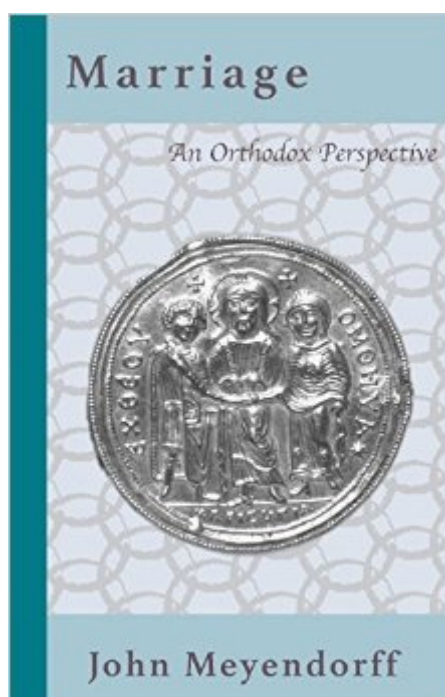


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# Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective



## Synopsis

The author writes: 'It is impossible to understand either the New Testament doctrine on marriage, or the very consistent practice of the Orthodox Church without seeing Christian marriage in the context of the Eucharist... The very notion of marriage as a sacrament presupposed that a man is not only a being with physiological, psychological, and social functions, but that he is a citizen of God's Kingdom, i.e., that his entire life'and especially its most decisive moments'involves eternal values and God Himself.' This excellent study on Christian marriage is a valuable resource for anyone seeking to understand the Orthodox perspective on marriage. In it John Meyendorff examines marriage in the Church from the contexts of Judaism and the New Testament, the early Church and Roman law, sacramental life, and contemporary society. Specific issues discussed include: second marriages, 'mixed' marriages, divorce, abortion, family planning and responsible parenthood, married clergy, celibacy, and the monastic life. Essential reading for all pastors, it is also useful for parents, newlyweds and those preparing for the sacrament of marriage.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Fr. John Meyendorff's *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* offers overviews of the major themes that Orthodox couples are likely to come across in marriage as well as explanations of the meaning of the Orthodox wedding ceremony and its history and development. Following are some of the highlights of the book: 1. Wedding as a Separate Rite Section VI, "The Contemporary Rite of Betrothal," offers one example of how the form of marriage developed over the centuries in the

Orthodox Church. "The new responsibility given to the Church by the laws of Emperors Leo VI and Alexis I--that of giving formal legitimacy to all marriages--required the adoption of new liturgical forms. These new forms, on the one hand, were to be separate from the Eucharist and, on the other hand, had to reflect the eternal and unchangeable teachings of the Church about the meaning of marriage" (p. 29). Although the Orthodox Church views herself as having preserving certain truths since the days of the Apostles, it cannot be said that the form of the marriage ceremony has been remained unchanged since those days. "Orthodox Byzantium, with its remarkable ability to interpret Scripture, to relate it to the central mystery of Christ, to use signs and symbols in expressing the meaning of the Christian faith, produced in the tenth and eleventh centuries the two present-day Orthodox services of betrothal and crowing" (p. 29). The betrothal service takes the place of the marriage contract. In it, the bride and the groom each promise to one another faithfulness. "It was originally a civil ceremony. By assuming responsibility for it, the Church did not suppress the legal and moral obligations imposed by the Old Testament law, by roman law and still maintained by our own contemporary society. She rather provided them with a new Biblical and spiritual meaning" (p. 30).

2. "Mixed" Marriages

Fr. John recognizes the reality of "mixed" marriages between Orthodox Christians and non-Orthodox Christians in a pluralistic society such as ours. "It is certainly possible," he writes, "without being members of the same Church, to enjoy friendship, to share interests, to experience a true character compatibility, and, of course, to 'be in love' with each other." Yet Fr. John cautions against these relationships: "the question is whether all these human affinities can be transformed and transfigured in the reality of the Kingdom of God if one does not share the same experience of what this Kingdom is, if one is not committed to the same and unique Faith" (p. 51). For Fr. John, one's faith is not merely "Christian," but rather, "Orthodox Christian," or "Protestant Christian," etc. I would contend, however, that one's faith is not in a denomination; rather, it is in Christ. Two Christians who have encountered the living Christ and who have been transformed by His love do share the same faith, and the potential for a love relationship between them knows no limits, even if they belong to separate denominations. Fr. John later concedes this point, writing that we all know of some mixed marriages that "lead to the creation of happy families, and it would be unwise and utopian to discourage them all. Actually, it may well be that some of such marriages end up being more durable and happier than those contracted by nominal Orthodox who never heard about the meaning of Christian marriage and who never accepted personally and responsibly any true Christian commitment" (p. 52). Despite this fact, Fr. John considers the act of blessing the marriage outside of the Orthodox Church to be an obvious "betrayal of the sacramental grace received from [the Orthodox Church] at baptism and is, in fact, inconsistent with Church

membership" (p. 53).<sup>3</sup> **Family and Family Planning**(a) OverviewFr. John begins by offering an overview of the Christian meaning of marriage and sex. "[O]ne of the essential differences between the Old Testament Judaic conception of marriage and the Christian one was that, for the ancient Jews, marriage was a means for procreation only, while, for Christians, it is an end in itself--a union of two beings, in love, reflecting the union between Christ and the Church" (p. 59). For the Orthodox, sex and marriage, in addition to the function of procreation, offers the husband and wife a union that reflects God's love and is thus unto their spiritual edification.

(b) **The Question of Birth Control Presented**I expected Fr. John to come across harshly against the use of artificial birth control, since it frustrates one of the ends of the marital relationship--procreation. Rather, he poses a series of difficult questions and then states that the Church has no one official rule that is to be applied across all couples. He begins by discussing the issues that have led couples to consider family planning: "if the 'life' given by parents to their children is to be a fully human life, it cannot involve only physical existence, but also parental care, education and decent living. When they beget children, parents must be ready to fulfill all these responsibilities. There obviously are economic, social or psychological situations where no guarantees can be given in this respect. And there is something even a near certainty that the newly born children will live in hunger and psychological misery. In those situations, various forms of family planning, as old as humanity itself, have been always known to men and women" (p. 61-2). Fr. John goes on to discuss the various options available to couples, including total continence, which "the New Testament and Church tradition consider [to be] an acceptable form of family planning" (p. 62), periodic continence, as taught in the Roman Catholic Church, and "artificial" contraception, such as the "pill." He then presents a series of questions as to the ethics of selecting one form of birth control over another: "is there a real difference between the means called 'artificial' and those considered 'natural'? Is continence really 'natural'? Is not any medical control of human functions 'artificial'? Should it, therefore, be condemned as sinful? And finally, a serious theological question: is anything 'natural' necessarily 'good'?" (p. 62). "Straight condemnation of birth-control," he concludes, "fails to give satisfactory answers to all these questions" (p. 62). Fr. John instead suggests that each couple may experience the right answers in a different way.

(c) **The Case Against Birth Control**I understand that, as Fr. John states, the Church as a whole has not pronounced a universal teaching on contraception. Yet it seems clear to me that artificial birth control is a wrong that should be avoided. One of the chief purposes of marriage is procreation; to thwart this end or to limit the size of family seems to me to undermine the very institution of marriage. Certainly, there are times when limiting the size of one's family is prudent, such as when a couple lacks the means to care for a child. Yet even in these

situations, to do so using artificial contraception counters nature and is detrimental to the spiritual and physical health of the partners. The "barrier" methods of birth control prevent the act from becoming what it was intended to be: a complete fusion of man and woman. Many of the drugs, such as the pill, have serious adverse health effects on the woman's body. Other methods, such as spermicides, give the message that one accepts the spouse fully, but rejects his fertility. The complete giving and receiving in the sexual act is undermined by such methods and the natural end of the sexual act is undermined. Natural family planning, in contrast, is able to obtain the same ends as artificial birth control, but in a way that is in keeping with nature. When the couple is able to practice periodic continence when the woman is fertile, nature is not thwarted, for sexual intercourse during the female's infertile period does not have the natural end of conception. Furthermore, the couple learns the virtue of self-control by limiting sexual intercourse to such times and the spiritual and physical health of the partners is not threatened. The comparison of artificial birth control to the use of medicine seems to me to be apt. Whereas medicines seek to restore God's intent of blessing man with good health, birth control thwarts His intent for partners to be fruitful and multiply. Whereas medicines curing people of illness are in accord with the natural end of man to live a long life and prosper, artificial birth control counters one of the natural ends of sexual intercourse: procreation. Medicine seeks to correct an evil that is not within God's divine intent; artificial birth control seeks to throw off course a good that God intended.

#### 4. Appendices

The book concludes with five appendices that deal with: (I) the New Testament's references to marriage; (II) the tradition of the Church, as recorded in the writings of the Fathers; (III) the Church's Canon Law based on the Ecumenical Councils, local councils, and writings of the Fathers endorsed by the Councils; (IV) an explanation of the liturgical tradition of the marriage ceremony; and (V) a reproduction of the marriage ceremony, including both the service of betrothal and the crowning. Among the most moving accounts of marriage are those of Fr. Alexander Elchaninov (1881-1934), which are reproduced in Appendix II. Fr. Alexander writes: "Marriage is a revelation and a mystery. We see in it the complete transformation of a human being, the expansion of his personality, fresh vision, and new perception of life, and through it a rebirth into the world in a new plenitude (p. 96). "Marriage, fleshly love, is a very great sacrament and mystery. Through it is accomplished the most real and at the same time the most mysterious of all possible forms of human relationship. And, qualitatively, marriage enables us to pass beyond all the normal rules of human relationship and to enter a region of the miraculous, the superhuman" (p. 97). "In fleshly love, besides its intrinsic value as such, God has granted the world a share in His omnipotence: man creates man, a new soul is brought into being" (p. 97). "In marriage the festive joy of the first day should last for the whole of life; every day should

be a feast day; every day husband and wife should appear to each other as new, extraordinary beings. The only way of achieving this: let both deepen their spiritual life, and strive hard in the task of self-development" (p. 100). Also of note is the explanation of the liturgical tradition in Appendix IV. Communion was a part of the original wedding ceremony, unless one or both of the spouses were not in good standing with the Church, in which case Communion was substituted by the common cup. "[T]o those who are not worthy of Communion--for example those who are being married a second time, and others--the Divine Gifts are not given, but only the common cup, as a partial sanctification, as a sign of good fellowship and unity with God's blessing" (p. 112). Today, however, the common cup has virtually replaced Communion in the Orthodox wedding ceremony.

When my cousin was married, my gift to her and her non-Orthodox husband was a wedding program that I wrote. I felt it would make the ceremony more interesting for the groom's family. It proved educational for my family as well. This book was an excellent reference. It provided an explanation of each part of an Orthodox marriage ceremony, why it occurs, and the historical origin. It provided a wealth of information in an easy-to-read format for non-Orthodox and Orthodox alike.

This book provides a good overview of marriage. While not as "deep" as some Orthodox books on the subject, it is definitely more practical than most, and also goes into the liturgical aspects of getting married more than most. Fr. John's explanation of how the Orthodox view of sex differs from the view of certain other Christians is probably helpful to those unfamiliar with all the theological disputes. And certainly, his inclusion of Canons and quotes from Church Fathers add some meat to Fr. John's overview.

I thought this book was well written and informative. It should be a must read for anyone who is considering marriage, so they understand the religious as well as personal aspects of the Sacrament.

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