

The Importance of Married Priests

The position and role of a priest's wife (Matushka, Presbytera) is hard to explain to the non-Orthodox. Despite the experience of married priests, the Canons of the Orthodox Church in the West began to insist on priestly celibacy. The matter of married priests in the East was settled firmly by the seventh century. Priestly celibacy was a continuous debate in the West and only came to be insisted upon around the 11th century.

Married priests are normative in Orthodox parishes. The Canons governing marriage and priesthood simply state that a man must be married before he is ordained and that the woman he marries cannot have been married before. This marriage is the only marriage for the priest. If his priest's wife dies, he does not remarry. It is an extremely literal interpretation of "the husband of *one* wife" (Titus 1:6). There are monastic priests and monks, of course, who may help out in parishes, but they are relatively rare. They cannot become pastors, nor is there such a thing as a "celibate priest". An Orthodox priest must either be married or a monastic.

Orthodoxy thus has an experience of priest wives that is two thousand years old. It is neither a novelty nor seen as an accommodation to human needs. The wife of a priest is surrounded by custom and tradition and held a place unlike in any church. Those traditions and customs are simply the expression of church life. For example, the wife of a priest has a title. In Greek, she is called "Presbytera" (the feminine form of "presbyter" or "elder"). In Russian she is called "Matushka". She is thus "beloved mother".

The fact that there is a title points to the role and an honor that surrounds the pastor's wife. Though, a priest's wife is not ordained and does not carry out liturgical functions, she is considered pastorally important in parish life. Different women have different gifts, which get expressed in various ways. Just as in a household with two parents, the priest's wife is not just a companion. To a degree, as the priest is a spiritual father in a congregation, so his wife is a spiritual mother. Like mothers and fathers elsewhere, those roles are expressed in various ways. Thus, the Matushka is present in the life of the parish. She has an important and normative role. Her wisdom is essential. She not only knows the parish, but knows her husband.

In our modern times, there is an increasing tendency to professionalize the priesthood, in which the pastor's wife becomes somewhat of a "corporate spouse". The veneration of the Theotokos (St. Mary, Mother of God) opens the heart to something that gets neglected otherwise. Everywhere around the world, there are Orthodox women who bring wholeness to the life of a parish. We often speak of the "parish family". The role of mother is certainly as essential as that of father.