

MARRIAGE AND PROCREATION

Many among the greatest of men have praised virginity; and it is truly worthy of praise, in its nature angelic, akin to the Heavenly powers, belonging to the company of incorporeal natures, as the shining glory of Holy Church, as that which overcomes the world, that which rises above earthly affections, which restrains desires, without relationship to Eve, as free of pain, immune from anguish, that need not hearken to that dread decree in which it is said: "I will multiply thy sorrows, and thy conceptions: in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shall have dominion over thee" (Gen. 3:16).

Venerable in truth is virginity, as an unconquered possession, a fruit tree that withers not, a dwelling of freedom, as the glory of the ascetic life, as something above the power of man, as being free of the compulsion of the appetites, as that which enters with Christ the Bridegroom into the bridal chamber of the Kingdom of Heaven.

And these are the glories of virginity, and of those who draw near to it: but "marriage is honourable in all" (Heb. 13:4), and above every gift of earth, as a fruit-bearing branch, as a flowering tree, as the root whence comes virginity, the husbandman of the living and reasoning shoots, as the gift bestowed for the increase of the world, as the comfort of the race of men, as the creator of humanity, as the painter of the image and likeness of God, as blessed of the Lord, as chosen to bring forth the whole world, as governing the same, and which He also honoured that He might become man, as being able freely to declare: "Behold I and my children, whom the Lord hath given me" (Is. 8:18).

Take away honourable marriage and where will you find the flower of virginity? For from nowhere else is this flower gathered. In saying this to you, beloved, we in no way desire to place conflict between marriage and virginity, for we admire both as one completing the other, since the Lord, Who in His Providence has ordained both has not set one against the other; for the true service of God embraces both the one and the other. For without the holy and precious love of God, neither is virginity to be revered, nor is marriage honourable.

(St. Amphilochius of Iconium, In Praise of Virginity, Marriage and Widowhood, and on the Meeting of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, Anna and Symeon, I)

IN ATTEMPTING TO PRESENT the Orthodox Christian viewpoint on marriage and procreation (and the related questions of contraceptives, "family planning," etc.), we must turn to the Holy Fathers, the Saints of the Church, in order to determine what the Church's view is on these matters. Others have written papers on these questions, and the positions they present vary widely.¹

One problem with presenting the position of the Church Fathers, in English at least, is that so many of their writings remain untranslated to this day. So, anyone who approaches this particular subject is actually faced with two distinct tasks: 1) translating the enormous amount of patristic material that deals with this specific matter, and 2) presenting a consensus of the Holy Fathers' commentaries, if, indeed, one can be found. The word "consensus" is used here purposely, because there appears to be, in fact, a wide range of opinion among the Church Fathers on marriage and procreation. This may be due to the fact that the writings of the Holy Fathers were often pastoral in nature, and, as one individual noted, they had to deal with people "at different points in their spiritual development; but some people have greater gifts—some are stronger or weaker than others by nature." And this seems to tie in with what our Saviour said to His disciples when the matter of divorce arose:

¹ For example, "The Creation of Man and the Establishment of the Family in the Light of the Book of Genesis," by Serge Verkhovskoy, *St. Vladimir's Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1964; also "The Mystery of Marriage in a Dogmatic Light," by Bishop Artemy Rantosavlievich, *Divine Ascent: A Journal of Orthodox Faith*, Vol. 1, nos. 3 & 4. Both of these papers provided valuable insights and sources for the study in hand.

“Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, allowed you to put away your wives; but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery; and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.”

His disciples said unto Him, “If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.”

But He said unto them, “All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother’s womb; and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs by men; and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.”

(Matt. 19:3-12)

Having said this, from what we have found in the Church Fathers (so far), we may arrive at the following conclusions:

- 1) The Holy Fathers, in concord with the teachings of Our Saviour and the Holy Apostles, place virginity on a higher level than marriage (see, for example, I Cor. 7:32-35).
- 2) By way of *economia*, God has also given us the Mystery of Marriage and He has blessed and hallowed the natural union of two “into one flesh” for man’s salvation.
- 3) The Church Fathers speak of relations within marriage on the basis of I Corinthians 7:5:

Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.

In fact, it would be a good idea if everyone read I Corinthians 7 in its entirety, with the commentary of the Holy Fathers.²

- 4) Marriage has manifold purposes.

With this in mind, let us see now what the Church Fathers have to say about marriage and procreation. As we shall see, we will find a wide range of views and interpretations.

In the second century, the church writer Athenagoras wrote the following to the Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Aurelius in his defense of the Christians, wherein he demonstrates the elevated morality of the Christians (in contrast to that of the pagans):

Having the hope of eternal life, we despise the things of this life, even to the pleasures of the soul, each of us reckoning his wife whom he has married according to the laws laid down by us, and that only for the purpose of having children. For as the husbandman throwing the seed into the ground awaits the harvest, not sowing more upon it, so to us the procreation of children is the measure of our indulgence in appetite. Nay, you would find many among us, both men and women, growing old unmarried, in hope of being in closer communion with God.

(*A Plea for Christians*, chap. 33)

As a result of the fall of mankind, says St. Maximus the Confessor:

The first man was fittingly condemned to a bodily generation that is material, without choice, and subject to death, God thus rightly judging him who had freely chosen what is

² Commentaries on I Cor. 7 may be found in the writings of St. Athanasius the Great (*PG* 27:1403-4); St. Gregory of Nyssa (*PG* 44:1303-26); St. John Chrysostom (*PG* 61:1-610; 51:207-42; 64:466-74); St. Cyril of Alexandria (*PG* 74:855-916, 916-52); St. Gennadius of Constantinople (*PG* 85:1727-30); St. John of Damascus (*PG* 95:569-776), and St. Ecumenius of Trikka (*PG* 118:635-1088).

worse over what is better. . . to bear the dishonorable affinity with the irrational beasts, instead of the divine, unutterable honor of being with God.

(*On Various Questions*, PG 91:1348A)

Elsewhere, the Saint writes:

Again, vice is the wrong use of our conceptual images of things, which leads us to misuse the things themselves. In relation to women, for example, sexual intercourse, rightly used, has as its purpose the begetting of children. He, therefore, who seeks in it only sensual pleasure uses it wrongly, for he reckons as good what is not good. When such a man has intercourse with a woman, he misuses her. And the same is true with regard to other things and one's conceptual images of them.

(*Second Century on Love*, 17; *Philokalia* 2: 67-68)

And again, the Saint details the three things that impel us toward every vice:

. . . passions, demons, and sinfulness of intention. Passions impel us when, for example, we desire something beyond what is reasonable, such as food which is unnecessary or untimely, or a woman who is not our wife or for a purpose other than procreation.

(*Second Century on Love*, 33; *Philokalia* 2:71)

As a result of the fall, says St. Gregory of Nyssa, mankind's procreation is now likened to that of the irrational animals:³

Through the beguilement of the enemy of our life, man of his own free will acquired the bent toward what is bestial and without intelligence.

(*To Those Who Mourn*, PG 46: 521D-524A)

Elsewhere, this Holy Father describes the consequences of the fall as "the putting on of the coats of skin". By "coats of skin" the Saint means

"the conformation belonging to an irrational nature with which we are clothed when we became familiar with passionate indulgence," namely: "sexual intercourse, conception, parturition, impurities, suckling, feeding, evacuation, gradual growth to full size, prime of life, old age, disease, and death."

(*On the Soul and Resurrection*, PG 46:148C-149A)

Saint John Chrysostom, in his work *On Virginity*, also ties the fall of mankind to marriage and its earth-bound concerns:

After he was created, man lived in paradise, and there was no reason for marriage. A helper needed to be made for him, and one was made and even then marriage was not deemed necessary. It had not yet appeared. But, rather, they continued without it, living in Paradise as if in Heaven and delighting in their converse with God... As long as they were unconquered by the devil and respected their own Master, virginity also continued, adorning them more than the diadems and golden clothing adorn the emperors. But when, becoming captives, they took off this garment and laid aside the heavenly adornment and sustained the dissolution deriving from death, the curse, pain, and toils in existence, then together with these, enters marriage, this mortal and slavish garment. Do you see whence marriage had its beginning, whence it was deemed necessary? From the disobedience, from the curse, from death. For where there is death, there is also marriage. Whereas, when the first does not exist, then neither does the second follow.

(*On Virginity*, PG 48:543-44)

³ For St. Gregory's discussion of how mankind would have "increased and multiplied" if Adam and Eve had remained sinless, see his work *On the Creation of Man*, chapter 17—"What we must answer to those who raise this question: If procreation is after sin, how would souls have come into being if the first of mankind had remained sinless?"

St. Gregory the Theologian writes that, by *economia*, "Marriage is the allowance of passion" (*Exhortation to Virgins*, PG 37:634A), as "a lawful union of bodies" (*Manifold Definitions*, PG 37:958A). Elsewhere, he writes:

It is good for one to be tied in marriage, temperately though, rendering more to God than to sexual relations. It is better to be free of these bonds, rendering everything to God and to the things above. . . . Marriage is concerned about spouse and loved ones. Whereas for virginity, it is Christ.

(*On Self-restraint*, PG 37:643A-644A)

Saint Gregory of Nyssa adds, however:

Let no one think that by these words we reject the *economia* of marriage. For we are not unaware that marriage, too, is not alienated from God's blessing.

(*On Virginity*, PG 46:353A)

Also, Saint John Chrysostom writes that:

Marriage is good, for it preserves a man in self-restraint, and it does not allow him to fall into immorality and die.

(*On Virginity*, PG 48:550)

And elsewhere, he continues:

You do not see marriage anywhere marveled at *by itself*, but only because it restrains the immoralities, the temptations, the lack of self-control.

(*Ibid.*, PG 48:562)

Truly, "it is not good that man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). After the fall, as we may see in the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers, God, by His divine economy, blessed marriage for many purposes: for the purpose of uniting man and woman as companions, for the procreation of children, that the woman might be a helpmeet unto salvation to the man, and that, together, they might deflect that self-centered, ephemeral and hedonistic bent toward immorality. Marriage is the perpetuating force for mankind, a force that preserved our race through the ages until the fullness of time came and the grace of the Holy Spirit visited the human race. Since then, all that are nourished with the grace of the Holy Spirit have the power to overcome the natural cohesive bond of the biological family and to remain brothers and sisters, even without this bond, as members of the One and Holy and great family which is called The Church. Thus, in anticipation of the new creation that awaits us, there was created the order that transcends nature – the order of celibacy.

Not all, however, have the same gifts. "All cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given" (Matthew 19:11). So also in the Church, marriage – the natural means of the continuance of mankind – abides as a bond that is ever sanctified, and this bond is also the natural protection of the faithful against the darts of the enemy, who seeks to ensnare them in the very powerful net of the self-centered hedonism of fornication. In the Church, we find also the basis for the choice between the married and the celibate life. With the grace of God, the natural desire for union with the other gender can be overcome or supplanted by the desire for Christ and His Kingdom. Indeed, not only does this person have no need of marriage, but marriage becomes even harmful for such an individual. "To him that is able to fight and to win, though stripped of clothing, the encumbrance of weapons is not only *not* a source of assistance, but it is rather a source of uttermost injustice since it deprives him both of the people's amazement [at his prowess] and also of brilliant crowns" (St. John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, 26). Whoever burns with carnal desire must find a person of the opposite sex with whom to be united wholly body and soul. "It is better to marry than to burn" (I Cor 7:9). In such a union, the love that God desires is nurtured, and selfish love and the selfish will are destroyed, and both spouses come to

understand that whatever is each one's does not belong only to each of them separately, but is shared in an unselfish bond. However, love, the destruction of selfishness, and common possessions are not attained in marriage only. The life of virginity also knows and experiences the same sentiments. The special goals that can be achieved in marriage are: a mutual companionship that is unto salvation, the bringing of children into the world, and the quenching of carnal desire for the avoidance of fornication. This, too, is the reason why the Apostle Paul commanded married couples not to defraud one another, "except it be with consent for a time" (I Cor 7:5); because otherwise, the one that is continent pushes the other who burns into fornication and into other carnal passions: "The procreation of children is indeed good, enjoined by the law; and marriage is good on account of fornications, for it does away with these, and by lawful intercourse does not permit the madness of desire to be inflamed into unlawful acts. Marriage is good for those who have no continence; but virginity, which increases the fruitfulness of the soul and offers to God the seasonable fruit of prayer, is better. 'Marriage is honourable and the bed undefiled, but fornicators and adulterers God will judge'"⁴ (St. John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book IV, chap. 24).

But as our Saviour teaches us, marriage was given for this world only:

"In the resurrection they neither marry, nor are they given in marriage, but they are as the angels of God in Heaven" (Matt. 22:30).



AS WE MENTIONED IN THE BEGINNING, there actually appears to be a wide range of opinion among the Church Fathers (and even a wide range of views within various works of the same Fathers!) on the question of marriage and procreation. Let us now continue our survey of these writings.

"First learn, what is the purpose of marriage, and for what reason it was introduced into our life, and seek nothing more. What is the excuse for marriage, and for what cause has God given it? Listen to Paul who says, 'Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife...' That is, that we may avoid fornication, that we may quench lust, that we may co-habit in chastity, that we may be well-pleasing unto God, being content with our own spouse. . . For this reason alone should we take a wife, that we may avoid sin, that we may be delivered from all manner of fornication. Every marriage is ordained for this cause: that it may assist us in chastity".

(St. John Chrysostom, *Encomium of Maximus*, V, PG 51:232)

We note here that St. John Chrysostom has nowhere mentioned procreation. But there is yet more:

"Marriage, then, was given for childbearing also, but even moreso in order to quench nature's burning. Paul himself bears witness to this, saying, 'Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife,' – *not for childbearing*. And again, he commands that couples should come together, *not that they might become the parents of many children*, but what? 'Lest Satan tempt you,' he says. *Indeed, after this, he did not say, 'but if they desire to have children,'* but what? 'If they cannot abstain, let them marry' (I Cor 7:9). For at the beginning, as I have said, this matter [marriage] had two intentions, but subsequently, when the earth, and sea, and the whole world have been filled [with the human race], one reason alone remains for this bond: the banishment of licentiousness and intemperance." [Emphasis added].

(St. John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, PG 48:547)

⁴ Heb 13:4

“These are the two purposes for which marriage was instituted: to make us chaste, and to make us parents. Of these two, the reason of chastity takes precedence. When desire began, then marriage also began. It sets a limit to desire by teaching us to keep to one wife. Marriage does not always lead to procreation, although there is the word of God which says, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’ (Gen. 1:28). We have as witnesses all those who are married but are childless. So the purpose of chastity takes precedence, especially now, when the whole world is filled with our kind. At the beginning, the procreation of children was desirable, so that each person might leave a memorial of his life. Since there was not yet any hope of resurrection, but death held sway, and those who died thought that they would perish after this life, God gave the comfort of children, so as to leave living images of the departed and to preserve our species. For those who were about to die and for their relatives, the greatest consolation was their offspring. To understand that this was the chief reason for desiring children, listen to the complaint of Job’s wife: ‘See,’ she says, ‘your memory has perished from the earth, your sons and your daughters’ (cf. Job 18:17). Likewise Saul says to David, ‘Swear to me that you will not destroy my seed, and my name along with me’ (I Kings 24:22). But now that the resurrection is at our gates, and we do not speak of death, but advance toward another life better than the present, the desire for posterity is superfluous. If you desire children, you can get much better children now, a nobler childbirth and better help in your old age, if you give birth by spiritual labor. So there remains only one reason for marriage, to avoid fornication, and the remedy is offered for this very purpose.

(St. John Chrysostom, *On the Sacred Institution of Marriage*,
Homily One)

In addition, we must pay special attention to these points: the Church Fathers consistently and unambiguously condemn abortions (which they call murder), and contraceptives that are, in fact, abortifacets. They also clearly condemn those couples that avoid having children altogether, as is the case of women who attempt in this manner—as they suppose—to keep their physical attractiveness (sometimes for various illicit and immoral purposes). In his 24th Homily on the Epistle to Romans (*PG* 60: 626-627), St. John Chrysostom comments on these particular practices:

Why do you sow where the field is eager to destroy the fruit? Where there are medicines of sterility? 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. Do you see that from drunkenness comes fornication, from fornication adultery, from adultery murder? 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 despise the gift of God, and fight with His laws? Do you seek that which is a curse as though it were a blessing? Do you make the anteroom of birth the anteroom of slaughter? Do you teach the woman who is given to you for the procreation of offspring to perpetrate killing? That she may always be beautiful and lovable to her lovers? And that she may rake in more money, she does not refuse to do this, heaping fire on your head; and even if the crime is hers, you are the cause. Hence also arise idolatries. To look pretty, many of these women use incantations, libations, philtres, potions, and innumerable other things. Yet after such turpitude, after murder, after idolatry, the matter still seems indifferent to many men—even to many men having wives. In this indifference of the married men there is great 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, invocations of demons, incantations of the dead, daily wars, ceaseless battles, and unremitting contentions.*

As we see, the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Fathers teach us that the woman was given to the man as a “helpmeet,” a companion. We are also taught that marriage is an “*economía*”, but

* Also, one may note here that, in our contemporary society, it has become commonplace for women to avoid having children so that they may pursue a professional career.

that it is honourable and that the marriage bed is undefiled, and that marriage assists the couple in maintaining chastity by teaching the spouses to remain faithful to one another, and thereby avoid adultery and fornication; for “God will judge fornicators and adulterers.” As we have also seen, Saint John Chrysostom strictly condemns abortion and abortifacets.

At this point, it would be useful to reiterate what Saint John Chrysostom said before:

“Marriage, then, was given for childbearing also, but even more so in order to quench nature’s burning. Paul himself bears witness to this, saying, ‘Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife,’—*not for childbearing*. And again, he commands that couples should come together, *not that they might become the parents of many children* [emphasis added], but what? ‘Lest Satan tempt you,’ he says. *Indeed, after this, he did not say, ‘but if they desire to have children,’* but what? ‘If they cannot abstain, let them marry’ (I Cor. 7:9). [Emphasis added.]

(St. John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, PG 48:547)

What are we to understand from this text? What implications are we to draw from these words of the Saint? Is Saint John Chrysostom saying here that it is permissible for a couple to have marital relations for purposes other than procreation? It would appear so. Let us examine this matter more fully.

If, as some maintain, married couples were to have marital relations only for the purpose of procreation, then—at least, for many—marriage would certainly not be “a remedy to avoid fornication,” nor would it serve “to quench nature’s burning,” as St. John Chrysostom instructs us; it would become, rather, an inferno of temptation: to have two healthy individuals of the opposite sex, lawfully married, living in the same home, but not allowed to touch one another, except only for the purpose of procreation, would hardly “quench nature’s burning” in most cases. Instead of a haven for “those that burn,” marriage would be turned into an infernal state of torment, where the presence of the opposite sex, rather than healing and quenching the passions, would inflame them to an unimaginable degree. One of the spiritual maxims of the Fathers is: “From seeing comes desire” (apó to orán to erán). What, then, is a husband expected to do in such a setting? Not look at his wife? Not speak to her? And if the wife has reached menopause, and can no longer have children, will the husband, then, be obliged to avoid any contact with her for the rest of their married lives? In other words, are we to believe that what God hath joined together, a spiritual father may put asunder (cf. Matt 19:6)? Our Saviour taught us the Lord’s Prayer, which concludes with the words: “and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one”; yet, here we see many married couples being led into temptation. . . .

Once again, Saint John Chrysostom provides some illuminating instruction on the matter of marital relations even when the wife is past the age when she can bear children, (and, by inference, when the couple is sterile). Saint John clearly indicates that such relations are not blamable, although—presumably—they are not procreative. For example, in preaching against avarice, the Saint remarks:

There is no great reason to have money, while, for reasons of preserving chastity, there is great reason to have a wife. Hence, no one blames a man who has lawful intercourse with his wife into old age, but all blame him who accumulates money. . . . This the blessed Paul [the Apostle] places almost in the rank of a command: “Having food and raiment, let us be therewith content (I Tim. 6:8). But concerning women he says, “Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent”—and “come together again” (I Cor. 7:5). And you see him often laying down rules for lawful intercourse, and he permits the enjoyment of this desire, and allows of a second marriage, and bestows much consideration upon the matter, and never punishes on account of it. But he everywhere condemns him that is fond of money. Concerning wealth also Christ often commanded that we should avoid the corruption of it, but He says nothing about abstaining from a

wife. For hear what He says about money: “Whosoever forsaketh not all that he hath” (Luke 14:33); but He nowhere says, “Whosoever forsaketh not his wife”; for He knew how imperious that passion is. And the blessed Paul says, “Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled” (Heb. 13:4); but he has nowhere said that the care of riches is honourable, but the reverse.

(Homily V on the Epistle to Titus)

On the other hand, there are couples that are able to refrain from marital relations quite readily. Thus, it is evident that the spiritual father must use great spiritual discernment, weigh the strengths and weaknesses of his spiritual children with great wisdom, and then only counsel them to do that which is within their capacity and spiritual understanding and to their profit. There are, for example, many examples in the Lives of the Saints of couples living as brothers and sisters. But not all are able to do this. Each must strive according to his or her strength. Indeed, is this not the reason that the clergy are permitted to marry?

There are some further considerations: As a loving mother, the Church also knows that, at every turn, in every event of their lives, and on countless occasions, her children are faced with temptations, with the possibilities and actualities of sin, with an inclination toward evil thoughts and acts. Conception, pregnancy, and childbirth—the entire process of procreation—are certainly no exception, and, indeed, present innumerable occasions for sickness, mental and bodily anguish, and every sort of temptation. Truly, as the Prophet-King David writes, “For behold, I was conceived in iniquities, and in sins did my mother bear me” (Psalm 50:5). Because of our various weaknesses and the temptations we suffer, we are constantly in need of God’s mercy, healing, and forgiveness. This, too, is why the Church expresses these very sentiments when she prays with the words: “. . . forgive Thy handmaid (*name*) who hath given birth today” and “Wash away her body’s impurity and the stain of her soul now that she has completed her forty days.”

As is also evident from the prayers of the Church and from the Service of Marriage, that which concerns the Church is that the childbirth be safe for the mother, and that the children be healthy, virtuous, and a source of joy to their parents.



LET US NOW EXAMINE how the Holy Fathers interpret the passage “Increase and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28). We will find that their understanding and range of interpretations on this passage are far greater than we may have anticipated.

Special attention should be paid to the fact that, in the interpretation and correct understanding of the text “increase and multiply,” we are speaking here about a commandment of God. No one, including monastics, is permitted to transgress God’s commandments. However, if the commandment is an order only to bear children, then monastics – by their very vocation – are transgressors of God’s law. Consequently, we are obliged to uphold St. Gregory of Nyssa’s interpretation of this passage, because otherwise we would be forced to conclude that all monastics (and even St. Paul) are despisers of God’s commandments and that, indeed, they are condemned as such by those who interpret this particular passage to refer *only* to the birth and rearing of children.

Commentaries of the Holy Fathers

On the passage “Increase and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28)

“And God blessed them and said, ‘Increase and multiply, and fill the earth.’ There is a twofold increase: one of the body, and one of the soul. The soul’s increase, however, is that growth which achieves maturity through instruction; whereas the body’s increase is the development that comes from what is smaller to what is a proper measure [of growth]. Accordingly, “increase” for irrational animals pertains to the maturity of the body, according to nature’s order, but for us, “increase” pertains to the inner man, according to the progress that leads us to God, which Paul speaks of: “Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before” (Philip. 3:13). This is the increase of mystic visions, the acquisition of godliness, the attainment of fullness [in grace], that we may ever yearn for the things that truly are...Increase, then, with the increase that brings perfection according to God, according to the inner man. Multiply the churches with blessing. Let not discourse concerning God be limited to one place, but let the gospel of salvation be preached throughout all the earth. “Multiply.” Who? Ye that are born according to the Gospel. “Fill the earth.” That is, the flesh [your earthen body] that is given to you for serving [God and mankind]. Let your eye be filled with beholding what is proper. Let your hand be filled with good works. Let the feet be for visiting the sick, and useful for transporting you to what is seemly. Let the whole constitution of your members be filled with works that follow the commandments. This is the meaning of “fill the earth.” The same words were spoken to the irrational animals also, but they take on special significance [for our kind] when we employ that which is “according to the image,” with which we were honored. For the first [the animals] increase bodily, but we spiritually; they fill the earth with their numbers, but we fill with good works the earth to which we are bound; this is our bodily ministry...”

“And fill the earth.” Fill it not by habitation, for if it were so, we the living would be constricted, if the earth were as large as our numbers would be. Rather, fill it with your authority. For to us is given rule over the earth. “Fill the earth.” No doubt, men fill it also by necessity, but He has made us lords to fill it, and we fill it with our thought... “Fill the earth.” He has made us lords. We have dominion over all of the earth, even though we do not have the use of [all of] it... “And fill the earth, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowls of the air, and over the beasts of the earth.” This blessing, this legislation, this dignity has been given to us by God.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Scriptural Passage*,
“Let us make man...,” Homily I and II,
PG, 44:281-184; 272)

“But they will perhaps ask, what then is the meaning of ‘male and female’ (Gen. 1:27) and ‘Be fruitful and multiply?’ (Gen. 1:28) In answer we shall say that ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ does not altogether refer to the multiplying by the marriage connection. For God had power to multiply the race also in different ways, if they kept the precept unbroken to the end. But God, Who knows all things before they have existence, knowing in His foreknowledge that they would fall into transgression in the future and be condemned to death, anticipated this and made ‘male and female,’ and bade them ‘be fruitful and multiply.’”

(St. John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book IV, chap. 24)

“...These words, then, must not be understood only literally, but also spiritually, as referring to Christ and the Church. And [St. Methodius] says that the divine Paul, after expounding these words, says, ‘This is a great mystery; but I speak concerning Christ and the Church’ (Eph 5:32). But even the words ‘increase and multiply’ were spoken not only concerning those who are born of seed and marital relations, or concerning the increase in vegetation, but also concerning those who are born and made perfect in the Spirit, as Paul also exclaims, addressing as children those who were born in this manner through him. For he says, ‘My little children, for whom I travail in birth again until

Christ be formed in you’ (Gal 4:19). And again, ‘for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel’” (1 Cor 4:15).

(St. Photius the Great, *Myriobiblos*, 237, PG 103:1161)

“We have now established, by means of Scriptural arguments that are not to be ignored, the fact that the first man may properly be referred to Christ Himself, inasmuch as he is not merely a figure and representation and image of the Only -Begotten, but precisely this has he become – Wisdom and the Word. For human nature, mingled like water with Wisdom and Life, has become one with that pure Light which inundated it. Hence the Apostle could apply directly to Christ, as arrows to their mark, all that was said of Adam. Thus would it be in excellent accord with this that the Church has been formed from His flesh and bone. For it was for her sake that the Word left His Heavenly Father and came down to earth in order to cling to His Spouse, and slept in the ecstasy of His Passion. Voluntarily did He die for her sake ‘that He might present her to Himself a glorious Church and without blemish, cleansing her by the laver’ [i.e., baptism; *vid.* Eph. 5:27,26] for the reception of that blessed spiritual seed which He sows and plants by secret inspiration in the depths of the soul; and like a woman the Church conceives of this seed and forms it until the day she bears and nurtures it as virtue.

“So too the word ‘Increase and multiply’ (Gen. 1:28) is duly fulfilled as the Church grows day by day in size and in beauty and numbers, thanks to the intimate union between her and the Word, coming down to us even now and continuing His ecstasy in the memorial of His Passion [i.e. the Holy Eucharist]. For otherwise the Church could not conceive and bring forth the faithful by ‘the laver of regeneration’ (Titus 3:5) unless Christ emptied Himself for them too for their conception of Him, as I have said, in the recapitulation of His Passion, and came down from Heaven to die again, and clung to His Spouse, the Church, allowing to be removed from His side a power by which all may grow strong who are built upon Him, who have been born by the laver and receive of His flesh and bone, that is, of His holiness and glory. Correctly interpreted, the flesh and bone of Wisdom is understanding and virtue; and His side is the Spirit of Truth, the Comforter, from Whom the illuminated [i.e., the newly baptized] receive and by whom they are rightly begotten into immortality.”

(St. Methodius of Olympus, *The Symposium – A Treatise on Chastity*, Homily 3,8)



ON THIS QUESTION of marriage and procreation, we have primarily chosen to allow the Holy Fathers to speak for themselves. As we pointed out at the beginning of this paper, the views that they present us are far more nuanced and varied than some would lead us to believe. It is evident that this variety of opinion among the Saints addresses people who are “at different points in their spiritual development.” There is, and can be, no one answer for everyone. The Church Fathers, as we have seen, offer certain basic guidelines, but also a variety of opinions within these guidelines. What is suitable for one, is not suitable for the other. One individual can climb the mountain in a few hours; the second will need a few days; the third may require a lifetime; the fourth may hardly make it past the foothills. Not all have the same spiritual abilities, not all have the same weaknesses. The experienced spiritual father knows this, and must gauge his spiritual counsel accordingly. This is how it has always been, and this is how it shall always be. In any case, Canon 102 of Quinisext demonstrates how the spiritual father must use a variety of spiritual medicines in order to heal and spiritually strengthen and edify various individuals. This is what the holy Canon says:

CANON 102.

IT behooves those who have received from God the power to loose and bind, to consider the quality of the sin and the readiness of the sinner for conversion, and to apply medicine suitable for the disease, lest if he is

injudicious in each of these respects he should fail in regard to the healing of the sick man. For the disease of sin is not simple, but various and multiform, and it germinates many mischievous offshoots, from which much evil is diffused, and it proceeds further until it is checked by the power of the physician. Wherefore he who professes the science of spiritual medicine ought first of all to consider the disposition of him who has sinned, and to see whether he tends to health or (on the contrary) provokes to himself disease by his own behaviour, and to look how he can care for his manner of life during the interval. And if he does not resist the physician, and if the ulcer of the soul is increased by the application of the imposed medicaments, then let him mete out mercy to him according as he is worthy of it. For the whole account is between God and him to whom the pastoral rule has been delivered, to lead back the wandering sheep and to cure that which is wounded by the serpent; and that he may neither cast them down into the precipices of despair, nor loosen the bridle towards dissolution or contempt of life; but in some way or other, either by means of sternness and astringency, or by greater softness and mild medicines, to resist this sickness and exert himself for the healing of the ulcer, now examining the fruits of his repentance and wisely managing the man who is called to higher illumination. For we ought to know two things, to wit, the things which belong to strictness and those which belong to custom, and to follow the traditional form in the case of those who are not fitted for the highest things, as holy Basil teaches us.

There is one standard of health that is set before all (“Be ye perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect”—Matt. 5:48), but the doctor who applies one medication to all patients will cause more harm than good.

Clearly, then, this is a matter of pastoral discernment and wisdom. “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” Amen.

✠Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston