulted by someone or offended in any matter, then beware of *angry* thoughts, lest by distress they sever you from agape and place you in the region of hatred.⁴

The one who sees a trace of *hatred* in his own heart through any fault at all toward any man, whoever he may be, makes himself completely foreign to the love for God, because love for God in no way admits of hatred for human beings.⁵

We can, at this point, combine St. Maximus’s insights on pride and on the affective trio of fear, anger, and hatred with the help of basic psychoanalytic categories in a way not evident in St. Maximus. If pride consists of the self-conscious inflation of the self, we know from psychoanalysis that our conscious sense of self masks unconscious emotions and desires that we simply do not want to confront. Pride could be a mask for self-loathing in the form of self-assertion. What then

² Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, trans. Eric Wheeler (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 203.

³ Maximus the Confessor, “Commentary on the Our Father,” in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 101. Emphasis added.

⁴ Maximus the Confessor, “The Four Hundred Chapters on Love” 1.29, in *Selected Writings*, 38. Translation modified. Emphasis added.

⁵ Ibid. 1.15, 37. Translation modified. Emphasis added.

blocks love in marital relationships goes beyond selfish impulses, but probably has something to do with unconscious fear, anger, and hatred, formed in particular ways according to each person's unique history. If one, for example, has developed a fear of failure, then one could misconstrue an otherwise harmless statement as a form of criticism to which one would negatively overreact; in other words, one could easily project onto the harmless statement—and onto the other who made it—all kinds of meanings that were never intended. Unconscious fear, anger, and hatred fuel the mechanism of projection onto the other, obfuscating the truth of the self, the other, and the situation, and making growth in love difficult (but not impossible).

Many more specific, concrete examples could be given, but the basic point is this: without attention (which is a form of contemplation and which Simone Weil says is the greatest form of generosity), such misfiring between committed others in a marital relationship that emerges from unconscious fear, anger, or hatred could ultimately gain momentum by fueling further fear, anger, and hatred, and could destroy the relationship. On the other hand, marriage could occasion, in a way that no other relationship can, intense self-reflection through the practice of truth-telling (perhaps confession or therapy), which could then lead to a self-knowledge that would then enable the addressing of unconscious fear, anger, and hatred, which would then clear the way for love of other, and not projection onto the other. To engage in such intense self-reflection is to enter a space of vulnerability, which in turn can lead

to a place of strength insofar as one is no longer shaped by fear, anger, or hatred; it can also increase one's capacity for empathy and compassion for the other. In the end, such self-reflection is a necessary (and not simply sufficient) condition for loving as God loves, because love cannot exist in the midst of falsity as self-deception.

A Theology of Sex

Marriage as sacramental through asceticism provides the basis for a theology of sex. The Christian default throughout history has been that sex outside marriage is morally wrong. As a result, Christians have not talked much about sex, especially the dynamics of desire surrounding the sex act. This silence gives the impression that somehow marriage neutralizes sex, and experience dictates that sex is anything but neutral, as it always affects the relationship of those engaged in sex, including marital relations. Since the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of 1968, the Christian debate on sex has been focused on the relation between the procreative and unitive aspects of sex. This debate has had many twists and turns, and I must admit that I am not totally satisfied with the arguments on either side, even though I am moving to a position that corresponds more to the prioritization of the unitive. I just do not think that either side sees fully that sex involves the bringing together of souls each with its own alignment as a result of a particular history, and that the sex act is affected by and affects those alignments. Insofar as those alignments of soul are both affected by and affect sex, then one's relationship with God is affected—not in terms of mortal or venial sins, but in the sense of the

potential for sacramentalization or desacramentalization. There is asceticism to sex, *not* in the sense of denying pleasure or doing it a few times a year, but in the sense of sex as an occasion for virtue that does not stifle desire, but actually increases it.

All sides of the debate recognize that there are forms of sex that are potentially destructive, which often involve violence and coercion. One such example is rape, which can occur even in marriage. Even those arguing for the prioritization of the unitive dimensions of sex are fully aware that not all sex in marriage is unitive; hence, the call by some theological ethicists for “just sex”—meaning, of course, not that married couples should just have sex, but that sex should be just.⁶

If just sex can be interpreted as giving the other what is due, and if this entails not forcing or coercing the other into sex, what does just sex have to say about the involvement of fetish or fantasy in sex, even when the partner is not aware of its presence? Christian theology is silent about the strangeness and mysteriousness of sexual desire, but fetish and fantasy are often categorized as perverse and are marginalized, excluded, or ignored. Yet while we can disdain it and name it perverse, it will still exist, and perhaps even more strongly as a result of the naming. What we do not talk about is its existence within sex as we debate the procreative versus the unitive. Both sides, strangely enough, seem to have similar responses—that marriage somehow is the solution. For the procreative side, it does not really matter what is going on in one’s head, as long as it is the kind of sex that can lead to procreation and entails a pro-

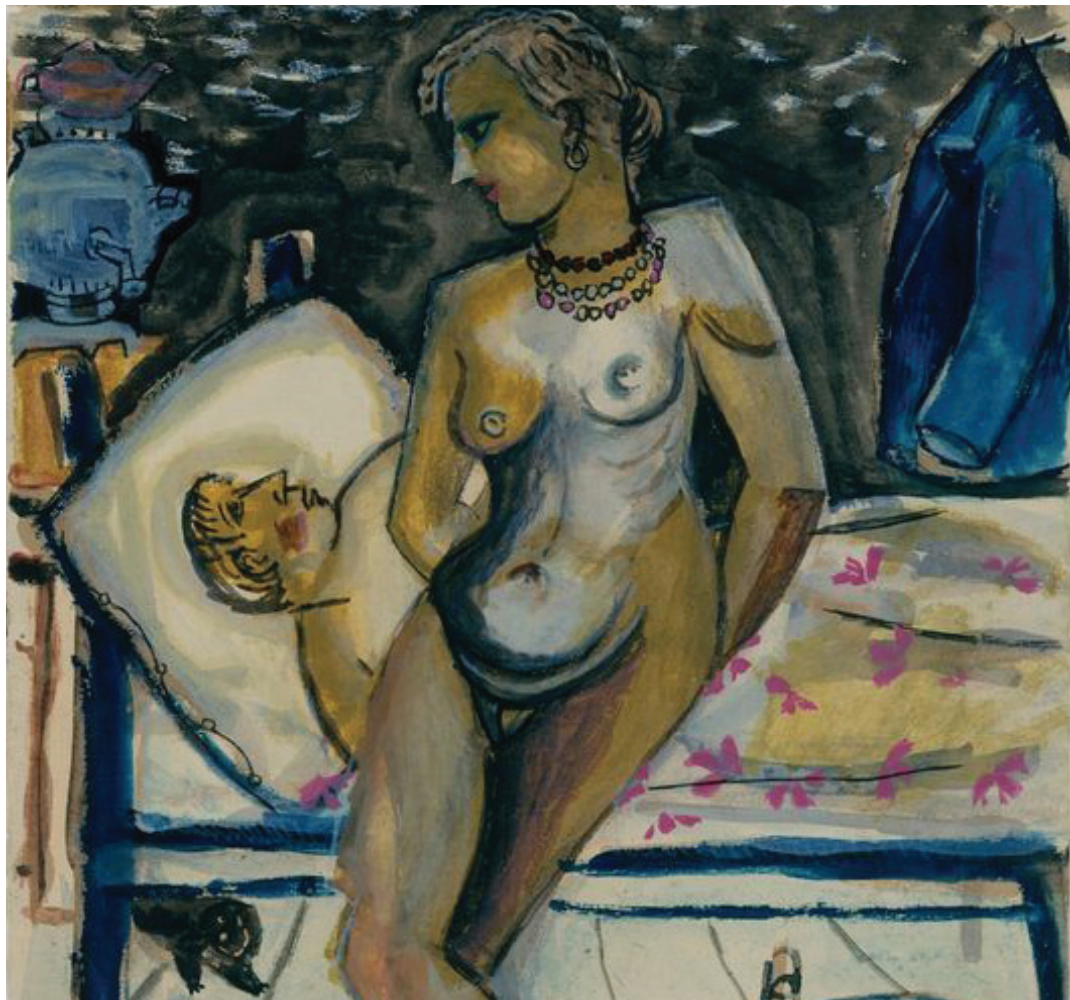
creative intent and is not violent or coerced. The unitive side is more aware that what is inside one’s head could threaten the unitive potential of sex, but is weak on the specifics of how marriage can actually be the place where the dynamics of sexual desire are worked out such that sex is not only just, but also sacramental. Somewhat ironically, I think the language of asceticism and theosis can attend to these not-talked-about dimensions of sex better than unitive and justice language by itself.

Beyond rape, the fact that the incitement of sexual desire often (if not always) results from fetish and fantasy makes imagining sex without objectification difficult, if not impossible. The interrelationship between desire, incitement, fetish, and fantasy illuminates the easily misinterpreted truth in the ascetical tradition that denies purity to sexual desire. The patristic and ascetical writers’ ambivalence to sex and, more generally, to erotic desire has often been interpreted to mean that sex is bad, should be restricted to procreation, and should be done only infrequently, abstaining on all days of fasting (including the monastic Monday in the Orthodox tradition), and even the night before receiving communion (which typically is not a day of fast). I even heard a story that an Orthodox priest in Chicago once asked someone coming to the chalice for communion if he had sex the previous evening. Again, this way of seeing sex cloaks it in deontological categories—when is it right to do, when is it wrong? Such an approach cannot probe the existential dynamics of sex and desire, and thus does not cohere with the understanding of the theotic aspects of sexuality.

⁶ See Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

If in fact sexual desire, in light of the phenomenology of its incitement, always objectifies in some measure, then the ascetical struggle within marriage consists in adhering to practices that mitigate such objectification. An obvious one is not forcing sex through violence or other forms of manipulation. Another basic practice is open communication, in which the married couple works toward discerning when to speak freely of fears, anxieties, fantasies, and even fetishes. The great sacramentality and grace of marriage consists in providing a space where, even given its potential for objectification and depersonalization, sexual desire can be channeled in such a way that through proper ascetical practices it can be productive, and not simply of children, but of greater intimacy, trust, and communion—that is, theosis. Sexual desire does not have to be denied in order to achieve theosis

(even in celibacy, it is not denied); it is part of the material aspect of human nature that can move us toward theosis, even if it always entails a measure of objectification. In short, the marital couple's honest recognition of and communication about sexual desire can allow sexual desire to contribute to the sacramentality of marriage, and not simply get in the way of this sacramentality. Put another way, if sex has something to do with the alignment of the parts of the soul to each other, then it has something to do with theosis and sacramentality. I am not necessarily arguing that sex need be non-objectifying in order for marriage to be sacramental. Even when—perhaps inevitably—sexual desire contains a measure of objectification through fetish and fantasy, marriage as asceticism cannot only potentially absorb such an act, but even cause it to work *toward* sacramentalization. But this



Marc Chagall,
Couple, 1911. Metro-
politan Museum of
Art, New York.

can only happen if marriage practices are seen as ascetical practices of learning to love—in other words, of theosis.

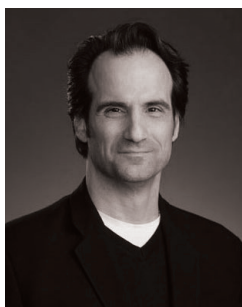
I am attempting to retrieve insights embedded within Christianity's long-standing tradition of seeing sexual desire as impure and marriage as a kind of remedy. In the case of the impurity of sexual desire, insofar as objectification in the form of fetish and fantasy is often, perhaps inevitably, involved in the incitement of sexual desire, it is hard to image a sexual desire that is simply and purely about the love one may have for the person with whom one is having sex. Marriage as a remedy acknowledges two things in my opinion: (a) very few can actually live a celibate life, and (b) marriage is a place to work through the potentially personally destructive dimensions of sexual desire ascetically, such that such objectification may be absorbed in a way that actually facilitates sacramentalization understood as a presencing of God, and further delineated in terms of a particular alignment of the soul, or the human condition.

Forced celibacy can actually unleash the potentially objectifying force of sexual desire, albeit in a repressed form. In other words, forced celibacy is a recipe for an anti-theotic state

of being, especially since it may incite fear, anger, and hatred. If that is the case, then long-term committed relationships, or marriages, are also spaces for working through the objectifying potential of sexual desire ascetically, such that it contributes toward and does not mitigate against sacramentality. A Christian tradition with theosis at its core, and, as a result, with attention to the dynamics of the various constitutive aspects of the human condition, recognizes that when it comes to sexual desire, simply to say "struggle" can be spiritually harmful and, thus, not ascetically discerning. Sexual desire just does not stop when we struggle; in fact, the struggle may even incite it more intensely.

It is unrealistic, as Saint Paul I think insightfully recognized, to expect someone simply to deny or turn off such desire; it is spiritually discerning to allow such a desire to be expressed rather than "to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9), in long-term committed relationships or marriages, whose aim is presencing God through the virtues, which, in the end, are manifest when the various constitutive parts of the human condition are configured so that one can be agapeic toward the other, and one can increase in eros for the divine. ✱

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