

THE POWER OF SEXUAL PURITY:

An Orthodox Response to the Sexual Revolution of Our Time

May 20, 2017

By David C. Ford and Mary Ford of St. Tikhon's Seminary

IN THIS MODERN day and age, when sexual promiscuity—i.e., any sexual relations outside marriage—abounds all around us, why would anyone choose to live in sexual purity? How could refraining from all sexual relations outside of marriage ever be more fulfilling, more satisfying, than having sexual adventures before getting married, and perhaps even after marriage through having affairs?

The Orthodox Church's answer would begin, we think, with affirming what our Saints through all the centuries have always known from their own life-experience, as shaped by the life of the Church—that virtue, including sexual purity, has power, contributing greatly to the deep inner peace, profound joy, true love, and ineffable satisfaction that come from finding our “true selves” through living in the way our Creator intends for us to live. As St. John Chrysostom writes near the end of the fourth century, in the very large, cosmopolitan city of Antioch in Syria, “though virtue involves work, it fills the conscience with much gladness, and has within it so much pleasure that no speech can describe it” (*Homilies on Matthew, LIII. 6*).

The Orthodox understanding of humanity emphasizes the profound interconnectedness of the body with the soul in each of us, so we recognize that whatever we do with our body affects our mind and heart more than we might imagine or realize at first. This is one key reason our Church recommends all the bodily ascetic practices she does. These various practices help us to master our sexual impulses, which is essential for genuine love of others. We may think that sexual experiences outside of marriage have no lasting, hurtful repercussions in our memories and emotions, and in the lives of those we're having such relations with, but so often they really do.

Living in sexual purity brings great benefit not only to ourselves, but also to those around us. For when we're protecting and honoring the purity of our bodies, we're helping at the same time to protect and honor the purity of the bodies of those we're interacting with. At the same time, by living in sexual purity, refraining from all forms of

sexual promiscuity, we're avoiding even the possibility of being involved with many deleterious things that so often come with improper sexual activity—things like fornication (which often leads to sexually-transmitted diseases), adultery (which often leads to the break-up of marriages), out-of-wedlock pregnancies (which often lead to abortion), sex addiction, prostitution, pederasty, and pedophilia. And besides the incalculable human suffering that these things cause, they all undermine the general society's respect for and commitment to strong marriages and stable family life, which have been and always should be the bedrock of every flourishing society in human history.

But again to speak more positively, if we're striving to live virtuously, we're walking with self-control, overcoming self-centeredness, building strength of character, and reverencing others as well as ourselves. If we're single and called to marriage, we're saving the beautiful gift of our virginity, our bodily purity, for our future spouse, as a kind of “present” waiting for the right time to be opened. And if we're married, we're making sure the gift of our sexual desire, which reflects the core of our being, is always only shared and fully expressed with our spouse.

In marriage, the intimate male-female sexual bond, preserved and sanctified in mutual fidelity and trust, and fully good because it is the gift of the Good God Who loves mankind, knits husband and wife ever more closely in a union that is more profound than anything else in the entire realm of human relationships. And we as Orthodox Christians also understand that marriage is meant to last forever. Indeed, since we will be the same persons with the same memories in the next life, all our relationships will continue there, yet in a wondrously transfigured way. (The Orthodox wedding service does not have the words, “Till death do us part.” Rather, the celebrant prays, “Receive their crowns into Thy Kingdom, preserving them spotless, blameless, and without reproach, unto ages of ages.”)

St. Gregory the Theologian, another Church Father in the fourth century, describes some of the glory of marriage in these words: “Marriage is the key of moderation and the harmony of the desires, the seal of a deep friendship...the unique drink from a fountain enclosed, inaccessible to those outside. United in the flesh,

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one in spirit, they urge each other on by the goad of their mutual love. For marriage does not take us from God, but brings us all the closer to Him; for it is God Himself Who draws us to it" (*Poem in Praise of Virginity*). Whether we're single or married, through preserving our sexual purity we are building a lifetime of faithfulness that's priceless, and more conducive to true inner peace and joy than living in sexual promiscuity, with all the hassles and heartaches which almost inevitably come with it—even if it doesn't lead to tragedy, and even if its initial thrill might be very appealing, and even if the temptation to it is very strong. But no matter how strong any sexual temptation might be, the power of our free will in conjunction with God's grace is even stronger. Under regular circumstances, we are never forced to do what is not right or good or beautiful. We are not victims, helpless to resist whatever comes our way.

If we do fall into sexual sin, there's always the possibility to repent, ask forgiveness, and receive the healing balm of God's forgiveness and the joy of one's conscience being made clean and at peace once again. This gives us a beautiful fresh start in the effort to live again in virtue. The beauty and power of personal holiness, made possible through sexual purity, are something wondrous to encounter. If we've ever been with a holy person, someone radiant with peace, joy, love, and purity, we know what this beauty and power are: we feel it; we sense it; we are encouraged and uplifted by it. The Orthodox Church offers this to the world through a living experience of

fellowship with the Saints, through the icons depicting them, and through encounters with people who are truly living this holy Faith. By associating with holy people, we are all the more empowered to live in sexual purity, and to experience the power and beauty that only this way of life can bring. (*David C. Ford is Professor of Church History at St. Tikhon's Orthodox Seminary in South Canaan, PA. Mary Ford is Associate Professor of New Testament and Hermeneutics at St. Tikhon's Orthodox Seminary*)

LESSONS ON LOVE, FROM SAINT MAXIMOS THE CONFESSOR

Perfect love does not split up the single human nature, common to all, according to the diverse characteristics of individuals; but, fixing attention always on this single nature, it loves all men equally. It loves the good as friends and the bad as enemies, helping them, exercising forbearance, patiently accepting whatever they do, not taking the evil into account at all but even suffering on their behalf if the opportunity offers, so that, if possible, they too become friends. If it cannot achieve this, it does not change its own attitude; it continues to show the fruits of love to all men alike. It was on account of this that our Lord and God Jesus Christ, showing His love for us, suffered for the whole of mankind and gave to all men an equal hope of resurrection, although each man determines his own fitness for glory or punishment.

We human beings love one another, commendably or reprehensibly, for the following five reasons; either for the sake of God, as the virtuous man loves everyone and as the man not yet virtuous loves the virtuous; or by nature, as parents love their children and children their parents; or because of self-esteem, as he who is praised loves the man who praises him; or because of avarice, as with one who loves a rich man for what he can get out of him; or because of self-indulgence, as with the man who serves his belly and his genitals. The first of these is commendable, the second is of an intermediate kind, the rest are dominated by passion.

If there are some men you hate and some you neither love nor hate, and others you love strongly and others again you love but moderately, recognize from this inequality that you are far from perfect love. For perfect love presupposes that you love all men equally.

EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **ST. SERAPHIM WEEK:** Thanks to our dedicated staff of Church School Teachers, parish teens and parents, we have had a wonderful week learning about angels, singing songs, praying, playing and making crafts! Thirty children participated in the activities this week. On Sunday, at the blessing of the food in the Parish Hall, the children will sing a few of the songs they have learned. Please give them your full attention.
- **MOTHER MELANIA** will be installed as Abbess of Holy Assumption Monastery, by Archbishop Benjamin, on Monday, July 3 during the 4 PM Vigil.
- **JULY 4th Pilgrimage to Fort Ross:** As always, there will be a Divine Liturgy at the Fort Ross chapel on July 4, 10 AM. His Eminence, Archbishop Benjamin, will preside at the service.
- **SERVICE OF THANKSGIVING AND ENDORSEMENT:** As many already know, Kate Willens is working as a chaplain for East Bay Hospice, having completed many years of training at SF Theological School in Marin, the Orthodox Institute in Berkeley and private sessions here at Church. In recognition of her accomplishments, and as an endorsement by the OCA, His Eminence Archbishop Benjamin will be here at 4 PM, July 4, to conduct the Thanksgiving and Endorsement for Chaplaincy. All are invited.
- **GOING AWAY BLESSING AND BBQ:** Fr. Theodore, Matushka Hanne, Simon and Filip are leaving us to return to Norway on July 10. In order to show our love, appreciation for their labors and best wishes for them, there will be a blessing and pot-luck BBQ on Sunday, July 9. We will begin with the blessing in the Church at 4:30 PM. The Svane family came to us two years ago so Fr Theodor could serve as a pastoral intern. Being mature, capable and accomplished, both Fr. Theodor and Matushka Hanne's time here should be described not as "internship" but as assistants and colleagues. We received incalculable benefits from the Svanes; they will all be sorely missed.
- **AMBROSE, MEGHAN** and the Inlow family will be departing to Pennsylvania later this month to begin their studies at St. Tikhon's Seminary. There will be a travel blessing and going-away potluck for them, day and time to be announced. Let us, as a parish, plan to offer some financial support during the three-year Masters of Divinity degree program. So far, our parish has collected (from two individuals over the last ten years) \$27,000 in support of seminarians from our Parish. This is a wonderful and generous beginning, which will hopefully inspire all of us to set aside some funds each month in support of the Inlows.
- **THE PROTECTION CHURCH** is getting some much needed repair on the bell tower, which has severe dry rot as well as charring inside of the structure from a fire which occurred at some point—no one seems to know when. In any case, the upper portion will be lifted off the building with a crane, rebuilt on the ground, and set back in place. We are very grateful for the anonymous donation of \$10,000 to cover the cost of this work.
- **FATHER PATRICK** and Hierodeacon Moses have been painting the fresco of the "Descent into Hades" last week and will be working on it for the next couple of weeks. The fresco was commissioned by the parish membership over fifteen years ago. The Fathers intend to paint the entire north clerestory area and only after that will tackle the Forty Martyrs again. Your offerings for the fresco fund in general, and for particular saints/feasts, are much appreciated.
- **KAZAN SKETE** will be celebrating the Monastery Feast Day on Friday, July 21 with Divine Liturgy, a procession and a festal lunch. Festivities begin at 9:30 AM.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE NARTHEX

THE PARISH COUNCIL, in response to parishioner requests, will have an iPad available in the Narthex for those who would like to use a Debit or Credit Card to make their offerings. This is a way to make giving your "thank-offerings" more convenient. We dare not say "easy," since we understand that *giving* is sacrificial and therefore neither convenient nor easy. *Sacrificial* giving operates in an entirely different realm: we offer to God a portion of what we have in thanksgiving to Him; this is a "sacrifice," which means it is an act of worship in acknowledgement that God owns every aspect of our life, including our finances. So, while this digital tool for giving in Church may be convenient (and an acknowledgement that these financial transactions are often digital), let us not lose *touch* (and that's the right word) with the aspect of sacrificial-giving that involves prayer, deliberation, and intention. —Fr. Lawrence

THE BRIDGE

A FRIEND OF OURS often uses the phrase “Is this the bridge you want to die on?” It’s a pithy reminder that most of the things that upset us are simply not worth the high toll they take on our relationships, not to mention our very lives. The question is worthy of serious deliberation. So often, we find ourselves on a “bridge” that we didn’t mean to be on, but we’re too proud or embarrassed or angry to admit it. Then we find ourselves in a fight with another person while the train is making its way to the bridge! Other times, we are so stubborn and foolish in our passions, that we DO choose to make a stand on a bridge. So, we do well to ask ourselves what bridges we’ve foolishly found ourselves on—purposely or not—and why. An honest answer to those questions would go far to help us move further towards God.

But we also need to ask ourselves the question, “What bridge DO I want to die on?” This brings to mind a video that comes across the internet every so often. Several people are laboriously carrying their crosses, but one

keeps complaining that his cross is too heavy and begging God to lighten it. Eventually, he takes matters into his own hands and cuts off the bottom of his cross. He goes forward, whistling cheerfully, while everyone else continues laboring under their crosses. Then, they reach a deep chasm, which they are able to cross only by laying their crosses over it and walking across them. The man who cut his cross is appalled, realizing that he can not cross over because his cross doesn’t reach. So, in the end, the only bridge worth dying on is the one that spans the gap between me and God. The gap is my sins, and the bridge is simultaneously Christ’s cross and the one He has given me (which, yes, often looks like it was given to us by our family members, neighbors, co-workers, etc.). And ironically, only if I am willing to die on that bridge—to give up my own life and will for love of God and neighbor—can I pass over the gap to live forever with the One Who bridged that chasm by His own death.

—*Mother Melania, Abbess of Holy Assumption, Calistoga*

FEAST OF THE GLORIFICATION OF SAINT SERAPHIM OF SAROV

JULY 18, 6:15 PM: Vigil with Lity

JULY 19, 9:30 AM: Greeting of Vladyka Benjamin and the Divine Liturgy
Festal luncheon to follow

St. Seraphim was glorified (canonized) by the Russian Orthodox Church on July 19/August 1, 1903. Records indicate that over 200,000 pilgrims came to Sarov, the “Russian Jerusalem,” to venerate the relics of the beloved Saint and to participate in the glorification services. Many miracles were recorded. Twenty years after the event the Soviets occupied and desecrated the Sarov Monastery, carted off the relics of St. Seraphim to an anti-religion museum, where they lay hidden for seventy years. In 1990, the relics were “found” (their whereabouts kept secret) and were taken on a 450-mile-long church procession to Diveyevo near Sarov.

O kind-hearted father: be thou indeed our guide to salvation, and bring us to the unwaning light of eternal life, by thy good intercession before the throne of the Most Holy Trinity...

PROTECTION OF THE HOLY VIRGIN MARY ORTHODOX CHURCH

JULY 2017

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
						JULY 1 • 4 PM, Children's Choir • 5 PM, Great Vespers
2 - St. John of SF • 10 AM Liturgy • Noon, Agape Meal	3 • 4 PM, <i>Calistoga Monastery - Installation of Mother Melania as Abbess</i>	4 • 10 AM, Divine Liturgy at Fort Ross • 4 PM, Molieben for Kate Willens – <i>Chaplaincy installation and blessing by Archbishop Benjamin</i>	5 • 6 PM, Vespers	6	7	8 • 5 PM, Great Vespers
9 - Hieromartyr Pancratios • 10 AM Liturgy • Noon, Agape Meal • 4:30 PM, Traveling Prayers and BBQ Potluck for Svane family	10	11 • 9 AM, Memorial Liturgy (Sakovich family) • 6 PM, Potluck and Talk on St. Gregory of Nyssa (Ambrose Inlow)	12 • 9:30 AM, <i>Parish Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, Stony Point Road</i>	13 • 7 PM, Master Planning Meeting	14	15 • 4 PM, Children's Choir • 5 PM, Great Vespers
16 - Fathers of the 1st Six Councils • 10 AM Liturgy • Noon, Agape Meal	17	18 • 6:15 PM, Vigil for St. Seraphim of Sarov	19 - St. Seraphim of Sarov • 9:30 AM, Greeting of Archbishop Benjamin, Divine Liturgy • Festal Luncheon	20 • 10 AM, Akathist to Prophet Elijah	21 - Kazan Icon Feast • 9:30 AM, Divine Liturgy at Kazan Skete	22 - St. Mary Magdalene [Fr. Lawrence and Matushka Ann away until July 28] • 9 AM, Divine Liturgy • 5 PM, Great Vespers
23 - St. Apollinaris of Ravenna • 10 AM Liturgy • Noon, Agape Meal	24	25	26 • 6 PM, Vespers	27 • 7 PM, Parish Council Meeting	28	29 • 4 PM, Children's Choir • 5 PM, Great Vespers
30 - Apostles of the 70: Silas, etc. • 10 AM Liturgy • Noon, Agape Meal	31 • 6 PM, Vespers (Bringing out of the Holy Cross)	1 - Procession of the Cross <i>Dormition Fast Begins</i> • 10 AM, Water Blessing • 6 PM, Supplicatory Canon to the Theotokos	2 • 6 PM, Supplicatory Canon to the Theotokos	3 • 6 PM, Supplicatory Canon to the Theotokos	4 • 6 PM, Supplicatory Canon to the Theotokos	5 • 5 PM, Vigil for Transfiguration of Christ