

THE GOOD WINE:
A PARISH-BASED BRIEF MARRIAGE INTERVENTION

by

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Abstract:

In the context of pastoral ministry, the normal challenges married couples experience in the areas of communication and navigating conflict often demonstrate the fateful disconnect between theology, liturgy, and piety. Helping couples to better understand and apply an Orthodox Christian pastoral vision of marriage can enable them to more effectively live out an Orthodox theological vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom and mutual salvation. This project seeks to help couples reframe the ordinary challenges in communication and conflict in light of such a vision of marriage.

This project develops a model of ministry based on a parish-based brief intervention model, consisting of six pre-recorded interactive video lessons participating couples view together. The lessons ground participating couples in an Orthodox pastoral vision of marriage and highlight some of the limitations that make it harder for individual spouses to live out this vision. The practice of mutual confession and mutual forgiveness is introduced as a practical way to live out an Orthodox vision of marriage as well as to transform marital challenges into opportunities for spiritual, relational, and personal growth.

Based on entrance and exit surveys, the model of ministry was effective in communicating an Orthodox pastoral vision of marriage. Within the context of this vision, participating couples grew in their ability to more effectively navigate conflict in general, to practice mutual confession and forgiveness in particular, and to overcome the disconnect between theology, liturgy, and piety in a practical way. The appendix includes a transcript of the course delivered to participating couples.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I. Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to provide a brief overview of my Doctor of Ministry final project, which addresses the topic of marriage enrichment. I will first discuss the ways in which my experience of parish ministry has informed my thinking on this topic. From there I will move to a discussion of why marriage enrichment is a critical topic. Finally, I will conclude with a description of the overall research process.

II. Parish Ministry Experiences

Father Alexander Schmemmann highlights the problem of what he describes as “the fateful divorce between theology, liturgy, and piety.”¹ The result of this divorce is a day-to-day experience of Christian life that is disconnected from the liturgical life of the Church. I see this disconnect in parish ministry through the ordinary struggles that husbands and wives experience as part of their marriage.

Based on my pastoral experience, it seems to me that when couples encounter such moments, they are really confronting the two-fold struggle to make sense of their marital challenges as well as determine how best to navigate them. To the extent that I have been able to help spouses begin to grasp an Orthodox vision of marriage through the help of God’s grace, they have been able to begin to see their struggles in a new light. This is because an Orthodox vision of marriage encompasses the idea of marriage as a path of mutual martyrdom and mutual salvation. Both concepts are lived out in marriage to the extent that husbands and wives learn to die to themselves and begin to live for the good of the other. To the extent that I am able to help couples re-frame their understanding of marriage as an opportunity of dying to self, in light of a vision of marriage that is communicated through the Orthodox Marriage Service, my ministry is a form of mystagogy, understood as the explanation of a sacred mystery.²

When it comes to the practical aspects of navigating the everyday challenges of marriage, many of the difficulties in this area can be reduced to either ineffective communication skills or a lack of practical skills for navigating conflict. That said, absent an Orthodox vision of marriage, skills alone are of limited utility in helping couples resolve their challenges. Because of this, I developed an interest in attempting to create a model of ministry to strengthen marriages by helping couples to re-frame the experience of the ordinary challenges that arise in marriage.

III. Significance

The topic of strengthening marriages is significant to me personally as both a husband and a parish priest. Helping couples to understand, embrace, and apply an Orthodox Christian vision

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism*, ed. Schmemmann 1997 (Crestwood, NY :St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 12.

² Goffredo Boselli, *The Spiritual Meaning of the Liturgy: School of Prayer, Source of Life* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 4-5.

of marriage is a way to lead them towards spiritual growth as well as build up the local parish community as the body of Christ. Finally, at the level of the Church more broadly speaking, research in the area of strengthening marriages might yield a model of ministry that can help marriages across a variety of ministry contexts and parish settings.

IV. A Brief Description of the Research Process

The overall goal of my research is to create a marriage-enrichment program that communicates on Orthodox Christian vision of marriage to participating couples. One key element of the program will be to reframe common marital challenges in the areas of communication and conflict in light of marriage as an opportunity to die to self. Given that the primary focus of the program will be to communicate an Orthodox vision of marriage, technical skills will play a secondary role and serve as a means to help couples actually apply an Orthodox vision of marriage in their own marriages.

The program itself will consist of a series of six pre-recorded, one-hour videos that couples will be asked to view together bi-weekly. Participating couples will be asked to complete various surveys before, during, and after the program in an attempt to gather enough data to determine whether or not the program is effective. Effectiveness will be evaluated in terms of both communicating an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and applying this vision in day-to-day married life.

V. Conclusion

In this introduction I have provided an overview of how I selected the topic of marriage-enrichment for my D. Min. final project. After discussing the relevant experiences in parish ministry and the significance of the topic, I then provided an overview of the overall research process. In the next chapter, we will next turn to the theological foundations of this project by taking a closer look at the structure, prayers, and scriptural readings of the Marriage Service.

Chapter 2: An Orthodox Pastoral Vision of Marriage

I. Introduction

In order to effectively navigate the normal challenges of conflict and communication in an Orthodox Christian marriage, it can be helpful to frame them within the context of the Christian life as a whole. The goal of life in Christ is *theosis*, or becoming as much like God as is humanly possible in this life through a process of ongoing humility and repentance. Humility and repentance are important dimensions of the Christian life in general and of married life in particular. The Orthodox Marriage Service (Crowning Service) reveals marriage to be a means of transformation for husband and wife. This transformation is the fruit of ongoing humility and repentance as both husband and wife learn to live out their marriage as ongoing mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification and a dying to self. In light of the ongoing transformation of husband and wife within marriage, challenges in the areas of conflict and communication can be understood as opportunities to encounter Christ in one another. As encounters with Christ, these are also opportunities for mutual martyrdom and mutual sanctification and for spiritual growth. In short, they are a means for the salvation of the couple, which for an Orthodox Christian perspective encompasses *theosis*. This is the ultimate purpose of marriage.

In this chapter, we will explore marriage through the lens of the Orthodox Marriage Service. The purpose of our exploration is to develop the key characteristics of an Orthodox pastoral vision of marriage so that we can better understand how navigating the normal challenges of conflict and communication in marriage can lead to spiritual growth. Beginning with a look at the structure and prayers of the Marriage Service, we will then examine selected scriptural and patristic sources. Our consideration of Scripture will focus on the Epistle and Gospel readings of the Marriage Service. To develop our patristic perspective, we will focus specifically on the teachings of St John Chrysostom as highlighted in his exegesis of the Marriage Service Epistle. Finally, we will draw the scriptural and patristic aspects together in order to articulate an Orthodox Christian pastoral vision of marriage. This vision will serve to theologially ground the ordinary experience of navigating challenges in the areas of conflict and communication in marriage. In addition, this vision will serve as the theological foundation for the intervention designed as part of this project.

The icon of the Wedding Feast at Cana is a helpful reference as we begin our exploration. Although there are various depictions of this icon, there are several common features. In addition to the bridegroom and bride, the icon depicts Christ, the Most Holy Theotokos, and the steward of the feast, as well as other figures. The bridegroom and bride are pictured centrally, wearing crowns. Christ is blessing them while looking at the Most Holy Theotokos.¹ This imagery is drawn mainly from the nuptial imagery in the book of Genesis and in the letter to the Ephesians and highlights

¹ Alkiviadis Calivas, "Marriage: The Sacrament of Love and Communion," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 40, no. 3-4 (1995): 247-275, at 250.

two truths about marriage:² 1) God himself is the author and celebrant of marriage as revealed by the depiction of Christ blessing the couple, and 2) Marriage is a relationship of love modeled after the relationship between Christ and his Church.

Both of these truths affirm the reality of marriage as a transformational participation in the divine life.³ Through marriage, husband and wife can begin to participate in the life of the Kingdom of Heaven even as they prepare to enter the Kingdom when it is fully revealed.⁴ Through the structure of the service and through the text of the prayers, the Marriage Service introduces various aspects of God himself as the author and celebrant of marriage and marriage as a relationship of love modeled after the relationship of Christ and the Church. These two truths are ultimately revealed in the Gospel and Epistle readings of the service.

II. The Witness of Tradition: The Orthodox Marriage Service

The Marriage Service is both an encapsulation of the Orthodox teaching on marriage as well as a symbolic summary of married life.⁵ By taking a close look at the service, we can begin to identify some of the specific contours and characteristics of marriage as a transformational participation in the divine life. One thing that becomes evident is the fact that the primary context of marriage is ecclesial: A bride and groom become one body in a mystery expressed in terms of the Church and the Eucharist.⁶ The ecclesial dimension of marriage points to the communal dimension of marriage, another key characteristic from an Orthodox Christian perspective. An authentic marriage can exist only within the context of an Orthodox Christian parish community. The Marriage Service is the means by which the bride and groom affirm their own faith as well as their willingness to integrate their life as a couple into the communal life of the Church by means of the parish.⁷ In doing so they form a new community as a domestic Church.

As we proceed with our exploration of the Marriage Service, we will focus first on the two-fold structure of the service. We will then touch on the chief prayers of the service. From there we will move to the central liturgical action of the service, which is the Rite of Crowning. We will conclude with the implications of the Marriage Service as a sacrament as understood from an Orthodox theological perspective.

IIA. Betrothal and Crowning

The Marriage Service consists of the Service of Betrothal and the Service of Crowning.⁸ The betrothal, normally conducted in the vestibule, is the Christian form of natural marriage, which is a marriage that has not been sanctified through the holy mysteries of the Church. Father Alexander Schmemmann describes such a natural marriage as a marriage in need of fulfillment and

² Ibid.

³ Peter A. Chamberas, *This is a Great Mystery: Christian Marriage in the Orthodox Church*, 2nd ed. (Brookline, MA: Metropolis of Boston, 2017), 21.

⁴ Metropolitan Georges Khodr, "Great Mystery: Reflections on the Meaning of Marriage," *St Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 8 (1964): 31-37, at 36.

⁵ Calivas, "Marriage," 252.

⁶ Ibid., 251.

⁷ Ibid., 259.

⁸ Orthodox Church in America, "Holy Matrimony," 2013. accessed Oct. 22, 2021, <https://www.oca.org/files/PDF/Music/Marriage/marriage-service.pdf>

redemption.⁹ The procession into the nave that occurs at the end of the betrothal is a procession into the Kingdom of God and the entrance of this world into the world to come.¹⁰ As an entrance into the world to come, the procession points to the Service of Crowning as the beginning of fulfillment and redemption for marriage. From this perspective, the two-fold structure of the Service of Betrothal and the Service of Crowning presents marriage as a journey that bride and groom are beginning together toward the Kingdom. This journey begins with the Service of Betrothal. The three main prayers of the Marriage Service help to illuminate some of the elements of this journey.

IIB. Prayers

The first prayer of the Marriage Service begins with a reference to Genesis 1 and focuses on the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam as well as the institution of natural marriage. The prayer goes on to interpret the events of Genesis 1 and 2 (cf. Gen 1.26–2.4; 2.4b–25) in the context of marriage.¹¹

O holy God and creator of all things visible and invisible, out of love for humankind, You transformed the rib of Adam the forefather into a woman, and You blessed them and said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over the earth;' and, by uniting them together, You declared them both to be one member...

The reference to the command “Be fruitful and multiply,” is an affirmation that marriage makes it possible for husband and wife to participate in the life of God. The underlying Greek for the phrase “be fruitful” means to grow and become perfect.¹² Similarly, the underlying Greek for “multiply” means “to make full or to increase,” encompassing a qualitative dimension.¹³ Taken together this two-fold command reveals marriage to be the path for husband and wife to participate in the divine life by becoming perfect, or reaching the end for which they were created, which from an Orthodox understanding is to grow more and more into the likeness of God. This process takes place in marriage through the relationship husband and wife share by drawing them out of their self-centeredness and isolation¹⁴ and into communion with Christ and each other. Whereas human effort and love alone cannot facilitate this transformation, love transformed by God’s grace working in the couple as they cooperate with God can. This transformation will be lived out daily by husband and wife in their marriage as they struggle to love each other with sacrificial, Christlike love.¹⁵ This is the type of love referred to in the first prayer of the Marriage Service as well as in other prayers of the service by petitions for “chastity” and “a marriage bed unassailed.”¹⁶

The second prayer of the Marriage Service enumerates the patriarchal couples from the Old Testament, Joachim and Anna, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and other couples blessed by God

⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1982), 88.

¹⁰ Ibid., 89.

¹¹ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 70.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹⁵ Calivas, “Marriage,” 253.

¹⁶ Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 152.

throughout salvation history. It also lists different examples of God's deliverance:¹⁷

Bless them, O Lord our God, as Thou didst bless Abraham and Sarah. Bless them, O Lord our God, as Thou didst bless Isaac and Rebecca. Bless them, O Lord our God, as Thou didst bless Jacob and all the patriarchs. Bless them, O Lord our God, as Thou didst bless Joseph and Aseneth. Bless them, O Lord our God, as Thou didst bless Moses and Zipporah. Bless them, O Lord our God, as Thou didst bless Joachim and Anna. Bless them, O Lord our God, as Thou didst bless Zachariah and Elizabeth. Preserve them, O Lord our God, as Thou didst preserve Noah in the ark. Preserve them, O Lord our God, as Thou didst preserve Jonah in the belly of the whale. Preserve them, O Lord our God, as Thou didst preserve the three holy children from the fire, sending down upon them dew from heaven...

Through this prayer, the bridegroom and bride become identified with the patriarchal couples and others who have been delivered by God. Being thus identified with other figures from salvation history, the couple is invited through this prayer to enter into the mystery of salvation history as servants of redemption and faithful witnesses to the work of God by means of their marriage.¹⁸ Their marriage will be the primary context in which they do this. Their response to this invitation is to live their marriage as a cooperation with God's grace so that it can be transformed into a new creation.¹⁹

The third prayer of the Marriage Service can be understood as a summary of the first two prayers as well as of the entire Rite of Crowning:²⁰

O holy God, who didst form man from the dust, and didst fashion woman from his rib, and didst join her unto him as a helper, for it seemed good to Thy majesty that man should not be alone upon earth: Do Thou, the same Lord, stretch out now also Thy hand from Thy holy dwelling-place, and unite this Thy servant, _____, and this Thy handmaid, _____; for by Thee is the husband joined unto the wife. Unite them in one mind; wed them into one flesh, granting to them of the fruit of the body and the procreation of fair children.

This prayer serves as a two-fold reminder that 1) God himself is the author of marriage, and 2) He is the one now joining the couple together into a new reality of one mind and one flesh. The supernatural love required to actually grow toward and achieve this unity is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who is invoked upon the couple in the actual crowning itself.

II.C. Crowning

The Crowning is the central rite of the Marriage Service. In the Rite of Crowning, the priest imposes crowns upon the head of the bride and groom, with the following prayer: "O Lord our God crown them with glory and honor." This prayer is an invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the couple like the *epiklesis* over the Holy Gifts in the Divine Liturgy.²¹ In the same way that the gifts

¹⁷ Orthodox Church in America, "Holy Matrimony".

¹⁸ Calivas, "Marriage," 257.

¹⁹ Ibid., 258.

²⁰ Orthodox Church in America, "Holy Matrimony".

²¹ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 82.

are transformed, the couple is transformed into a new creation.²²

The Rite of Crowning points to the ascetical dimension of marriage.²³ St John Chrysostom helps us better understand this ascetical dimension by explaining that the crowns imposed upon the heads of bride and groom are symbolic of victory over the passions.²⁴ The couple, now crowned and joined together by God, have also been empowered by God. With God's help, they will struggle to make their marriage a lived experience of their victory over the passions. To the extent they overcome their passions they will be able to embrace and live out the conditions of an authentic Christian marriage. Central to this will be the daily choice to accept the Gospel and bear the Cross of Christ through lives of joyful self-offering and service to each other.²⁵

This joyful self-offering and service to one another is reflected in the New Testament imagery of crowns as a sign of victory such as athletes win through rigorous training.²⁶ Marriage will serve as an "arena" in which husband and wife will train spiritually. This spiritual training will consist of self-discipline as they struggle for an "imperishable wreath" (cf. 1 Cor 9.24–25).²⁷ Marriage crowns as signs of victory represent God's reward for the couple's struggle to live their marriage in a manner consistent with new life in Christ (cf. 2 Tim 4.7–8; 1 Pet 5.4).²⁸ Because the martyrs are those who have given the ultimate example of living their lives (and in some cases their marriages) in a manner consistent with new life in Christ, the wedding crowns are also a reminder of the martyr's crown.

Understanding the crowning of the bride and groom in the context of martyrdom does not mean that Christian marriage must involve suffering, but it does mean that the couple is called to a life of faithfulness to each other and to Christ.²⁹ This is lived out as husband and wife bear witness to Christ in their lives through dying to their own desires. This daily dying to self is the way husband and wife will live sacrificially for one another. This asceticism of love is a particular form of martyrdom for husband and wife³⁰ and only possible with the help of the Holy Spirit, who has transformed the couple through Rite of Crowning.

The couple will live out the transformation that has occurred throughout their married lives. Over time, the Holy Spirit will cleanse them from selfishness and transform their love. The fact that this cleansing and transformation will take time reveals marriage to be a journey. Cleansing and transformation are the means by which marriage is brought into the life of the Church.³¹ As the marriage is transformed over time, the love between the couple will become a way of

²² Ibid.

²³ Vigen Guroian, *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 124.

²⁴ John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 25.

²⁵ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 83.

²⁶ Ibid., 81.

²⁷ Ibid., 82.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ David C. Ford, Mary S. Ford, and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, *Marriage as a Path to Holiness: Lives of Married Saints*, 2nd ed., rev., and exp. (Waymart, PA: St Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2013), xxxii.

³¹ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 83.

communion with God.³² This transformed love is manifested in the virtue of chastity, prayed for throughout the marriage service. Marital chastity does not exclude sexual love but refers to a love that is purified and transformed. This is a love that learns to transcend the desire to possess and control one's spouse, or to use one's spouse for selfish ends.³³ Understood in light of Orthodox theology, such a transformation is another dimension of the ascesis of Christian marriage, one which fosters true communion between husband and wife.³⁴ From this perspective the Rite of Crowning can be understood as an expression of the couple's entrance into the Kingdom of God³⁵ and the rest of the marriage as the lived experience of bearing out the reality of this entrance.

IID. The Marriage Service as a Sacrament

Marriage in the Orthodox Church is a sacrament, which implies the idea of transformation.³⁶ As a service of initiation, the Marriage Service re-creates the bride and groom as one body and brings them into a new mode of being.³⁷ The Marriage Service confers an actual transformation and at the same time begins a process of ongoing transformation for the bride and groom. Throughout their marriage, their relationship will be conformed to the relationship between Christ and the Church.³⁸ This process reflects the dynamic reality of the Christian life as a whole and married life in particular. In light of this dynamism, the ongoing transformation of marriage can be understood as a deepening and perfecting of the grace conferred through the sacrament of the Marriage Service.³⁹ This deepening and perfecting are part of the ascetical struggle of learning how to love with authentic, Christlike love.⁴⁰ As the spouses grow in their mutual Christlike love, the reality of their one-flesh union will also grow.⁴¹

Another aspect of the transformation brought about by the sacrament of marriage is the restoration of the authentic humanity of husband and wife.⁴² As their human love becomes more and more Christlike, husband and wife will be better able to transcend their limited, fallen humanity, becoming more and more united with each other "in Christ."⁴³ This is another way in which the sacrament of marriage makes the bride and groom participants in the divine life.⁴⁴

As a sacrament, marriage is a gift bestowed upon the couple by God to facilitate their

³² Ibid.

³³ Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 124.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 84.

³⁶ Schmemmann, *Life*, 81.

³⁷ George Koshy, *Marriage: the Mystery of Love: An Eastern Christian Perspective* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 2016), 85.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ John Breck and Lyn Breck, *Stages on Life's Way: Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*, Foundations Series, vol. 1 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 64.

⁴⁰ Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Sex, Marriage, and Theosis," *The Wheel* 13/14, (Spring/Summer 2018): 91-97, at 92.

⁴¹ Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, *Sacraments and Other Rites*, (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019), 206.

⁴² Koshy, *Mystery of Love*, 79.

⁴³ George Koshy, *The Wedding in Cana: The Power & Purpose of the First Sign of Jesus Christ*. (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), 158.

⁴⁴ Meyendorff, *Marriage*, 20.

journey into Christ's Kingdom. Without the help of God's grace this journey would be impossible.⁴⁵ With God's help, marriage will become the means of effecting this passage. Because of the dynamic nature of the transformation that begins with the Wedding Service, the sacrament of marriage cannot be understood as being limited to the text of the service or to the blessing conferred. The sacrament of marriage includes the bride and groom and exists in the couple.⁴⁶ In the couple, the sacrament of marriage will deepen and continue to grow as a spiritual reality throughout the couple's lives.⁴⁷ This dynamic of ongoing development points to the need for husband and wife to continue to accept and cooperate with the gifts offered through the sacrament of marriage.⁴⁸ The Epistle and Gospel texts from the Marriage Service help us to understand what this cooperation looks like as it is lived out in the life of husband and wife.

III. A Scriptural Witness: The Wedding Service Readings

In this section we continue our examination of the Orthodox Marriage Service, narrowing our focus to the Gospel and Epistle readings. Within the broader context of the New Testament, marriage is presented within the context of resurrection and everlasting life (cf. Mt 22.23–32; Mk 12.18–27; Lk 20.27–37).⁴⁹ This context reinforces the new reality of marriage as related to divine realities,⁵⁰ and thus is oriented toward the Kingdom. In this section we will develop a scriptural perspective on what this means. Rather than an exhaustive scriptural exegesis, we will focus on how both passages inform an Orthodox pastoral vision of marriage.

IIIA. Marriage Gospel: John 2:1-11

In those days there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with his disciples. When the wine failed, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "O woman, what have you to do with Me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now six stone jars were standing there, for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast." So they took it. When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine; but you have kept the good wine until now." This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him.⁵¹

The account of the Wedding Feast at Cana presents a verbal icon of the transformation of the spouses that begins during the Marriage Service, and which will continue to take place throughout the marriage. Although the presence of Christ at the wedding in this Gospel reveals

⁴⁵ Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 115.

⁴⁶ Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, "Toward a Theology of Marriage in the Orthodox Church," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 22 (Fall 1977):249-283, at 283.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Meyendorff, *Marriage*, 20.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁵¹ Orthodox Church in America, "Holy Matrimony".

that it is Christ himself who transforms marriage into a participation in the Kingdom of God,⁵² the cooperation of husband and wife is necessary to affect this participation. Their mutual cooperation is manifested by husband and wife offering themselves and their daily interactions, large and small, to the Lord to be changed.⁵³

The key aspect of this Gospel reading in the context of the Marriage Service is the revelation that marriage is capable of being transformed by Christ. The changing of water into wine can be understood as a transformation of the marriage in general and the couple's love for one another in particular. This is lived out in everyday married life, leading to the transformation of the entirety of the marriage over time. This transformation will allow husband and wife to experience their marriage as a participation in the life of God.⁵⁴

The transformation of the couple's passions and their love is an important aspect of their participation in the divine life. Such a transformation will enable them to live out the ideal of mutual submission that is introduced in the Epistle reading with ever greater intensity. Through the transformation of unstable passions, marriage becomes a locus for the presence of Christ.⁵⁵ As loving service and humility between husband and wife grow over time, marriage is revealed as a manifestation of the reality of the Kingdom.⁵⁶

IIIB. Marriage Epistle: Ephesians 5:20-33

Brethren, give thanks always for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that the church might be presented before him in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one." This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.⁵⁷

Within the context of the Marriage Service Epistle, St Paul reveals marriage to be a "great mystery" (Eph 5.33), an expression of the spiritual union between God and humankind.⁵⁸ In order

⁵² Koshy, *Wedding in Cana*, 154.

⁵³ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 89.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Josiah B. Trenham, *Marriage and Virginty According to St John Chrysostom* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2013), 166.

⁵⁶ Alfeyev, *Sacraments*, 206.

⁵⁷ Orthodox Church in America, "Holy Matrimony".

⁵⁸ Trenham, *Marriage and Virginty*, 149.

to examine the nature of this mystery, we have to begin with the broader context of the letter to the Ephesians as a whole. St Paul dedicates the first half of the letter to the Ephesians (chapters 1–3) to focusing on the redemptive work of God in human history through Christ and the Church.⁵⁹ In the second half (chapters 4–6) he presents the practical consequences that flow from this reality, with an emphasis on the new type of life lived by the baptized.⁶⁰ St Paul reveals that marriage is part of God’s redemptive work, and that it can only be understood in light of the new type of life into which the baptized enter.

The opening line of the Epistle reading is an invitation to the bride and groom to be thankful in all circumstances, including difficult ones.⁶¹ This opening admonition reveals that thankfulness as the fundamental attitude of a Christian husband and wife:

Brethren, give thanks always for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

In addition to thankfulness, the ideal of imitating Christ by serving each other in love, a key dimension of an Orthodox pastoral vision of marriage, is presented as a lens through which to understand the rest of the reading:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

As the interpretive key for the rest of the Epistle reading, this admonition reveals that all that follows is intended to be understood within the context of mutual submission. Practically speaking, this mutual submission is lived out in marriage by each spouse laying aside their own will and choosing to follow God's will for marriage.⁶² It follows from this that an underlying attitude of service and humility is a key aspect for both husbands and wives. Because of the emphasis on mutual submission, husbands and wives are equally subject to each other, contrary to the popular misreading of this passage. This mutual submission and obedience to one another serves as a wellspring of love for husband and wife, as it is undertaken for the sake of love for God.⁶³ Mutual submission is not only an expression of the love for God, but it helps love for God to grow and infuses the love between husband and wife with a supernatural quality as they become more and more bound to the love of God.⁶⁴

In addition to emphasizing the relationship of mutual submission between spouses, the marriage Epistle reveals a deeper theological meaning for marriage.⁶⁵ Being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ is the way that husband and wife encounter Christ through one another, thus making mutual submission a way of recognizing and reverencing the image of Christ in each

⁵⁹ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 84.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Christopher Stade, Theophylactus, and Nicodemus, *The Explanation of the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Ephesians* (House Springs, MO: Chrysostom Press, 2013), 80.

⁶² John Abdalah, and Nicholas G. Mamey, *Building an Orthodox Marriage: A Practical Commentary on the Eastern Orthodox Marriage Rite* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2017), 18.

⁶³ Stade, *Ephesians*, 80.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 84.

other.⁶⁶ In this way, marriage is revealed as an encounter with Christ through one's spouse.

The concept of mutual submission for the sake of Christ reinforces the idea that marriage is oriented toward drawing husband and wife closer to Christ and to each other through authentic, Christian self-sacrificing love.⁶⁷ This type of love can only grow and develop over time and is the result of human love transformed by God's grace. In this light the marriage Epistle illuminates the specific "how" of the transformation that takes place within marriage by the transforming power of divine grace.

St Paul goes on to delineate specific roles for husband and wife as the manner in which their mutual submission will be lived out:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

By laying out these responsibilities within the context of the relationship between Christ and the Church, St Paul reveals mutual submission as a practical aspect of life in Christ versus a mere human obligation. It is important to note that the voluntary subjection of the wife to her husband is an act of love.⁶⁸ As the Church loves and submits to Christ so the wife loves and submits to her husband.⁶⁹ The husband represents Christ and is the leader who provides for his bride, the "head and protector (savior)."⁷⁰ Saint Paul further emphasizes the role by first comparing the husband to Christ, and then referring to the wife as the husband's own body.

Because this passage was originally addressed to a Christian community, and because it is being read in the midst of a Christian community during the Marriage Service, there is an implicit assumption that husband and wife are committed to living out a Christian vision of marriage. Such an assumption allows us to better understand the following verse:

As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.

An authentic Christian understanding of marriage as mutual service is assumed as the context for understanding this passage.⁷¹ Such an assumption precludes abuse and mistreatment. In fact, everything that we have developed to this point in terms of Christlike love, victory over the passions, and marriage as a participation in the Kingdom all inform how we are to understand the concept of a wife's subjection to her husband and the husband's love for his wife.

By framing his admonition in the context of Christ and the Church, St Paul is reinforcing the idea that marriage points beyond itself. Saint Paul continues to expand on the concept of Christian marriage as an allegory or a sign for the relationship between Christ and the Church. Turning from the role of wives to be subject to their husbands out of love, he goes on to explain how husbands subject themselves to their wives in love, in the same way that Christ loved the Church:

⁶⁶ Abdalah, *Practical Commentary*, 18.

⁶⁷ Ford, *Marriage as a Path*, xxx.

⁶⁸ Stade, *Ephesians*, 81.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 82.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that the church might be presented before him in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

The love of a husband for his wife is a love that is oriented toward self-sacrifice and the good of the other. It is a love of service. In this we see that as the wife must grow beyond her own inclinations and subject herself to her husband, the husband must grow beyond his own inclinations and passions to truly love and cherish his wife. This is how he will subject himself to his wife. This is where the asceticism of love is lived out in day-to-day married life.

Saint Paul then shifts to a more practical analogy while still continuing with the theme of marriage as a reflection of the relationship between Christ and the Church:

Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church

Saint Paul deploys the motivation of self-love to explain the duty of husbands to love their wives. Just as a husband loves and takes care of his own body, he should love and take care of his wife. The duty to love is not only out of a duty to love as Christ loves, but because he and his wife have been joined together in "one flesh."⁷²

As St Paul begins to conclude his address to husbands and wives, he reminds his hearers that the obligation of mutual submission and the particular duties of husband and wife are rooted within the reality of being members of the Church:

...because we are members of his body.

To those who have come to the Church to be crowned, and to the community assembled to witness the event and share in their joy, St Paul is essentially saying that all these duties flow from being baptized into Christ. Apart from the dynamics of the Christian life and the transformation that has taken place through the grace of the Holy Spirit in the Rite of Crowning, the mutual submission and love called for are incomprehensible.

Saint Paul ends with a final admonition for the husband to love his wife and to preserve the unity of love with her:

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one."

The husband has departed from his own family of origin and has joined himself to his wife into an "unbreakable union."⁷³ With this final admonition to love, St Paul reveals more clearly the deeper meaning of marriage as a type of the relationship between Christ and the Church:

This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church.

The holy mystery of marriage finds its ultimate meaning in serving as a living icon of Christ and the Church. In the context of the preceding verse, St Paul leverages the earliest scriptural reference to the joining of a man and woman (Adam and Eve), and reveals that the statement about a man

⁷² Ibid., 84.

⁷³ Ibid., 85.

leaving father and mother and being joined to his wife similarly points to Christ and the Church.⁷⁴ This is fulfilled in Christ assuming flesh in the Incarnation and joining himself to his bride the Church and becoming one Spirit with her through baptism.⁷⁵

Saint Paul concludes this passage by affirming that even though marriage is an analogy of the relationship between Christ and the Church, all that he has written still applies to individual husbands and wives as well:

...however let each one of you love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

This is a reminder that Christian marriage is a literal union of the flesh while at the same time a living spiritual allegory. In the union of marriage, love should prevail,⁷⁶ meaning that mutual submission is ultimately an act of love for Christ and love for each other. In the next section we will build on this theme as we explore St John Chrysostom's vision of marriage.

IV. A Patristic Witness: St John Chrysostom

Marriage plays a significant role in St John Chrysostom's theological vision.⁷⁷ On the topic of marriage, he is the most prolific of the Greek fathers.⁷⁸ Because of this, his comments on the wedding Epistle can help us to better understand Christian marriage from a patristic perspective. Saint John Chrysostom sees marriage as a means to holiness for husband and wife⁷⁹ and as a means for drawing husband and wife back into communion with God.⁸⁰ His teachings present self-control and marital harmony as ideals for Christian marriage.⁸¹ When a husband and wife are as united as they should be, theirs is the closest of all human relationships.⁸² Saint John Chrysostom even goes so far as to say that the love of a husband and wife is such that it even has the force to hold society together.⁸³

IVA. Wives, Be Subject to Your Husbands

Although the entire passage of Ephesians 5.20–33 is understood within the broader context of mutual subjection, it is lived out practically in different ways by husband and wife. Wives are invited to be subject to their husbands for the sake of harmony,⁸⁴ as equal authority between husband and wife could disrupt the peace and harmony of the marriage.⁸⁵ Saint John Chrysostom uses the example of the structure of the Church and the concept of authority being vested in one person to draw this out.⁸⁶ He sees the wife's subjection to her husband as "to the Lord" as an act of

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 83.

77 Trenham, *Marriage and Virginit*y, 83.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 121.

81 Ibid., 104.

82 John Chrysostom, Catherine P. Roth, and David Anderson, *On Marriage and Family Life*, Popular Patristics Series, vol. 7 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 43.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid., 45.

85 Ibid., 53.

86 Ibid.

service offered to the Lord for the sake of harmony within the marriage.⁸⁷

The husband is also called to render service to the Lord in the context of Christian marriage. The husband is described as the "head of the wife" in the same way that Christ is the head of the Church and its savior. Saint John Chrysostom focuses on this to emphasize the fact that the headship of the husband is lived out as service to and sacrifice for his wife. Such service and sacrifice are characterized by a husband's active efforts to foster the well-being of his wife.⁸⁸ In the same way the wife is invited to be subject to her husband, the husband is in turn invited to love his wife, complementing her obedience with his love.⁸⁹ These two dimensions are meant to co-exist and support one another.

IVB. Husbands Should Love Their Wives as Their Own Bodies

Just as the wife's obedience is compared to the obedience the Church offers Christ, the husband's love is expected to lead to the same care that Christ takes for the Church, to include suffering and even death.⁹⁰ Saint John Chrysostom points out that St Paul essentially intensifies the call for husbands to love their wives by reminding husbands that their wives are their own bodies.⁹¹ Returning to the language of Genesis and the concept of "bone of my bones" (Gen 2.23) and "they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2.24), St John Chrysostom goes on to present this in a Christological context by stating that because husband and wife are both members of Christ's body, they are his flesh and bones. This roots marriage within the mystery of baptism and a sharing in the life of Christ, as well as within the Eucharist, by which husband and wife come to share in the divine nature.⁹² In this sense, Christian marriage and its dimensions cannot be understood apart from the experience of the sacramental life of the Church.

IVC. For This Is a Great Mystery

Saint John Chrysostom explains St Paul's "great mystery" by combining two illustrations: the natural body and Christ's body.⁹³ In terms of the natural body, the relationship between husband and wife is seen as an image of the relationship between Christ and the Church, as well as Christ and the individual Christian. When a man leaves his family of origin and is joined to his wife, their union with each other produces a child as a visible instantiation of their one-flesh union.

In speaking of Christ's body, St John emphasizes that Christians are made one flesh through their communion with Christ.⁹⁴ He explains that through the two-fold illustration of the natural body and Christ's body, St Paul reveals the Incarnation of Christ to be the great mystery.⁹⁵ He left the Father to become Incarnate and to marry his bride the Church to become one spirit with her (cf. 1 Cor 6.17).⁹⁶

By describing the Lord as the great mystery and referring Christian marriage to this

87 Ibid., 45.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 53.

90 Ibid., 46.

91 Ibid., 50.

92 Ibid., 51.

93 Ibid., 52.

94 Ibid., 51.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid., 52.

mystery, St John Chrysostom emphasizes the duties of husband and wife within the context of a lived imitation of the self-sacrificing love and obedience of Christ. A marriage lived out in this way, in his vision, is a marriage in which self-sacrificing love on the part of both husband and wife should prevail over all.⁹⁷ His description of marriage as the sacrament of love characterizes this.⁹⁸ Such an emphasis on love helps us to contextualize the experience in marriage of navigating typical challenges in the areas of conflict and communication in light of his theological vision of marriage.

IVD. Practical Dimensions for Marital Conflict

In addressing the question of how a husband or wife should respond when the other fails to subject themselves or love as Christ commands, St John asserts that each spouse should focus on their own struggle to be transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ through marriage. In this way, we understand that the commandment to be subject to the other and the commandment to love are not conditional. The husband loves his wife even if she is not subject to him, even if she does not respect him. The wife is subject to her husband even if he does not act toward her in a loving way.⁹⁹ The ideal articulated by St John Chrysostom for husbands is “untiring love,”¹⁰⁰ which precludes “threats, or violence, or terror, or anything like that.”¹⁰¹ Although addressed specifically to husbands, this ideal can be applied to both spouses. This is an ideal that informs how spouses navigate challenges with conflict and communication in marriage.

Saint John's guidance to husbands who seek a greater degree of respect is for them to show a greater degree of love. As part of this obligation to love in a way that is sacrificial and modeled after the love of Christ for the Church, St John says that husbands should “provide for their wives with everything and endure trouble for her sake.”¹⁰² Saint John shows the power of love by saying it was through love that Christ subjected the Church to himself, even after she had turned her back on him.¹⁰³ Saint John suggests that even if a wife belittles, despises, or mocks, the husband's response is one of affection, kindness, and a display of his great regard.¹⁰⁴ The proper attitude of a husband toward his wife is love and patience.¹⁰⁵

As the head, the husband is called to be an example. Saint John Chrysostom says that he should give the example of temperance, gentleness, and respect, thus inspiring the same virtues in his wife.¹⁰⁶ In this way, we can begin to understand how the prayers for chastity in the Marriage Service are lived out, and how the passions are transformed to allow for the development of Christlike, self-sacrificing love.

As we turn toward a synthesis of what we have developed thus far in this chapter, St John Chrysostom's admonishment to married couples serves as a helpful summary to this section:¹⁰⁷

⁹⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁹⁸ Ford, *Marriage as a Path*, ix.

⁹⁹ Chrysostom, *On Marriage*, 54.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 46.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 56.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 46.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰⁷ Trenham, *Marriage and Virginity*, 202.

Use marriage appropriately, and you shall be the first in the Kingdom and enjoy every good thing!

V. Synthesis: An Orthodox Theological Vision of Marriage

The appropriate use of marriage is a means for husband and wife to cooperate with God's grace in order to be formed into the image of Christ.¹⁰⁸ As they are formed more and more into the likeness of Christ, husband and wife become more authentically human and grow in their communion with God.¹⁰⁹ Tied intimately to the Holy Mysteries of Baptism and Eucharist, marriage makes a husband and wife into one new person,¹¹⁰ and their unity of love makes them an image of the relationship between Christ and the Church.¹¹¹ This image is revealed over time through the transformative power of marriage as husband and wife live out their reality as a "new creation of one flesh" with the help of the Holy Spirit day by day.¹¹²

VA. Authentic Humanity

According to the patristic tradition, Christ is the true image of God.¹¹³ As the model and archetype of authentic humanity (cf. 1 Jn 3.2, Col 3.10), Christ reveals that to become truly human is to grow in relational existence. This is revealed and lived out in marriage by two baptized Christians who are regularly partaking of the mystery of Holy Communion, who marry "in the Lord" and thus become "one flesh." Calivas describes the relationship between husband and wife as so close as to make them a single substance, though without confusion or change.¹¹⁴

The union of a husband and wife in marriage prefigures the total Christ, understood as humanity deified. Marriage serves as a means for husband and wife to grow ever more and more united interiorly through self-sacrificing love for one another.¹¹⁵ Husbands and wives can only find themselves by "forgetting" themselves for the sake of the spouse. By their self-sacrificing love, they discover themselves as the image of Christ, who reveals the true meaning of love.¹¹⁶

Another way that Christ reveals authentic humanity is by laying down his life in love. This points to the fact that becoming authentically human in the likeness of Christ's humanity requires a life of asceticism and the acquisition of the virtues.¹¹⁷ This life of asceticism and acquisition of the virtues is the life of the Cross and the means by which husband and wife strive within marriage to attain the full stature of being human in Christ.¹¹⁸ This full stature is the ideal of married life lived out as an experience of total self-giving and obedience to God, both for the sake of love.¹¹⁹

¹⁰⁸ Khodr, "Reflections," 179.

¹⁰⁹ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 20.

¹¹⁰ Calivas, "Marriage," 251.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Breck, *Stages*, 64.

¹¹³ Khodr, "Reflections," 37.

¹¹⁴ Calivas, "Marriage," 256.

¹¹⁵ Khodr, "Reflections," 37.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹⁷ John Behr, "From Adam to Christ: From Male and Female to Being Human," *The Wheel* 13/14 (Spring /Summer 2018):19-32, at 21.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹⁹ Schmemmann, *Life*, 85.

VB. Authentic Love

In referring to marriage as the sacrament of love,¹²⁰ St John Chrysostom expresses the truth that we are created in the image and likeness of the God who is a Trinity of persons and who is love (cf. 1 Jn 4.8). A primary characteristic of this love is that it is a shared love. As persons made in God's image, husbands and wives are made for shared love.¹²¹ Marriage is a path for discovering the truth that husband and wife are not self-sufficient but made for relationship¹²² and called to live in community.¹²³

Part of the transformation that takes place in marriage is the transformation of the passions into Christlike love, which is a manifestation of the Kingdom of God.¹²⁴ Husbands and wives live this out in the everyday affairs of married life through offering each other selfless and unconditional love.¹²⁵ Each serves the other through self-emptying imitation of Christ, manifesting divine love.¹²⁶ This is an ideal, and the struggle of Christian marriage is to strive for this ideal day in and day out, as husband and wife seek to be united to one another in Christ.¹²⁷

Marriage is a journey by which human love is transformed by means of divine love. As they cooperate with God's power and grace, husband and wife come to live in a divine way, participating by grace in God's nature, which is love.¹²⁸ The goal of Christian marriage is union with God, perfection in love, and the Kingdom of God.¹²⁹

Husbands and wives find their true fulfillment through being united to each other in Christ as they grow in Christlikeness themselves. In Christ, their love for each other is an expression of their love for Christ. In this light, marital struggles are revealed to be the struggle to love one's spouse with the love of Christ (cf. Eph. 5.20-22).¹³⁰ As our love for our spouse is transformed in marriage, we become different people as we learn over time to love with greater and greater degrees of selflessness.¹³¹ This is the transformation that transfigures an Orthodox Christian marriage into the reality of the Kingdom.¹³²

VC. New Life in Christ

Christian marriage can only be seen and understood and lived from the perspective of new

¹²⁰ Ford, *Marriage as a Path*, ix.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Abdalah, *Practical Commentary*, 13.

¹²³ Ibid., 17.

¹²⁴ Philip Mamalakis, "The Spiritual Life and How to be Married in it," in *Raising Lazarus*, ed. Stephen Muse, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Press, 2004), 216.

¹²⁵ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 20.

¹²⁶ David C. Ford, Mary S. Ford, and Alfred K. Siewers, ed., *Glory and Honor : Orthodox Christian Resources on Marriage*, (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016), 295.

¹²⁷ Paraskeve Tibbs, "Perspectives on Marriage and Family in the Orthodox Church," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 60, no. 1-2 (2015):105-127, at 120.

¹²⁸ Khodr, "Reflections," 181.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 182.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Mamalakis, "Spiritual Life," 215.

¹³² Ibid.

life in Christ.¹³³ The Christian life is a resurrection life whether one is married or single.¹³⁴ That means that Christian life is a daily cooperation with divine grace for the sake of transformation, in order to grow more and into the likeness of Christ (Phil 4.4-8).¹³⁵ This growth in Christlikeness is the human being's participation in the divine life and becoming ever more by grace all that God is by nature.¹³⁶ For those who are married, their marriage is their particular path toward *theosis*, and what their marriage is all about. Each and every challenge that arises in marriage is potentially a means of growing in Christlikeness, but also involves embracing the Cross.

As an extension of the overall effort required to live the Christian life, marriage requires that husband and wife take the commitment implied by the cross,¹³⁷ and by extension their crowning, seriously. Being ever mindful of the presence of Christ in marriage and living in a way that manifests this presence takes effort.¹³⁸ The practical implication of this reality is that husband and wife learn to embrace the Cross through loving self-sacrifice and learning to live with concern for the well-being of each other. As they do so marriage becomes an entrance into the Kingdom by crucifixion.¹³⁹ Through this means natural marriage is elevated by the Church into a sacrament and becomes a witness to the couple being a new creation in Christ.¹⁴⁰

Marriage as a path to holiness demands spiritual growth, making this growth an essential part of Christian marriage.¹⁴¹ Together couples struggle with prayer, fasting, temperance, working toward their common growth in the Christian life. According to St John Chrysostom, the couples divide the labors and share the crowns.¹⁴² As part of this labor, husband and wife learn to love with Christlike love and learn to recognize that their struggle is not against one another but against the flesh (cf. Gal 5.13-25).¹⁴³ Through this struggle they realize marriage as a journey toward perfect, Christlike love.¹⁴⁴ Such a vision of marriage can seem like an unrealistic ideal. Without the help of God, it is unattainable. But, as a new creation in Christ by virtue of the Marriage Service, the married couple become a living manifestation of the new life in Christ.¹⁴⁵ This is a life that is continually renewed through:¹⁴⁶

- The Holy Eucharist and the other mysteries of life in the Church
- The personal prayer life of the couple

¹³³ Calivas, "Marriage," 252.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 249.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Thomas Hopko, "Learning to Love as God Loves: On Christian Marriage and Monasticism," in *Glory and Honor : Orthodox Christian Resources on Marriage*, ed. David C Ford, Mary S Ford, and Alfred K Siewers, (2016), 289.

¹³⁷ Stylianopoulos, "Toward a Theology," 249.

¹³⁸ Koshy, *Wedding in Cana*, 161.

¹³⁹ Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 128.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ford, *Marriage as a Path*, xliv.

¹⁴² Hieromonk Gregorios, *The Mystery of Marriage* (Columbia, MO: Newrome Press, 2020), 49.

¹⁴³ Mamalakis, "The Spiritual Life," 216.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Calivas, "Marriage," 249.

¹⁴⁶ Stylianopoulos, "Toward a Theology," 271.

- Virtuous living in the world

These three things are characteristics of a life of repentance and humility. That said, we can now sum up the meaning of marriage in an Orthodox Christian context.

VD. The Meaning of Marriage

An Orthodox Christian marriage is a revelation of the Kingdom of God in the husband and wife.¹⁴⁷ The vision of marriage is manifested in the couple as they struggle throughout their marriage to acquire the new identity they were given in the Marriage Service.¹⁴⁸ This struggle reveals the goal of Christian marriage as the couple's salvation.¹⁴⁹ To the extent that marriage is open to the actions of grace it becomes a source of eternal life.¹⁵⁰ Christian marriage assumes a Christian husband and wife, both of whom are committed to living as Christians according to the teachings and practices of the Church.¹⁵¹ This includes the vision of Christian marriage as a means of seeking fullness of life in God, versus seeking one's own desires.¹⁵² Through becoming one through the sacrament of marriage, husbands and wives can overcome the limitations of their own fallenness through self-sacrificing love.¹⁵³ Such a love takes time, patience, and effort to develop.

Within the context of Christian marriage, a husband and wife are co-workers with the Lord, accepting the way of the Cross for the sake of their own salvation as well as for the sake of those around them. In this way marriage becomes one of God's ways of redeeming the world.¹⁵⁴ Through the Marriage Service, God grants husband and wife the dispositions and virtues necessary for building up his Kingdom.¹⁵⁵ This allows the unity of the husband and wife to be transformed into a manifestation of the Kingdom through the experience of self-emptying love.¹⁵⁶ This love, modeled after the love between Christ and the Church, is a love without conditions or excuses.¹⁵⁷ Over the course of the marriage, husband and wife struggle together to make their marriage ever more and more reflective of the eternal Kingdom, thus making their marriage the means by which they prepare for eternal life in the Kingdom.¹⁵⁸

When it comes to the experience of navigating marital conflicts and other challenges, couples are called to "use" their marriages appropriately as they journey toward the Kingdom together. According to St John Chrysostom, marriage is an equal partnership, challenging both spouses to imitate the self-emptying love of Christ for the sake of each other.¹⁵⁹ In his words, this type of love can even correct and transform the fallen image of God in a husband and wife.¹⁶⁰

¹⁴⁷ Khodr, "Reflections," 180.

¹⁴⁸ Calivas, "Marriage," 248.

¹⁴⁹ Tibbs, "Perspectives," 107.

¹⁵⁰ Khodr, "Reflections," 31.

¹⁵¹ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 15.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Koshy, *Mystery of Love*, 41.

¹⁵⁴ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 114.

¹⁵⁵ Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 115.

¹⁵⁶ Calivas, "Marriage," 259.

¹⁵⁷ Koshy, *Mystery of Love*, 41.

¹⁵⁸ Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, 18.

¹⁵⁹ Tibbs, "Perspectives," 113.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 122.

Repentance and humility is the means by which a couple bring this reality into being.

VI. Conclusion

In this chapter we have attempted to articulate an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage rooted within the context of Christian life as a whole. We explored the critical qualities of humility and repentance as lived out in marriage through dying to self. The primary framework for our exploration was the Orthodox Marriage Service. After exploring certain aspects of the service, we focused on the scriptural readings and ended by viewing the Marriage Service Epistle through the patristic lens of St John Chrysostom. We ended with a synthesis of the key aspects of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage.

Chapter 3: A Focused Review of Marriage-Enrichment Literature

I. Introduction

In this chapter we provide a focused review of selected marriage-enrichment literature. Beginning with a historical overview of the marriage-enrichment movement, we will then move to a review of the current literature, with an emphasis on a shift away from marriage enrichment's traditional focus on skills in the areas of conflict and communication towards an emerging focus on transformative processes. Finally, we will synthesize key findings of this review, focusing on how emerging trends can inform parish-based marriage-enrichment efforts in the form of brief marital interventions.

II. A Brief History

The broad category of Couple Relationship Education (CRE), of which the marriage-enrichment movement is a subset, can be defined in broad terms as "programs that provide skills and principles to help couples achieve and sustain healthy relationships."¹ The marriage-enrichment movement itself is focused on an educational and preventative approach to enhance the functioning of marital relationships.² Marriage-enrichment programs are designed to teach the necessary skills to build more satisfying marriages, prevent interpersonal problems, and effectively address the typical problems experienced by married couples.³ As a preventative intervention, marriage-enrichment efforts have traditionally focused on relatively healthy marriages as opposed to those in a state of distress.⁴

The marriage-enrichment movement traces its origins to three main sources: preventive mental-health services, the human potential movement, and the concern of various religious groups over the decline of marriage.⁵ Preventive mental-health services have contributed the perspective that prevention is more effective than intervening after a crisis has developed.⁶ The human-potential movement of the 1960s provided the perspective that untapped, extraordinary potential can be cultivated in anyone in order to enhance their quality of life and contribute to positive social change.⁷ Early marriage-enrichment programs adapted this philosophy and applied it to marriage, which was seen as an area in which individuals could grow toward their potential for self-actualization. These three elements converged during the early 1960s, leading to the development

¹ Jeremy B. Kanter and David G. Schramm, "Brief Interventions for Couples: An Integrative Review," *Family Relations* (2017): 1-16, at 2.

² R. Baker and J. Terrill, "Marriage Enrichment," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling*, ed. J. Carlson and S. Dermer, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2017), 1028.

³ David G. Schramm, et al., "What Relationship Researchers and Relationship Practitioners Wished the Other Knew: Integrating Discovery and Practice in Couple Relationships," *Family Relations* 66, no. 4 (2017): 696-711, at 697.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Baker, "Marriage Enrichment," 1028.

⁷ Ibid.

of the first marriage-enrichment programs.⁸

In 1962, Fr. Gabriel Calvo created a program for the Roman Catholic Church called Marriage Encounter. Initially developed in Spain, this program was intended to be a resource to help family members communicate more effectively, with the first step being to help married couples.⁹ The program was run by a team consisting of a priest and a married couple who provided talks and facilitated the program. Couples were given time to write down personal reflections in order to foster interpersonal communications. These programs have continued to expand over the years and are now present in more than ninety countries, with many other religious and nonreligious organizations using similar approaches for marriage enrichment.¹⁰

In the same year, David and Vera Mace developed a program associated with the Quakers. Their program involved minimal organization and structure, allowing couples to establish their own goals and focus on dialogue between husband and wife. This program placed an emphasis on voluntary sharing, and much of the dialogue between couples took place in the presence of other group members.¹¹ David and Vera Mace went on to establish the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (ACME) to promote marriage-enrichment resources and programs.¹²

During this same time period, Leon and Antoinette Smith developed Marriage Communication Labs for the Methodist Church.¹³ This program promoted experiential learning through exercises designed to encourage group and spousal interactions. The program was led by facilitators who explained exercises and supervised participating couples.¹⁴

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, numerous other marriage-enrichment programs emerged, all with different structural approaches. Hof and Miller's 1981 book *Marriage Enrichment: Philosophy, Process, and Program* listed at least fifty different programs with audiences ranging from ten couples to more than 420,000.¹⁵ Many programs assign couples or individuals to facilitate sessions. These facilitators can range from licensed mental-health professionals to volunteers with minimal training. Although some programs do require specific training and certification, clinical training is not typically required.¹⁶ Finally, the duration of these programs range from a format of weekend "marathons" to multi-week sessions.

Since the early 2000s marriage-enrichment efforts have expanded to include specifically faith-based programs as well.¹⁷ A 2007 review of over thirty faith-based marriage-enrichment programs covered programs of varying formats, focus areas, and types of materials. Content ranged from video presentations to demonstrations of skills and couple-participation exercises. Program formats were also varied, ranging from retreat and workshop group formats to a ten-week

⁸ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 697.

⁹ Tiffany Bowling, et al., "An Overview of Marriage Enrichment," *The Family Journal* 13, no. 1 (2005):87-94, at 92.

¹⁰ Baker, "Marriage Enrichment," 1028.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Bowling, "An Overview of Marriage Enrichment," 92.

¹⁴ Baker, "Marriage Enrichment," 1028.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1029.

¹⁷ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 698.

series or neighborhood study group on the topic of marriage. Supporting materials were as varied as program formats, with everything from small-group books and workbooks to materials for couples to use at home.¹⁸

III. Overall Approach

Marriage-enrichment programs are generally guided by principles of humanistic psychotherapy, such as acceptance and non-judgment. These principles tended to lead to a focus on articulating feelings, establishing effective relationships, and achieving personal competencies.¹⁹ In addition, these programs often incorporate various psychoeducational models. Marriage-enrichment programs tend to foster an atmosphere of acceptance and non-judgment in order to foster an environment in which individual husbands and wives can freely express their feelings, develop trust, and experience support and acceptance from each other. This focus on acceptance and non-judgment helps to foster a recognition that each individual spouse has their own unique perspective, which in turn shapes their actions and behaviors.²⁰

Marriage researchers have identified a range of factors that predict poor marital quality, the most critical of which seems to be negative-affect-reciprocity. This describes the chain of retaliatory negativity that emerges between spouses during marital conflict.²¹ An example of this would be a husband responding to criticism with denial and insults, and the subsequent downward spiral. Marriage-enrichment programs have traditionally tried to help couples learn to interrupt these cycles of negativity by learning to manage their emotions during conflict in a more effective manner.²² This common approach implies an underlying assumption that fostering change in a couple's patterns of interaction can improve the quality of the relationship. According to this assumption, behaviors drive relational outcomes, thus teaching new skills and behaviors can improve marriages.²³ These skills and behaviors typically focus on the areas of communication and conflict.

IIIA. Communication and Conflict

Many early marriage-enrichment programs were developed to focus on behaviors that were identified as those that seemed to distinguish happy couples from distressed. This led to an emphasis on problem solving and communication skills, as they seemed to correspond to marital stability.²⁴ These skills were taught by means of scripted statements and exercises that could then be used to effectively navigate conversations during times of conflict.²⁵ This focus continued with programs developed in the 1990s, when studies emerged demonstrating the ability to predict divorce based on a couple's communication patterns and conflict management.²⁶

Alongside the emergence of these studies, an increase in federal funding led to the development of a large number of programs, most of which were grounded in the premise that

¹⁸ Baker, "Marriage Enrichment," 1029.

¹⁹ Bowling, "An Overview of Marriage Enrichment," 92.

²⁰ Baker, "Marriage Enrichment," 1029.

²¹ Eli. J. Finkel, et al., "A Brief Intervention to Promote Conflict Reappraisal Preserves Marital Quality Over Time," *Psychological Science* 24, (2013): 1595-1601, 1600.

²² *Ibid.*, 1596.

²³ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 699.

²⁴ Kanter, "Brief Interventions," 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 697.

unhealthy communication and conflict patterns led to unhappy marriages and even divorce. This led to more programs focused primarily on teaching couples new communication and conflict-resolution skills.²⁷ Despite what seems to have been a justified emphasis on problem solving and communication skills, evaluations of large-scale and experimental designs have not supported this emphasis.²⁸

IIIB. Critiques

Although there has been an expansion of marriage enrichment efforts since the 2000s, new programs for the most part have not incorporated relevant discoveries from other fields such as neuroscience, positive psychology, and others.²⁹ The focus of marriage-enrichment offerings for the most part has remained on developing skills in the areas of communication and conflict.³⁰

The use of federal funding to attempt an evaluation of marriage-enrichment efforts led to two large-scale, randomized controlled evaluations that involved thousands of couples in 2010 and 2012. These evaluations seem to indicate that marriage-enrichment programs are largely ineffective.³¹ Additional studies have shown similar results, and in 2015 Johnson and Bradbury³² noted accumulating evidence that challenges the assumption that changes in communication are easy, necessary, or even effective when it comes to improving marriages.

Schramm, et al.³³ have also called the traditional marriage enrichment focus on teaching new communication and conflict resolution skills into question, citing three objections. The first is that the context of a marriage extends beyond conflict management and communication tools. Referring to Karney and Bradbury's³⁴ vulnerability-stress-adaptation model, Schramm, et al. suggest that individual personality traits can make it difficult to learn and begin to practice new behaviors or to respond effectively to them when practiced by one's spouse. The second objection is based on the fact that married couples experience unexpected events as well as other things that act as sources of stress and strain on the marriage. This can make it more difficult to maintain an atmosphere of closeness, stability, and connection. In turn this difficulty can make it much less likely that couples will be able to implement ideal behaviors, such as those taught by marriage-enrichment programs, during times of elevated marital conflict. The third objection is rooted in the fact that there is a body of research that seems to challenge the traditional assumption that teaching communication and conflict skills is effective for preventing marital distress. The following examples serve to briefly illustrate this third objection.

Lavner, et al.³⁵ have questioned the hypothesis that communication predicts satisfaction

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kanter, "Brief Interventions," 2.

²⁹ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 698.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Matthew D. Johnson, and Thomas N. Bradbury, "Contributions of Social Learning Theory to the Promotion of Healthy Relationships: Asset or Liability?," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 7, no. 1 (2015): 13-27.

³³ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 699.

³⁴ Benjamin R Karney and Thomas N Bradbury, "The Longitudinal Course of Marital Quality and Stability : A Review of Theory, Method, and Research," *Psychological Bulletin* 118, no. 1 (1995): 3-34.

³⁵ Justin A Lavner, et al., "Does Couples' Communication Predict Marital Satisfaction, or

(and by extension success in marriage) based on a lack of empirical evidence. Research seems to indicate that more satisfied spouses are able to engage in more effective communication with greater positivity and less negativity.³⁶ Although improving communication can be a valuable first step for a couple's intervention, it is not likely to be sufficient for lasting relational satisfaction or from the perspective of improving overall marital relations.³⁷

In their decade review on marriage, Fincham and Beach³⁸ call attention to the questions that have been raised regarding the relevance of skills training for enhancing marriages. Their review builds on Burleson and Denton's³⁹ earlier conclusion that questions empirical evidence for the impact of communication skills on marital satisfaction.⁴⁰ Finally, Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury⁴¹ cite research that seems to indicate that satisfaction in marriage is a more consistent predictor of effective communication than effective communications is a predictor of satisfaction.

IIIC. General Effectiveness

Although marriage enrichment was originally designed as a preventative approach to improving and enhancing marriages, research findings seem to indicate that the overall satisfaction level among those participating in marriage-enrichment programs is lower than for those not participating. In particular, satisfaction with communication skills is lower among marriage-enrichment program participants than among those who have not participated. It has been suggested that marriage-enrichment programs raise the bar of expectations to a higher level than a couple is able to sustain over time.⁴²

A 2004 review of thirteen empirically supported marriage-enrichment programs determined that only four could be deemed "efficacious," with another three determined to be "possibly efficacious."⁴³ Those deemed to be efficacious or possibly so did demonstrate improved communication skills and self-awareness among participants.⁴⁴ Another review of secular and religious marriage-enrichment programs has concluded that the most commonly used programs have strengths and limitations, and should be matched to the needs of particular couples based on where they are as far as the development of their marriage and their own lives.⁴⁵

It would seem that couples do experience benefit from marriage-enrichment programs even if supporting empirical evidence is limited. Studies of couples who participate in marriage-enrichment programs reveal that most couples generally view their participation as rewarding. One study found that 70 percent of participants found their experiences as excellent or very good. The

Does Marital Satisfaction Predict Communication?," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 78, no. 3 (2016): 680-94, at 689.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 692.

³⁸ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 699.

³⁹ Brant R. Burleson and Wayne H. Denton, "The Relationship Between Communication Skill and Marital Satisfaction: Some Moderating Effects.," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59, (1997): 884-902.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 699.

⁴² Baker, "Marriage Enrichment," 1030.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1031.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1033.

same study found that 51 percent reported learning an exceptional amount or very much, whereas 96 percent said they would repeat the process, and 98 percent said they would recommend marriage enrichment to a friend.⁴⁶

Kanter and Schramm⁴⁷ have discussed two limitations that may at least partially explain these mixed results. The first is that marriage-enrichment programs fail to reach and retain a broad audience due to time constraints. Evidence seems to suggest that nine to ten hours of class is required for optimal effectiveness.⁴⁸ Retention is a common issue, and overall effectiveness is impacted when sessions are missed. The net result is that traditional, longer programs may no longer be realistic for contemporary couples.⁴⁹ The second limitation is a one-size-fits-all approach utilized by many programs. The primary emphasis on communication and conflict-resolution skills fails to take into account the influence of both personality characteristics and the context of each particular couple.⁵⁰ These two factors support the approach of brief interventions, as we will discuss below.⁵¹

Recent research and more rigorous studies have demonstrated the limited effectiveness of marriage-enrichment programs focused primarily on teaching communication and problem-solving skills. These findings are consistent with a more recent debate within the literature regarding a shift from the traditional focus on skills to a more balanced focus on principles or guidelines. This more balanced approach seeks to support couples throughout a variety of contexts, situations, and interactions, as opposed to an exclusive focus on stress and conflict.⁵² Such an approach allows couples to apply general principles in their unique daily circumstances in a manner most appropriate to them.⁵³ The study of transformative processes reflects this new approach.

IV. Transformative Processes

Researchers and scholars in the field of marriage enrichment have begun to suggest that conflict may either be less central or less capable of explaining real-world marital outcomes than theories, research, and interventions suggest.⁵⁴ Fincham, Stanley and Beach⁵⁵ cite observations that support this assertion, citing longitudinal findings that show that conflict by itself accounts for only a small portion of variability in marital outcomes. In addition to this they cite other factors that call into question the role of conflict, such as instances where negative conflict behavior is actually a predictor of improved marital satisfaction, or the resolution of problems in marriage without external intervention.⁵⁶ They highlight more recent marriage-enrichment concepts that are

⁴⁶ Bowling, "An Overview of Marriage Enrichment," 92.

⁴⁷ Kanter, "Brief Interventions," 2.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 706.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Frank D Fincham, et al., "Transformative Processes in Marriage: An Analysis of Emerging Trends," *Journal of marriage and the family* 69, no. 2 (2007): 275-92, at 276.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

part of an emerging focus on transformative processes in marriage.⁵⁷

A transformative process is a healing process that occurs in marriage without outside professional intervention,⁵⁸ leading to the remission of relationship distress.⁵⁹ Transformative processes seem to indicate that some couples are able to transform potentially negative challenges and situations into opportunities for growth.⁶⁰ An example of this is a couple that emerges from a period of difficulties and who now find themselves more focused on joint goals and caring for their marriage than before.⁶¹ Because couples who participate in even empirically efficacious marital interventions are subject to relapse, a question has emerged as to whether or not naturally occurring self-repair processes in marriage can serve to improve existing programs.⁶² Examples of transformative processes include forgiveness, sacrifice, and sanctification.

IVA. Forgiveness

Many clinicians and researchers believe that forgiveness is the central element of a successful marriage, and research reveals that spouses share this view as well.⁶³ Forgiveness is an example of a self-repair process that has the potential to influence marriage over time by changing the degree to which one spouse's behavior determines the response of the other. Forgiveness can alter the mutual influence a husband and wife have on each other,⁶⁴ thus disrupting negative-affect reciprocity mentioned above.

Although forgiveness has often been associated with a religious context, researchers and clinicians in the early 2000s began to recognize its value for enhancing emotional well-being, physical health and intimate relationships.⁶⁵ Although clinicians had limited utility for many of the early models of forgiveness, by 2006 the importance of forgiveness for mental and physical health was widely recognized.⁶⁶ It seemed that forgiveness was especially important in marriage,⁶⁷ and forgiveness is now recognized as one of the most significant factors contributing to marital longevity as well as the overall level of marital satisfaction.⁶⁸ Marriage therapists have noted that forgiveness is a critical aspect of the healing process for both major transgressions and everyday hurts.⁶⁹ It has been suggested that absent forgiveness, unresolved transgressions can spill over into future conflicts and stand in the way of resolving them in an effective manner, thus setting the couple up for a negative cycle of interactions and putting the marriage at risk for greater

⁵⁷ Ibid., 275.

⁵⁸ Michael A. Goodman, et al., "Religious Faith and Transformational Processes in Marriage," *Family Relations* 62, no. 5 (2013): 808-823, at 808.

⁵⁹ Fincham, "Memos and Marriage," 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁶¹ Goodman, "Religious Faith," 808.

⁶² Fincham, "Transformative Processes," 283.

⁶³ Ibid., 279.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 280.

⁶⁵ Frank D. Fincham, et al., "Forgiveness in Marriage: Current Status and Future Directions," *Family Relations* 55, no. 4 (2006): 425-427, at 415.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

problems.⁷⁰

There are a number of misunderstandings about forgiveness that contradict how it has been defined by the CRE literature. One misunderstanding is that forgiveness means forgetting about the offense and reconciling with the offender.⁷¹ In reality, most definitions include the idea of a change that leads the offended spouse to become less motivated to think, feel, and behave negatively toward the offending spouse. Forgiveness is not something to which the offender is entitled, but is offered anyway, leading some researchers to describe it as an altruistic gift.⁷²

When there is a transgression in marriage, the offended party enters into a negative motivational state towards the transgressor. Researchers define forgiveness as overcoming this negative motivational state. Part of forgiveness is "an attitude of real goodwill toward the offender as a person" or "the attitude of respect which should always characterize interpersonal behavior."⁷³ This means that forgiveness is not simply overcoming the negative motivational state caused by the hurt.⁷⁴ Studies of marital forgiveness have highlighted both a decrease in negativity (the tendency towards retaliation or withdrawal) as well as an increase in goodwill toward the offending spouse.⁷⁵ These studies seem to indicate that the concept of forgiveness also encompasses a transformation in the motivation of the spouses,⁷⁶ allowing them to move beyond a negative motivational state. Because of this, forgiveness can disrupt the pattern of an offended party seeking retaliation or holding a grudge and thus perpetuating a cycle of conflict.⁷⁷

Because the concept of forgiveness has a religious connotation, some researchers and clinicians have been hesitant to explore its role in marital interventions. That said, interventions utilizing forgiveness and spirituality have been developed.⁷⁸ Some marital-education programs focus on forgiveness as a means of prevention.⁷⁹ In the context of marital interventions, forgiveness is not the same as accepting, condoning, or excusing an offense. Forgiveness does not include the unwillingness to perceive the injury, the attempt to forget it, or even reconciliation in the form of restoring the relationship.⁸⁰ Although forgiveness might make reconciliation more likely, it is best understood as a process or a transformation that occurs over time.⁸¹ From a process perspective, the statement "I forgive you" can be better understood as "I am trying to forgive you."⁸²

IVB. Empathy

Empathy is a relational concept that seems to play an important role in the process of forgiveness and thus has been incorporated into forgiveness interventions. One study revealed that

⁷⁰ Ibid., 418.

⁷¹ Ibid., 415.

⁷² Ibid., 416.

⁷³ Fincham, "Memos and Marriage," 16.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Fincham, "Forgiveness in Marriage," 417.

⁷⁶ Fincham, "Transformative Processes," 279.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Fincham, "Forgiveness in Marriage," 424.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 420.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 416.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 421.

empathy was a better predictor of forgiveness in husbands than in wives, possibly because empathy is less common for men and thus less influential.⁸³ The majority of interventions that incorporate forgiveness have focused on facilitating the process of forgiveness through increasing empathy for the offender. Empathy may have a direct effect on impulses to retaliate, as it makes the transgressor easier to relate to and understand.⁸⁴

In a destructive marital interaction, couples often shift from cooperative goals to more adversarial emergent goals. An emergent goal is one that arises during an interaction between husband and wife and that usually derails the original intent.⁸⁵ It does so by allowing negative interactions to sidetrack the couple's original, more positive direction.⁸⁶ The power of emergent goals to disrupt marital interactions are a reason why training in empathy, like training in communication skills, may not be enough to ensure that training in forgiveness translates into something helpful to the couple.⁸⁷

IVC. Sacrifice

There is a growing body of literature examining sacrifice in romantic relationships.⁸⁸ In the context of marriage, sacrifice refers to behavior in which one gives up some immediate personal desire for the benefit of the spouse, reflecting a transformation from self-focus to couple focus.⁸⁹ The growing literature on sacrifice is consistent with the idea of transformation, or behaviors and attitudes that can exert an exponentially positive impact on marriage.⁹⁰ Whitton, Stanley, and Markham⁹¹ have highlighted significant advances in understanding the role that sacrifice plays in marriage.

IVD. Sanctification

Another emerging area of research related to marriage enrichment is sanctification and in particular its relationship to forgiveness.⁹² From a research or academic perspective, one definition of sanctification is "the perception of an aspect of life as having divine character and significance."⁹³ Pargament and Mahoney⁹⁴ describe this process as a result of an individual either 1) perceiving an object as a direct manifestation of one's images, beliefs, or experiences about God; 2) attributing qualities to an object that are typically associated with the divine; or 3) both. Once something has been imbued with a sense of the divine, or sanctified, it can elicit a strong emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and motivational response.⁹⁵ Sanctification in marriage refers to

83 Ibid., 419.

84 Ibid., 420.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Fincham, "Transformative Processes," 281.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Fincham, "Forgiveness in Marriage," 425.

93 Kenneth I. Pargament and Annette Mahoney, "Sacred Matters: Sanctification as Vital Topic for the Psychology of Religion," *International Journal of the Psychology of Religion* 15, no. 3 (2005): 179-198, at 187.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid., 188.

the belief that one's marriage has spiritual character and significance, including the view that one's marriage is a manifestation of God.⁹⁶

In the realm of marriage research, marriage can be psychologically elevated to a sacred status and thus infused with spiritual meaning.⁹⁷ The significance of sanctification is that a couple will potentially work harder to preserve their marriage given the perception of a higher spiritual state.⁹⁸ This is manifested in behaviors such as the willingness to make greater personal sacrifices for the sake of the marriage, forgiveness of transgressions, and the use of more constructive methods when it comes to resolving disagreements.⁹⁹ Empirical evidence seems to support the assertion that sanctification of a particular aspect of family life leads to that area functioning better, suggesting that sanctification of marriage represents an aspect of religion that is tied to greater adaptivity in marriage.¹⁰⁰

V. Parish-Based Marriage Enrichment

There is a debate within the field of CRE regarding an emphasis on skills versus principles.¹⁰¹ As our overview has shown, there are trends emerging in marriage enrichment pointing to a greater awareness of the importance of principles that have been traditionally understood in a religious sense, namely forgiveness and sanctification. These transformative processes point to what can be posited as an inherently religious dimension of marriage enrichment. Leveraging the religious dimension of marriage enrichment more fully, the Orthodox Christian parish can create customized, parish-based approaches to marriage enrichment uniquely suited to the needs of individual congregations. Below we conclude this chapter with a synthesis designed to articulate the elements of a parish-based approach to marriage enrichment in light of the literature we have reviewed.

VA. The Religious Dimension

Goodman et al.¹⁰² have discussed the implications of a study which included interviewing 144 religiously observant Christians, Jewish, and Muslim couples in order to gain insight into the qualitative connection between religion and transformative processes in marriage. The study revealed specific religious beliefs and practices related to how couples approach their marriage. Religious practices mentioned by couples in the study included prayer, religious rituals, and seeking spiritual counsel.¹⁰³ Prayer in particular is noteworthy in that it was the most frequent practice that helped couples cope with challenges.¹⁰⁴

One of the main religious practices mentioned by couples in the study was their marriage ceremony.¹⁰⁵ Another frequent theme was that of challenges bringing the couple closer to God. Some couples seemed to engage in the process of sanctifying their challenges and adversities by

⁹⁶ Fincham, "Forgiveness in Marriage," 425.

⁹⁷ Finkel, "Conflict Reappraisal," 222.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 227.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 228.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 697.

¹⁰² Goodman, "Religious Faith," 808.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 818.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 815.

seeing a divine purpose or reason for them.¹⁰⁶ Related to this was the belief expressed by many couples that God played a role in helping them cope with and deal with challenges and that marriage was beyond their own human ability to navigate successfully.¹⁰⁷ Another religious practice identified was seeking spiritual counsel. The most common aspect of this was seeking counsel from a religious leader within the congregation during specific challenges.¹⁰⁸ Others spoke of seeking out spiritual counsel more regularly.¹⁰⁹

Two religious practices to help with conflict that seemed to stand out as they were mentioned by couples from almost every faith tradition were repentance and forgiveness.¹¹⁰ Many couples spoke of the helpful and healing nature of both practices as well as the central role they played in addressing and resolving marital conflict.¹¹¹ These practices were not ones that came easily to couples and were either situational or part of the weekly worship practice.¹¹²

VA. Brief Interventions

There are two major challenges that have been identified when it comes to delivering marriage-enrichment programs. The first is the investment of time and money these interventions sometimes require, and which a couple may not have. A second challenge is that due to the multiple components of a typical marriage-enrichment program, isolating the specific component(s) that improves marital quality can be difficult.¹¹³

Researchers have recently advocated for a different approach to CRE that involves shorter programs that can potentially reach a wider audience and be offered on a more frequent basis as compared to more traditional offerings.¹¹⁴ These shorter programs, termed brief interventions, might mitigate accessibility challenges by means of delivery methods such as the Internet. In addition, they might allow for offerings that are more precisely designed for the needs of particular couples and their individual contexts.¹¹⁵

As they do not require physical attendance for extended periods of time, brief interventions can be completed within a day or a few minutes each day, better accommodating the needs of contemporary couples. Another difference between brief interventions and more traditional marriage-enrichment programs is the lack of a requirement for formal assessments or even heavily structured material. Brief interventions can leverage any instructional or relationship-reinforcing activity for a couple to complete on their own, with little or no professional guidance.¹¹⁶

Research has demonstrated the potential for brief, theory-based interventions to yield lasting improvements for marriages by helping facilitate thoughts and behaviors that self-reinforce

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 817.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 819.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 820.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 819.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Finkel, "Conflict Reappraisal," 2.

¹¹⁴ Kanter, "Brief Interventions," 3.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

over time.¹¹⁷ These behaviors serve as self-repair processes such as those mentioned above. Because of this, brief interventions may potentially have equal or larger impacts than more intensive programs by promoting small changes in perspective over time, which in turn influence the couple's regular activities together.¹¹⁸ Although there is a large body of research on the effectiveness of more traditional marriage-enrichment approaches, there has been less of an emphasis on evaluating brief interventions.¹¹⁹ Below we briefly highlight a few such studies.

Finkel et al. tested a twenty-one-minute intervention with 120 couples by means of a two-year study. During the first year none of the couples received any intervention. During the second year, half the couples were randomly assigned to receive an intervention and half were not. Both groups reported a decline in the quality of their marriage over the first year. During the second year, this trend continued for the couples in the control group, but not for the couples receiving the intervention.¹²⁰ This study illustrated the potential for brief interventions to preserve marital quality over an extended period of time in a non-clinical sample.¹²¹

Another study, conducted by Kanter and Schramm,¹²² cited a study of two brief interventions oriented toward newlyweds - Relationship Awareness (RA) and expressed gratitude. Their study served as initial evidence that couples may not need to learn new skills in order to promote healthy marital relationships. Instead, they might only need to be reminded to recognize thoughts, behaviors, and interactions already occurring within their marriage.¹²³ A third study of couples married for a longer period of time also seemed to demonstrate the efficacy of brief interventions for promoting positive outcomes for relationships.¹²⁴

Kanter and Schramm also note a potential limitation of most marriage-enrichment programs' focus on couple-level interactions, which can obscure the specific impact of the behavior of either spouse. They suggest a more helpful approach might be to focus on individual spouses and how their unique outlooks, perspectives, and life experiences drive their behaviors.¹²⁵ The studies they reviewed all focused on the individual husband or wife, their specific outlook, and based on that outlook their specific way of interacting with the world. In doing so, they were able to take into account the limitations an individual husband or wife might introduce into the marriage.¹²⁶ Based on this they highlight the importance of focusing on how individuals perceive and process situations, as opposed to simply focusing on behaviors. In support of this they cite a study¹²⁷ in which researchers were able to alter behaviors by changing the perception of certain

¹¹⁷ Finkel, "Conflict Reappraisal," 1.

¹¹⁸ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 704.

¹¹⁹ Kanter, "Brief Interventions," 3.

¹²⁰ Finkel, "Conflict Reappraisal," 1.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Kanter, "Brief Interventions," 9.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ D. C. Marigold, J. G. Holmes, and M. Ross, "Fostering Relationship Resilience: An Intervention for Low Self-Esteem Individuals," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46, (2010): 624-630.

situations.¹²⁸

Another intervention designed by Rogge et al.¹²⁹ was part of a three-year study of engaged and newlywed couples designed to explore the efficacy of brief interventions.¹³⁰ They designed a relationship awareness (RA) intervention consisting of a single in-person session with only ten minutes of didactic content. As part of this intervention, couples were asked to engage in a series of open-ended conversations on the topics of conflict and problem solving, support and positivity, and forgiveness. Notably, there were no skills-based exercises.¹³¹

The goal of this intervention was to both heighten a couple's awareness of their relationship and the need to work on the relationship on a regular, ongoing basis. Rather than teaching new skills, the intervention sought to call attention to specific behaviors. Using conversation prompts, the intervention allowed couples to decide if a specific behavior was constructive or destructive.¹³² This intervention was offered to one group, whereas two other groups were offered either PREP, which focused on conflict management skills, or CARE, which emphasized empathy and support skills. All couples who received either RA, PREP and CARE had a lower divorce rate compared to the control group.¹³³ This evaluation revealed that compared to a control group, the couples who received an intervention that was not skills based exhibited results comparable to those couples who did receive skills-based interventions.¹³⁴ Their results also supported the potential value of brief interventions and the approach of fostering small changes in thinking patterns and behaviors over time, as compared to longer, more intensive programs.¹³⁵

It is important to note that the emergence of brief interventions as a concept does not mean one must choose between conventional marriage-enrichment offerings or a brief intervention. Brief interventions can be seen as another tool that can help strengthen a couple's relationship.¹³⁶ Given the constraints of most parishes, they may represent an ideal model for parish-based marriage-enrichment activities. An intervention that would enhance longer term outcomes for marital forgiveness is one that might help couples recognize and respond effectively to their own emergent retaliatory goals,¹³⁷ and thus be more likely to engage in repentance and forgiveness.

VB. Repentance and Forgiveness

According to Fincham et al., it is well established that an apology from the transgressor facilitates the process of forgiveness.¹³⁸ Although there has been a lot of emphasis on the process of granting forgiveness, seeking forgiveness may actually be more impactful for navigating

¹²⁸ Kanter, "Brief Interventions," 12.

¹²⁹ R. D. Rogge, et al., "Is Skills Training Necessary for the Primary Prevention of Marital Distress and Dissolution? A 3-Year Experimental Study of Three Interventions," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 81, (2013): 949-961, at 952.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 954.

¹³³ Ibid., 960.

¹³⁴ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 701.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Kanter, "Brief Interventions," 3.

¹³⁷ Fincham, "Forgiveness in Marriage," 420.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 417.

challenges in marriage.¹³⁹ Humbling oneself, confessing shortcomings, and asking forgiveness is something that can have a significant positive impact on a marriage in the face of offenses and transgressions.¹⁴⁰ This kind of behavior is a manifestation of the two religious behaviors or acts of repentance and confession.

VC. Skills Training

Although training couples in communication may not be as effective a marriage intervention as was once believed, it is still an important skill.¹⁴¹ The broader approach to marriage enrichment within the Christian context is shifting away from problem solving to the ongoing development and maturity of each spouse. This process encompasses personal, relational, and spiritual growth.¹⁴² Such comprehensive development lends itself to the ideal of a marriage-enrichment approach that includes both skills and principles.

VD. Changing Paradigms

There are several terms scholars have begun to use to discuss changes in the way an individual interacts with the world, including "outward mindset" or "change in motivations." Whereas Gottman used the terms "turning toward" versus "turning away" or "against," others have used terms such as "other-centeredness," "selflessness," "paradigm shift," or a "shift in perspective."¹⁴³ These terms are all related to one's fundamental orientation regarding interactions with the world.¹⁴⁴ In terms of formulating a parish-based approach to marriage enrichment, these terms can be operationalized in the concept of repentance, understood in the broader sense of *metanoia*, or a change of heart, mind, or orientation.

VE. A Parish-based Brief Intervention

A parish-based marriage-enrichment program derived from themes and concepts touched on in this literature review would ideally take the form of a brief intervention, providing greater flexibility relative to more traditional marriage-enrichment programs in terms of delivery method, content, and customization for the needs of particular husbands and wives. Based on research conducted on specific topics in marriage-enrichment programs, key topics include community, commitment, conflict resolution, children, and church.¹⁴⁵ Other helpful topics that have been identified include learning about marriage, deepening one's relationship with God, and self-discovery.¹⁴⁶ A parish-based marriage enrichment brief intervention might focus on one or a few of these topics at a time as a way to focus and simplify.

Another study has revealed that discussion with spouses is an important part of marriage-enrichment programs.¹⁴⁷ Because of this, a parish-based brief intervention could be structured in such a way as to foster discussions between participating spouses. In addition to this, other helpful

¹³⁹ Ibid., 424.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Les and Leslie Parrott Parrott, "The Symbis Approach to Marriage Education," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31, no. 3 (2003): 208-212, at 210.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Schramm, "Relationship Researchers," 705.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Bowling, "An Overview of Marriage Enrichment," 92.

¹⁴⁶ Lee M. Williams, et al., "An Empirical Approach to Designing Marriage Preparation Programs," *The American Journal of Family Therapy* 27, no. 3 (1999): 271-283.

¹⁴⁷ Bowling, "An Overview of Marriage Enrichment," 92.

elements have been identified as learning about marriage, the overall content of the programs, deepening one's relationship with God, and self-discovery.

Finally, a parish-based brief intervention could leverage transformative processes that fit into the framework of life in Christ, such as forgiveness, sacrifice, and sanctification. Leveraging topics such as prayer, religious rituals, and the practice of repentance and forgiveness, such an intervention could leverage an existing predisposition towards these sacrifices or cultivate such a disposition in order to help couples learn to see everyday interactions as the place where their transformation together takes place over time. Finally, it could be delivered in a convenient and flexible format, such as by means of the Internet, to individual participating couples in the comfort of their own home.

VII. Conclusion

In this chapter we have provided a focused overview of marriage enrichment based on a review of selected literature. After beginning with a brief historical overview, touched briefly on the traditional focus and current state of marriage-enrichment programs, with an emphasis on critiquing the traditional focus on conflict. We introduced the concept of transformative processes as well as brief interventions and ended with a consideration of how these two factors might influence a parish-based marriage enrichment offering.

Chapter 4: The Good Wine - A Parish-Based, Brief Marriage Intervention

I. Introduction

In this chapter we discuss the conceptual elements of the parish-based, brief marital intervention implemented as part of this project. The intervention was grounded in an Orthodox vision of marriage as laid out in Chapter Two and leveraged both transformative processes and brief intervention models as discussed in Chapter Three. The overall goal of the intervention was to provide a pastoral mystagogy of marriage and reframe how couples understand the nature of marriage. From an historical perspective, mystagogy is the term applied to the manner in which eucharistic services were explained to Christian converts¹ and answers the question: “Why are we doing these rituals?”² Mystagogic catechesis of the patristic era was a direct answer to the “why” of liturgical rites and rituals.³ In the context of an Orthodox parish-based marriage-enrichment program, a mystagogic approach can answer the two-fold question of “What is marriage all about?” and “What is the meaning of conflict in my marriage?”

To address these questions, the six sessions of the intervention were designed to help couples begin to see marriage as a healing and transformative path of humility and repentance. Through this new lens, challenges in communication and conflict were then reframed as an encounter with Christ, and thus opportunities for personal, spiritual, and relational growth.

We will proceed with this chapter by first discussing the design principles of the intervention. We will next present key theological concepts that inform the intervention and then proceed to a discussion of the practical or pastoral dimensions that flow from these theological concepts. Finally, we will conclude with a brief explanation of what it looks like for spouses to incorporate this approach in their marriage.

II. Design Principals

As discussed in the previous chapter, brief interventions provide a high level of flexibility relative to traditional marriage-enrichment programs.⁴ For an Orthodox parish-based setting, the brief intervention is ideal as it allows for a high level of customization in terms of delivery, structure, and content. Delivery-wise the intervention was designed to be provided to participating couples by means of an online series of asynchronous, pre-recorded video sessions. This particular means of delivery provided maximum flexibility for participating couples, as well as anonymity for those couples who desired to keep knowledge of their participation to themselves.

In keeping with the findings of the literature review conducted in Chapter Three, content for the intervention consisted of a mix of skills training as well as experiences designed to bring about a shift in thinking about marriage. After first presenting participating couples with an Orthodox vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom and mutual sanctification, couples were then

¹ Roberta R Ervine and St Nersess Armenian Seminary, *Worship Traditions in Armenia and the Neighboring Christian East: An International Symposium in Honor of the 40th Anniversary of St Nersess Armenian Seminary* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006), 285.

² Ibid.

³ Goffredo Boselli, *The Spiritual Meaning of the Liturgy : School of Prayer, Source of Life* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 18.

⁴ Kanter, “Brief Interventions,” 3.

invited to explore the topics of forgiveness, sacrifice, and sanctification in their own lives as ways to live out this vision. Finally, the intervention attempted to foster greater awareness for each participant of how their own struggles and limitations might be keeping them from living out this vision.

The intervention was delivered as a series of six bi-weekly sessions. Each session included a range of interactive exercises that were designed to provide an experiential component and foster an opportunity for participating couples to engage in conversation on topics they might not otherwise address. The experiential component consisted of guided discussions initiated by discussion prompts, short videos, and activities for the couples to work on together between sessions. One unifying theme throughout each session was that of spouses learning to think about marriage as a means for their cooperation with God's grace for the purpose of being formed into the image of Christ.⁵ In this light, tools, techniques, and models for communication and conflict were secondary to the idea of changing how participants think about their marriages in general and about the experience of conflict in particular.

A second unifying theme was that of marriage as a healing encounter with Christ. As an encounter with Christ, marriage is about learning to see Christ in one's spouse, as well as learning to manifest Christ to one's spouse. To help emphasize this theme, a variation of Deacon Stephen Muse's Dia-Logos prayer was introduced in the first session and included as part of the homework for each subsequent session. In its original form the prayer reads as follows:⁶ "Lord, love the world through me. Let me love the world through you. And be loved by you through the world." Couples were asked to insert the phrase "my spouse" or even their spouse's name in place of "the world."

III. Theological Considerations

The main theological principle the intervention focused on communicating to participating couples was marriage as a path of becoming more Christlike through repentance and humility. Becoming more Christlike means that in addition to the call to growth in spiritual maturity, husbands and wives are also attentive to the associated call to grow as persons over time. Consistent with this idea, St Clement of Alexandria pointed to married couples as exemplars of the effort required to live an authentic Christian life.⁷ According to the patristic understanding, such an authentic Christian life is manifested through a life of Christian virtue.⁸ This means that every interaction between husband and wife is a potential opportunity to grow together in Christlikeness by striving to exercise and grow in virtue. Deacon Stephen Muse has pointed out that as spouses grow in Christlikeness with God's help through acquisition of the virtues, they are more and more able to paraphrase St Paul in Gal 2.20: "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who love my spouse, but Christ who loves my spouse through me."⁹

IIIA. Marriage and the Christian Life

As a sacrament or holy mystery of the Church, marriage is a means of purification and healing.¹⁰ The word sacrament originates from the Greek *mysterion*, a derivative of a verb meaning

⁵ Khodr, "Reflections," 179.

⁶ Stephen Muse, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Prayer and the Embodied Life* (Waymart, PA: St Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2017), 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ Hierotheos Vlachos and Esther Williams, *Orthodox Psychotherapy* (Levadhia, Greece:

"to close the eyes for the purpose of protecting them from a vision of deity."¹¹ Christian marriage provides the opportunity to dwell in the presence of God, who reveals himself to the spouses through each other for the sake of their mutual transformation in Christ.¹² As God reveals himself to the spouses and offers to transform them through grace, they have the possibility to be healed of their passions and to overcome the obstacles that impeded loving one another with Christlike love. This process requires that both spouses be open to influence of the Holy Spirit. Both must also be willing to come to terms with their own limitations, which requires an attitude of patience, courage, and humility.¹³

This process by which husbands and wives can be transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ through their daily interactions with one another is known as *theosis*, or deification, and is the ultimate goal of Christian life. In order to cooperate fully with the grace of God in this process, couples must be intentional when it comes to living out their responsibility as baptized Christians to grow in the likeness of God. In the context of marriage, growth into the likeness of God includes growth in Christlike love of the spouses for one another. Part of the process of growth in Christlike love is identifying and confronting the obstacles that stand in the way of exercising such love, such as particular beliefs, habits, emotions, or passions.¹⁴ Identifying and overcoming these obstacles are part of the asceticism of marriage.

IIIB. The Asceticism of Marriage

Marriage is a means of salvation, healing, and transformation for husband and wife. Living out a vision of marriage consistent with this reality requires a desire to grow in Christian virtue. Such growth can only happen to the extent that the couple willingly engage in the asceticism of marriage.¹⁵ One definition of asceticism is the "the forceful practice of self-control and love, patience, and stillness" that will "destroy the passions hidden within."¹⁶ The term "passion" comes from the verb *pascho*, or "to suffer," and denotes a sickness of the soul.¹⁷ Asceticism implies self-control, and it allows spouses to grow in their capacity for exercising self-sacrificing, Christlike love. Through embracing the asceticism of marriage, couples can draw closer to Christ¹⁸ and thus more effectively encounter him in and through each other.

The most basic passion from which all others flow is pride, or self-love.¹⁹ Pride is a key obstacle to the ability of spouses to love each other with Christlike love.²⁰ They can only overcome pride and grow spiritually through marriage to the extent that they strive to live the asceticism of marriage as a key spiritual principle.²¹ One way spouses can practice the asceticism of marriage is

Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1994), 32.

¹¹ Abdalah, *Practical Commentary*, 34.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Calivas, "Marriage," 255.

¹⁴ Mamalakis, "Spiritual Life," 219.

¹⁵ Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 33.

¹⁶ Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 51.

¹⁷ Ibid., 231.

¹⁸ Joshua Makoul, *Healing Your Wounded Soul: Growing from Pain to Peace* (Chesterton, Indiana: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2020), 105.

¹⁹ Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 207.

²⁰ Ibid., 196.

²¹ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 121.

by trying to learn how to deal with each other in a humble and patient way, especially in the face of challenging issues.²² In part learning to deal with each other in this way requires that each spouse learn to see their own limitations, which in turn requires an ongoing attitude of repentance and humility. Marriage provides spouses with daily opportunities to practice both and to transform their passions into virtues as they grow in self-knowledge.

IIIC. Repentance and Humility in Marriage

Repentance is a broad concept and is a key prerequisite for growing in Christlikeness. At the most basic level repentance can be understood as acknowledging one's actions and feeling remorse for them. In broader terms, repentance includes a constant labor to improve spiritually, a desire to always strive to do good, and regret over sinful thoughts, words, and deeds.²³ Repentance also encompasses growth in self-awareness in terms of one's inner spiritual condition. Such awareness includes a corresponding willingness to change one's way of life and the desire to turn away from every obstacle to communion with God and a Christian way of life.²⁴ Finally, the concept of repentance also includes a resolution to reform one's behavior, like the Prodigal Son (cf. Lk 15.11–32).²⁵

In marriage, repentance is lived out as a process that is facilitated by the spouses' recognition of their failure to recognize the image of Christ in one another, along with the failure to love one another with Christlike love in all circumstances. Repentance can be understood as a return to one's right mind or right senses,²⁶ and thus a failure to love one's spouse in a Christlike way is a failure to be in one's right mind. Admitting one's failings in this area is the beginning of a return to one's right mind²⁷ and of the process of repentance.

One obstacle to such a return can be the feeling one has nothing for which to repent.²⁸ To overcome this obstacle it can be helpful for spouses to conduct a daily self-examination, focusing on the good they have failed to do for each other.²⁹ A second obstacle is doubt that forgiveness is possible.³⁰ In the face of this obstacle it can be helpful for spouses to remember that no matter what they have done, God's forgiveness is rooted in his infinite mercy.³¹ A third obstacle is shame. Saint John Chrysostom teaches that, properly speaking, shame follows sin, while repentance is an act of courage.³² He goes on to point out that the devil reverses this proper order so that one feels courage in sin and shame in repentance. A final obstacle is delay and postponing the process of repentance.³³

²² Calivas, "Marriage," 255.

²³ Alfeyev, *Sacraments*, 117.

²⁴ Peter Chamberas, *The Mystery of Repentance and Confession in the Orthodox Church* (United States: Peter A. Chamberas, 2010), 53.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hieromonk Gregorios, *Repentance and Confession* (Columbia, MO: Newrome Press, 2013), 11.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 21.

²⁹ Ibid., 22.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 23.

³² Ibid., 25.

³³ Ibid., 26.

Practically speaking, spouses live out the process of repentance in their daily lives together each time they resist the impulse to treat one another with less than Christlike love or make amends for giving in to such an impulse.³⁴ Repentance allows the spouses to see what they can become by the grace of God³⁵ and offers the opportunity for a new beginning in the face of hurts and failings.³⁶ As a new beginning, repentance works together with humility by allowing spouses to recognize and confront their own challenges and shortcomings when it comes to loving one another.

Love and humility are important aspects of the Christian life in general and of marriage in particular. In explaining their importance, St Dorotheos of Gaza uses the analogy of a house. In the same way that a roof completes a house, authentic love completes the virtues. As a roof has railings to crown it, humility is the crown of authentic Christlike love.³⁷ Marriage provides an opportunity for spouses to crown their love for each other with humility through daily opportunities to resist the individualism and impulses of fallen nature.³⁸ Humility in the context of marriage is revealed as love that is given completely and freely, as opposed to love constrained by our self-centered inclinations. According to St John Chrysostom, such self-giving love between husband and wife is capable of restoring the fallen image of God in man.³⁹ Growing in Christlike love is the path to *theosis* and deification for a Christian husband and wife.

Just as pride is an inflated sense of self, humility is the willingness to see one's limitations and grow in self-knowledge.⁴⁰ Humility is an aspect of spiritual maturity and includes the desire to accurately perceive one's own imperfections and face them.⁴¹ In order to allow God's grace to cure the passions, as well as harmful emotions, thoughts, and habits, spouses must be aware that they are there. To the extent that spouses choose the path of humility and begin to recognize these aspects of fallen humanity in themselves and choose to resist them as an expression of repentance, they are purified and transformed over time.⁴² Purification and humility lead to self-knowledge, which is a key dimension of living out an Orthodox theological vision of marriage.⁴³ Growth in self-knowledge leads to certain practical implications.

IV. Practical Implications

In this next section we attempt to make a connection between the theological considerations we have been discussing and a few practical implications for Christian marriage. These practical implications relate to the process of reframing conflict and communication challenges within the context of an Orthodox Christian marriage. For the intervention, I chose to focus on how defense

³⁴ Christopher Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation: Theosis in Scripture and Tradition* (Dalton, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2013), 29.

³⁵ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 82.

³⁶ Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 169.

³⁷ Papanikolaou, "Sex, Marriage, and Theosis," 92.

³⁸ Tibbs, "Perspectives," 119.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴⁰ Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 255.

⁴¹ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 38.

⁴² Stephen Muse, "Growing Married in the Face of Adversity: Toward a Faith Unashamed and a Love Unfeigned," (paper presented at *Pastoral Challenges in Marriage: Chronos and Kairos*, Houston, TX, January 22-25, 2020), 2.

⁴³ Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 47.

mechanisms and the shame family of emotions can impact the interpersonal dynamics of married couples when it comes to conflict and communication. Please see Appendix Three for more information on how defense mechanisms and the shame family of emotions relate to Gottman's "Four Horsemen"⁴⁴ and the Parrott's "C.O.R.E.,"⁴⁵ the two primary models of communication and conflict employed as part of the intervention.

As we begin this section on the practical implications of trying to live out an Orthodox vision of marriage, it can be helpful to look at three common myths about communication and conflict in marriage. The first myth is that acquiring the right technical skills is the secret to a long and happy marriage.⁴⁶ As discussed previously, skills are helpful but not sufficient.⁴⁷ A second myth is that personality problems can ruin marriage, which is not the case as long as spouses learn to effectively navigate such problems.⁴⁸ A third myth is that common interests are the secret to a happy marriage. Whether or not common interests are helpful depends on the how couples interact when spending time together.⁴⁹

Dr. John Gottman has highlighted research that supports the idea that most marital arguments cannot be resolved.⁵⁰ Rather than trying change each other, it is more helpful for spouses to focus on trying to understand the underlying differences that may lie at the root of particular conflicts.⁵¹ Such an approach can lead to greater cooperation between spouses.⁵² Such an approach also requires an openness to being transformed through marriage, which implies an openness to growing in self-awareness and a willingness to overcome personal limitations, such as defense mechanisms.

IVA. Marriage and Personal Transformation

A marriage is only as healthy as the individual spouses.⁵³ Three aspects of health that contribute to the health of each individual spouse are their relationship with God, their relationship with themselves, and their relationship with one another.⁵⁴ In marriage this is manifested in the ability to effectively manage passions and emotions, enter into mature relationship with one's spouse, and grow in self-awareness. It is also demonstrated through ongoing efforts towards

⁴⁴ Julie S. Gottman, John M. Gottman, and Daniel J. Siegel, *10 Principles for Doing Effective Couples Therapy*, Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology, (W. W. Norton & Company, NY: 2015), xvi.

⁴⁵ Les Parrott and Leslie L. Parrott, *The Good Fight: How Conflict Can Bring You Closer* (Brentwood, TN: Worthy, 2013), 17.

⁴⁶ John M. Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Harmony, 2015), 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 28.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 4.

⁵³ Les Parrott and Leslie L. Parrott, *Healthy Me, Healthy Us: Your Relationships Are Only as Strong as You Are* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, an imprint of Thomas Nelson, 2020), xii.

⁵⁴ Ibid., xx.

personal, emotional, and spiritual growth regardless of challenges and limitations.⁵⁵

Unhealthy characteristics in marriage all come down to self-absorption,⁵⁶ which limits the ability to exercise Christlike love.⁵⁷ Self-absorption also keeps spouses from recognizing their own failures to live in a Christlike manner and the image of Christ in each other.⁵⁸ In any given marriage each spouse is on a continuum between self-absorption and Christlike love. Christian marriage can be described as a type of crucible⁵⁹ that provides an opportunity for husband and wife to confront their passions and temptations in all their various manifestations.⁶⁰ Through cooperation with God's grace, these confrontations can lead to the transformation of unhealthy characteristics into characteristics that are healthier. Opportunities for such transformation is embedded within the daily fabric of married life, as each spousal interaction is an opportunity to encounter the Grace of God. These encounters are part of the transforming work of marriage and can help with healing from self-absorption, as well as other passions and temptations.⁶¹

Every challenge in marriage can be transformed through the grace of the Holy Spirit.⁶² As part of this transformation spouses must work to attain the Orthodox *phronema*, or mindset. Such a mindset includes being motivated in all things by a genuine love for God and a desire for insight and self-knowledge.⁶³ Growing in self-knowledge and the awareness of one's shortcomings and sins is an opportunity for healing and transformation through God's love.⁶⁴ As spouses struggle to overcome these sins and shortcomings with God's help, the Lord is able to purify them, help them grow in humility and Christlikeness.⁶⁵ Growth in humility and Christlikeness in turn leads to an increased capacity for exercising Christlike love. In a similar way, encountering inadequacies, limitations, and weaknesses in one's spouse is an opportunity to exercise humility and love without judgment.⁶⁶

IVB. Overcoming the Past

Within the community of marriage, husbands and wives grow in self-knowledge and in faith as they allow God to use the daily circumstance of married life to reveal the things that keep them from exercising Christlike love.⁶⁷ As spouses become aware of these things, they are confronted with the reality of their powerlessness without God's help.⁶⁸ Such confrontations are

⁵⁵ Ibid., xvi.

⁵⁶ Ibid., xvii.

⁵⁷ Gregorios, *The Mystery of Marriage*, 8.

⁵⁸ Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 121.

⁵⁹ Muse, "Growing Married," 2.

⁶⁰ Calivas, "Marriage," 253.

⁶¹ Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 79.

⁶² Muse, "Growing Married," 3.

⁶³ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 105.

⁶⁴ Philip Mamalakis, "Helping Married Couples When They Are Stuck," in *Glory and Honor: Orthodox Christian Resources on Marriage*, ed. David C Ford, Mary S Ford, and Alfred K Siewers, (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016), 280.

⁶⁵ Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 41.

⁶⁶ Calivas, "Marriage," 262.

⁶⁷ Abdalah, *Practical Commentary*, 23.

⁶⁸ Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 30.

opportunities for spouses to grow spiritually.⁶⁹ Making use of these confrontations for spiritual growth requires that spouses exercise a nonreactive, nonjudgmental attitude towards themselves and each other.⁷⁰ The essence of such an attitude is illustrated by St Macarius of Optina's description of a Christian home as one where all the members of the household bear each other's burdens, and one condemns only oneself.⁷¹

As discussed previously, openness to emotional healing is one practical aspect of developing humility and repentance in marriage. Modern social sciences can provide insight into ways unresolved emotional wounds can impede spiritual growth.⁷² Failure to attend to such wounds can inhibit spouses' spiritual growth in general and growth in Christlikeness in particular.⁷³ The transforming work of marriage can include resolving past hurtful experiences.⁷⁴ To the extent that spouses can learn to better understand their own individual challenges and not blame them on the past or one another, they can better cooperate with God's work of growth and healing.⁷⁵ This requires that spouses put humility into practice through the effort to grow in self-knowledge.

Each spouse's past experiences influence the present through the memories and even emotions of past events, meaning that the past can cause challenges in the daily experience of marriage.⁷⁶ Absent self-awareness, spouses can even allow the past to unduly influence their interactions with each other.⁷⁷ As spouses become aware of such challenges, they can confront them as opportunities for spiritual and emotional growth.⁷⁸ Failing to recognize and confront unresolved past challenges can inhibit the ability of spouses to love one another with Christlike love.

These challenges can manifest as fear, anger, and other strong emotions, which can often lead to easily projecting unintended meanings onto spousal interactions.⁷⁹ Other ways the past can negatively impact the present include the tendency toward being constantly on guard or overreacting,⁸⁰ leading to difficulty in forgiving and moving past difficult moments.⁸¹ Becoming aware of such tendencies allows spouses to bring them to confession and resolve them,⁸² and thus translate self-knowledge into an opportunity for spiritual growth.⁸³

Three ways the past can impede spiritual growth are loss of trust, fear of vulnerability, and

⁶⁹ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 14.
⁷⁰ Parrott, *Healthy Me, Healthy Us*, 84.
⁷¹ Mamalakis, "Helping Married Couples," 284.
⁷² Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 3.
⁷³ *Ibid.*, 12.
⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.
⁷⁵ Parrott, *Healthy Me, Healthy Us*, 44.
⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.
⁷⁷ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 34.
⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.
⁷⁹ Papanikolaou, "Sex, Marriage, and Theosis," 94.
⁸⁰ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 40.
⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 11.
⁸² *Ibid.*, 47.
⁸³ *Ibid.*, 70.

shame.⁸⁴ Loss of trust in God or one's spouse can lead to a loss of hope in marriage and the feeling of being stuck in situations that will never change.⁸⁵ A fear of vulnerability in the context of marriage can lead to struggles with control and avoidance.⁸⁶ Research has shown that healthy and successful people focus primarily on those things that are relevant and within their control.⁸⁷ Spouses who learn to relinquish control over each other can find greater peace in their own personal lives as well as in their marriages,⁸⁸ which creates a greater space for God to act within the marriage.⁸⁹ Finally, avoidance can lead to self-sabotaging behavior and emotional distance between spouses.⁹⁰

To grow in Christlike love towards one another, spouses must be willing to exercise vulnerability toward one another, which in turn requires a growth in their awareness and acceptance of their own human limitations.⁹¹ This means that vulnerability in marriage, which involves the decision of each spouse to be vulnerable to the other, is oriented toward self-emptying or the gift of self, or what one researcher describes as "mutual kenotic vulnerability."⁹² The decision to be vulnerable towards one's spouse ultimately requires confronting and overcoming one's defense mechanisms, which are often the result of shame, which has been described by some researchers as an entire family of emotions.⁹³ Shame emotions all share the characteristic of the experience of painful self-awareness, embarrassment, guilt, and self-consciousness.⁹⁴

IVC. Overcoming Defense Mechanisms

When faced with feelings of embarrassment, guilt, or self-consciousness in the midst of marital interactions, spouses can often try to avoid these feelings by means of defense mechanisms, which may operate beneath the level of conscious awareness.⁹⁵ Learning to recognize and disarm defense mechanisms to the extent they impede growth in Christlike love between spouses is important and requires vigilance.⁹⁶ Vigilance can help spouses learn to observe defensive mechanisms in action, and so learn to choose different behaviors.

Common behaviors that result from defense mechanisms include avoidance, denial, and

⁸⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Parrott, *Healthy Me, Healthy Us*, 32.

⁸⁸ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 26.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 91.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁹¹ John Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame That Binds You*, Recovery Classics (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2005), 161.

⁹² Benjamin A. Roberts, *The Voice of the Bridegroom: Preaching as an Expression of Spousal Love* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2021), xvi.

⁹³ Joseph Burgo, *Building Self-Esteem: How Learning from Shame Helps Us to Grow* (Chapel Hill, NC: New Rise Press, 2020), x.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 235.

⁹⁶ Joseph Burgo, *Why Do I Do That? Psychological Defense Mechanisms and the Hidden Ways They Shape Our Lives* (Chapel Hill, NC: New Rise Press, 2012), 193.

control.⁹⁷ In the midst of spousal conflict, these behaviors can manifest as self-centeredness, blaming, criticism, and contempt.⁹⁸ In marriage, defense mechanisms are a way to limit the experience of painful self-awareness by trying to control one's spouse.⁹⁹ Attempting to control one's spouse is an impediment to Christlike love,¹⁰⁰ as love precludes the attempt by one spouse to control the other.¹⁰¹ Along these lines, it is important for spouses to realize they cannot change, fix, or control each other in any way.¹⁰²

A helpful behavior spouses can choose when confronted with feelings from the shame family of emotions is to re-frame the experience. This involves attempting to see something that causes embarrassment, guilt, or self-consciousness not as something terrible but as a valuable opportunity to grow in self-knowledge.¹⁰³ Because each spouse experiences shame emotions differently, one spouse may have a very strong negative feeling from the same event that causes the other spouse only mild feelings.¹⁰⁴ This means that spouses should never assume that something that is a big deal for them is also a big deal for their spouse, or that something that is not a big deal for them is not a big deal for their spouse. Oftentimes spouses can struggle with communication and come into conflict because they are having two different subjective experiences about the same experience.

As a family of emotions, shame can cause problems both in the spiritual life and in marriage,¹⁰⁵ making it difficult to accept love from God as well as from one's spouse.¹⁰⁶ One way to describe shame is the belief that one is a bad person.¹⁰⁷ This belief can lead to a sense of ongoing failure, which is in turn accompanied by perfectionism. This perfectionism can be an attempt to be "good enough," even if it is not clear what "good enough" means or looks like.¹⁰⁸ Perfectionism as a defense mechanism of last resort is a refusal to accept the need to make the best of who we are, face our limitations, and grow from that awareness.¹⁰⁹ A related way the shame family of emotions can fuel conflict in marriage is by provoking an ongoing need to demonstrate superiority over one's spouse and always prove one's point.¹¹⁰ Both of these are a denial of one's limitations and serve as examples of how defense mechanisms can lead to spousal conflict absent an awareness and acceptance of one's limitations.¹¹¹ If one is not aware that defense mechanisms are active, it can be difficult to recognize one's own failures or acknowledge one's hurtful behaviors

⁹⁷ Burgo, *Building Self-Esteem*, 13.

⁹⁸ Burgo, *Why Do I Do That?*, 164.

⁹⁹ Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 236.

¹⁰⁰ Burgo, *Building Self-Esteem*, 227.

¹⁰¹ Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 236.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 229.

¹⁰⁴ Burgo, *Building Self-Esteem*, xi.

¹⁰⁵ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 27.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 28.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁹ Burgo, *Why Do I Do That?*, 172.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 168.

¹¹¹ Ibid., IX.

toward one's spouse.¹¹²

With an openness to repentance and self-knowledge, the shame family of emotions have the potential to facilitate growth in humility through creating a greater awareness of one's limitations and an acceptance of them.¹¹³ Acceptance of one's own limitations in turn can make it more likely that one will accept perceived limitations in one's spouse. It can be helpful for a spouse to learn to tolerate the shame family of emotions without allowing defense mechanisms to take over. Whereas attempting to deny or control the experience of shame can isolate spouses from each other and impede growing in intimacy,¹¹⁴ the courage and willingness to be vulnerable can lead to personal growth.¹¹⁵ This vulnerability includes an openness to being embarrassed, or feeling guilty or self-conscious, without feeling the need to defend against one's spouse. Another aspect of being vulnerable to one's spouse is humor and includes learning to laugh at oneself, which can counter the tendency to become defensive.¹¹⁶

Practically speaking, humility includes a willingness to confront one's limitations. As spouses acknowledge their limitations and mistakes through an attitude of repentance, humility can help them learn to embrace their vulnerability and human limitations,¹¹⁷ leading to healthier attitudes toward these limitations.¹¹⁸ That said, insight or awareness alone is not enough, because acquiring new habits and new behaviors requires new decisions over time.¹¹⁹ Another aspect of humility in the context of marriage is accepting the reality that authentic change is driven by new choices made over time.¹²⁰ This reality is the reason it takes time and effort to learn to control one's behavior in the face of defense mechanisms.¹²¹ The struggle to become more aware of such behaviors and overcome them can become opportunities for growth and healing to the extent that spouses are aware of the need to struggle in hope. As spouses learn to overcome their defense mechanisms, they can begin to more effectively practice mutual confession and forgiveness.

V. Mutual Confession and Forgiveness

Moments of hurt, disappointment, stress, or conflict in marriage are actually opportunities to confront one's limitations when it comes to loving one's spouse with Christlike love.¹²² As we have discussed, one's ability to exercise Christlike love is impacted by past hurts and defense mechanisms, which can foster a tendency toward blame, judgment, and focusing on the faults and shortcomings of one's spouse.¹²³ When spouses can reframe the experience of embarrassment, guilt, or self-consciousness, difficult moments in marriage become valuable opportunities to learn and to grow.¹²⁴ By admitting their own shortcomings, confessing and repenting of them, spouses

¹¹² Ibid., 170.

¹¹³ Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 17.

¹¹⁴ Burgo, *Building Self-Esteem*, 227.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 228.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 229.

¹¹⁷ Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 165.

¹¹⁸ Burgo, *Building Self-Esteem*, 255.

¹¹⁹ Burgo, *Why Do I Do That?*, 184.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 193.

¹²² Mamalakis, "Helping Married Couples," 280.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 229.

participate in their own transformation towards Christlike love.¹²⁵

VA. Growing in Christlike Love

In order to grow in Christlike love, spouses must learn to think of such love in concrete, easily measurable terms. Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 13.4–7) defines love in terms of behaviors such as patience, kindness, a lack of rudeness, being slow to anger, and not bearing grudges. In a word, Christlike love is about service, not control or seeking one's own advantage.¹²⁶ In the words of Deacon Stephen Muse, the potential to grow in Christlike love is revealed in the words "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."¹²⁷ To the extent that spouses surrender the desire to control one another, they grow in Christlike love.¹²⁸ This requires growth in mutual understanding¹²⁹ as well as becoming comfortable with ongoing differences that may have no real resolution.¹³⁰ One way of approaching such differences is with a spirit of thanksgiving.

Deacon Stephen Muse, in keeping with the tradition of countless Fathers of the Church, has described the goal of the Incarnation as the sanctification of creation through Christ.¹³¹ Spouses participate in this process to the extent they develop the behavior of offering every aspect of their marriage to God with thanksgiving and receiving it back as a blessing, including the difficult moments. To be able to approach conflict with a spirit of thanksgiving, gratitude, and offering, spouses must first realize that conflict exposes areas in which they are in need of healing¹³² in order to grow in Christlike love.

VB. Learning to Forgive and Seek Forgiveness

Every spouse has challenges that need to be handled with loving patience and tolerance.¹³³ In keeping with St Paul's admonition to bear with one another in love (Eph. 4:2), spouses can learn to endure one another's weaknesses.¹³⁴ In fact, choosing not just to endure but to love one's spouse in spite of their weaknesses reveals marriage to be a school for authentic love.¹³⁵ Such love is an aspect of the asceticism of marriage¹³⁶ and serves as an agent of healing and transformation for husband and wife.¹³⁷ Growth in this type of love requires an ongoing humble acceptance of one's overall inability to love without divine assistance.¹³⁸ As each spouse repents of their own inability to love, they also seek God's help and mercy at the same time, and open themselves up to the action

¹²⁵ Mamalakis, "Spiritual Life," 226.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 221.

¹²⁷ Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 71.

¹²⁸ Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 163.

¹²⁹ Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 195.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 196.

¹³¹ Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 53.

¹³² Muse, "Growing Married," 8.

¹³³ Gregorios, *The Mystery of Marriage*, 34.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ John Chryssavgis, *Love, Sexuality, and the Sacrament of Marriage* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1996), 32.

¹³⁶ Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 47.

¹³⁷ Koshy, *Wedding in Cana*, 85.

¹³⁸ Chamberas, *Repentance*, 53.

of God's grace.¹³⁹ Even in the most difficult moments of a marriage, loving patience, forgiveness, and prayer can lead to healing transformation through the power of God's grace.¹⁴⁰ With the help of humility this can in turn lead to mutual confession and repentance.¹⁴¹

In the words of the late Fr Thomas Hopko, "love means always having to say you're sorry."¹⁴² Such an approach to marriage is something that comes from Christlike love and patience,¹⁴³ as well as the habit of spouses continually offering mercy and forgiveness to one another.¹⁴⁴ This is part of the reality of learning to bear with each other in love and being open to confessing one's own failings, forgiving one another, and praying for one another.¹⁴⁵ The struggle to pray for and love one's spouse ever more deeply is an aspect of repentance as well as living one's marriage as a daily self-offering to one's spouse.¹⁴⁶

As spouses learn to take personal responsibility for their own inability to love in a Christlike way,¹⁴⁷ they create an environment for mutual confession, which in turn can lead to greater love, intimacy, and vulnerability. Mutual confession and forgiveness can transform a situation of conflict to one of mutual support¹⁴⁸ and encouragement.¹⁴⁹ The dynamic of mutual confession and forgiveness is also a way that spouses can help each other grow personally and spiritually and help their marriage as they overcome the cycle of blame.¹⁵⁰ As a path to both transformation and healing, the practice of confession and forgiveness can help spouses realize they each are in need of the other's forgiveness.¹⁵¹

Choosing to forgive is not a one-time event, but it initiates a process that takes time, even though the initial decision can lift the burden of negative feelings.¹⁵² The reason forgiveness takes time is that spouses have to work through and process what Les and Leslie Parrott describe as "emotional memories."¹⁵³ These result from problems that have not been resolved or worked through as a couple¹⁵⁴ and can lead to fear, anger and resentment.¹⁵⁵ Because the decision to forgive includes wishing the best for the one forgiven,¹⁵⁶ trying to actively cultivate feelings of fondness and admiration can help spouses with the process of forgiveness and help overcome any tendency

¹³⁹ Gregorios, *Repentance and Confession*, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Gregorios, *The Mystery of Marriage*, 135.

¹⁴¹ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 147.

¹⁴² Abdalah, *Practical Commentary*, 123.

¹⁴³ Gregorios, *The Mystery of Marriage*, 135.

¹⁴⁴ Roberts, *Voice of the Bridegroom*, 18.

¹⁴⁵ Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 47.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴⁷ Mamalakis, "Spiritual Life," 226.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Les Parrott and Leslie L. Parrott, *I Love You More: How Everyday Problems Can Strengthen Your Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 127.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁵² Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 159.

¹⁵³ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 98.

¹⁵⁴ Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 187.

¹⁵⁵ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 99.

¹⁵⁶ Parrott, *I Love You More*, 127.

to hold grudges.¹⁵⁷

Another aspect of forgiveness in marriage is giving up the desire to control one's spouse, letting down one's defenses, and choosing to make oneself vulnerable.¹⁵⁸ The decision to allow oneself to be vulnerable in marriage is also a decision to not be controlled by past hurts and anger¹⁵⁹ and can help spouses to become more Christlike.¹⁶⁰ As spouses decide to let down their defenses and become vulnerable in the face of difficult moments and enter into the process of mutual confession and forgiveness, they can begin to transform the struggles of their marriage.¹⁶¹

IVC. The Sacramental Dimension

Marriage is ultimately a journey of returning to the Father's love like the prodigal, and as such the sacrament of confession is at the heart of the marital journey. As a turning toward God, confession is a way to be open to the healing that comes from God's ceaseless bids for connection.¹⁶² Confession is a turning toward God and spouse and nurtures marital union by helping to preserve intimacy and connection. Confessing brokenness rather than acting out of brokenness is a way of expressing love for one's spouse and growing in love for them.¹⁶³ This requires that spouses come to see marriage as an opportunity to continually turn to Christ.¹⁶⁴

When a couple approaches the sacrament of Confession regularly as part of the spiritual discipline of their marriage, it serves not just as a powerful aid to reconciliation for each individual spouse, but it also serves to foster a life of ongoing repentance and forgiveness within the marriage.¹⁶⁵ Through cultivating insight and self-knowledge, spouses can learn to prayerfully ask forgiveness of the Lord and their spouse as often as needed, as well as bring this increased awareness of their faults and failings to confession.¹⁶⁶ Confession is an opportunity to maintain new insights and to focus on behaviors that are not consistent with Christlike love.¹⁶⁷ To the extent the spouses focus on the perfect love in the context of confession, they orient the movement of repentance and confession towards the future.¹⁶⁸

Confession can also serve as a means of accountability for spouses, allowing them to reflect on the condition of their soul as manifested in the day-to-day interactions of marriage. As part of this accountability they can evaluate how well they are separating past from present, attentive to ways they may be inflicting hurt on their spouse because of unresolved experiences.¹⁶⁹ Spouses can bring their personal faults and failures to confession, which can serve as the spiritual medicine

¹⁵⁷ Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 158.

¹⁵⁸ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 99.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 147.

¹⁶² Philip Mamalakis, "'Turning Toward' as a Pastoral Theology of Marriage," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 56, no. 1–4 (Spring 2011): 179-195, at 190.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 187.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 190.

¹⁶⁵ Koshy, *Wedding in Cana*, 101.

¹⁶⁶ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 126.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 127.

¹⁶⁸ Chamberas, *Repentance*, 57.

¹⁶⁹ Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 127.

needed to heal one's own personal challenges.¹⁷⁰ This is one of many reasons it is important for husbands and wives to seal complete their mutual forgiveness through the holy mystery of confession.¹⁷¹ Another is that a husband and wife's commitment to a Christian vision of marriage can be more fully lived out through sacramental repentance and confession as an act of self-offering.¹⁷² When husband and wife repent and acknowledge their failures before God, they can make new choices and restore if not renew their communion with each other and with God.¹⁷³ This dynamic reality¹⁷⁴ reveals repentance to be a perpetual beginning, and an invitation to an ever-renewed life.¹⁷⁵

Husband and wife can imitate Abba Sisoës, who at the end of his long life told the spiritual children surrounding him that he needed more time to repent. When his disciples said, "You have no need to repent, Father!" he replied: "I am not sure whether I have even begun to repent!"¹⁷⁶ If Christian marriage is an opportunity for husband and wife to grow in Christlike love through the practice of humility and repentance, as well as mutual confession and forgiveness, conflict takes on a new meaning in light of the pastoral theology of marriage we have discussed.

VI. Synthesis: A Pastoral Theology of Marriage

Every spouse has challenges that need to be handled with loving patience and tolerance.¹⁷⁷ In keeping with St Paul's admonition to bear with one another in love (Eph 4.2), spouses can learn to endure one another's weaknesses.¹⁷⁸ In fact, choosing not just to endure but to love one's spouse in spite of their weaknesses reveals marriage to be a school for authentic love.¹⁷⁹ Such love is an aspect of the asceticism of marriage¹⁸⁰ and serves as an agent of healing and transformation for husband and wife.¹⁸¹ Growth in this type of love requires an ongoing humble acceptance of one's overall inability to love without divine assistance.¹⁸² As spouses repent of their own inability to love, they also seek God's help and mercy at the same time and open themselves to the action of God's grace.¹⁸³ Even in the most difficult moments of a marriage, loving patience, forgiveness, and prayer can lead to healing transformation through the power of God's grace.¹⁸⁴

Attitude drives perception and mindset and thus one's view of reality.¹⁸⁵ Perceptions do not always reflect objective reality, but one's attitude in marriage will lead to perceptions

¹⁷⁰ Koshy, *Wedding in Cana*, 101.
¹⁷¹ Ibid., 85.
¹⁷² Chamberas, *Repentance*, 58.
¹⁷³ Ibid., 52.
¹⁷⁴ Ibid.
¹⁷⁵ Ibid.
¹⁷⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷⁷ Gregorios, *The Mystery of Marriage*, 34.
¹⁷⁸ Ibid.
¹⁷⁹ Chryssavgis, *Sacrament of Marriage*, 32.
¹⁸⁰ Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 47.
¹⁸¹ Koshy, *Wedding in Cana*, 85.
¹⁸² Chamberas, *Repentance*, 53.
¹⁸³ Gregorios, *Repentance and Confession*, 7.
¹⁸⁴ Gregorios, *The Mystery of Marriage*, 135.
¹⁸⁵ Parrott, *I Love You More*, 61.

consistent with one's expectations.¹⁸⁶ This will in turn drive how spouses interpret each other's words, thoughts, and actions.¹⁸⁷ A critical attitude in one spouse will tend to lead toward always finding a reason to be critical. A forgiving attitude will tend to lead to finding reasons to be forgiving. An attitude that is not aligned with the concept of marriage as a path of mutual martyrdom and mutual sanctification will make it difficult to embrace and live out an Orthodox Christian vision for marriage.¹⁸⁸ To the extent spouses can learn to see conflict as a chance to exercise Christlike love,¹⁸⁹ conflict will become an opportunity for growth and an encounter with Christ, revealing the power of the Holy Spirit to transform both husband and wife through their cooperation with God's grace.¹⁹⁰

It is important for spouses to recognize that their assumptions about each other's actions do not necessarily correspond to reality. Realizing this and choosing to question one's perception of a given action or situation can provide an opportunity to reframe and more effectively navigate difficult situations.¹⁹¹ Such an attitude can lead to a greater readiness to extend forgiveness and practice patience.¹⁹² This is especially helpful when it comes to navigating challenges in marriage and requires that spouses see their marriage as journey toward God with and through each other.

VIA. Marriage as a Journey Toward God

Marriage as a mutual journey toward God requires that a couple actively cultivate both their individual and shared prayer lives in the home and elsewhere. In the words of St Gregory Palamas, someone who has no concern for prayer at home as well as places other than in church, does not even really pray when in church.¹⁹³ To journey toward God together, it is important for spouses to worship together, pray together, go to confession together, and to actively seek to grow in the spiritual life daily.¹⁹⁴ This can lead to greater attentiveness toward one another, as well as to a greater facility to extend Christlike self-offering love.¹⁹⁵ This in turn enables a greater capacity for forgiveness and of love.¹⁹⁶

The concluding prayer of the Marriage Service includes a prayer for God to receive the couple's crowns in his Kingdom, serving as an encouragement for the newly crowned couple to follow the ways of the martyrs and married saints on the path to salvation.¹⁹⁷ The crown is also a reminder of a new cross given to the couple, which will require them to work together in order to carry this new cross in service to Christ through each other.¹⁹⁸ One of the ways couples carry this cross is by recognizing and confessing their own limitations in marriage. These limitations are

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Parrott, *The Good Fight*, 41.

¹⁸⁸ Parrott, *I Love You More*, 57.

¹⁸⁹ Mamalakis, "Spiritual Life," 220.

¹⁹⁰ Mamalakis, "'Turning Toward'," 187.

¹⁹¹ Parrott, *The Good Fight*, 41.

¹⁹² Parrott, *I Love You More*, 61-62.

¹⁹³ Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 78.

¹⁹⁴ Mamalakis, "Helping Married Couples," 282.

¹⁹⁵ Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 78.

¹⁹⁶ Mamalakis, "Helping Married Couples," 282.

¹⁹⁷ Abdalah, *Practical Commentary*, 57.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

revealed by design through marriage, along with the need for God's mercy and the grace.¹⁹⁹

Marriage is an opportunity to overcome one's own shortcomings through repentance and grow in Christlike love. Two ways spouses can repent of their own shortcomings involve resetting expectations and striving to overcome self-absorption. Often spouses enter into marriage expecting that their personal expectations will be met by the other, and when this does not happen, there is a tendency to blame. Expectations can be characterized as rigid, demanding, self-made beliefs that dictate what others are supposed to do, feel, or be. Because unmet expectations can lead to anger, learning to convert expectations into hopes can be helpful.²⁰⁰ Hope can be described as a gentle desire for a certain outcome.²⁰¹ Hopes are flexible and forgiving and can help with growth in humility.²⁰² One characteristic of Christlike love is hope versus expectation.²⁰³ Placing expectations upon one's spouse is ultimately a form of self-absorption, which is a rejection of love.²⁰⁴

As spouses work to overcome self-absorption, they grow in their ability to respond to one another with patience and consideration.²⁰⁵ The struggles of husband and wife to grow from selfishness to authentic love help them to mature spiritually.²⁰⁶ As they grow toward Christlike love, they also grow in their ability to exercise empathy, the ability to accurately see the world through the eyes of one another.²⁰⁷ Because empathy requires that one suspend self-centered interests, at least for a moment,²⁰⁸ and try to understand another's feelings, desires, ideas and actions in a meaningful way,²⁰⁹ growth in empathy can help spouses grow in self-giving, Christlike love.²¹⁰ Absent empathy, self-giving love is not attainable.²¹¹ Empathy in turn leads to the ability to love one's spouse more fully.

Difficult moments in marriage are an invitation to turn to God in prayer and transform the experience into a moment in which God is invited to be more fully present to act.²¹² By turning to God at all moments and circumstances, couples learn to live by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.²¹³ Such inspiration can allow spouses to see themselves more clearly and provide insights they might not otherwise have.²¹⁴ Just as the Divine Liturgy reminds us to commend "our whole life and one another unto Christ our God,"²¹⁵ couples can turn their hearts and minds to God before

199 Mamalakis, "Helping Married Couples," 280.

200 Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 92.

201 Ibid., 96.

202 Ibid., 92.

203 Ibid.

204 Gregorios, *The Mystery of Marriage*, 8.

205 Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 109.

206 Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 53.

207 Parrott, *Healthy Me, Healthy Us*, 156.

208 Ibid., 152.

209 Ibid., 141.

210 Ibid.

211 Ibid., 156.

212 Mamalakis, "'Turning Toward'," 185.

213 Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 196.

214 Makoul, *Wounded Soul*, 123.

215 Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 196.

acting, speaking, or even thinking in order to sanctify their every interaction, even in difficult moments, by the word of God and prayer (1 Tim 4.5).²¹⁶ By turning to prayer in all circumstances, couples learn to keep Christ at the heart of all interactions with each other²¹⁷ and open up a space for Christlike love.²¹⁸

VIB. The Spouse as an Icon of Christ

Dr Philip Mamalakis has explained that challenges in the areas of communication and conflict are a normal part of marriage.²¹⁹ Although the root of these challenges is often the perception of a problem in one's spouse,²²⁰ it can be more helpful to approach these perceived problems as opportunities to encounter Christ.²²¹ As an encounter with Christ in the person of one's spouse, a marital challenge is not necessarily a problem to be solved but a mystery to be experienced.²²² This mystery is the Cross, manifested in marriage as the tension between the call to love one's spouse with Christlike love and the normal challenges of marriage.²²³ This means that spouses must learn to intentionally seek Christ in one another when these challenges arise.²²⁴ This can often require a change in attitude toward both one's spouse and one's marriage.

The opening lines of the Marriage Service Epistle begin with St Paul's admonition toward mutual reverence. Deacon Stephen Muse suggests the only proper response to one's spouse, who has received the Eucharist, is an interior movement of prostration and repentance.²²⁵ This inner reverence and repentance is an expression of authentic Christlike love for one's spouse, a way to approach them in and through Christ and as a way to encounter Christ through them.²²⁶ As spouses grow in humility and recover the likeness of Christ in themselves, they can better recognize the likeness of Christ in each other.²²⁷ As spouses grow in their ability to encounter Christ through each other, they become more capable of authentic relationship²²⁸ and are better able to help one another towards salvation.²²⁹ When one does not seek to encounter Christ in and through one's spouse, there can be a danger of turning them into an object of one's own needs and desires.²³⁰

VIC. Reinterpreting Conflict

An Orthodox Christian vision of marriage lived out in two spouses is an ongoing turning of spouses towards each other, as opposed to turning away or turning against each other when conflict arises. Turning toward one's spouse is an act of self-giving love and a self-offering both

216 Ibid.
217 Muse, "Growing Married," 13.
218 Ibid.
219 Mamalakis, "Helping Married Couples," 277.
220 Ibid.
221 Ibid.
222 Mamalakis, "'Turning Toward'," 186.
223 Ibid.
224 Ibid., 187.
225 Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 79.
226 Ibid.
227 Chamberas, *Great Mystery*, 121.
228 Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 79.
229 Abdalah, *Practical Commentary*, 101.
230 Muse, *Earthen Vessels*, 71.

to Christ and to one's spouse.²³¹ In any given moment each spouse has a choice to turn toward Christ by means of each other. The first step in turning toward each other is realizing the importance of small things each day for building and maintaining one's marriage. It is in these small things that couples seek and express their support for one another and make deposits in each other's emotional bank accounts.²³²

Turning away from one's spouse refers to communicating disinterest by means of distracted or preoccupied disregard or through interrupting behavior. Part of the cross of marriage is learning to overcome such temptations, regardless of how one is feeling towards one's spouse, in order to communicate interest and Christlike love. Turning against one's spouse can involve contemptuous put downs, belittling, as well as combative, contradictory, domineering, critical, defensive, angry, or blaming responses. Turning against communicates disdain, disrespect, and even hatred. Spouses can be particularly tempted to turn against each other when angry, overwhelmed, feeling stressed out, hurt, or tired.²³³

Living out the reality of authentic love in the context of a sacramental marriage requires that a spouse be willing to go far beyond the initial feelings of attraction. There are times when spouses either do not have the capacity or the desire to turn toward one another.²³⁴ This creates a tension between the call to acquire Christlike love and the limitations spouses experience in marriage. These limitations are often experienced especially when one or both spouses are in a particularly emotional state such as angry, frustrated, hurt, or overwhelmed.²³⁵ These are moments to remember that love goes beyond feelings.²³⁶ In the words of St Ambrose of Optina, "Do the deeds of love, and the Lord will put love in your heart."²³⁷ The deeds of love are manifested in the decision to be patient, kind, and gentle toward one's spouse regardless of feelings.²³⁸ Couples demonstrate authentic, Christlike love when they treat each other with kindness, gentleness, and tenderness even in the midst of the tensions and challenges of marriage.²³⁹

Such an approach demonstrates that marriage is a journey that must be sustained by the Holy Spirit and that transforms the spouses through an encounter with divine love.²⁴⁰ Such a vision of marriage presupposes a "personalistic conception of marriage,"²⁴¹ by which love is the primary reason for marriage. This love leads to growth in unity and holiness, which in turn requires among other things approaching conflict as an opportunity for spiritual, personal, and relational growth. As a dimension of an Orthodox vision of marriage is the way of the cross, undertaken through prayer, confession, and repentance.²⁴²

²³¹ Mamalakis, "Turning Toward'," 186.

²³² Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 88.

²³³ Mamalakis, "Turning Toward'," 188.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 186.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ Mamalakis, "Helping Married Couples," 284.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 281.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 278.

²⁴¹ Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, 44.

²⁴² Mamalakis, "Turning Toward'," 188.

Chapter 5: Analysis of Results

I. Introduction

In this chapter we discuss the results of the Good Wine parish-based brief marriage intervention. We will begin with a discussion of qualitative data obtained from participants by means of surveys designed for this intervention. After discussing qualitative data, we will move to a discussion of quantitative data obtained by means of the PREPARE/ENRICH Three Couples Scale survey instrument. We will conclude with a summary analysis of the data and results discussed.

As a brief intervention, this intervention focused on the topics of learning about marriage, communication and conflict, and self-reflection. Because this was a parish-based program intended for use in an Orthodox Christian context, learning about marriage was rooted in an Orthodox pastoral vision of marriage. In addition, topics such as prayer, repentance and forgiveness, sanctification, and sacrifice were included as aspects of living out an Orthodox vision of marriage. The overall intent of this intervention was to shift the way participating couples think about their marriages and the experience of challenges in marriage. Various models and skills for communication and conflict resolution were introduced as concrete ways for couples to implement this shift and grow in their understanding and ability to live out an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification.

II. Participants and Sample Size

The intervention was advertised to prospective participants by word of mouth and bulletin announcements within the parish of Holy Transfiguration Melkite Church in McLean, VA. Although the intervention was designed for a sample size of twenty participating couples, twenty-seven couples were enrolled. Nineteen couples completed the intervention. Although the post-intervention survey and PREPARE/ENRICH surveys include responses from all participants, there are a few cases where either a spouse or a couple failed to return a survey for a specific module. Such cases are noted as appropriate.

As the intervention was open to all parishioners, participants consisted of a range of couples. The length of marriages varied from under two years to over forty years. Some couples were new to an Orthodox perspective on marriage, whereas other were experienced facilitators from the parish marriage preparation program. Couples also came from a wide background as far as an Orthodox theological formation. Some couples were relative newcomers to the parish, whereas others were either seminarian or clergy couples. Based on participant feedback, a majority of participants, regardless of background, grew in their understating of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification, as well as their ability to apply that vision within their own marriage. This seems to demonstrate that all couples, including experienced facilitators, seminary graduates and clergy couples, can benefit from a marriage-enrichment program that specifically focuses on helping them to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage.

III. Data Collection

Data collected as part of this intervention was focused solely on attempting to characterize

the effectiveness of the intervention in communicating an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and in helping participants apply that vision in their own marriages in practical ways relative to communication and conflict. Data was collected by means of quantitative surveys designed to assess the effectiveness of the intervention as well as a qualitative PREPARE/ENRICH survey instrument.

Participants were asked to complete and return the surveys at the end of each session. Session-based surveys consisted of four questions based on a five-point Likert scale as well as two narrative questions. The Likert scale questions were designed to determine the overall effectiveness of the module in terms of: 1) presenting new information, 2) providing greater awareness in the specific topic covered by the session, 3) providing helpful exercises, and 4) helping participants apply an Orthodox vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification. The narrative questions were designed to identify particularly helpful aspects of each module as well as anything participants felt should have been included but was not. Complete details for each session, to include exercises and homework, can be found in Appendix One.

At the end of the intervention, participants were asked to complete and return a survey designed to determine the overall effectiveness of the intervention in terms of: 1) an increased understanding of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification, 2) facilitating the application of this vision in one's own marriage, 3) increased understanding of the relationship between an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and communication, 4) better communications with one's spouse, 5) an increased understanding of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and navigating conflict with one's spouse, and 6) more effectively navigating conflict with one's spouse. An open-ended narrative question was also included to elicit feedback as far as anything not covered as part of the intervention that participants felt should have been.

The PREPARE/ENRICH Three Couples Scales survey was administered before and after the intervention. The scales provide a research-based quantitative measurement of couples in terms of their communication, conflict management, and overall relationship satisfaction.¹ As the intervention focused only on communication and conflict management, only the questions pertaining to those two dimensions were utilized.

IV. Summary of Survey Results

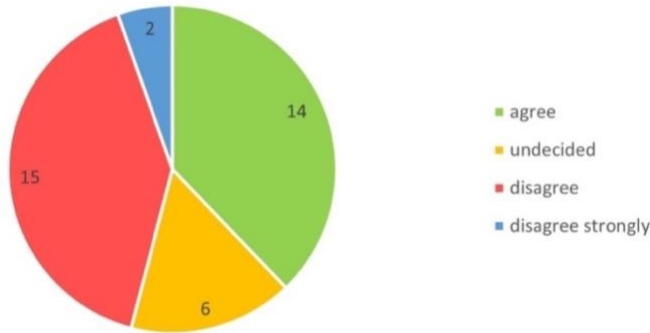
Below we will review the results of the surveys for each module, followed by a review of the post-intervention survey results. We will conclude with a review of the PREPARE/ENRICH survey results.

Session One - Casting the Vision

The goal of Session one was to lay the theological foundation of an Orthodox Christian pastoral vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom and mutual sanctification. Based on feedback from participants Module One was effective in communicating and Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as well as helping couples reframe their daily experiences in marriage in light of that vision. That summary below represents feedback from 37 participants, as one spouse did not return a survey.

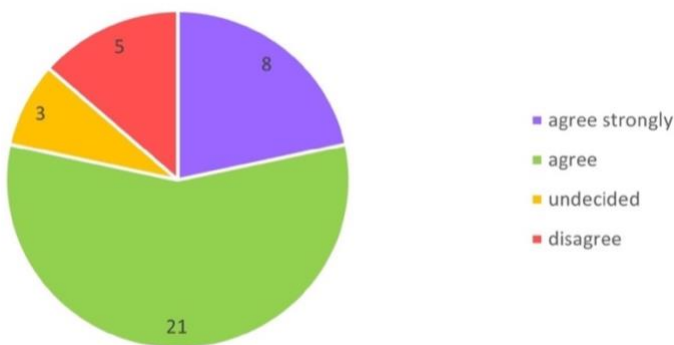
¹ Blaine J. Fowers and David H. Olson, "Enrich Marital Inventory: A Discriminant Validity and Cross-Validity Assessment," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 15, no. 1 (1989): 65-79.

The information presented was new to me.



Fourteen participants (38.9 percent) agreed the information in session one was new to them compared to seventeen participants (45.9 percent) who either disagreed or disagreed strongly. One of the things to note about the results of this question is that more participants were familiar with the information presented than were not.

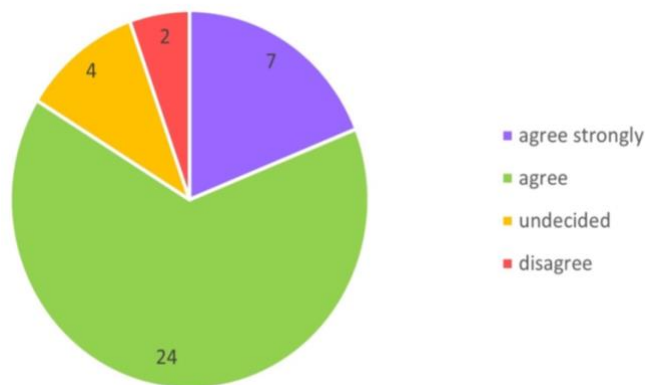
The information presented has given me greater awareness in the area of the Orthodox vision of marriage.



Overall, twenty-nine participants (78.4 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the information in session one provided greater awareness of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage. This seems to indicate that even for those familiar with Orthodox Christian teachings on marriage can receive benefit from further teaching on the topic and can grow in their awareness of the Orthodox Christian vision of marriage. Five of those who agreed the information provided greater awareness of an Orthodox vision of marriage also indicated the information was new, although two who strongly agreed the information provided greater awareness disagreed the information was new. Those who agreed strongly that they grew in their awareness through this session indicated in the narrative responses that learning about the transcendent aspects of marriage was most helpful.

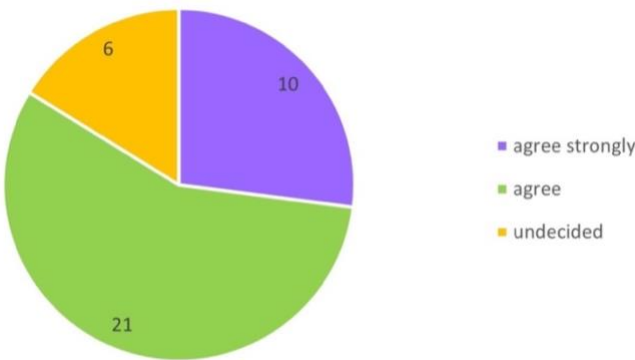
The fact that 78.4 percent agreed the information presented created greater awareness compared to 45.9 percent who disagreed the information was new seems to support the fact that even those who are familiar with an Orthodox vision of marriage can continue to grow in their awareness of that vision.

The exercises were helpful.



Overall, thirty-one participants (83.8 percent) either agreed or strongly agreed that the session one exercises were helpful. A review of the narrative responses revealed that those who agreed strongly that the exercises were helpful also found the discussions between spouses that were part of the session especially valuable. In particular, a number of respondents highlighted as particularly helpful a discussion prompt focused on personal and cultural expectations for marriage versus an Orthodox vision of marriage. Finally, respondents singled out the Dia-Logos prayer that couples were asked to pray together on a regular basis as another helpful exercise.

The information in this module has helped me to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification in my marriage.



Overall, thirty-one participants (83.8 percent) agreed or strongly agreed the information presented in session one helped them to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification within their own marriages. All of those who strongly agreed also agreed (five participants) or strongly agreed (five participants) the exercises were helpful. Narrative responses from these participants also highlighted the impact of learning to see marriage as a process of transformation over time, as well as the value of reflecting on different prayers of the marriage service. There was also mention of the benefit of learning to think about the communal/ecclesial aspect of marriage.

As with the responses related to greater awareness, the number of participants who agreed or agreed strongly the information presented in session one helped to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage in their own marriages would seem to indicate that even those familiar with the

Orthodox vision of marriage can benefit from ongoing teaching and discussions on this topic. The implication for parish-based marriage enrichment is that continually returning to “the basics” is important.

Narrative Responses

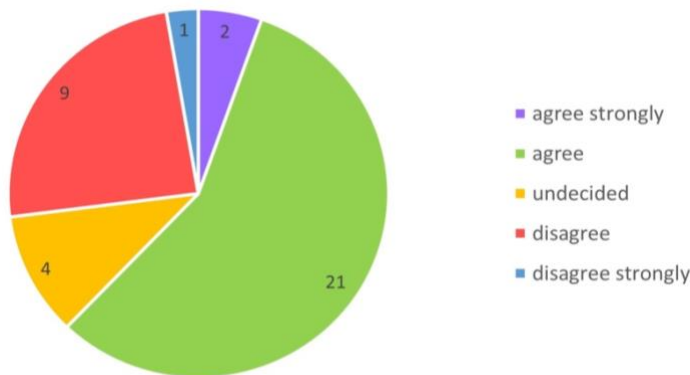
The majority of participants who indicated the information was not new also indicated it was helpful as far as raising their awareness of the Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and increasing their ability to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage. A general theme of appreciation for an opportunity to focus on the transcendent aspects of marriage is also present in the narrative responses. Two topics specifically singled out along these lines were marriage as a means of mutual salvation and marriage as a means of the transformation of the couple over time. Responses also highlighted the value of learning to become more aware of the presence of Christ in one’s marriage in general, and in one’s spouse in particular.

Three of the six participants who were undecided on whether or not the lesson helped them apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage provided narrative feedback that may at least partially explain their responses. In one case, narrative feedback indicated the need for written material to aid with retention of the information. Another participant commented that a course outline would have been helpful, admitting that they may have forgotten if it was presented, which it was. A third participant expressed that it would have been helpful for a more practical discussion of what mutual sanctification “looks like” as well as why salvation can require suffering and sacrifice. Finally, one participant commented that each topic could have served as an entire session by itself, indicating that the session may have been overwhelming to some due to the amount of information.

Session Two - Humility and Repentance

Session two provided an initial step towards translating a theological vision of marriage into specific attitudes and behaviors. The main focus of session two was humility and repentance and how they can be lived out in marriage. Based on the data collected, the session seems to have been effective in increasing awareness in the areas of repentance and humility as a component of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and in helping couples translate that awareness into aspects of day-to-day married life. The summary below represents feedback from thirty-seven participants, as one spouse did not return a survey.

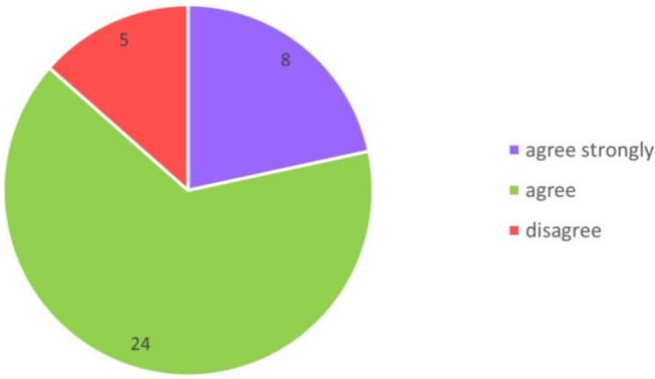
The information presented was new to me.



Overall, twenty-three participants (62.2 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the

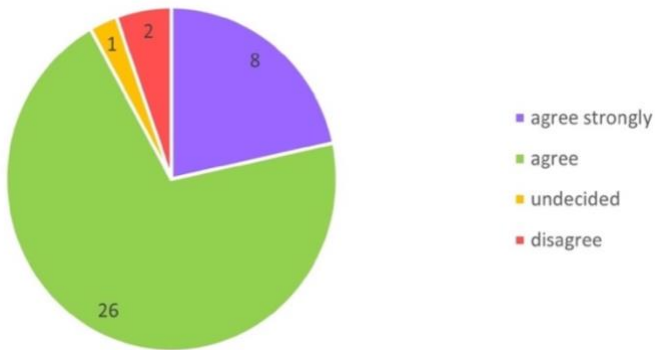
information presented in session two was new to them. The phrasing of the question did not distinguish whether the information was new in general or new within the context of Christian marriage.

The information presented has given me greater awareness in the area of repentance and humility.



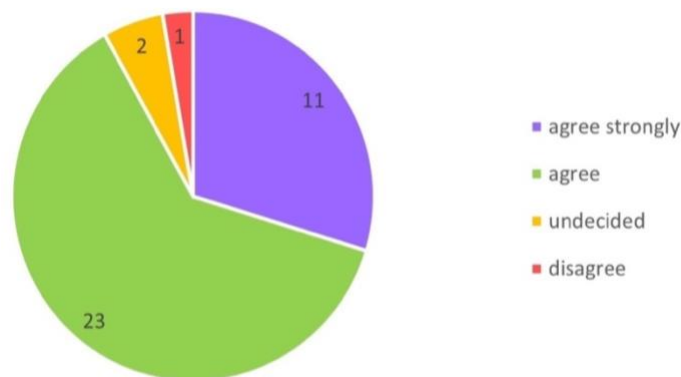
Overall, thirty-two participants (86.5 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the information presented in session two gave them a greater awareness in the area of repentance and humility. Again, the question did not distinguish between an overall greater life awareness and a greater awareness within the context of marriage. Seven of the participants who agreed strongly that the information presented in the content provided a greater awareness in the area of repentance and humility either agreed or agreed strongly that the information was new to them. All eight agreed that the exercises were helpful and that the information presented in the session helped them to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage in their own marriages.

The exercises were helpful.



Overall, thirty-four participants (91.9 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the exercises in session two were helpful. Narrative responses from the eight participants who agreed strongly highlighted the short videos on blame and empathy as being particularly helpful.

The information in this module has helped me to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification in my marriage.



Overall, thirty-four participants (91.9 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the information in module two helped them apply an Orthodox Christian vision of mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification within their own marriages. In the case of the eleven who strongly agreed, narrative responses highlighted the value of learning to think about hopes versus expectations and marriage as an opportunity to learn love through self-knowledge and humility. Other topics mentioned in the narrative responses of these eleven participants included shame and humility, shame and its impact on one’s behavior in marriage, the importance of emotional health for spiritual health, marriage as a path of healing for both spouses, and empathy.

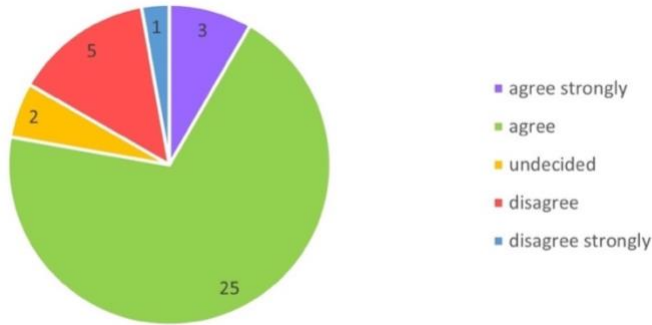
Narrative Responses

The narrative responses highlighted above indicate that this session helped participants adjust their thinking about marriage, conflict in marriage, and responses to challenges in marriage. There were a number of participants who indicated the desire for more concrete examples, such as those provided in the video shorts on blame and empathy that were part of this session. There were two related suggestions for content on healing past hurts in marriage, and for letting go of things and “moving on.”

Session Three - Bearing with One Another in Love

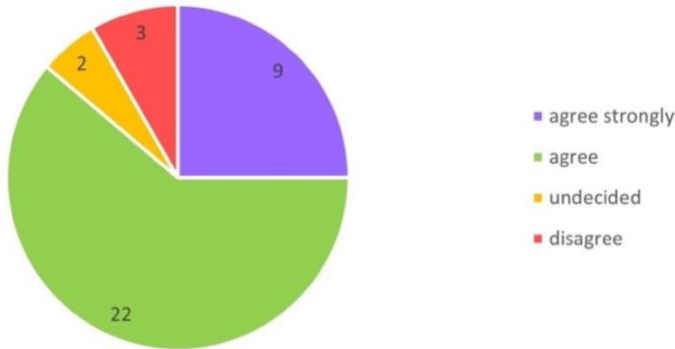
The goal of session three was to introduce the concept of looking at challenges in communication and conflict as opportunities to encounter Christ in one another, against the backdrop of marriage as a path towards transformation in love. Based on survey responses the session appears to have been effective in terms of raising awareness in the area of communication in marriage in general, as well as in the area of a few common pitfalls and problems in particular. It also seems this session was effective in helping participants live out an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual salvation in their own marriages. The responses discussed below are from thirty-six participants, as one couple did not return a survey.

The information presented was new to me.



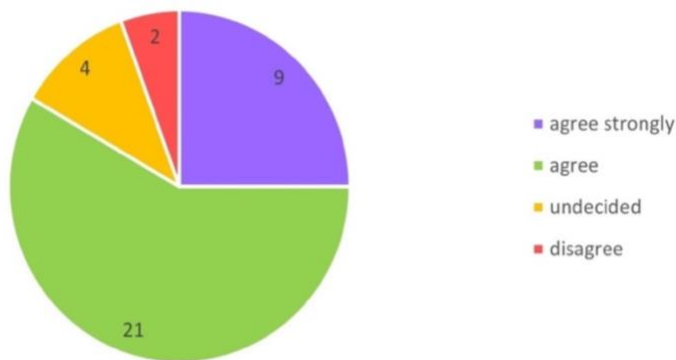
Overall, twenty-eight participants (77.8 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the information presented in this module was new. Narrative responses from those who agreed strongly included references to the shame family of emotions and different conflict styles, communicating hurt feelings in a constructive way, and the physiological impacts of conflict especially as regards the difference between men and women.

The information presented has given me a greater awareness in the area of communication in marriage.



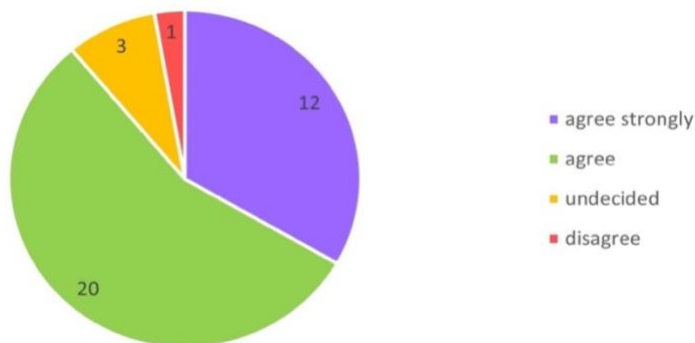
Overall, thirty-one participants (86.1 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the information in module three provided greater awareness for them in the area of communication in marriage. Eight of the nine participants who agreed strongly that the information in session three gave them greater awareness in the area of communication in marriage either agreed or agreed strongly that the information presented in this session was new. All nine of these participants either agreed or agreed strongly that the information presented helped them to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage in their own marriages. Narrative responses from these nine participants highlighted as key topics insight into one’s own styles of conflict and defensiveness, tendencies to blame others, the importance of shifting from conflict to collaboration, and the impact of the Four Horsemen on conflict and communication in marriage.

The exercises were helpful.



Thirty participants (83.3 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the exercises were helpful. One specific item highlighted in the narrative feedback of the nine who agreed strongly was related to the topic of providing direct feedback without blame or criticism.

The information in this module has helped me to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification in my marriage.



Overall, thirty-two participants (88.9 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the information in session three helped them to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification within their own marriages.

Narrative Responses

The narrative responses indicated an appreciation for the focus on practical content related to dealing with conflict in this session. A number of participants singled out Gottman's Four Horsemen as a particularly helpful topic, as was a formula presented for changing a criticism into a request. There were two responses related to a changed perspective on marriage and the dynamic of conflict and communication. One participant mentioned a new awareness of responding to their spouse in love and humility as part of the path to salvation, and another mentioned a dimension of the asceticism of marriage as liberation from the passions and learning to see Christ in one's spouse even when things are difficult.

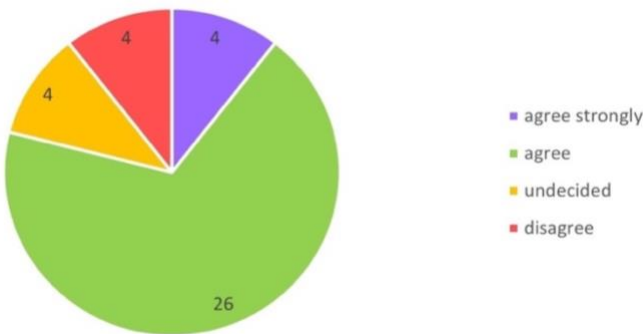
Narrative responses also included specific suggestions for additional content. One suggestion was the impact of family of origin issues on conflict in marriage, and another was for

material addressing what to do when techniques to reduce conflict do not work. One participant indicated that it would be helpful to have additional communication exercises to work on with one's spouse.

Session Four - Mutual Martyrdom

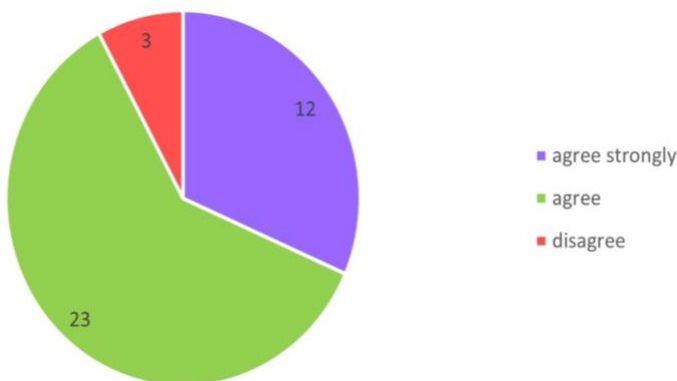
The goal of session four was to continue to explore the concept of looking at challenges in communication and conflict as a potential encounter with Christ through one another. Based on survey results this session was effective as far as increasing awareness of the dynamics of conflict in marriage, and in helping participants apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification in their own marriages. Based on the narrative responses, the exercises and models presented seemed to have played a large part in the effectiveness of this session. The summary below reflects responses from all thirty-eight participants.

The information presented was new to me.



Thirty participants (78.9 percent) agreed or agreed strongly the information in session four was new. Narrative feedback from the four participants who agreed strongly highlighted Drs Les and Leslie Parrot's C.O.R.E. model for constructively engaging in conflict as particularly helpful, in addition to the practice of sharing withholds, a way to periodically express both appreciation and annoyance in a constructive manner.

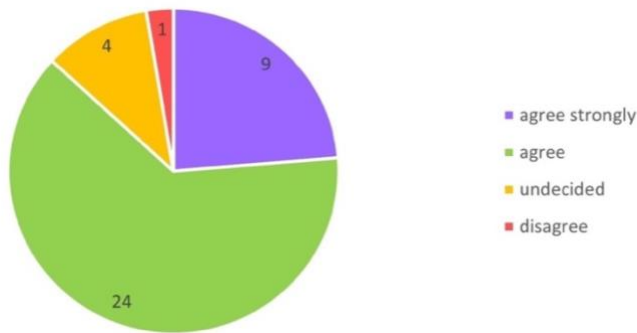
The information presented has given me a greater awareness in the area of conflict in marriage.



Thirty-five participants (92.1 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that the information in session four provided a greater awareness in the area of conflict in marriage. Narrative responses of the twelve participants who strongly agreed highlighted the C.O.R.E. model, the practice of

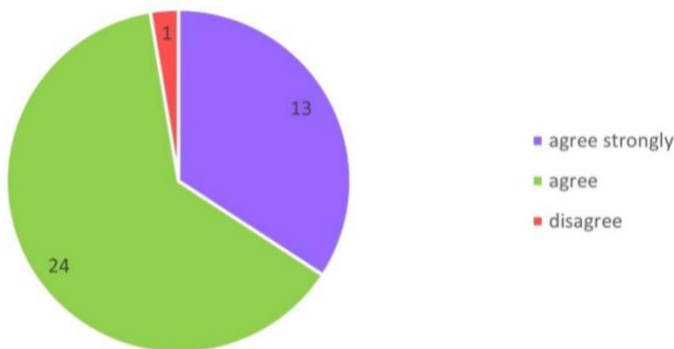
sharing withholds, and the Parrott’s XYZ technique for sharing direct feedback in a non-blaming and non-criticizing way. All twelve participants who agreed strongly that this session provided greater awareness in the area of conflict in marriage also agreed or strongly agreed that the information in session four helped them apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual salvation in their own marriages.

The exercises were helpful.



Thirty-three participants agreed or agreed strongly that the exercises for session four were helpful (86.8 percent). Narrative responses of the nine who strongly agreed all focused on either the C.O.R.E, XYZ or sharing withholds videos shown to couples as part of this session. One of these nine participants highlighted being able to engage in the exercises with one’s spouse as part of the session as being particularly helpful.

The information in this module has helped me to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification in my marriage.



Thirty-seven participants (97.4 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the information in session four helped them apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification in their own marriages. Based on narrative feedback, the thirteen participants who agreed strongly that the information in this module helped them apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage in their own marriages found the models and tools presented as part of this module particularly helpful in doing so.

Narrative Responses

Other useful topics highlighted in the narrative responses included the impact of one’s attitude on behavior, the fact that one’s perception is not the same as reality, taking time-outs during heated engagements, and the asceticism of marriage as lived out in making the choice to

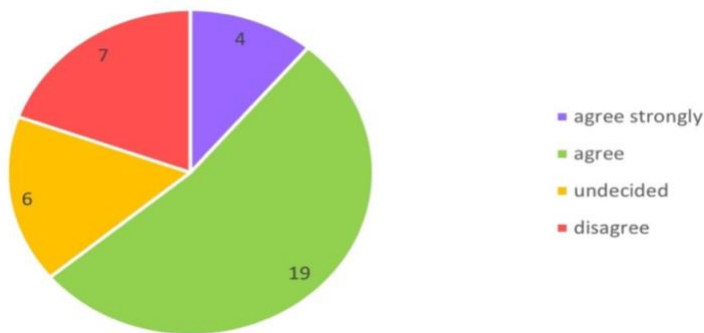
refrain from responding to one's spouse in pride-induced anger.

The narrative responses also included requests for specific concrete examples of what to do in scenarios where the techniques and models presented do not work, as well as concrete examples to illustrate the point presented. There was also a request for content to address situations in which one spouse does not easily engage in conversation or problem solving. There was also a request for material from the holy fathers on topics such as humility for reading and reflection in the context of married life. Finally, there was a suggestion that the material in the session could be useful for marriage preparation programs

Session 5 - Mutual Sanctification

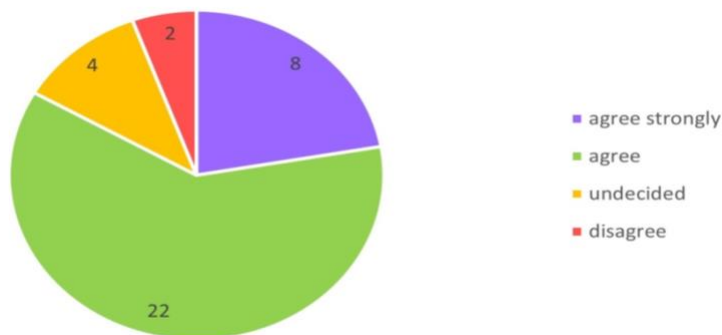
The goal of session five was to provide a summary of all material covered in previous sessions and to present a discussion of marriage as a journey toward *theosis* in which husband and wife share. A key part of this journey is the dynamic of repentance and forgiveness. The summary of data below represents responses from 36 participants, as one couple did not return a survey.

The information presented was new to me.



Twenty-three participants agreed or agreed strongly that the information in session five was new (63.9 percent). Narrative responses for all four participants who agreed strongly that the information was new specifically commented on the material presented on the topic of repentance and forgiveness in marriage. All four also agreed strongly that session five provided greater awareness for them in the area of requesting and granting forgiveness in marriage, all four strongly agreed that the exercises were helpful, and all four also agreed strongly that the session helped them apply and Orthodox Christian vision of marriage in their own marriages.

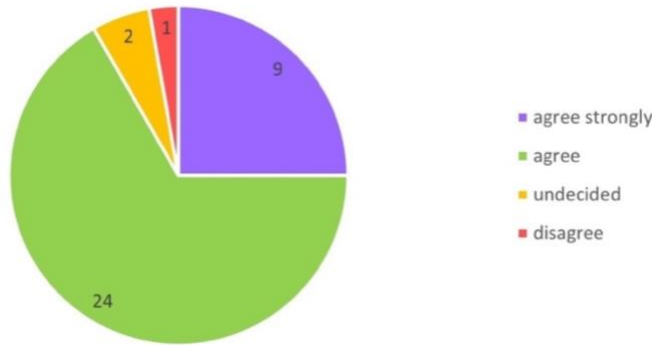
The information presented has given me a greater awareness of requesting and granting forgiveness in marriage.



Thirty participants (83.3 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that information in session five

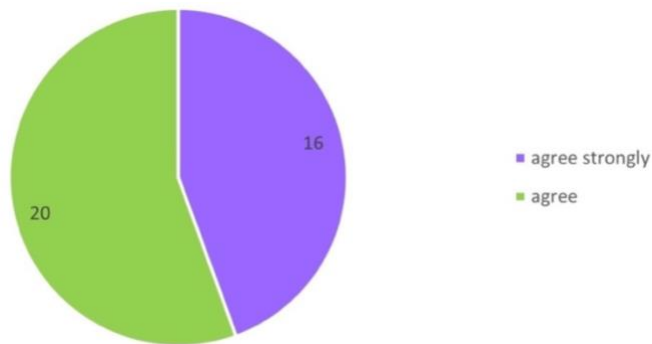
provided them with greater awareness in the area of requesting and granting forgiveness in marriage. In reviewing the narrative responses of these eight participants, three themes related to forgiveness in marriage emerged: asceticism in marriage as an overcoming of the passions and self-love, the importance of always asking forgiveness, and asking forgiveness as a way of becoming more mindful of one’s own faults.

The exercises were helpful.



Thirty-three participants (91.7 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the exercises were helpful. Nine of the thirty-three strongly agreed. One comment from the narrative responses of these nine indicated that the ability to discuss these topics with one’s spouse was very helpful and fostered a deeper level of mutual understanding. Another comment mentioned the value of a proposal that the couple begin a practice of mutual forgiveness as part of their evening prayer.

The information in this module has helped me to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification in my marriage.



All participants (100 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that this module helped them apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification in their own marriage. Narrative responses from those who strongly agreed highlighted the importance of taking time to reflect on how one’s spouse is helping them on their spiritual journey towards Christ, the need for God’s grace in marriage, the emphasis on the constant struggle to be vulnerable to one’s spouse, the idea that forgiveness is a process and not an event, and the concept of mutual transformation in marriage.

Narrative Responses

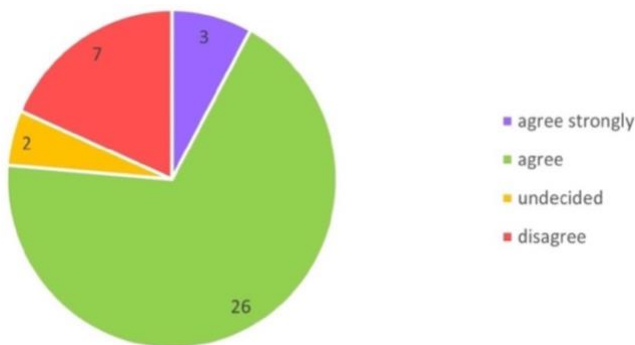
In addition to comments mentioned above from the narrative responses, other highlights for participants from this session included the idea of making sacramental confession a regular practice as part of marriage, increased awareness of God’s transforming activity in marriage

through each other, learning to see challenges in marriage as opportunities to grow, and the experience of suffering, confession, and repentance as being related to mutual transformation and sanctification. One response highlighted the value of the comprehensive reviewing of previous material that was part of this session. One comment indicated that the material may have been easier to absorb in smaller chunks.

Session 6 - Turning Toward as a Pastoral Theology of Marriage

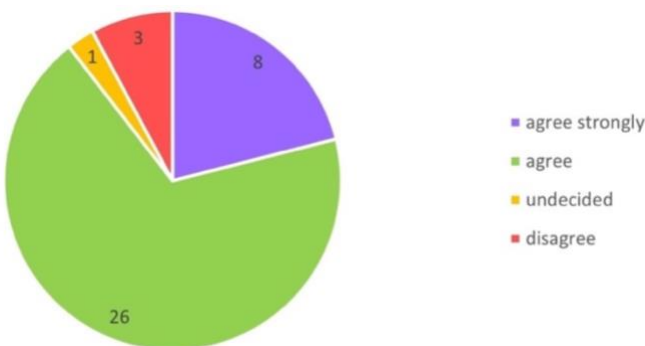
The goal of session six was to serve as a capstone for the intervention, tying together many of the themes from previous sessions. One of the key elements of session six was placing technical information (models and tools) discussed as part of this intervention within the context of marriage as a journey towards salvation that husband and wife make together. The summary below encompasses data from thirty-eight participants.

The information presented was new to me.



Twenty-nine participants (76.3 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the information in session six was new to them. A review of the narrative responses of the four who agreed strongly revealed the following topics as particularly helpful: choosing healthy behaviors for a healthier marriage by turning toward Christ, learning as a couple to help carry one another’s cross, and to accept help in carrying one’s own, turning toward one another when tired or angry as well as seeking the Kingdom together, and marriage as a path to holiness versus happiness.

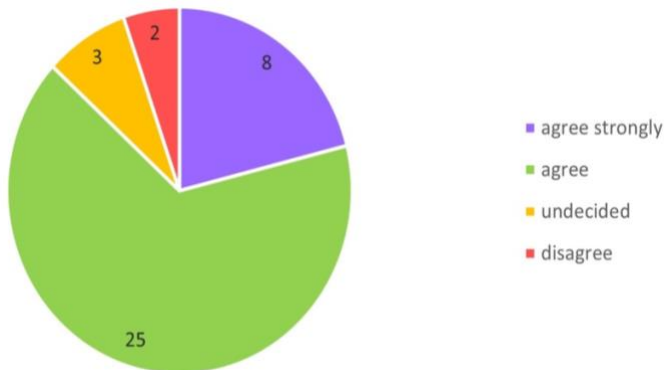
The information presented has given me a greater awareness in the area of growing in unity, holiness, and love in marriage.



Thirty-four participants (89.5 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the information presented in session six provided greater awareness in the area of growing in unity, holiness, and love in marriage. A review of the narrative responses of the nine participants who strongly agreed highlighted the topics of bids for connection and repair attempts, turning toward one another even in the midst of anger or emotional problems, the importance of daily showing

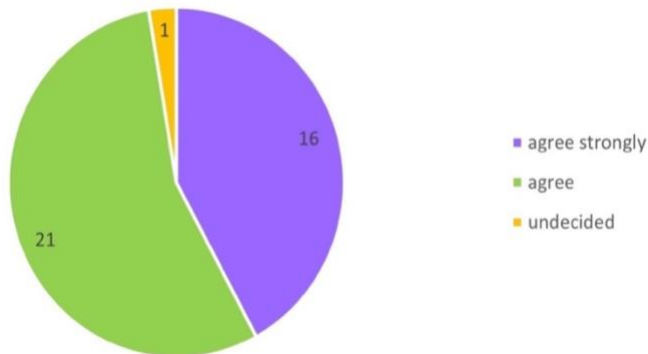
appreciation for one’s spouse, reverence toward one’s spouse as an image of Christ, and confession as a way of turning toward one’s spouse as particularly helpful.

The exercises were helpful.



Thirty-three participants (86.4 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the exercises were helpful. A review of the narrative responses highlighted the discussions as a couple around bids and repair attempts, seeking the Kingdom together, and the exercises as ways to reinforce the didactic content as being particularly helpful.

The information in this module has helped me to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification in my marriage.



Thirty-seven participants (97.4 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the information in session six helped them to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage in their own marriages. The narrative responses from the seventeen participants who agreed strongly that session six helped them to apply an Orthodox vision of marriage in their own marriages show that the specific topics that seemed helpful included bids for connection, problems in marriage as opportunities for greater love toward one’s spouse, seeing Christ in one’s spouse, seeking the Kingdom together, and the role of mutual and sacramental confession in marriage.

Narrative Responses

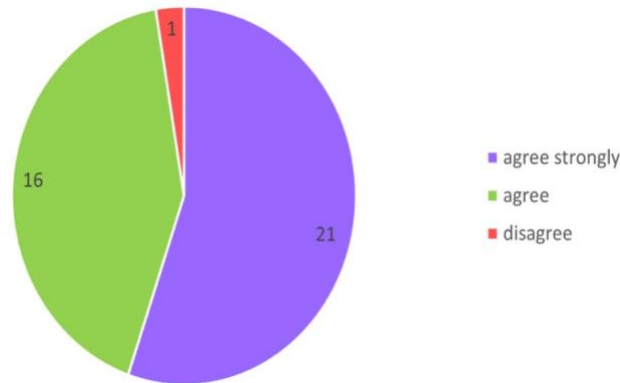
Based on feedback from the narrative responses, the most helpful content in this module was the idea of being attentive to little things couples can do to stay connected or to reconnect in moments of difficulty, or bids for connection, regardless of the circumstances. A few participants commented on the theme of learning to see Christ in one’s spouse. Others commented on the importance of seeking to serve one’s spouse and overcoming selfishness, as well as learning to see marriage as a way to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

A number of participants commented on the need for more concrete examples to help illustrate the didactic components of the session. The single participant who was undecided whether or not this lesson helped them to apply on Orthodox Christian vision of marriage expressed a desire for more concrete examples. Similarly, two other participants indicated the desire for more concrete or in-depth examples as well as anecdotes. Other participants specifically commented on the need for more examples of repair attempts. One participant suggested a visual aid to better illustrate the continuum of growth in Christlike love, and another commented on the need for handouts as well as suggestions of things couples might work on next as a follow on.

Post-Intervention Survey Results

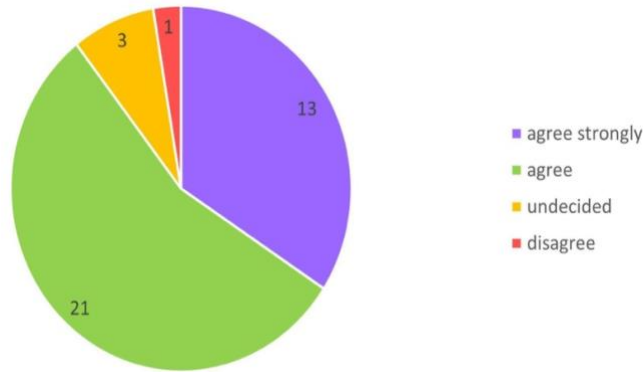
The goal of this survey was to attempt to determine the overall effectiveness of the intervention. The results below reflect the responses of thirty-eight participants.

The presentations have increased my understanding of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification.



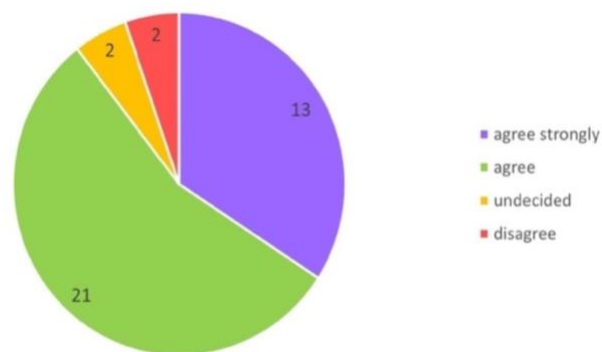
Thirty-seven participants (97.4 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the intervention increased their understanding of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification. Of the respondents who strongly agreed, ten offered suggestions for feedback on additional topics or ways to improve participant experience. This feedback will be addressed in the narrative response section below. The single participant who disagreed also expressed a desire for more examples in order to make the material clearer and easier to remember. The responses to this question seem to indicate that, overall, the intervention was effective as far as raising participant awareness in the area of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage.

The presentations have helped me to apply the Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification within my marriage.



Thirty-four participants (89.5 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the intervention increased their ability to apply an Orthodox Christian vision as mutual martyrdom/mutual salvation in their marriage. Twelve of the fourteen participants who agreed strongly also agreed strongly that the presentations increased their understanding of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual salvation. This seems to indicate a possible relationship between the ability to apply concepts that were presented in one’s own marriage and an increased awareness of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage. The variation in results between this question and the previous question may indicate a difference between the effectiveness of the intervention in terms of creating new awareness and helping participants apply this new awareness. We will be able to expand a bit on these results as we examine the narrative response section below. The single participant who disagreed also expressed a desire for more examples in order to make the material clearer and easier to remember. Of the three participants who were undecided, two indicated a desire for more examples in the narrative summaries. Overall, I would assess the intervention as effective for most participants in helping them apply a vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification in their own marriages given the 89.5 positive response rate. That said, the four responses that were not positive may indicate that additional examples as part of the intervention could have made it more effective.

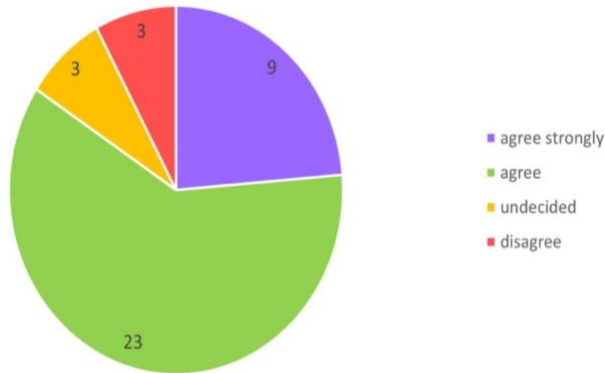
The presentations have increased my understanding of the relationship between the Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and communication.



Thirty-four participants (89.5 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the intervention increased their understanding of the relationship between the Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and communication. Twelve of the fourteen participants who agreed strongly also agreed strongly that the presentations increased their understanding of an Orthodox Christian vision of

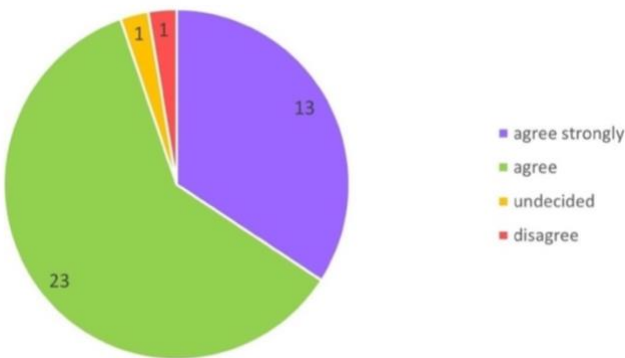
marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual salvation and the remaining two agreed. This may indicate an indication of the effectiveness of the intervention in terms of framing communication within the context of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage. Of the two participants who disagreed, one expressed a desire for real-world examples. Overall responses to this question seem to indicate the intervention was effective in creating greater awareness of the relationship between communication and living out an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage.

The presentations have helped me to better communicate with my spouse.



Thirty-two participants (84.2 percent) either agreed or agreed strongly that the intervention increased their understanding and helped them to better communicate with their spouse. Of the participants who agreed strongly, eight also agreed strongly that the intervention helped them to navigate conflict better with their spouse. Of the three who were undecided, two indicated a desire for more examples. Overall, responses seem to indicate that the intervention was effective in helping participants communicate more effectively with their spouses.

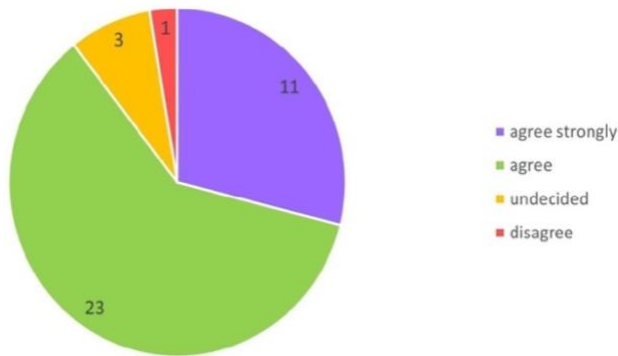
The presentations have increased my understanding of the relationship between the Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and navigating conflict.



Thirty-six participants (94.7 percent) either agreed or agreed strongly that the intervention increased their understanding of the relationship between an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and the process of navigating conflict. Of the fourteen who agreed strongly, thirteen also agreed strongly that the intervention increased their understanding of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification. This may indicate that there is some correlation between understanding the relationship between conflict and marriage within the context of an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and in understanding marriage and mutual

martyrdom/mutual sanctification. Both the participant who disagreed and the participant who was undecided indicated that they felt the program was lacking in examples. Comments from these participants' narrative responses seemed to indicate that the material was not entirely clear or easy to remember. The single participant who was undecided also expressed a desire for more examples. These two responses may indicate a need for more examples in future iterations of this intervention. Overall, the responses to the question seem to indicate that the intervention was effective in creating greater awareness of the relationship between navigating conflict and an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage.

The presentations have helped me to better navigate conflict with my spouse.



Thirty-four participants (89.5 percent) either agreed or agreed strongly that the intervention helped them to better navigate conflict with their spouses. Of those who agreed strongly, two participants indicated that more concrete examples might be helpful. Both of the participants who were undecided indicated that more examples might be helpful. The participant who disagreed did not indicate anything specific in the narrative responses.

Narrative Responses

The narrative responses were positive in general and helped to identify elements of the intervention that were particularly helpful. Two participants highlighted the inclusion of practical tips as helpful, and another participant highlighted as helpful the concept of marriage as a means to salvation for both spouses. A third participant highlighted the value of spending time going through the intervention as spouses

Another way in which the narrative responses were helpful was in identifying ways to increase the effectiveness of the intervention. One participant indicated that a printed outline as an aid to retaining the information and concepts presented would have been helpful. Four participants indicated that the inclusion of more concrete or real-life examples would have enhanced their learning. One participant suggested that the material be made available in audio format (like a podcast) so that the material might be revisited easily on a mobile phone.

A third way the narrative responses were helpful was in identifying topics for future iterations. Suggested topics included prayer with one's spouse, sexual intimacy, parenting young children, navigating the specific conflict of conflicting parenting styles, time management, and a selection of best practices for other more seasoned couples. No content or topics were highlighted by participants as unnecessary.

PREPARE/ENRICH Three Couple Scales Results

The PREPARE/ENRICH Couple Scales survey provided measures in the areas of the quality of a couple's communication as well as the ability of a couple to discuss and resolve differences. The survey was administered to all participating couples at the beginning of the intervention and at the conclusion of the intervention. The goal of doing so was to test for a change in either area that might be attributed to the intervention itself. The information presented in the two tables below is derived from the proprietary PREPARE/ENRICH Three Couple Scales scoring worksheet.

Communication Scale Results

Of the five couples who scored Very High prior to the intervention, four couples experienced a decrease in satisfaction with the quality of their communication. Two scored High post-intervention, and two scored Moderate. Of the ten couples who scored High pre-intervention, two experienced a decrease in satisfaction with the quality of their communication post-intervention, scoring Moderate. Two others experienced an increase, scoring Very High. Of the four couples who scored Moderate pre-intervention, three couples experienced an increase in satisfaction with the quality of their communication post-intervention, scoring High.

Quality of Couples Communication	Number of Couples Pre-intervention	Number of Couples Post-intervention
Very High	5	2
High	10	11
Moderate	4	6
Low		
Very Low		

Table 1 Comparison of Pre-intervention and Post-intervention Communication Scale Results

The overall couple mean pre-intervention was 38.79, and post intervention was 35.95. Both scores fall within the range of High. As a group it seems that the participants experienced something of a decrease in the overall quality of their communication. This decrease is expected in light of a common phenomenon documented in the marriage enrichment literature as discussed in Chapter Three. Research findings seem to indicate that the overall satisfaction level with communication skills for marriage-enrichment program participants is lower than for those who have not participated in these programs. One theory that has been posited is that marriage-enrichment programs create expectations around communications that are difficult for couples to sustain over time. Pastorally, this phenomenon can be attributed to the effects of the various limitations and challenges with which each spouse struggles, especially during challenging moments.

Conflict Resolution Scale Results

The couple that scored Very High pre-intervention scored High post intervention. Two of the seven couples that scored High pre-intervention scored Very High post-intervention, and the remaining five scored High. Post-intervention, one of the eleven couples who scored Moderate pre-intervention scored Very High, seven of the eleven couples who scored Moderate pre-intervention scored High post-intervention, and the remaining three scored Moderate.

Quality of Couples Conflict Resolution	Number of Couples Pre-intervention	Number of Couples Post-intervention
Very High	1	3
High	7	13
Moderate	11	3
Low		
Very Low		

Table 2 Comparison of Pre-intervention and Post-intervention Conflict Scale Results

The overall pre-intervention couple mean was 34.37 and the overall post-intervention was 37.53, indicating a shift from Moderate to High on average for participating couples. This would seem to indicate that the intervention was effective in helping couples navigate conflict more effectively.

V. Summary Analysis

Based on qualitative and quantitative data collected, it would seem that the intervention was effective in communicating an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage. Within that context, participating couples learned how to more effectively navigate conflict. It is interesting to note that although participating couples demonstrated an increase in the ability to discuss and resolve differences and to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage, their responses indicated a perceived decrease in the quality of their communication. As discussed above, this decrease is consistent with marriage-enrichment research findings. Further, the fact that the ability to resolve conflict improved without a commensurate perceived improvement in communication skills supports the emerging focus in marriage-enrichment programs and literature on transformative processes, such as the practice of mutual confession and forgiveness. Based on participant feedback, this was the topic which most effectively helped participating couples apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification, or dying to self, to their own marriages.

VI. Conclusion

In this chapter we began with a discussion of the results of the parish-based brief marriage intervention. We first reviewed the results of the qualitative survey data, and then discussed PREPARE/ENRICH Three Couple Scales derived quantitative. We concluded with a summary analysis of the results and data discussed in this chapter. In our next chapter, we will conclude this work with a discussion of areas for future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

I. Introduction

In this chapter we summarize this project. We will first discuss limitations of the research, followed by key outcomes of the intervention. We will then proceed to a discussion of areas for future research. We will conclude with a few comments about the intervention overall.

II. Research Limitations

One key limitation of the research conducted as part of this Doctor of Ministry final project is the relatively small sample size. Although the results do not warrant making generalizations about the broader audience, they are reflective of my local context. Another limitation is the lack of follow-up with participants over time. Although the data collected supports the conclusion that the intervention was effective in helping couples apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual salvation, data is lacking on the long-term effectiveness of the intervention. Despite these limitations, this research has identified elements that can be relevant to other priests in ministering to married couples and has highlighted areas for future research.

III. Key Outcomes

One key outcome was the role of the transformational processes of repentance and forgiveness helping to navigate challenges with communication and conflict in marriage. All participants agreed that this topic was helpful in helping to apply an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom/mutual sanctification. This indicates that for couples in my ministry context, focusing on the concepts of repentance and forgiveness can help re-shape how couples think about navigating challenges with conflict and communication. This leads to a second key outcome for my ministry context.

The focus of this intervention was not to teach specific skills so much as to teach participants a different way of thinking about marriage. Based on the data analysis presented in the previous chapter, it would seem that couples did learn to think about marriage within the context of mutual salvation. This shift in perspective can lead to a shift in meaning for the couples when it comes to facing challenges within their marriage. This speaks to the impact of including a focus on transformational processes such as repentance and forgiveness in parish-based marriage enrichment interventions.

A third key outcome of this intervention was that participating couples indicated lower levels of satisfaction with their communication skills post intervention, which is in keeping with the body of research concerning marriage-enrichment program participants. This means that for my parish context, focusing strictly on communication and conflict resolution skills will likely have limited effectiveness. Based on survey data from participants, these technical skills were helpful to the extent they helped apply an Orthodox vision of marriage as mutual martyrdom and mutual sanctification in practical ways.

Although the results of this intervention are only applicable to my ministry context, they are reflective of a number of the findings in the marriage-enrichment literature. Of particular note, participation for the duration of the intervention was a challenge. That speaks to the potential value of brief interventions, in the form of parish-based marriage-enrichment programs that deliver lessons around individual topics, and that do not require either previous participation or a commitment to future participation. We will address this a bit more in the next section.

IV. Areas for Future Research

The areas for future research can be divided into two categories: further refinement of the existing intervention and adaptation of the existing intervention for other contexts. Participant feedback included suggestions for additional topics that should be covered, as well as suggestions for the improvement of the intervention. One suggestion is the inclusion of more concrete examples of techniques for navigating conflict. Such examples might take the form of case studies, skits, role plays, and other similar activities. One area of future research is how to enhance the existing intervention by incorporating additional content, pruning content that is not impactful enough to retain, and reevaluating program effectiveness considering these changes. Additional content could come from suggestions made by the participants in this intervention or through the canvassing of married couples within the parish community.

One area of future research that involves adapting this intervention to other contexts is in the area of marriage preparation. There are parishes such as my own that already have programs in place to prepare engaged couples for marriage. Such parishes might identify elements of this intervention that can be leveraged in order to enhance the overall effectiveness any similar programs they may already have in place. Related future research might involve leveraging this intervention as a foundation for a new marriage-preparation program.

A second area of future research is pastoral counseling for married couples. Because one aspect of pastoral counseling for married couples is to help them navigate some level of crisis, an approach to this ministry that reframes marriage as an opportunity to die to self might also serve as an effective way to help couples through crisis. In particular, the concepts of repentance and forgiveness might serve to help couples in crisis toward resolution. Although both marriage preparation and pastoral counseling for married couples lend themselves to a structured, programmatic approach, a final area of future research to consider is adapting the topics of this intervention for delivery as independent units.

As discussed in our overview of marriage enrichment, one of the advantages of brief interventions is that they can be completed within a day or a few minutes each day. This advantage addresses the problem of attrition. Given that only nineteen couples of the twenty-seven who enrolled completed the program, attrition is a factor of which to be aware. Delivering the topics of this intervention as individual units without a requirement to have participated in any others might allow for a wider audience and thus potentially a greater impact within the parish context. On a related note, it could be helpful to elicit specific topics of interest to married couples within the parish community and to incorporate those topics into an ongoing program that consists of brief interventions delivered as individual sessions over time. A final comment in the area of future research involves actual delivery mechanism of this intervention. As this intervention was delivered asynchronously, modifying this intervention for real-time delivery in a group setting might be a worthwhile area for future research. Real-time, in-person delivery might have the added benefit of building a community of couples dedicated to strengthening their marriages within the local parish community.

V. Overall Results

The intervention delivered as part of this Doctor of Ministry final project has demonstrated the utility of a parish-based brief intervention as a means of marriage-enrichment. The intervention was effective in terms of the primary goal of communicating an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage to participants. In addition, the ability of participating couples to apply this vision to

marital challenges in the areas of communication and conflict was also enhanced. On a personal note, my own ministry effectiveness has been enhanced by the experience of developing and delivering this intervention. Both in the context of the holy mystery of confession and pastoral counseling, the information and insights I have gained as a result of this intervention have become an integral dimension of my own pastoral ministry, thus allowing me to help couples in my parish in a more effective manner.

VI. Conclusion

In this chapter we have presented a concluding summary of my Doctor of Ministry final project. After discussing research limitations, we addressed key outcomes as well as areas for future research. Finally, we concluded with a few comments about the intervention overall.

Appendix 1: Conflict-Related Concepts, Models, and Tools Used in the Intervention

In this Appendix we present key concepts, models, and tools presented to couples who participated in the intervention. One key aspect in shifting how couples think was introducing them to the concept of the shame family of emotions and defense mechanisms. In this appendix we begin with a brief discussion of the interplay of shame, defense mechanisms, and conflict in marriage.

In the midst of conflict, it can be easy to believe that one's spouse is the issue. The reality is that conflict in marriage is an opportunity to confront oneself.¹ If one is willing to exercise humility, conflict in marriage can lead to growth in self-awareness, as well as in spiritual and emotional maturity.² The two models leveraged in this intervention, Dr John Gottman's Four Horsemen and Drs Les and Leslie Parrot's C.O.R.E. model, provide a helpful way of thinking about the underlying dynamics of marital conflict. Whereas the Four Horsemen highlight a set of related negative behaviors, the C.O.R.E. model provide a set of corresponding behaviors to address them. These models were used in the intervention to help foster growth in self-awareness and provide a way of adopting more mature and Christlike behaviors in the face of conflict in marriage.

I. Defense Mechanisms and Marital Conflict

Defense mechanisms, which are rooted in the shame family of emotions, can distort a spouse's perceptions when it comes to marital conflict. These distortions lead spouses to act out of a desire for avoidance, denial, and control.³ In concrete terms these behaviors are manifested in blaming, criticizing, and expressing contempt, each of which can be perceived as a personal attack by one's spouse.⁴ Another behavior resulting from defense mechanism is self-centeredness or narcissism, which results in blaming and feeling contempt for others due to difficulty in acknowledging one's own fault or error.⁵ Narcissism as a defense mechanism can lead the need for one spouse to demonstrate superiority over the other,⁶ which can lead to arguments that are not easily resolved. In general, defense mechanisms have an adverse impact on conflict and communication in marriage.⁷

¹ Parrott, *The Good Fight*, 27.

² Ibid., 28.

³ Burgo, *Building Self-Esteem*, 13.

⁴ Burgo, *Why Do I Do That?*, 164.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 168.

⁷ Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 213-216.

To effectively navigate conflict in marriage, it is important that spouses learn not to automatically accept or be controlled by feelings, especially if it is possible that defense mechanism have been engaged. Feelings such as contempt, righteous indignation, and angry blaming are often a clue that that defense mechanisms at work.⁸ Part of the transforming journey of marriage is learning to recognize the presence of these defense mechanisms and their impact. As one becomes more self-aware, one can better take responsibility for one's own feelings and reactions when it comes to conflict and communications.⁹

A helpful behavior one can choose when confronted with feelings from the shame family of emotions is to re-frame the experience. Instead of seeing something that causes embarrassment, guilt, or self-consciousness as something terrible, one can attempt to see it as a valuable opportunity to learn.¹⁰ Similarly, one can also try to see such experiences as healing encounters with Christ through which he is pointing out an area for potential growth in humility and love.

It can also be helpful for two spouses in the middle of a disagreement to remember that both their viewpoints are subjective and equally valid.¹¹ This means that what matters most is what the listener hears, not the speaker's intent. Research indicates that most fights in marriage are caused by the perception of either threat or neglect.¹² In a project involving 3,539 married couples, every argument was due to one spouse feeling either unjustly blamed or neglected by the other.¹³ Whether these perceptions are real or not, if one spouse feels threatened by the other, the brain's limbic system can trigger defensive behaviors or even a counter-attack.¹⁴ This in turn can lead to a downward spiral of behavior that can cause a conflict to become harder to resolve. Gottman's Four Horsemen is one way of identifying and better understanding how such a downward spiral can occur.

II. Gottman's Four Horsemen

The Four Horsemen is a term for a specific patterns of interpersonal behavior that can create dysfunction in marriages and even lead to marital breakdowns if they become habitual. These patterns are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.¹⁵ Couples deploy criticism and contempt as weapons against one another, and leverage defensiveness and stonewalling to isolate and protect themselves from one another.¹⁶ These four patterns work in concert to disrupt effective communications in marriage.¹⁷

Expressing praise and admiration for one's spouse is something that can disrupt the cycle of the Four Horsemen.¹⁸ Although in the midst of a tense conversation is likely not the time most spouses think of expressing praise or adoration toward one another, this can be the opportunity for

⁸ Burgo, *Why Do I Do That?*, 202.

⁹ Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 250.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹¹ Gottman, *10 Principles*, 135.

¹² Parrott, *The Good Fight*, 46.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵ Gottman, *10 Principles*, xvi.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ John Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 97.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

an ascetical effort manifested in the form of a genuine expression of praise or adoration.

IIA. Criticism

Criticism is blaming a problem on a spouse's personality flaw,¹⁹ and can be recognized by the use of words such as "lazy," "dumb," "selfish," and "thoughtless."²⁰ Common phrases such as "you always" or "you never" are forms of criticism because they imply that the spouse at whom they are directed is defective in some way.²¹ Criticism may be the most common defensive reaction to others driven by the shame family of emotions.²² Spouses can often deploy criticism against one another in order to help to alleviate uncomfortable feelings resulting from embarrassment, guilt, or self-consciousness.²³

One of the problems with criticism is that the one being criticized can feel attacked no matter how the criticism is phrased and may retaliate as a result.²⁴ When one spouse becomes aware of having criticized the other, it is helpful to apologize right away.²⁵ When it comes to receiving criticism from one's spouse, it can be helpful to refrain from becoming defensive. It may be helpful to acknowledge the truth of the criticism or ask clarifying questions. If there is responsibility for having done whatever has led to the criticism, one should admit that and apologize.²⁶ Some small amount of criticism can be common in marriages. That said, frequent criticism can lead to the other, more deadly horseman of contempt.²⁷

One alternative to criticism is to offer feedback in the form of sensory-based observations devoid of any interpretation.²⁸ An example would be saying, "I noticed that the trash has not been taken out" instead of "You never take out the trash." A request is concluded with a politely framed, concrete description of what is needed to feel better.²⁹ An example of this would be the request, "Would you please take out the trash next time?" instead of the criticism, "You to be more responsible."³⁰

IIB. Contempt

Gottman describes contempt as criticism "gone nuclear."³¹ It is a form of disrespect for one's spouse that arises from a sense of superiority³² and includes behaviors such as insults, name-calling, put-downs, and blame.³³ Other expressions of contempt can include sarcasm, mockery,

¹⁹ Gottman, *10 Principles*, 129.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 123.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Burgo, *Building Self-Esteem*, 162.

²⁵ Gottman, *10 Principles*, 130.

²⁶ Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 242.

²⁷ Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 34.

²⁸ Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 242.

²⁹ Gottman, *10 Principles*, 130.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 132.

³² Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 34.

³³ Gottman, *10 Principles*, 132.

eye-rolling, and facial expressions.³⁴

Because contempt makes it nearly impossible to resolve problems, it leads to even more conflict.³⁵ One effective way to neutralize contempt is to refrain from seeing arguments with one's spouse as a way to get even or show superiority in any way. As with criticism, a more helpful approach can be to make precise requests instead of character attacks. Another way to address contempt in marriage is to make a sincere effort to express admiration, which is the opposite of contempt.³⁶ An alternative to criticism is the "gentle startup:" expressing the feeling, the cause, and a positive request.³⁷ A common source of contempt can be long-simmering negative thoughts about one's spouse, thus it is important to address unresolved differences in a timely manner.³⁸

IIC. Defensiveness

Defensiveness is rooted in the instinct for self-preservation and can trigger withdrawal or counterattack in response to what feels like a verbal assault.³⁹ Gottman describes two main types of defensiveness: innocent victimhood and righteous indignation.⁴⁰ Innocent victimhood leads one to claim mistreatment, whereas righteous indignation leads to a counter-attack in the form of criticism.⁴¹ Shifting blame is one of the most common strategies for evading uncomfortable feelings such as embarrassment, guilt, or self-consciousness. It can be difficult to hear criticism, as it is often experienced as failure or imperfection.⁴² As a defense mechanism, a spouse who is being criticized can seek to expose the failure or flaws of the other.⁴³

Defensiveness is the a natural response of one who feels unjustly blamed or attacked,⁴⁴ but tends to escalate rather than resolve a conflict.⁴⁵ One way to de-escalate defensiveness is to take responsibility to the extent one is able to do so.⁴⁶ From the perspective of defense mechanisms, taking responsibility can actually feel like an attack on one's self-worth.⁴⁷ Because of this one spouse or the other might resist holding themselves accountable, but taking ownership where possible can lead to increased mutual love and respect.⁴⁸

IID. Stonewalling

The fourth horseman is stonewalling, or effectively shutting down in the middle of a conflict or discussion and withholding responses.⁴⁹ Although criticism, contempt and

34 Ibid., 133.

35 Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 34.

36 Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 84.

37 Gottman, *10 Principles*, 134.

38 Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 36.

39 Gottman, *10 Principles*, 135.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Burgo, *Why Do I Do That?*, 170.

43 Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame*, 123.

44 Gottman, *10 Principles*, 134.

45 Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 85.

46 Gottman, *10 Principles*, 135.

47 Ibid., 136.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 137.

defensiveness do not arise in any specific order, one will invariably lead to another,⁵⁰ and one spouse will eventually tune out through stonewalling.⁵¹ Stonewalling occurs when criticism, contempt, and defensiveness become overwhelming. Stonewalling is a protection against feeling psychologically and physically overwhelmed. This can happen when the negativity of one spouse is so intense and sudden that the other spouse begins to feel overwhelmed.⁵² This sensation of feeling of overwhelmed is known as flooding.⁵³

The more often a particular spouse experiences flooding due to criticism received from the other spouse, the more hypervigilant and defensive they become, thus leading to greater defensiveness.⁵⁴ When one spouse begins to experience flooding in the midst of a discussion, it becomes harder for them to pay attention, process information, or engage in creative problem solving. The only two responses available to one experiencing flooding are fight (criticism, contempt, defensiveness) or flight (stonewalling).⁵⁵ If a spouse is not cannot physically fight or run away, they may try to withdraw from the situation in order to calm themselves.⁵⁶

Flooding has physiological components such as an accelerated heart rate, increased blood pressure, shallow breathing and perspiration, hormonal changes, including the secretion of adrenaline,⁵⁷ or even feeling hot, flushed, and shaky.⁵⁸ A spouse can be experiencing all of these effects at the same time they are having an apparently normal conversation.⁵⁹ These physiological clues can allow one to realize they are beginning to experience flooding. If one or both spouses recognize they are beginning to experience flooding, it can be helpful to try to remain calm or even take a break as appropriate.⁶⁰

An effective response can be for the spouse beginning to experience flooding to call for an immediate break, which means no one should try to get the last word in. Both spouses should move to separate places⁶¹ and engage in a self-soothing activity such as music, reading, meditating on scripture, or prayer. Such breaks should last for at least 30 minutes but no longer than 24 hours.⁶²

III. Emotions and Conflict in Marriage

The Four Horsemen demonstrate that the fact that spousal communication during times of conflict can often lead to negative emotions. Because these negative emotions can reveal information about how to more effectively love one's spouse, it is important to learn how to truly hear what one's spouse is saying when they are upset. It can be helpful for each spouse to learn to express their negative emotions in a way that facilitates listening versus feeling attacked, which

⁵⁰ Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 37.

⁵¹ Ibid., 38.

⁵² Ibid., 39.

⁵³ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁶ Gottman, *10 Principles*, 139.

⁵⁷ Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 41.

⁵⁸ Gottman, *10 Principles*, 139.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 138.

⁶⁰ Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 176.

⁶¹ Gottman, *10 Principles*, 139.

⁶² Ibid., 140.

means communication with a spirit of gentleness.⁶³ Drs Les and Leslie's C.O.R.E. model provides a helpful framework for implementing this.

III. Drs Les and Leslie Parrott's C.O.R.E. Model

The acronym "C.O.R.E" stands for cooperation, ownership, respect, and empathy,⁶⁴ all of which require a certain amount of humility on the part of the one trying to maintain these attitudes and associated behaviors. C.O.R.E can help couples address marital conflict in a manner consistent with an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage, and emphasizes the elements of what Drs Les and Lesli Parrot term a "good fight" versus a "bad fight."⁶⁵ While the former is helpful, positive, and clean, that latter is hurtful, negative, and dirty.⁶⁶ Bad fights include: arguments where one or the other spouse becomes defensive, stubborn or withdraws; arguments in which contempt or belittling is used; or arguments that are unproductive and toxic to the marriage.⁶⁷ The characteristics of a "bad fight," summed up with the word pride,⁶⁸ are all consistent with the Four Horsemen.

IIIA. Cooperation

The Parrots suggest a few rules for cultivating cooperation in marriage. One is to make a regular habit of sharing with one's spouse things they do that are bothersome instead of letting them build up over time. One way to do this is for each spouse to write down two things the other spouse has done over the past forty-eight hours that were appreciated but not acknowledged, along with one thing over the same time period that was bothersome. After both spouses have written what they want to share with one another, they take turns sharing.⁶⁹ An important caveat is that the person receiving end can only say "thank you" after each statement, including the negative one. Another caveat is that no discussion of the bothersome items is allowed for 30 minutes. This creates an environment in which it is easier to respond instead of reacting to one another, allowing for a greater level of objectivity.⁷⁰ Such a habit allows spouses to share with one another things that bother them without the fear of further conflict. More importantly this allows for loving and respectful critique to occur within the context of affirmation.⁷¹

A second rule to help foster a spirit of cooperation is to rate the depth of disagreement over any given topic on a ten-point scale, allowing for each spouse to have a better sense of how important the issue is to the other and thus whether or not it is worth engaging in conflict over.⁷² A final rule for cultivating cooperation is agreeing to disagree when necessary. This can be helpful when spouses find themselves in a conversation that is going in circles.⁷³ This can be a helpful way to address the reality that many problematic issues in marriage are never truly solved so much as managed.⁷⁴

⁶³ Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 157.

⁶⁴ Parrott, *The Good Fight*, 17.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

IIIB. Ownership

Ownership involves a spouse's willingness to take responsibility for their own part in creating a situation of marital conflict.⁷⁵ The alternative to taking ownership is blaming one's spouse, which shifts responsibility and can even sometimes escalate the conflict.⁷⁶ Two basic rules to help foster greater courage are apologizing when you mean it and practicing the "XYZ" formula,⁷⁷ which Drs Les and Leslie Parrot describe as follows: "In situation X, when you do Y, I feel Z."⁷⁸ This can serve as a simple way to state the impact of a spouse's behavior without projecting frustration.

Apologizing to one's spouse has the power to heal hurts, as well as repair harm and mend relationships in the face of marital disputes. Apologies can also defuse anger and prevent further misunderstandings. Finally, an apology can diminish the negative effects of past actions.⁷⁹ The Parrotts suggest that an apology have three Rs:⁸⁰ 1) Responsibility - i.e. "I know I hurt your feelings"; 2) Regret - i.e. "I am sorry that I caused you harm"; and 3) Remedy - i.e. "I won't do it again." Brief apologies are recommended over longer ones, as well as refraining from offering excuses or explanations. Brief apologies are more likely to seem sincere, and excuses or explanations can come across as self-justification.⁸¹

IIIC. Respect

A primary way of cultivating respect in marriage is to avoid contempt, a word marriage researchers use for cruelty. Just as criticism is a barrier to ownership, contempt is a barrier to respect.⁸² Because appreciation can serve to counter contempt, the more a couple intentionally begins to look for and acknowledge positive things in their relationship and each other, the more they will foster admiration and fondness in their marriage. This dynamic can reduce and even eliminate contempt.⁸³

Another way of cultivating respect is avoiding heated discussions and arguments by taking time-outs as needed. When either spouse finds that they are too upset or negative to engage in an effective conversation, it is likely time to take a break. For time-outs to work as a means of fostering respect, it is important to agree in advance on ground rules for invoking a time-out.⁸⁴

IIID. Empathy

Empathy refers to the ability of one spouse to see a situation accurately from the perspective of the other spouse.⁸⁵ Research suggests that 90 percent of marital conflicts can be resolved if husband and wife are able to accurately see things from each other's perspective.⁸⁶ One practice for fostering empathy is learning to ask one's spouse what they are thinking. Although we

⁷⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 78.

⁸³ Ibid., 80.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 81.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 24.

constantly observe facial expressions, body language and other cues as part of how we communicate, misunderstanding these cues as they pertain to one's spouse and their intentions or feelings is common.⁸⁷ One study suggests that married couples can only guess each other's thoughts and feelings with 35-percent accuracy.⁸⁸ When either spouse is at risk for making an assumption or reading into what has been said by the other, one can offer to guess at what the other is thinking. In response, the other spouse can rate the accuracy or inaccuracy of such a guess on a one-to-ten scale and share what they are actually thinking.⁸⁹

Another helpful practice is praying for one's spouse, which can lower one's defenses and help to better understand a spouse's perspective. Praying for each other in the midst of difficulty is a way that spouses can grow closer to one another in the face of differences that might otherwise divide them.⁹⁰ A University of Austin study found that 83 percent of couples who pray together described their relationship as very happy, as compared to 69 percent among couples who did not pray together. A similar University of Michigan study found that prayer for one's spouse reduces stress and pain in the person who is praying, thus making empathy easier.⁹¹

Empathy can curb criticism,⁹² draw couples together in the midst of conflict, and allow them to better see things from each other's points of view.⁹³ Empathy helps to shorten conflicts because it can make it easier to replace blame with positive solutions and replace "you" statements with "we" statements.⁹⁴ A study conducted jointly by the University of Pennsylvania and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill concluded that couples who use "we" have a sense of shared interest, which sparks compromise.⁹⁵ This same study showed that couples who use "you" statements tend to criticize, disagree, justify, and otherwise express negativity.⁹⁶ Empathy is something that can draw husband and wife together in the midst of conflict.

Validation, or letting one's spouse know that they are understood, is closely related to empathy. Validation serves as an antidote to criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and requires an attempt to see the situation from the spouse's point of view. An important aspect of validation, especially for men, is to acknowledge the emotion being expressed in difficult moments, versus trying to solve a problem. This means attempting to understand the perspective of one's spouse, including their emotional state.⁹⁷ A good starting point for both empathy and validation can be simply listening and acknowledging what one's spouse is saying, and not arguing for one's own point. A next step can be letting one's spouse know their point is understood, which can include taking responsibility as appropriate.⁹⁸ A helpful practice of expressing empathy and validation can be to summarize one's spouse's point of view before attempting to present one's own

87 Ibid., 83.

88 Ibid., 84.

89 Ibid., 85.

90 Ibid., 87.

91 Ibid.

92 Parrott, *Healthy Me, Healthy Us*, 143.

93 Ibid., 144.

94 Ibid., 145.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 195.

98 Ibid., 196.

perspective.⁹⁹

IV. Additional Tools and Concepts

In this section we present suggestions and tools for navigating conflict in marriage from the intervention that are not included above.

IVA. Harsh and Gentle Start-ups

The Four Horsemen of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling are the biggest predictor of poor conflict management in marriage. A conversation that begins with a negative and accusatory approach, such as criticism or sarcasm, is an example of what Gottman refers to as a harsh start-up.¹⁰⁰ A conversation that begins this way will invariably lead to the Four Horsemen, flooding, and increased emotional distancing and loneliness.¹⁰¹ A helpful alternative to criticism and contempt is what the Gottman refers to as the gentle, soft start-up.¹⁰²

The most important aspect of a gentle start-up to a conversation is to refrain from criticism, contempt, defensiveness, or stonewalling. Another important element is to assume at least some responsibility for the problem at hand. Absent the ability to do so, a statement that acknowledges that the other spouse is not entirely to blame can be helpful.¹⁰³ Ideally a soft start-up has four parts, allowing for direct requests while avoiding criticisms or contemptuous accusations¹⁰⁴: 1) Sharing some responsibility for the situation; 2) Sharing one's feelings; 3) Describing the specific situation; and 4) Describing what is needed in positive terms, with an emphasis on oneself versus one's spouse.

IVB. Making Requests

Making requests can serve as an antidote to criticism, understood as a general expression of negative feelings or opinions about a spouse's character or personality.¹⁰⁵ A request can also be understood as a constructive way of complaining and allow spouses to air grievances and identify areas for ongoing improvements. A key difference between criticism and making a request is that criticism always begins with "You," as in "You always." A request begins most often with "I," as in "I feel."¹⁰⁶ A request focuses on a specific behavior or event and has three parts¹⁰⁷: 1) What the spouse making a request feels; 2) The specific situation that has provoked those feelings; and 3) What that spouse needs, wants, or prefers.

IVC. Time-outs

Time-outs are one way the Parrott's suggest cultivating respect in marriages. They propose the following guidelines to implement time-outs in an effective way:¹⁰⁸

⁹⁹ Gottman, *10 Principles*, 152.

¹⁰⁰ Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 32.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 163.

¹⁰² Gottman, *10 Principles*, 152.

¹⁰³ Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 164.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 165.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁶ Parrott, *Healthy Me, Healthy Us*, 144.

¹⁰⁷ Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 32.

¹⁰⁸ Parrott, *The Good Fight*, 82.

- Both spouses agree to resume the conversation within twenty-four hours;
- The spouse requesting a timeout affirms their intention to work together;
- The discussion ends immediately, and the requesting spouse removes themselves from the situation in order to go calm and down elsewhere;
- Instead of thinking about the conversation during the time-out it is best to try to relax;
- The spouse requesting the timeout lets the other spouse know when you will be ready to resume, even if by text or email;
- The couple should share an everyday activity together before resuming the conversation if possible, as this helps to resume a close, calm connection.

IVD. Bids for Connection and Repair Attempts

Gottman's research has revealed that happily married couples and couples in distress have the same amount of problems and difficulties, with the difference being how they maintain their emotional connection.¹⁰⁹ Happily married couples maintain closeness through the small and simple exchanges that are a part of daily life together. These exchanges, described as "bids for connection,"¹¹⁰ can be something as simple as a question, a gesture, a look, or a touch. All of these express the desire to be emotionally connected, versus simply exchanging or sharing information.¹¹¹ Recognizing and responding to these bids can make a marriage resistant to the effects of conflict and the difficulties conflict can bring.¹¹² Moments of anger or other negative emotions can make it difficult to recognize a bid for connection.¹¹³ These are moments when it is important to focus on a bid that may be obscured by harsh words versus how the bid is delivered.¹¹⁴ When confronted with the temptation to react defensively, a spouse can pause, take a few deep breaths, and ask the other what they need in that moment.¹¹⁵

Another aspect of keeping marriages healthy is what Gottman calls repair attempts, which refer to any statement or action that prevent conflict and negativity from escalating out of control.¹¹⁶ Repair attempts are a means by which healthy marriages maintain emotional and spiritual closeness even in the midst of challenges.¹¹⁷ Healthy and effective couples become experts at sending each other repair attempts as well as recognizing and responding to repair attempts from each other.¹¹⁸

¹⁰⁹ Mamalakis, "'Turning Toward,'" 183.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 22.

¹¹³ Ibid., 91.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 92.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹¹⁷ Mamalakis, "Helping Married Couples," 278.

¹¹⁸ Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 27.

Appendix 2: Text of Presentation Series Slides

This appendix provides the speakers notes from the slides that were used for the intervention. The actual PowerPoint slide themselves are not able to be included due to space and licensing constraints. Because of the graphics and videos embedded in the slides, they are too large to be transmitted by email. In addition to this, one key graphic I used on the title slide of each session was license only for use in the intervention, and not for publication or any other public dissemination. Links to all videos have been included in the text as necessary.

Session One: Casting the Vision

Slide 1

Introduction

Welcome to Session One of “The Good Wine.”

The goal of this program, part of my Doctor of Ministry final project, is two-fold:

1. To ground participating couples in the Orthodox Christian theological vision of marriage;
2. In light of that vision, to reframe common challenges in the areas of communications and marital conflict.

Tonight, we will focus on establishing a foundation within an Orthodox Christian theological vision of marriage and address the question of how we, as Eastern Christians, understand marriage.

The next five sessions, scheduled to run every other week, will cover:

- Repentance and Humility
- Bearing with One Another in Love
- Mutual Martyrdom
- Mutual Sanctification, and,
- Turning Toward One Another as a Pastoral Theology of Marriage

Each session will be about one hour long, and in some cases there may be an exercise I will ask you to work on as a couple between sessions.

Overview

Following this brief introduction, tonight's session will cover:

- A Brief History of Marriage
- Marriage from an Orthodox Perspective

- Key Aspects of the Marriage Service
- Marriage as Martyria, or Witness to Christ

Let's take a look at this icon of for a moment to set the stage for this evening's session.

This is an icon of the wedding feast of Cana. You can see Christ, the Most Holy Theotokos, the bride and bridegroom with their crowns, the steward of the feast, and others.

The bride and groom are central, along with Christ blessing the couple while looking at the Most Holy Theotokos.

This icon presents two essential elements that are a particular emphasis for marriage in the perspective of the Christian East:

- 1) God himself is the author and celebrant of marriage. This is shown in Christ blessing the couples.
- 2) Marriage is a loving relationship modeled after the unique reality of the loving relationship between Christ and his Church.

In marriage, the way of life and love between two people is sustained and perfected in their oneness with God's love, which is a self-offering covenant love.

The icon depicts this truth by centering attention on Christ the eternal Bridegroom and his bride, the Church

In light of this, we can say that the wedding itself is the wedding of the spouses to Christ.

What this means is that Christian marriage is a participation in the divine life, and there is nothing "ordinary" about it.

Something else we can say about marriage as we begin is that the primary context of marriage is ecclesial: It exists within the context of the Church. The spouses do not exist in a vacuum but become part of a much greater reality as a Christian couple.

Because marriage derives its essential character from baptism and Eucharist, Christian marriage can only be seen and understood and lived from the perspective of new life in Christ, the life of the Resurrection, which begins in this life.

Because of this, the purpose of marriage transcends the personal goals or purposes of those who enter it, much like the goals and purposes of a monastic community transcend the individual goals and purposes of its members.

Christian life for the married couple, as for Christians who are not married, is a participation in the life of the Resurrection. That means that in and through marriage:

- Husband and wife choose daily to break the bonds of culture, habits, and life's addictions.
- They seek to live in communion with everything that is good, noble, natural, and sinless. (Phil 4.4-8)
- And they are committed to forming themselves by God's Grace into the likeness of Christ.

All of this to say that what makes Christian marriage a Christian marriage is a fundamental orientation toward the Kingdom of God. Marriage is a revelation of that Kingdom, and marriage is the means by which the spouses begin to participate in and journey toward that Kingdom.

Slide 2

Let's do an activity.

In a moment, I am going to ask you to pause the video, and as a couple I want you to answer two questions in the following exercise:

- What goals or purposes did you have in getting married?
- How do these compare to an idea of a purpose that transcends your own personal goals or purposes?

Go ahead and set a timer or stopwatch and get ready to pause this video for five minutes. When the time is up, please resume the video.

Slide 3

Welcome back.

Marriage in the Old Testament

- From an Old Testament perspective, the essential goal and meaning of marriage was procreation.
- The most obvious sign of God's blessing was seen in the continuance of the race through children.
- In part, this perspective can be tied to the fact that early Judaism did not have a clear conception of personal survival after death.
- In this light, God's promise to Abraham implied that life could be perpetuated through posterity.

Marriage in the Roman World

In the Roman world marriage was seen as an agreement between two freely choosing parties.

- The essence of marriage was in the consent which in turn gave meaning and legal substance to the marriage agreement or contract.
- As a legal contract whose subjects were only the parties involved, marriage did not need a third party to give legal validity.

Marriage in the New Testament

- The New Testament introduces a radical change in the meaning of marriage.
- Christian marriage becomes tied to the Good News of the Resurrection.
- Christians are called to experience new life and become citizens of the Kingdom.
- Those who are married experience this life and citizenship in the Kingdom through marriage.
- Marriage is no longer about the simple satisfaction of the needs of earthly existence or survival through posterity

In speaking of marriage as a Great Mystery St Paul clarifies the new meaning of Christian marriage:

- Husband and wife now both have the possibility and the responsibility to transfigure their agreement into the reality of the Kingdom.
- Through life in Christ, marriage enters into the realm of eternal life and has its own proper place within the Kingdom.

Marriage in the Early Church

- For early Christians the new reality of marriage was not expressed in any specific or independent marriage ritual but understood in light of specific and total new experience they accepted in baptism and Eucharist.
- This is evidenced by the fact that through the ninth century, the Eucharist was the locus of the Church's rites of marriage.
- Specific ceremony was not as important as who was accepting the marriage contract.
- The Church both during the time of the persecutions and afterward accepted Roman laws regulating marriage.
- If the parties were Christian, then the marriage was a Christian marriage with Christian responsibilities and Christian experiences.
- Christian spouses gave Christian marriage sacramental significance and moved it beyond the realm of a legal agreement.
- Once the marriages of a Christian husband and wife were accomplished in accordance with the rites of their society, their marriages were then transformed into a sacrament of the Kingdom when the couple received Holy Communion with the blessing of the clergy in the presence of the entire community of the faithful at the eucharistic assembly.

An Orthodox Theological Vision of Marriage:

From the perspective of an Orthodox theological vision, there are three inseparable elements which must be kept in mind:

- God made everything good as the created expression of his divinity.
- Everything has been corrupted and perverted by human sin.
- Everything is redeemed, sanctified, and glorified by the crucified and risen Christ.

This threefold experience of reality is received through the sacramental life of the Church:

- As a sacrament, marriage is a theophany, or revelation of God.
- Natural marriage as well as the husband and wife are transformed.
- In Christian marriage the Kingdom of God is revealed in the husband and wife, and the husband and wife become revelations of God to one another.
- The glory of marriage lies through along the path of co-crucifixion and the cross.

At the same time, Christian Marriage as a sacrament is a gift bestowed upon the couple by God, through the Church:

- It is a passage from nature and fallen marriage into the new order of Christ's Kingdom.
- Christian marriage is a medicine that heals the ruptured relationship of men and women by uniting them through grace within the community of the Church.
- God also bestows upon the couple the dispositions and virtues necessary for building up his Kingdom.

The law of the Kingdom is not legally compelling:

- It presupposes a free human response.
- The gift of human marriage must be freely accepted, freely lived, and can be eventually rejected.

Christian marriage is an end in itself:

- Marriage has no other end than for the couple to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of God.
- Beyond procreation and committed union, the purpose and meaning of marriage is the mutual salvation marriage enables the husband and wife to work out.
- From an Orthodox perspective both the unitive and procreative aspects of marriage are important, but the ultimate reason for marriage is greater than both.
- The aim of Christian marriage is to lead the couple to salvation.

For marriage to be a path to holiness and salvation, it must involve spiritual growth:

- Couples strive to spiritually struggle together with prayer, fasting, temperance.
- Each in their own way is a helpmeet to the spiritual effort of the other.
- The two together struggle for their common advancement in Christ.
- As Chrysostom said: The couples divide the labors and share the crowns.

This Orthodox vision of marriage is enfolded by the couple as they acquire a new identity through marriage:

- The unity of husband and wife can be transfigured and become a manifestation of the reality of the Kingdom through kenotic (self-emptying) love.
- This means that husband and wife are joined in marriage to participate in self-giving love.
- This presupposes a Christian man and a Christian woman who are both committed to living a Christian life in Christ and in his Church.
- The heart and mind must be transformed, committed to the real nature and ultimate purpose of Christian marriage, which is seeking the fullness of life in God.

- Through becoming one through the sacrament of marriage, husbands and wives can overcome the limitations and shortcomings of this world through self-sacrificing and self-giving love.
- This type and quality of love takes time, effort, and patience to develop.

The Uniqueness of Christian Marriage

Christian marriage testifies that new life is not an individual pursuit of salvation:

- In the Christian vision marriage is something that transcends the wishes, needs, interests, and desires of its individual members.
- There is an ancient usage no longer followed in the Armenian and Syrian rite for the couple to exchange baptismal crosses—a symbol that bride and groom surrender their destinies to each other and as a couple to Christ and the Church.
- Christian marriage is marriage "in the Lord," because the two who are wed have already been united with Christ through baptism.
- Through baptism they become imitators and followers of Christ.

Marriage is a process of learning to love with perfect, Christlike, love:

- This is a struggle against the flesh (cf. Gal 5.13–25), not our spouse.
- Marital struggle is the struggle for the salvation of our souls.
- The goal of marriage is not self-gratification, endurance, or even happiness, but salvation, union with Christ, perfection in love.

Oneness in God through marriage is organic and dynamic, not static:

- The goal is to grow together in oneness by moving towards God through each other.
- Over time the husband learns to live for his wife, and the wife learns to live for her husband, each serving the other as they would Christ.

Slide 4

Let's do another activity.

In a moment I am going to ask you to pause the video again, and as a couple I want you to do answer these questions in the following exercise:

- How is your marriage transforming each of you into the likeness of Christ?
- How do you see your marriage making God real and present in your lives?

Once you do that, share your answers with each other.

Go ahead and set a timer or stopwatch and get ready to pause for five minutes. When the time is up, please resume the video.

Slide 5

The Orthodox wedding service contains a synthesis of the Church's theology of marriage. To help better appropriate an Orthodox theological vision of marriage, we will spend a few minutes taking a closer look at the marriage service.

Two-fold Structure: Betrothal and Marriage

The first point to note is the two-fold structure of the wedding service. We have the betrothal in the narthex, while the marriage service itself takes place in the church proper.

The betrothal performed in the vestibule is the Christian form of the natural marriage. The betrothal gives marriage its perspective and direction.

“Natural” does not mean self-sufficient or insufficient but in need of fulfillment and redemption:

- The vestibule of the Kingdom represents both fulfillment and exile.
- The procession into the church symbolizes the entrance of marriage into the Kingdom.
- This is the entrance of the world into the world to come.
- This is the procession of the people in Christ into the Kingdom of God.

“O Lord our God, who has espoused the Church as a pure virgin from among the Gentiles, bless this betrothal, and unite and maintain these thy servants in peace and oneness of mind.”

- Even in the betrothal service we begin to understand that marriage is a participation in salvation history.
- And that it is the Lord himself who provides and maintains the oneness of the spouses in marriage.

Wedding Service

In the wedding service, God unites a man and a woman in marriage. According to St John Chrysostom, the two becoming one is an image of God himself. It is in the service of marriage that they are made into one body (On Marriage, p.75).

The entrance of the couple into the gathered Church is an expression of the desire and commitment to share the life and values of the Church and to form their marriage in the direction of the Kingdom:

- Christian marriage is not a private affair but an ecclesial event, lived in an intensely personal way at the level of intimacy.
- It is communal as the couple seeks to respond to the call to make their relationship an authentic covenant.
- It is a bond between persons that unites them with God and with the entire Church, understood as the universal communion of saints living and reposed.

An authentic Christian marriage in the Orthodox context is only possible in the context of a faith community:

- Through the marriage rite couple affirm their faith.
- They also affirm their willingness to integrate into the life of the Church.

Prayers

Natural love is subject to human inconstancy:

- Thus, there are also prayers within the marriage service asking for the gifts of "perfect love," "indissoluble bond," and "mutual love and friendship."

Slide 6

The first prayer of marriage begins with a reference to Genesis Chapter 1 and the creation of Eve out of the rib of Adam and the institution of natural marriage: "O holy God and creator of all things visible and invisible, out of love for humankind, You transformed the rib of Adam the forefather into a woman, and You blessed them and said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over the earth;' and, by uniting them together, You declared them both to be one member...."

This prayer is a reminder:

- The goal and purpose of natural marriage is to make it possible for people to partake of the life of God.
- The Greek words "be fruitful" mean "to grow and become perfect".
- "Multiply" means "to make full or to increase" in a way that includes a qualitative manner.
- This is achieved together by the two spouses in their relationship of love, which draws them out of their isolation.

There is also reference in the first prayers to nuptial chastity and a marriage bed unassailed:

- Marital chastity does not exclude sexual love but purifies and transforms love into the abundance, richness, pleromic communion and joy of the Kingdom.
- Just as he transformed water into wine for the wedding banquet, marital love is transfigured.
- True marriage requires giving up the sinful desire to possess and control, to use others for self-gratification and self-glorification.
- Orthodox theology understands conjugal chastity as an askesis of the spirit that elevates our nature and transforms the life of husband and wife together into true communion, a gift and a sharing of self, and a receiving of the gift that is the other.

Slide 7

The second prayer recounts the patriarchal couples, Joachim and Anna, Zechariah and Elizabeth, as well as many other couples and acts of Gods' deliverance:

- Through the wedding service the spouses are called to enter the mystery of salvation history.
- As faithful witnesses (or martyrs) to the work of God they, become servants of redemption.
- To a certain degree they become identified with the patriarchal couples mentioned in the prayers of the service.
- They take their place alongside all married couples in Church history.
- They are called to live out their own history as a couple as a means of transfiguring their union into a new creation fit for the Kingdom.

Slide 8

The third prayer of marriage rite summarizes the content of the first two as well as the entire rite of crowning:

O holy God, who didst create man out of the dust, and didst fashion his wife out of his rib, and didst yoke her unto him as a helpmeet; for it seemed good to thy majesty that man would not be alone upon the earth: do thou, the same Lord, stretch out now also thy hand from thy holy dwelling-place, and conjoin this thy servant, N., and this thy handmaiden, N.; for by thee is the husband united unto the wife. Unite them in one mind: wed them into one flesh, granting unto them the fruit of the body and procreation of fair children.

This prayer is a reminder that God is the one who created marriage, and that he is the one now joining the couple into one mind and one flesh.

Slide 9

In a moment I am going to ask you to pause the video again. I would like each of you to think about the following questions, and perhaps jot down a few thoughts.

- In what ways has your marriage helped you to grow in self-giving love?
- In what ways do you see your own marriage and you as a couple called to crucify its selfishness and self-sufficiency?

Go ahead and set a timer or stopwatch and get ready to pause for five minutes. When the time is up, please resume the video.

See you in five minutes.

Slide 10

Readings

Ephesians 5.20-33

Talks about the mutual life of the spouses as well as the more profound theological meaning of marriage:

- Chapters 1–3 develop the redemptive work of God in human history through Christ and the creation of the Church.
- Chapters 4–6 develop the practical consequences that flow from this for members of the Body of Christ.
- There is a particular emphasis on the new life now possible in and through Christ.

Paul's first admonition:

- All Christians should be grateful to God for all things and subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.
- Christ came to serve and help others, not to be served.
- Christians as well must be more concerned about others than themselves.
- This is applicable to spouses in a particular way.
- The wife is no more subject to the husband than the husband to the wife.
- Being subject to one another in reverence for Christ speaks to the fact that in obedience the love of God is encountered through the spouse.
- As each is in the image and likeness of God their mutual love allows them to love God, whom they experience in each other.

The concept of being subject is not about subjugation or subordination:

- Being subject to another is to recognize the personal image of God in the other.
- It means to offer the other the dignity they are due as an image of God.

No matter how the general pattern of male headship is lived out in particular circumstances:

- Everything in marriage is done in Christ and thus oriented towards bringing the couple closer to Christ and to each other in truly Christian love.
- Such love does not seek its own but the welfare of the other.
- This is not an emotionally unhealthy self-effacement or "self-annihilation."
- One must be healthy both emotionally and spiritually to try to offer this kind of love.

Our relationship to God involves obedience:

- In marriage both spouses submit to God and obey God.
- Submission in marriage is about following God's will and not about domination over another.
- The head of the house is Christ, as he is the one who gives marriage, and both husband and wife have the responsibility to receive God's direction and save the other.

Slide 11

John 2.1–11

The story of the Marriage in Cana in Galilee:

- The presence of Christ at the marriage is an affirmation and a blessing of marriage in general and of every truly Christian marriage in particular.
- This is reinforced by the dismissal prayer: "May Christ our true God, who revealed marriage to be honorable by his presence in Cana of Galilee...."

The presence of Christ in marriage changes the water of natural passions into the wine of a new love that is a manifestation of the Kingdom.

This speaks to the mystery of our contribution to the divine work of re-creation:

- New creation is not from nothingness: We offer the initial matter of fallen yet restorable nature.

The Lord is saying, fill the jars with water so that I can give you wine:

- Give me whatever little or insignificant thing you have in life so that I may restore to you that which you have lost.
- With the power of God's love, the water of our fallen life is changed into "great wine."
- Marriage can be transfigured into a communion of two persons actually living in the image and likeness of God.
- The love of the spouses can transcend the merely human dimension and ascend to a supernatural experience of the divine love of God himself.

The changing of water into wine is a symbol of the transformation of day-to-day married life into a celebration:

- The marriage blessed by Christ is a union in which the Lord himself is invisibly present.
- It must become a continual celebration as the spouses discover the face of God in each other.
- Marriage is a continual transformation of all aspects of their life together.

Slide 12

In marriage the couple bear witness to the new life in Christ to each other. By definition, a martyr is a witness. The way in which married couples live out their mutual witness or mutual martyrdom is by growing in authentic humanity, growing in authentic love, and by learning to be living witnesses to Christ.

Growing into Authentic Humanity

In the patristic tradition the true image of God is Christ:

- Christ is the model and archetype of true human life (1 Jn 3.2, Col 3.10).
- Because we are created in the image and likeness of God, the truth about being human is to grow into relational existence.
- For two baptized and communicating Christians who marry in the Lord, this relational existence is manifested in two individuals who mystically are made into one flesh.
- Souls and bodies commingle without confusion or change, without ceasing to be male and female.
- Yet they become one being, a single substance.

If we further define what it means to be human in terms of the love Christ shows by laying down his life, then we understand that being human requires a life as asceticism and an acquisition of the virtues:

- Marriage is primarily about attaining the full stature of being human as demonstrated by Christ by means of the cross.
- The character and quality of true love is revealed by Christ on the cross.

Growing in Authentic Love

St John Chrysostom calls marriage the sacrament of love:

- Marriage expresses something fundamental about who we are as human persons.
- We are created in the image and likeness of God the Trinity.
- God is love (1 Jn 4.8).
- This not self-love but a shared love, a communion or *koinonia* of three persons loving one another.
- If God is love, then the human person is also love, not self-love but shared love.

We are not self-sufficient but are made to be in relationship:

- Created in the image and likeness of a communal and perfect God, we are created to live in community.
- When God presents Adam and Eve to each other, he is granting them the opportunity to love one another.
- Without each other, we could be alone and unable to love (Gen 2.18).
- Our relational nature reflects who God is.
- In community the other person is a gift.
- This allows us to complete our nature as persons who can love as God loves.

The basic element of marriage is perfect and true love offered selflessly and unconditionally:

- This love is seen as a practical application of the mundane affairs of married life.
- Marriage involves loving the other as they are while at the same time loving them as grace may make them.
- Each man and woman serves the other through self-emptying service in imitation of Christ.
- Each submits to the other in a sacrificial self-offering of love out of their love for God.
- They do this in imitation of divine humility and actualize the divine love that exists from all eternity among the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

St John Chrysostom considered the work of marriage to be an equal partnership, challenging both the husband and wife to be self-emptying like Christ, for the sake of each other:

- The spouse is the personal revelation of Christ.
- When spouses are united, the presence of God is increased through them, and they are able to reflect God in their personal lives.

St John Chrysostom suggests that the self-giving love of husband and wife in marriage can correct and transform the fallen image of God:

- Christian marriage involves a day-to-day struggle to live out the ideal.
- The task for the married couple is to pursue divine communion, being united to one another in Christ, no matter the effort, or how often there is a failure to live the ideal.

Marriage is a journey of love:

- Human love is transformed in union with divine love.
- Through the mystery of marriage, we come to live in a divine way.
- "It is no longer I who loves my spouse but Christ who loves in me" (cf Gal 2.20).
- This is not about the external dimension of two people who never fight but a transformation internally of the husband and wife, who participate through grace in the divine nature of God (2 Pet 1.3–4).

Husbands and wives find their fulfillment through being united in Christ and as they grow in Christ:

- The love for Christ is expressed through love for spouse.
- Love for the spouse witnesses the love for God.
- Marital struggles are the struggle to love our spouses as we love the Lord (Eph 5.20–22).
- The goal of the Christian life is not to remain married but to be united with God, perfected in love, and to inherit the Kingdom of God.
- Marriage transfigures human love into a new reality of heavenly origin and transfigures the unity of man and woman into the reality of the Kingdom.

Through the transformation of our love for our spouse, we become a different person:

- We learn to love more purely, more selflessly.
- This is the mystery or sacrament of marriage.

Living Witnesses of Christ

Christian marriage is an extension of the overall effort required to live a Christian life:

- It requires progress in faith, blameless conduct, philanthropy, a life worthy of God.
- This progress comes through faithful obedience to the commandments of Christ.
- These commandments are a daily test of Christian marriage.

- Each challenge for the couple is a challenge to remain faithful and steadfast witnesses of God in the world.

Christian marriage is a witness (*martyria*) of God in the world:

- Husband and wife assume the responsibility of being co-workers of God in Christ.
- They follow the way of the cross.
- Their chief goal is their salvation and the salvation of others.
- In this way marriage becomes one of God's primary ways of redeeming the world.

Keeping Christ present in a marriage requires effort:

- In marriage the husband and wife are in the process of growth.
- Marital life is supposed to be the experience of changing water into wine miraculously every day and every moment of marital life.
- God's presence in marriage increases marital joy over the years, reserving the best for last as at the wedding in Cana.

A Final Word

The Orthodox Christian vision of marriage can seem like an unattainable ideal, and there can be a temptation to discard it as impractical:

- By faith we know that as Christians we are a new creation.
- Christians are called to walk by the Spirit and manifest the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 6.22).
- Marriage in Christ cannot be understood apart from new life in Christ.
- Christ, the author and maker of marriage, has empowered couples to live out this vision, if they choose to accept it.

Slide 13

Okay, it's time for our final exercise.

In a moment I am going to ask you to pause the video one final time this evening.

I would like each of you to think about the following questions, and perhaps jot down a few thoughts.

- Is there anything that you have found particularly useful or challenging in this evening's session?
- Is there anything you would like to apply as a couple over the next two weeks, until the next session?

Go ahead and set a timer or stopwatch and get ready to pause for five minutes. When the time is up, please resume the video.

Okay, see you in five minutes.

Slide 14

Lord, love my spouse through me.
Let me love my spouse through You.
And be loved by You through my spouse.

Insert name.

It's not about you, but about Christ present in your spouse, and Christ present in you, and Christ present between the two of you.

I will be sending out a link to a brief post-session one survey. Please complete it within the next two weeks.

See you in two weeks.

Session Two: Humility and Repentance

Slide 1

Introduction

Welcome to Session 2 of "The Good Wine."

As a reminder, the goal of this program, part of my Doctor of Ministry final project, is twofold:

1. To ground participating couples in the Orthodox Christian theological vision of marriage.
2. To reframe the common, everyday challenges in the areas of communications and marital conflict in light of that vision.

One comment: It's possible that some couples participating in this program may be experiencing challenges that feel like they are beyond common, everyday experiences. If that is the case, and you find that this course is causing difficulty, please feel free to contact me directly.

Last week, we tried to establish our theological foundation by focusing on the Church's theology of marriage.

Now that we've established a foundation, we will spend the next five sessions exploring ways to live out that theology in practical terms.

This week we will discuss humility and repentance. In the coming weeks, our focus areas will include bearing with one another in love, mutual martyrdom, mutual sanctification, and turning toward one another as a pastoral theology of marriage.

Slide 2

This session is our first step from the theoretical towards the practical.

After a brief recap of last week, we will discuss:

- Marriage as a Healing Path
- Behaviors we do not Fully Control
- Repentance and Humility in Marriage
- Turning Water into Wine

The Great Mystery Revisited

In session one we tried to highlight some important differences between an Orthodox Christian vision of marriage and personal or cultural expectations.

The primary purpose of marriage is not happiness or personal fulfillment, but for the spouses to help each other enter the heavenly Kingdom:

- That does not mean you should expect to be unhappy, but it does mean that happiness by itself does not constitute a success criterion for marriage.
- Christian marriage creates the conditions that will allow each spouse to grow in holiness and to develop together into the likeness of God if the spouses choose to embrace the Church's vision of marriage.

Christian marriage is a journey:

- It is a path to *theosis* or being transformed over time to become more like God.
- This is especially appropriate in light of the fact that the Orthodox concept of a sacrament or Holy Mystery implies transformation.
- It is a path of mutually bearing witness to Christ.

This path of mutual witness or mutual martyrdom invites married couples to the experience of growing daily in authentic Christian love, which is a self-giving or self-sacrificing love. This leads to growing in authentic humanity, which is humanity in the likeness of Christ.

Martyrdom or witness to Christ is not unique to marriage but is the form of the Christian life for everyone, because all Christians are called to embrace the cross:

- Just as the cross was the hour of Christ's glory, the cross in marriage is an opportunity for glory both in this world and in eternity.
- This mutual witness is lived out by means of the day-to-day struggle to live out the ideal of authentic love, a struggle that continues regardless of the effort, regardless of how often we fail to achieve the ideal:
 - The daily struggle in marriage is not struggles against our spouse but the struggle to acquire perfect love.
 - It is the struggle to love our spouses as we love the Lord.

- In marriage our love for our spouse is an expression of our love for God, and a witness to that love.

A word about suffering:

- Suffering enters in because all of us, in our fallenness, are self-centered to one degree or another.
- It is painful to learn to put the needs of another before our own, and to let go of our selfishness.
- Marriage as a path to salvation is a path to our healing, understood as a restoration of our pre-fall nature, of being God-like.
- This healing is painful because we do not easily surrender our self-centered attitudes and behaviors.

Slide 3

It can be helpful to talk about marriage as a healing path within the broader context of the Christian life.

The aim of Christian life is deification or *theosis*, to attain the likeness of God:

- For married couples, every interaction in marriage is a potential opportunity to grow more into the likeness of God.
- Growing in the likeness of God is a process of purification and healing.

Purification and healing are the work of the Church, through the Holy Mysteries, such as marriage:

- Purification and healing are the fruit of Christian asceticism.
- One definition of asceticism is "the forceful practice of self-control and love, patience, and stillness" that will "destroy the passions hidden within us."
- One motivation for asceticism is our desire to draw closer to Christ, to encounter him in and through our spouse.
- Another motivation is our desire to be healed, and to regain the likeness of Christ.

Lived out in marriage, this asceticism looks like spouses learning to be humble and patient with each other as they work hard to resolve issues through mutual trust, forgiveness, tenderness, and kindness:

- Marriage as a healing path requires a dedication toward spiritual growth in addition to ascetical effort.
- This is another dimension of the martyrdom of marriage.

Marriage is able to help us on the journey of healing because it is a crucible of sorts:

- In marriage we bring our faith and willingness to struggle.
- Through struggle, we choose to resist our fallen nature as it manifests itself in the form of pride, envy, deceit, wrath, insensitivity, and selfishness, all of which take away from the likeness of Christ and destroy the human person.

- As we resist the manifestations of our fallen nature, we are purified through the refining fires of adversity.
- This means we must learn to take responsibility for our own problems as opposed to blaming our spouse or others.

Once we take responsibility for our own problems and challenges, they become something we can work on together as a couple through patience and prayer:

- In pursuing patience and by praying for our spouse, we actively participate in our own transformation and growth in perfect love.

Marriage as a healing path corrects the blindness of our self-centered or egocentric tendencies:

- This blindness keeps us from recognizing Christ in our spouse and keeps us from seeing the ways in which we fail to live in a Christlike manner.
- In a sense, our problems in marriage are due to our failure to see Christ.
- To the extent we mistreat or fail to love our spouse, we are mistreating and failing to love Christ.

The Passions

To cooperate with the healing work of marriage we have to be aware of the passions active in us

The term "passion" comes from the verb *pascho*, which means to suffer and denotes the sickness of the soul:

- The most basic passion from which all others flow is self-love.

Marriage is an opportunity to transform the passions into virtues through self-knowledge:

- One of the obstacles to both virtue and self-knowledge is pride, described by St Maximus the Confessor as self-love.
- It consists in the inflation of the self, and sometimes masks emotions and desires we may not want to confront.
- Pride understood as self-love keeps us from confronting areas in which we need to heal and grow

Although there are many aspects to the spiritual struggle as lived out in marriage, the battle with pride is the toughest:

- Pride is the principal enemy of the divine law.
- Pride functions principally by using the reasoning mind and asserting its superiority by pointing to its achievements.
- Marriage as a healing path is an opportunity to learn how to overcome pride and recover the likeness of Christ in ourselves so that we can see the likeness of Christ in our spouse.

Part of our transformation and healing as regards the passions is coming to a state of dispassion:

- Dispassion is a state in which the soul no longer yields to evil impulses.
- This is impossible without God's help.

- St Maximus the Confessor describes dispassion as "a peaceful condition of the souls in which the soul is not easily moved to evil."

Marriage as a healing path helps us to grow toward dispassion through prayer, love, and humility.

Prayer

Prayer can allow us to see ourselves more clearly. In particular, silent prayer can allow us insight we might not otherwise gain:

- Certainly, prayer books are good and helpful, but there are times when we simply need to stand in silence before the Lord.
- Elder Sophrony taught that we should learn to live by inspiration, which means learning to acquire the habit of turning to God at all times and in all circumstances (Eph 5.20, Rom 12.2).
- Before acting, speaking, or even thinking, we can turn our hearts and mind to God in order to sanctify all by the word of God and prayer (1 Tim 4.5). The liturgy reminds us of this through the prayer at the beginning of the Anaphora, which invites us to commend "our whole life and one another unto Christ our God."

Feeling overwhelmed and angry are common experiences in marriage:

- What we may not realize is that such moments are invitations to turn to God in prayer.
- These are moments for the Lord to act.
- When we respond to being overwhelmed and angry with prayer, we can more readily turn to our spouses in love.

Prayer can help us learn a necessary constant two-fold attentiveness to God and our spouse:

- Being truly attentive to our spouse is necessary for authentic love.
- The Dia-Logos prayer is a helpful reference because it reminds us that we cannot be truly attentive to God if we are not attentive to our spouse.
- This two-fold attentiveness means keeping Christ at the heart of all our interactions with our spouse.

In moments of difficulty and tension, our prayer can be along the lines of "Thy will be done on earth in my marriage as among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit":

- This opens up a space for us to love our spouse as we are loved by God.
- It means surrendering the illusion that we are in control and leaving room for God to operate within the daily experiences of marriage.
- Learning to respond to our spouse prayerfully and leave room for God is an act of both love and humility.

Love

By design marriage reveals the limitations of our human capacity for love:

- In part our limitations come from our own diseases and illnesses of the heart.
- They reveal our need for God's mercy and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

These limitations are often experienced intensely when we find ourselves angry, frustrated, hurt, or overwhelmed:

- These are moments when it is especially important to remember that love is something that goes beyond feelings.
- Love is manifested in the decision to be patient, kind, and gentle toward our spouse no matter how we are feeling.

St Ambrose of Optina suggested that if you find there is no love in you but want to have love, do the deeds of love, and the Lord will put love in your heart:

- We demonstrate authentic, Christlike love when we treat our spouse with kindness, gentleness, and tenderness even in the midst of the tensions and challenges of marriage.

Humility

Dorotheos of Gaza compare the Christian life to building a house:

- As a roof completes a house, authentic love completes the virtues.
- As a roof has railings to crown it, so humility is the crown of charity.

Marriage as a healing path provides a way to transcend our self-centered inclinations by offering daily opportunities to surrender our self-absorbed and self-sufficient individualism:

- These daily opportunities are also opportunities for humility.

In marriage humility is revealed as a love that is given completely and freely:

- According to St John Chrysostom, this self-giving love between husband and wife in marriage is capable of restoring the fallen image of God in man, and thus helping us to grow in *theosis*.

We can summarize all of this by saying the healing path of marriage leads us toward dispassion and can teach us to choose to respond attentively in love to our spouse, as opposed to simply reacting. This means that we have to be aware of our own limitations and challenges. We have to try to recognize when we are contributing to the current difficulty we are experiencing and choose the path of loving, Christlike actions and attitudes.

Slide 4

Activity #1

- 5-minute discussion
- What are ways in which marriage is a healing path for you?

Slide 5

Another way we can cooperate with God's grace in marriage for the sake of our healing is to try to become more aware of behaviors we do not fully control. We've already touched on the

struggle with the passions and the importance of self-control and love for the sake of our transformation in Christ.

In addition to the battle with the passions, some of us struggle with behaviors of which we may be unaware or of which we are not in full control. Lacking self-awareness, we are effectively paralyzed when it comes to spiritual growth or loving our spouses with perfect love.

The goal of this section is to simply raise awareness in regard to possible blind spots that can affect our ability to love our spouses with Christ like love.

Behaviors We Do not Control

As a result of modern social sciences, we are now more aware of how certain experiences affect us:

- Unresolved emotional wounds can act as roadblocks to spiritual growth.
- If we attempt to navigate through life without seeking insight into issues and struggles that negatively impact us and those with whom we are in relationship, we can find our *theosis* stunted.

Embracing the cross in marriage includes the difficult work of resolving past experiences that have wounded us:

- Sometimes we take pain from past events and layer them over current relationships, reacting to present people and events as though the past were still affecting us.
- We can even unconsciously recreate conflict patterns and harmful dynamics from the past.
- Choosing to address these issues can help us better carry the cross in a God-pleasing manner.

The past matters because our lives are shaped by our memories, whether they are of what actually happened or how we have interpreted past events:

- Our past can help us as far as being confident.
- It can also serve as a source of anxiety in our present.
- When we blame our real or interpreted past for the present, we can block God's work of growth and healing in our lives.

Unresolved issues can actually inhibit our ability to love our spouse with Christlike love:

- They can show up as unconscious fear, anger, and other strong emotions.
- This can lead to easily projecting unintended meanings onto otherwise harmless statements or those who make them.

Other ways our past can haunt our present include:

- The tendency to easily over-react to situations or find ourselves constantly on-guard.
- Assigning meanings to the actions and words of others:
 - These meanings are not always accurate if the past is leaking into the present:
 - Learning to separate the past from the present in our daily interactions will help us in our spiritual life.
- Difficulty letting go of a certain interactions, events, or something someone has said.

Being aware of such tendencies allows us to bring them to confession and resolve them.

Let's briefly discuss three specific ways in which our emotional wounds hinder us spiritually: loss of trust, fear of vulnerability, and shame:

- Ignoring these obstacles can limit our spiritual growth.
- Resolving them can help us grow spiritually.

Loss of Trust

Loss of trust leads to loss of hope in relationships. We can feel stuck in a situation that will never change because we don't feel that we can trust God or our spouse.

Fear of Vulnerability

Fear of vulnerability leads to struggles with avoidance and control:

- Avoidance in close relationships leads ultimately to self-sabotaging behavior for the sake of putting emotional distance between ourselves and the other person in order to feel safe.

In regard to control, research has shown that healthy and successful people focus primarily on those things that are relevant and within their control:

- Giving ourselves permission to not be in control can be liberating but to let go is easier said than done.
- Part of healing is learning to see that our powerlessness leaves an opportunity for God to act.
- This can be a space where God will surprise us through his providence and activity.

Vulnerability in our marriage involves both a certain level of risk as well as harm, but vulnerability is the condition for the possibility of healing, health, and wholeness:

- One researcher has described vulnerability in marriage in terms of "mutual kenotic vulnerability."
- This means that vulnerability in marriage:
 - involves the decision of each spouse to be vulnerable to the other;
 - is oriented towards self-emptying or the gift of self;
 - is open to the possibility of growth and fruitfulness or harm for both.

Setting boundaries and being vulnerable are not mutually exclusive:

- Being vulnerable means that we are willing to take risks in forgiving, loving and potentially being hurt.
- That said, there are times when we might need to learn to set boundaries, such as when we encounter inappropriate behavior that violates our physical, emotional, or spiritual space.
- Setting boundaries does not mean we cease to love the other person or cut them off or ignore them.
- It may aid the other person in gaining insight and avoids enabling behaviors.

Shame

Shame makes it difficult if not impossible to accept love from God as well as from our spouse.

As an emotion, shame has the ability to wreak the most havoc in our spiritual lives and in our marriages:

- For the purposes of this presentation, we will describe shame as the belief that we are bad people:
- This belief leads to a sense of ongoing failure.

Shame can lead to perfectionism and a sense of trying to be "good enough":

- Even if we are trying to be good enough or what being good enough looks like is not clear.
- It can be helpful to compare shame with guilt:
 - Guilt is regret over something done.
 - Regret allows for one to wish the past could be different, but there is a certain sense of acceptance.
 - Shame includes a sense that we deserve punishment.

We can summarize everything we have just covered by saying that, for some of us, there are behaviors and emotions that affect us in ways we may not fully control or be aware of. These behaviors and emotions can impact our spiritual life as well as our marriage. Part of the healing path of marriage is to seek to grow in our awareness of these areas so that we can address them.

Slide 6

Let's do an activity.

I am going to show you a three-minute video on a particular involuntary behavior: blame.

Once the video is over, take another three minutes to discuss whether or not you are aware of a tendency to blame your spouse for things, or of some other involuntary response.

https://youtu.be/RZWf2_2L2v8

Slide 7

So far, we have talked about the passions and the need for self-control and love as we struggle to transform them, as well as behaviors and emotions that may not be fully in our control. We have discussed both in terms of their impact on our ability to grow in perfect love for our spouse—self-sacrificing, Christlike love.

We are going to try to bring both themes together through the lens of humility and repentance.

Humility and Repentance in the Christian Life and in Marriage

The process of becoming Christlike, or healing and purification, requires repentance:

- Repentance is a fundamental change in our whole way of life or mode of being.
- Through repentance, we strive to live in such a way that our reactions in all circumstances are Christlike.

- Each time we resist the impulse to sin in difficult circumstances we are taking up our cross and striving to change our way of life.
- This is what repentance looks like in the daily experience of marriage.

As members of the body of Christ, we are capable of perfect love toward our spouse through our union with Christ:

- To realize this capacity, we must focus intently on the call to grow in the likeness of God, which is growth towards perfect love.
- In part this process includes identifying the obstacles which keep us from taking responsibility for our inability to love in this perfect way such as beliefs, habits, emotions, or passions.
- This requires that we confront our own passions and other restraints to love.
- This confrontation requires the self-knowledge of humility.

Repentance and Constraints to Love

In the Christian tradition the concept of repentance is very broad:

- Although repentance might be reduced to acknowledging one's sinful acts and feeling remorse, it goes beyond that.
- Repentance is an approach to living the Christian life that includes daily self-analysis, regrets over sinful acts and thoughts, constant labor to improve spiritually and a striving always to do good.

One way of misunderstanding repentance is thinking it means looking down on ourselves:

- St John Climacus says that to repent is not to look downward on our own shortcomings but upward at God's love:
 - It means looking not backwards with self-reproach but forward with trust.
 - It means to see not what we have failed to be, but what we can become by the grace of God.

Repentance is a healing medicine:

- It is the means by which we allow God's transforming grace to work in our lives in the context of marriage:
- St John of the ladder in part defines repentance as "a contract with God for a fresh start in life."
- The life of repentance brings the soul to its proper state—Christlikeness—and gives it life.

Humility and Self-awareness

If pride is an inflated sense of self, we can describe humility as the willingness to see our limitations, or as self-knowledge:

- Humility, as an aspect of spiritual maturity, encompasses the desire to accurately perceive our own imperfections and face them without turning away.
- In order to be cured of the passions, as well as harmful emotions, thoughts, and habits, it is essential to be aware that one is ill.
- One who is not aware of being ill will not go to the doctor.
- Self-knowledge is the first step towards being made well.

Within the community of marriage, husbands and wives grow in self-knowledge and in the faith by allowing God to reveal and correct the things that keep them from living in a Christlike way:

- There are times when God in his mercy allows us to see ourselves as we really are, along with the realization that we cannot do any good thing without the help of the Lord.
- Father Joshua Makoul has described moments of insight and self-awareness as rungs on the ladder of ascent toward God. We can respond by climbing these rungs when we translate our insight into resolutions.

Marriage is unique in that it can foster intense self-reflection through the practice of "truth telling" in practices such as confession or even therapy:

- This is another path to self-knowledge that enables one to begin to address otherwise hidden emotions and thus clearing the way to love others versus projecting onto them.
- The process of confronting these feelings with humility is a way to enter into a space of vulnerability that can in turn become a place of strength to the extent that one is no longer shaped by hidden emotions.
- It can also increase the capacity for empathy and compassion.

Our own shortcomings and sins cause us to become stuck on this path of transformation. Being stuck, however, is not a problem to solve so much as an invitation to be healed and transformed by God's love:

- In the struggle against committing sin and against passionate thoughts, one can be humiliated and shattered by the fight.
- The sufferings of the struggle can bring purification little by little and help us grow in Christlikeness.
- With humility, the struggle itself becomes a means of healing.

In a similar way, when we encounter the inadequacies, limitations, and weaknesses of our spouse, this is an opportunity to exercise humility and love them without judgment:

- We can see this is also an opportunity to turn towards Christ present in our spouse.

To grow in self-awareness, one must have a non-reactive, nonjudgmental attitude:

- This involves stepping back from a particular experience with a desire to understand it more accurately.
- This approach can help overcome resistance to greater self-awareness.
- St Macarius of Optina described a Christian home as one where all the members of the household bear each other's burdens, and one condemns only oneself.

Humility and repentance work together in the spiritual life and in marriage as the means by which we learn to recognize and confront our own challenges and shortcoming when it comes to the ability to love our spouse perfectly. As we grow spiritually and our self-knowledge increases, we are better able to address these challenges for the sake of our own *theosis*. Growing in our ability to love as Christ loves, we become better able to love our spouse with the perfect love of Christ.

Slide 8

Let's do another activity.

In a moment I am going to ask you to pause the video again, and as a couple I want you answer the following question:

- In what way might humility and repentance as we have discussed them might help you love your spouse more perfectly?

Repentance = resisting the impulse to sin in difficult circumstances

Humility = an awareness to confront our own limitations and allow God to heal them

Go ahead and set a timer or stopwatch and get ready to pause for five minutes. When the time is up, please resume the video.

Slide 9

The Healing of our Passions

The word sacrament originates from the Greek *mysterion*, a derivative of a verb meaning "to close the eyes for the purpose of protecting them from a vision of deity":

- In this sense the term sacrament conveys the concept of dwelling in the presence of God, who reveals himself for the sake of transformation.
- God reveals himself within our marriage so that we can be transformed.
- This transformation brings about the healing of our passions and overcomes other obstacles to our ability to love with Christlike love.

This requires that as spouses be open to the influence of the Holy Spirit:

- Both husband and wife must be willing to come to terms with their own limitations.
- This requires an attitude of patience, godly courage, and humility.

Through the transforming grace of the Holy Spirit:

- Every small encounter in marriage is capable of transformation.
- All the crosses and places of struggles in marriage can be transformed into places of light, joy, peace, and hope, no matter how great the struggle.

As part of our transformation as spouses, we must work to attain the Orthodox *phronema*, or mindset:

- It includes the concept of spiritual balance versus extremes:
- Within this balanced approach to life, we are not indifferent to sin, but we do refrain from a judgmental spirit—which means we do not shame anyone, including ourselves.

- This mindset incorporates an approach to life motivated by genuine love for God, as well as insight and self-awareness, which have been key topics of this session.
- Finally, it also means that we strive for and treasure humility by which we can better confront our own shortcomings so that we can repent of them.

The problems we see in our spouse actually reveal our own inability to love:

- Part of our growth towards perfect love is learning to reframe negative interactions with our spouse as a failure to love on our part.
- Marriage is not about changing our spouse to meet our needs, but to allow the Holy Spirit to change us as we choose to love, even in the face of disappointment and unmet needs.

From Expectation to Hope

Two ways we can repent of our own shortcomings involve adjusting expectations and overcoming self-absorption

We expect when we enter into marriage that our personal needs will be met by each other, and when this does not happen, we tend to blame the other person:

- Expectations can be characterized as rigid, self-made constructs that map out in advance what others are supposed to do, feel or be.
- Rigid expectations can limit our ability to love as we end up binding others and molding them into our expectations.
- When not met, our expectations can lead to hurt, anger, frustration, and a feeling of victimization.
- Learning to convert expectations to hopes can be helpful.

Hopes are flexible and forgiving, and when we replace our expectations with hope, we open a well spring of humility:

- Hopes are flexible, humble, and gentle desires for a certain outcome.
- When unmet they may lead to disappointment, mild grief, but ultimately acceptance and peace.
- Whereas unmet expectations cause anger, unfulfilled hope may include disappointment or even grief, but is less destructive and leads to resilience.
- Love hopes but does not expect.

From Self-Absorption to Empathy

Love presupposes the eradication of our own self-centeredness (ego):

- Such self-centeredness is actually the rejection of love.
- The first step towards creating a communion of love is the denial of our own ego.

Growth in insight and self-awareness are part of our healing and give us greater awareness of how our actions affect others:

- This can lead us to pausing more and thinking before we speak and act.
- This can lead us to a greater sense of empathy.

Empathy is the ability to accurately see the world through the eyes of another person and is at the heart of the ability to extend self-giving love:

- The goal of empathy is to understand another's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions in a meaningful way.
- Only those who are healthy can become adept at exercising empathy.
- Learning to do this can lead to healthy relationship, as empathy is the beginning of evidence of self-giving love.
- In order to put empathy into practice, we must learn to set aside our own agenda, at least momentarily.
- The means the willingness to consider things we would prefer not to do, or feel, or talk about.
- Absent empathy, self-giving love is not attainable.

Our transformation in marriage involves our openness to being influenced by our spouse and to being changed by the Holy Spirit. Not only are the ordinary experiences of married life changed into something sublime, we, too, are changed by the experience of marriage. One of the greatest skills we can begin to cultivate, through the practice of repentance and humility, is empathy. Listening to our spouse with empathy is an ascetical work when done out of love for Christ and love for our spouse.

Slide 10

Let's do our final activity.

I am going to share a three-minute video on empathy.

Once the video is over, take another three minutes to discuss the following question:

- Where do you see opportunities to practice greater empathy?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

Slide 11

Lord, love my spouse through me.
Let me love my spouse through You.
And be loved by You through my spouse.

Insert name.

It's not about you, but about Christ present in your spouse.

During the next two weeks, if you have a difficult moment, pause, pray, and try to listen to your spouse with empathy. One way to do this is the phrase: "Help me understand why this matters to you."

As a reminder, the four dimensions of empathy are:

- Perspective-taking: attempting to imagine what life is like for another person, at least for a given moment in time, respecting their perspective as how they see the world.
- Nonjudgment.
- Recognizing emotion in other people.
- Communicating recognition of another's emotion.

Empathy is a practical way of letting God love your spouse through you, and of letting God love you through your spouse.

I will be sending out a link to a brief post-session two survey. The questions pertain only to this module. Please complete it within the next two weeks.

See you in two weeks when we dive more deeply into navigating conflict and communication.

Session Three: Bearing with One Another in Love

Slide 1

Introduction

Welcome to Session 3 of "The Good Wine."

As a reminder, the goal of this program, part of my Doctor of Ministry final project, is twofold:

1. To ground participating couples in the Orthodox Christian theological vision of marriage;
2. To reframe the common, everyday marital challenges in the areas of communications and marital conflict in light of that vision.

Slide 2

In this session, our half-way point, we will continue to explore how we as couples can live out the Church's theology of marriage in practical terms when it comes to the areas of communication and conflict.

First, a brief recap of what we have covered so far:

During the first session, we established our theological foundation by focusing on the Church's theology of marriage, and framed marriage within the context of our journey towards salvation:

- The primary purpose of Christian marriage is the mutual salvation of the spouses—husband and wife help each other to enter the Kingdom of heaven:
 - Toward this purpose, Christian marriage is a journey that creates the unique conditions that will allow each spouse to grow in holiness and develop together into the likeness of God, IF they choose to embrace the Church's vision of marriage.
- This journey is a mutual martyrdom in terms of bearing witness to Christ to each other by growing daily in authentic Christian love which is self-sacrificing.
- This is a journey that leads to becoming fully and authentically human, in the full sense of the word:
 - Human as Christ revealed humanity to be.
- This journey involves struggle, a struggle against our own selfishness as we try to acquire perfect love for our spouse.

During the second session, we discussed marriage as a journey of healing:

- In marriage we are provided with an opportunity for the healing and transformation of our passions as well as from behaviors we do not fully control.
- Marriage is an ascetical journey, which means that in marriage we learn to practice self-control and love, patience, and stillness in order to transform the passions hidden within us:
 - Two things we need most for this journey are repentance and humility.
 - Repentance is the choice to resist the impulse of our passions and involuntary behaviors in difficult moments.
 - Humility is an awareness of our limitations and a willingness to confront them and allow God to heal them.
- Empathy is a practical way that we allow God to love our spouse through us and allow God to love us through our spouse:
 - Empathy means taking the perspective of our spouse, without judgment, recognizing their emotion, and communicating that recognition.

In the remaining sessions we will focus on mutual martyrdom, mutual sanctification, and turning towards one another as a pastoral theology of marriage.

For this session, our key topics are:

- Marriage as the Path for Our Transformation
- Communication and Conflict as Opportunities
- Shifting from Conflict to Cooperation
- Bearing with One Another in Love

Slide 3

Marriage: A Path of Transformation

In our last session we spoke about marriage as a healing path within the broader context of the Christian life. Today we will speak about marriage as a path of transformation for husband and wife as part of that healing.

St Clement of Alexandria held up those who were married as opposed to monastics as exemplars of the struggle for maturity in Christ:

- For the married as for the monastics, maturity in Christ requires prayer and ascetical struggle.
- As we live this struggle out in marriage, we are transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ, if we choose to cooperate with the Church's vision of marriage.
- Our cooperation is essential, because although we are created in the image of God and have the potential to become authentic human persons in the divine likeness, we can refuse or frustrate this process of growth.
- Our spiritual maturity, which we can also refer to as our sanctification or deification (human by essence, divine by grace), is the result of constant collaboration with the grace of the Holy Trinity.

Through this struggle we learn by experience that we are not isolated individuals but persons in community:

- This is why we often speak of the community of marriage.
- This learning requires us not only to accept our need for community in the person of our spouse, but also our own human limitations.
- One of our limitations can come in the form of our own defense mechanisms, some of which are the result of past experiences.

The Shame Family of Emotions

In our last session we spoke a bit about shame as an emotion that can make it difficult to accept love from God and from others. We are going to expand on this in today's session.

There are some researchers who describe shame as an entire family of emotions:

- The experience of one of the shame family of emotions ranges from slightly unpleasant to agonizing, and can be very brief or long lasting:
 - One thing all the emotions in the shame family have in common is an aspect of painful self-awareness, embarrassment, guilt, and self-consciousness, all of which are unavoidable aspects of daily life.

Here is something important to remember:

- For one spouse a particular event or experience may cause a feeling of devastation whereas for the other spouse it might cause only mild embarrassment.
- Never assume that something that is a big deal for you is a big deal for your spouse, or that something that is not a big deal for you is not a big deal for your spouse.
- Oftentimes we miscommunicate or come into conflict in marriage because we are having two very different subjective experiences about the same thing.

Instead of accepting the experience of embarrassment, guilt, or self-consciousness, we can often try to avoid them through our defense mechanisms, which may operate beneath the level of our awareness:

- Shame as we are speaking about it at the root of humility, because it is the awareness and acceptance of our limitations.

- If we can encounter and accept our own limitations, we are more likely to accept and encounter the limitations we perceive in our spouse.
- If we are not aware of our own limitations or am unwilling to accept them, then our defense mechanisms may come into play.

Increasing Our Awareness—Defense Mechanisms

So, what do these defense mechanisms look like?

Some of the primary strategies to which spouses can resort in order mitigate exposure to painful self-awareness such as embarrassment, guilt, or self-consciousness include avoidance, denial, and control:

- When deployed against our spouses, these defense mechanisms can manifest as narcissism (self-centeredness), blame, contempt, personal attacks, and criticism (righteous indignation).

Narcissism as a defense mechanism results in difficulty acknowledging fault or error, blaming others, and feeling contempt for other people:

- When it is extreme it is defensive in nature and can manifest as arrogance and conceit.
- In contrast to a sense of inherent value, defensive narcissism seeks to prove the point and can lead to an ongoing need to demonstrate that one is right in all circumstances.

Another defense mechanism driven by the shame family of emotions is blaming others:

- Shifting blame is one of the most common strategies for evading uncomfortable feelings such as embarrassment, guilt, or self-consciousness.
- It can be difficult to hear criticism leveled at us, because we can experience it as failure or imperfection.
- We can avoid this by exposing the failure or flaws of another.

Blame, along with criticism, may be the most common way the shame family of emotions cause us to react towards others:

- Like blame, criticism of another can alleviate the painful self-awareness brought on by embarrassment, guilt, or self-consciousness.
- Here's the problem, though: The person being criticized can feel attacked no matter how the criticism is phrased and may try to retaliate.
- Criticism as a defense is a behavior in marriage that can be quite harmful to both the one criticizing and the one being criticized.

Contempt or a feeling of superiority over someone else is another common strategy for evading the pain of shame:

- It manifests as righteous indignation, which leads one to go on the offensive.

Defense mechanisms such as these distort our perception of reality:

- When they are engaged, it can be a bit like wearing out-of-focus contact lenses without knowing they are there.
- We have to be aware that such things exist and make the effort to adjust our perceptions.

Adjusting our Perceptions

There are a few ways in which the shame family of emotions and related defense mechanisms can distort our thinking in marriage. These distortions, all related to the strategies of avoidance, denial, and control can especially impact the areas of marital communications and conflict:

- Mind reading: making assumptions about how our spouse is reacting to us;
- Personalization:
 - The author Paul Bradshaw compares this to the experience of a toothache.
 - When your tooth hurts you can only think about your tooth.
 - When you are in the midst of a moment of painful self-awareness, you can only think about yourself.
- Should thinking: As a result of trying to be perfect, we fall under the tyranny of “should” or subject others to this:
 - Based on this we can tend to operate from a list of inflexible rules about how we and others should act.
 - The rules themselves are seen as absolute and correct and are not subject to discussion.
 - Key words that accompany this are "should," "ought," and "must.”
 - Remember our previous conversation about hopes versus expectations: this is similar to that.
- Blaming: This is a way to cover up our feelings about ourselves and leads to labelling:
 - This can serve as a distraction from our own personal responsibility as well as from looking at ourselves honestly.

To the extent we can identify such behaviors at work in our own lives, we can adjust our perceptions. With adjusted perceptions, we can choose different behaviors.

Choosing Different Behaviors

The defense mechanisms we have discussed all amount to ways of controlling the experience of painful self-awareness by trying to control our spouse:

- Control is an enemy of intimacy and communion with another person.
- Living in communion excludes the idea of one spouse trying to control another.
- It is important to realize that you cannot change or fix your spouse or control their lives in any way.

One behavior we can choose is to re-frame, or change our interpretation or point of view:

- Instead of seeing something that causes embarrassment, guilt, or self-consciousness as something terrible, we can come to it as valuable opportunities to learn.
- We can also try to see the experience of painful self-awareness as a healing encounter with Christ.
- Christ is trying to show us an area for potential growth in humility and love.

The bottom line: It is important to not believe everything we feel, especially when we are feeling are being stirred up by our internal defenses, which can often cause contempt, righteous indignation, and angry blaming:

- When we experience these feelings, it is important to realize these may be our defense mechanisms at work.

- Part of the transforming journey of marriage with regards to conflict and communication is learning to recognize when we are projecting our feelings on to others and take responsibility for our own feelings and reactions.
- Another part of this journey is learning to realize and take responsibility for our part in communication challenges and difficulties navigating conflict.

Slide 4

- Five-minute discussion
- In what ways might my defense mechanisms interfere with my ability to communicate and engage in conflict in a Christlike manner?
 - Self-centeredness, blaming, contempt, criticism (personal attacks and righteous indignation).

Slide 5

Communication and Conflict

Communication Patterns

In his book *Building an Orthodox Marriage*, Bishop John Abdalah says that the difference between men and women in terms how they think and understand the world is so great as to make all communications between them "transcultural":

- In general, women tend to engage in "rapport-talk" in order to promote connection, whereas men engage in "report-talk," in which they focus on exchanging information with little or no emotional implications.
- This is a difference that results in regular misunderstandings between men and women.
- Men regularly make the mistake of thinking they are being given problems to solve, when in reality a wife is sharing herself in order to be understood and appreciated:
 - Advice giving can come across as criticism, causing the wife to withdraw emotionally.
 - This can in turn lead to anger for the husband who sees himself as only "trying to help."
 - It is helpful if husbands remember that if advice is wanted, it will be asked for.
 - If advice is not requested, the husband should simply listen attentively with the goal not of fixing but of demonstrating that he cherishes his wife and understands how important she is.

Women should understand that men are fragile and need to know that their wives notice the things they do, and that it is important for men to feel respected and appreciated:

- For husbands, making their wives happy is important, but they need to be reminded.

- When a wife has to remind a husband about something, the attitude of "If I have to ask or tell you it doesn't count" is not helpful.

When a disagreement arises, it is important to confirm that you are hearing what you think you are hearing prior to responding:

- A phrase as simple as, "Are you saying that..." can help in this regard.
- Above all, it is important for a husband and wife to remember that they are a team, not competitors.
- While trying to work through a disagreement, it is important to stay on topic and avoid incorporating other issues.
- If it seems that talking is not helping, it can be helpful to write to each other, perhaps writing out what it is you want and ask your spouse to respond within a certain time period.

Conflict Styles

We grow in love through our marriages by learning to reconcile our differences, which can result in some level of conflict. With regards to addressing conflict, marriages can be categorized into three types, all of which are equally stable based on research:

- Validating marriages—as problems arise, couples compromise often and calmly work out their problems to mutual satisfaction.
- Conflict-avoiding marriages—couples agree to disagree and rarely confront conflict head on.
- Volatile marriages—conflict often erupts, resulting in passionate disputes.

Avoiding conflict can ruin your marriage, although there is no single conflict style that is better than another as long as it works for both spouses:

- When choosing your spouse, you are inevitably be choosing a particular set of unsolvable problems you will grapple with for the rest of your marriage.
- 69 percent of marital conflicts cannot be resolved.
- It is helpful to choose the problems to address that you can cope with.
- It is important to learn to address the unsolvable problems so that they do not become overwhelming.
- The appropriate response is to keep them in their place and approach them with a sense of humor, as well as love, patience, and humility.

Perpetual problems can cause gridlock in marriage, and you can find yourself having the same conversation over and over again, while resolving nothing.

Characteristics of gridlocked problems are as follows:

- You feel rejected by your spouse.
- You keep discussing it but make no headway.
- You become entrenched and are unwilling to alter your position.
- You become more frustrated and hurt when discussing the subject.

- Your conversations about the topic are devoid of humor, amusement, and affection.
- You become more entrenched over time and begin to take it out on each other.
- You become more polarized and less willing to compromise.
- You disengage from each other emotionally.

Negative emotions hold important information about how to love each other better:

- It takes a lot of understanding and proficiency to hear what your spouse is saying when they are upset.
- For both spouses it is important to learn to express negative emotions in a way that facilitates listening without feeling attacked.
- This allows the message to get through in a manner that can cause healing versus more hurt.
- This type of discussion can be difficult for both spouses, but it is important to be gentle with each other.

When you address conflict in a way that is not gentle, there are four specific behaviors that can result that are extremely detrimental to marriage.

Slide 6

The Four Horsemen

There are four elements in a couples' communication and conflict resolution that can lead to dysfunction and relational breakdown if they become habitual—criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

- The first two are weapons the couple use against each other.
- The second two are used defensively in order to isolate and protect themselves from one another.
- Together, the Four Horsemen create a cycle of negativity that interferes with a couple's ability to communicate effectively.

Criticism

Criticism is the act of blaming a relationship problem on a personality flaw of our spouse:

- Words like “lazy,” “dumb,” “selfish,” and “thoughtless” are consistent with this behavior.
- Phrases like "you always" or "you never" are also forms of criticism as they imply a defect in the person to whom they are directed.
- If you become aware that you have levied criticism against your spouse, it is helpful to apologize right away and soften whatever you are going to say next.

Criticism is always a subjective interpretation that is based on our own experience and grounded in our personal history:

- Another dimension of criticism in marriage is related to self-doubt and is rooted in criticism of oneself.

- If you recognize yourself as a self-critic, it is important to work on self-acceptance, including all of your own flaws.

Instead of criticism we can offer feedback:

- Such feedback consists of sensory based observations without providing an interpretation”:
 - “I notice the bills have not been paid.”

Another alternative to criticism is making a request:

- A request begins with an "I" statement regarding your own feelings.
- When you are not able to identify a specific feeling, you can simply say "I am upset" or "I feel stressed."
- This is followed by describing the specific situation that has evoked the emotion, but doing so in a way that does not blame your spouse.
- A complaint is concluded with a concrete description of what is needed to feel better, framed as politely as possible.
- Instead of saying "I need you to be more responsible" it would be more effective to say:
 - "I need you to pay the bills tonight."
 - It would be best to say, "Would you please pay the bills tonight?"

When you are subjected to criticism:

- It is helpful to refrain from defending ourselves.
- Certainly, we acknowledge the truth of the criticism, either in terms of its possibility or probability.
- We can ask clarifying questions.
- When we have done what we are being criticized for, we confess that.

Although some level of criticism may be common in marriages, frequent criticism can pave the way for the other and more deadly horseman—contempt.

Contempt

Contempt is the second horseman and can be described as criticism "gone nuclear”:

- Contempt is a form of disrespect that arises from a sense of superiority over the other person.
- Contempt conveys insults, name-calling, put-downs, blame, as well as much more.
- It includes things such as sarcasm, mockery, eye-rolling, and facial expressions.
- Contempt is a way of showing that you feel superior to your spouse.
- When it comes to contempt versus criticism, your intention is to insult and psychologically abuse your spouse, insulting the heart of your spouse’s sense of self.
- Criticism makes it virtually impossible to resolve a problem and leads to even more conflict.

The best way to neutralize contempt is to stop seeing arguing with your spouse as a way to retaliate or exhibit your superior moral stance:

- Things can improve if you approach your spouse with precise complaints rather than attack your spouse's character.

- Added to this, expressing a healthy dose of admiration can also help, as this is the opposite of contempt.

Research has shown that couples who are contemptuous toward each other are more likely than others to suffer from infectious illness:

- The alternative to criticism is the gentle start-up: expressing the feeling, the cause, and a positive request.
- As another source of contempt can be long-simmering negative thoughts about your spouse, such thoughts are likely if your differences have not been resolved.

Defensiveness

Defensiveness is a natural response to feeling unjustly blamed or attacked:

- It is important to realize that during a tense moment, it does not matter if the intent is to blame or attack.
- What matters is what the listener hears.
- In every interaction there are always two points of view regarding what is happening, and each is equally valid.
- When you are feeling attacked you may actually miss what could be an underlying plea for a connection and hear instead only negative emotions and respond with defensiveness.

Defensiveness is a result of the instinct for self-preservation, which can also trigger withdrawal or counterattacks in the face of verbal assaults:

- There are two main types of defensiveness--what can be described as innocent victimhood and righteous indignation:
 - Innocent victimhood: your response is to claim to be mistreated.
 - Righteous indignation: counterattack by returning criticism.

Defensiveness tends to escalate rather than resolve a conflict. Forms of defensiveness include:

- Disagreement accompanied with negative mind reading.
- Counterattacks.
- Repeating yourself.
- Whining.

The counter to defensiveness is to take responsibility for the problem at hand with phrases such as "fair enough" or "good point," if you are able to do so:

- For some this may not feel like a comfortable or safe thing to do.
- Sometimes we can resist holding ourselves accountable due to challenges with self-esteem and the shame family of emotions:
 - When this is a challenge for us taking responsibility can actually feel like an attack on our self-worth.
 - Where taking ownership is possible it can lead to an increase in mutual love and respect.

Speaking and listening non-defensively is helpful in easing defensiveness:

- It can help defuse flooding and the need to stonewall, as well as lessen the spouse's need to be defensive.
- Non-defensiveness smooths ruffled feathers, maintains calm conflict management, and nurtures a peaceful partnership between spouses.
- Defensiveness is a behavior that further escalates the conflict.

Stonewalling

The fourth horseman is stonewalling, which is shutting down in the middle of a conflict or discussion and withholding any verbal or non-verbal response:

- Stonewalling occurs with the other horsemen become overwhelming.
- Normally, people stonewall as a protection against feeling psychologically and physically overwhelmed, which is a sensation known as flooding.
- In one study related to this behavior 85 percent of the stonewallers were men.
- Men who are stonewalling typically fall silent, fold their arms and look down or away for extended periods.
- Women can also stonewall, especially if they have endured any type of abuse during early years.
- For a woman who is stonewalling, she does not look away, does maintain eye contact but the eyes can glaze over, and the face and body can look lifeless.

The horsemen criticism, contempt, and defensiveness do not arrive in any specific order, but once one of the horsemen arrives, it invariably will lead to another:

- Discussions that begin with criticism and contempt eventually lead to defensiveness, just as a defensive response can lead to criticism and contempt.
- Either way, the end result is that one spouse will eventually tune out through stonewalling.

Spouses who stonewall are in "flight or fight mode," which is the common name for diffuse physiological arousal (DPA), another term for flooding.

Flooding

Flooding occurs when your spouse's negativity is so intense and sudden that it leaves you overwhelmed:

- The more often you experience flooding from a spouse's criticism or contempt, the more hypervigilant you become.
- Flooding is the result of a physiological response, which includes:
 - An accelerated heart rate (100-165 bpm).
 - Rapid and shallow breathing.
 - Perspiration.
 - Hormonal changes including the secretion of adrenaline.
 - An increase in blood pressure.
- This can be taking place at the same time someone is sitting quietly and conversing.

Remember the study I mentioned a moment ago in which 85 percent of those who engaged in stonewalling were husbands:

- The male cardiovascular system is more reactive to stress than the female cardiovascular system and takes longer to recover from stress.
- If both a husband and wife hear an unexpected loud sound such as a tire blow-out, the husband's heart rate and blood pressure is likely to remain elevated for a longer period of time.

When flooding happens in the midst of a discussion, it impedes the ability to process information, making it harder to pay attention to your spouse or engage in creative problem solving:

- The only two responses available become:
 - Fight (criticism, contempt, defensiveness).
 - Flight (stonewalling).

In short, Flooding leaves the person effected by it ill equipped for a rational conversation:

- Flooding can create tunnel vision and tunnel hearing, and for one who is stonewalling, everything seems loud and signals a potential attack.
- Flooding is a physically uncomfortable experience; muscles tense up, including the gut, jaw, arms, and legs.
- Absent the ability to think or physically fight or run away, the spouse suffering from flooding withdraws not to punish or abandon the spouse but to calm themselves.

Self-soothing is a skill that slows down flooding and prevents stonewalling:

- A key to this is learning to sense flooding as it is first starting and before it takes control of the brain and body.
- One way to do this is to keep track of your pulse.
- Other physical signs of which you may become aware include a tightening of the mid-section, clenched jaws, or shoulders shifting upward.
- You might even start to feel hot, flushed, and shaky.

A helpful response can be for the spouse experiencing flooding or the spouse noticing this is happening to call for a break:

- This means that no one gets the last word in.
- It is important to determine when the conversation will resume, but other than that both spouses should retreat to separate places.

Calming and distracting activities include music, reading, meditating on Scripture, and prayer:

- It is important that this time not be spent thinking about the fight or rehearsing future conflicts.
- Breaks should last for at least thirty minutes, but no longer than twenty-four hours.

Making an effort to remain calm can help, as it eases flooding and the need to stonewall:

- This means there has to be an effort to recognize when you are beginning to feel flooded.
- It requires a deliberate effort to calm yourself and take a break.

Here is something to keep in mind:

- Expressing praise and admiration for your spouse is something that can unseat the Four Horsemen.
- When you are in the midst of a tense conversation, this may be the last thing on your mind.
- A tense conversation may be an opportunity for an ascetical effort manifested in the form of a genuine expression of praise or adoration.

Slide 7

Let's do an activity.

Five-minute discussion

- In what ways do you allow the Four Horsemen ride into your marriage?
- Is there a frequent criticism you voice which you can try to reframe as an effective request?

Slide 8

From Conflict to Cooperation

Every person has weaknesses. That means that every husband and wife beginning the journey of marriage have weak points that will need to be handled with loving patience and tolerance, or they will develop into Problems:

- In the Christian understanding of marriage, our failures assume a special significance for salvation.
- In keeping with the saying of the Apostle Paul of bearing with one another in love (Eph 4.2), we learn to tolerate and endure the weaknesses of others as we want them to be patient with us and endure our own weaknesses.
- Healing comes through the realization that we are loved despite our personal weaknesses.
- This becomes the starting point for each spouse to be able to love the other, as it is unconditional and forgiving love that enables growth towards perfection.
- Loving our spouses in spite of their weaknesses is another way in which marriage is a school for authentic love.

The prayer for Christ to love my spouse through me is a prayer for the Lord to remove self-love from my heart, transforming my heart from stone to flesh:

- The heart of stone is only able to offer contempt and the spirit of criticism.
- The heart of flesh is able to offer itself to God and suffer for the sake of the other.

Our Spouse - A Living Icon of Christ

Thanksgiving and praise are antidotes for criticism and contempt, just and thankfulness is one route towards forgiveness.

We encounter Christ in the midst of a struggle that grows ever more intense as we pray with our very lives, "Lord let me love my spouse through you":

- In this struggle it is important to realize that we are struggling with the sin, or lack of Christlikeness.
- In this light asceticism is not a struggle against the body or human nature but is rather the liberation of both from sin and the passions.

The only proper response before my spouse who has received the Eucharist is an interior movement of the heart:

- In which I fall on my face in repentance, turning away from the things that make me less Christlike, before the Lord.
- Recognizing he has received my spouse into Himself.
- Christ is present in my spouse and in me, loving through us, and we are each being loved by Him through one another.
- In order to have an authentic encounter with my spouse, I must meet them in and through Christ and receive Christ through them.

Empathy and Validation

Empathy curbs criticism and allows us to better see a complaint from our spouse's point of view:

- Empathy also shortens conflicts by exchanging blaming for positive solutions and replacing "you" statements with "we" statements.
- A study conducted jointly by the University of Pennsylvania and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill concluded that those couples who use "we" may have a sense of shared interest that sparks compromise and other ideas.
- This same study showed that "you"-sayers tend to criticize, disagree, justify and otherwise express negativity.
- The bottom line is that empathizing with your spouse makes conflict inclusive.

Validation, or letting your spouse know that you understand, is an antidote to criticism, contempt, and defensiveness:

- Instead of ignoring or attacking your spouse, you attempt to see the situation from your spouse's point of view.
- One important element of this, especially for men, is to acknowledge the emotional content as opposed to attempting to solve the problem.
- This means attempting to put yourself in your spouse's shoes and try to imagine their emotional state.
- Navigating conflict is most effective when the spouse who is listening understands and summarizes their spouse's point of view before bringing up their own.

A good starting point can be simply listening and acknowledging what your spouse is saying, and not arguing for your own point:

- A next step can be to let your spouse know you understand their point.

- If possible, take responsibility by acknowledging what you did, apologizing, and offering a compliment.

Growing in Humility

Last session we spoke of humility in terms of the willingness to confront our own limitations.

A concrete step in our healing is to develop the habit of self-examination in order to discover when we have been wrong:

- In acknowledging our mistakes, we are able to embrace our human vulnerability and finite nature.
- The role of healthy shame is to remind us that we are fallible and will make mistakes.
- The experience of shame can be helpful when we learn to respect the limitations of who we are.

It is also helpful to our healing to learn to tolerate the shame family of emotions without deploying defense mechanisms:

- Attempting to deny or control the experience of guilt, embarrassment, or self-consciousness can isolate us from others and stands in the way of growing in intimacy with our spouse.
- The courage necessary for personal growth includes a willingness to be vulnerable—open to being embarrassed, or feeling guilty, or self-conscious without feeling the need to defend against our spouse.
- Humor is also important and includes learning to laugh at ourselves, which counters the tendency to become defensive.

We have to learn to recognize and disarm our defense mechanisms when they impede our growth in love for our spouses:

- Defending ourselves against the experience of shame includes:
 - Denial
 - Rationalization
 - Blaming others while insisting on our own innocence

To learn to move beyond these defenses, vigilance is necessary:

- This allows us to observe our defensive behaviors in action, which in turn gives us the option to not engage in them.
- Simple insight or awareness is not enough. If we want new habit and new behaviors, we have to make new choices over time so that we can develop new habits.

Perfectionism is a defense of last resort:

- It is a refusal to accept the need to make the best of who they are, face their limitations, and grow from that awareness.

Authentic change is driven by the choices we make over time:

- Choosing to act in a way that is different from our defenses and then following through on that decision requires effort.

- Those with a harsh perfectionist outlook find it difficult to accept that growth can occur bit-by-bit over time.
- As part of this outlook, they have a difficulty admitting failures and find it hard to acknowledge their own hurtful behaviors.

Two things to remember when it comes to marital conflict:

- No one is right.
- In marital conflict there is not absolute reality, only two subjective ones.
- This is the case whether you are dealing with an issue that can be solved or one that cannot be.

Acceptance is crucial:

- It is difficult if not impossible for others to heed advice if they do not feel that the person speaking to them understands, respects, and accepts them for who they are.
- Feeling criticized, disliked, and unappreciated makes it all the more difficult to change.
- When you feel under siege you tend to dig in.
- A key element of dealing effectively with relationship issues is learning to communicate your basic acceptance of your spouse.
- Before you can ask them to change anything, you have to make sure they feel known and respected as opposed to criticized or demeaned.

Slide 9

Let's do another activity.

Is there a current conflict that might be transformed into an opportunity for cooperation?

Go ahead and set prepare a stopwatch and get ready to pause for five minutes. When the time is up, please resume the video.

Slide 10

Bearing with One Another in Love

Being able to compromise on a solvable problem in a way that leaves both spouses satisfied can prevent the issue from becoming a gridlocked and damaging conflict:

- Even so, it can still leave scars if you cannot process past the issues at hand, leaving what Gottman refers to as "emotional injury."
- This refers to the fact that the past lives in our bodies in the present.
- Unaddressed emotional injuries can become constant injuries that cause distance to build up over time.
- It is normal to have past emotional injuries that we need to talk about or otherwise work through.

Defining Perfect Love

To grow in authentic love, we have to define this love in concrete terms:

- One place we can look is 1 Cor 13:4–7, which provides characteristics such as patience, kindness, a lack of rudeness, not being easily angered, and not bearing grudges.
- We can expand this list based on our own particular experiences as a couple.
- As a starting place, love does not mock or minimize the other, it does not belittle or oppress, or subjugate the other.
- Love condemns sin, but not the sinner, and so does not reject the other.
- Love does not seek to control, but to serve.

Learning to live this out can only happen if we as couples do the hard work of cultivating a deep understanding between each spouse that allows both to feel safe and secure in the marriage:

- In the case of problems that cannot be solved, this means becoming comfortable with your ongoing differences.
- For problems that can be solved, this means discovering the right strategy to solve them.

Learning to Make Requests

A request focuses on a specific behavior or event and has three parts:

- Here is how I feel . . .
- About this very specific situation, and . . .
- Here is what I need/want/prefer.

This is an antidote to criticism, which is more general and expresses negative feelings or opinions about your spouse's character or personality:

- A request can also be understood as a constructive way of complaining.
- It allows spouses to air grievances and identify areas of ongoing improvements.
- There is a key difference between criticism and complaining or making a request.
- Criticism always begins with "You," as in "You always..." Complaining begins most often with I, as in "I feel...."

Gentle Startups

The biggest predictors of poor conflict management for a couple are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. A healthy alternative to criticism and contempt is the gentle start-up:

- A hard start-up is beginning a conversation by becoming immediately negative and accusatory.
- Beginning with criticism and/or sarcasm, which is a form of contempt, is an example of beginning with a harsh start-up.
- In contrast, statements that contain request or complaints are soft start-ups.

The most important aspect of softening your start-up is a lack of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, or stonewalling:

- A harsh start-up leads to the Four Horsemen, flooding, and increased emotional distancing and loneliness.

Another important aspect of a softened start-up is taking some responsibility for the problem at hand. If you are not able to do this in some way, then a statement that acknowledges that the other person is not entirely to blame can be helpful.

Ideally a soft start-up has four parts, allowing for direct complaints while avoiding criticisms or contemptuous accusations:

- 1) Share some responsibility for the situation.
- 2) Share your feelings.
- 3) Describe the specific situation.
- 4) Describe what you need in positive terms. Instead of pointing the finger at your spouse, point it at yourself.

In order to try to solve the problems that can be solved, the following steps can be helpful:

- Soften your start-up.
- Learn to make and receive repair attempts.
- Keep calm—soothe yourself and each other.
- Work together as a team—compromise.
- Realize that forgiveness is a process and work through grievances so that they do not linger.

One helpful tool can be the Gottman-Rapaport Exercise:

- Spouses who want to discuss a specific conflict issue postpone persuasion until each can summarize the position of the other to the other's satisfaction.
- The speaker states what is needed with a gentle start-up, free of blame and criticism.
- They describe the feelings and what has evoked them.
- They then state what they need or want (note: in this context needs and wants are considered interchangeable).
- The listener takes notes and only asks for clarifying questions for the sake of clarification or understanding and does not bring up their own viewpoint.
- When the speaker concludes, the listener summarizes the position of the first speaker to make sure they have it right.
- They then do the best to validate their partner.
- “From your point of view, it makes sense to me that...”
- “Okay, I get it, I understand.”
- They then exchange roles.

This is something that stops the cycle of the Four Horsemen as long as both use the gentle start-up when stating their needs. The gentle start-up is able to short circuit criticism, blame, and contempt. Note-taking makes defensiveness less likely.

Slide 11

Let's do our final activity.

I am going to share a three-minute video on empathy.

Once the video is over, take another three minutes to discuss the following question:

- Where do you see opportunities to practice greater empathy?

Slide 12

Lord, love my spouse through me.
Let me love my spouse through You.
And be loved by You through my spouse.

Insert name.

It's not about you, but about Christ present in your spouse.

During the next two weeks, if you have a difficult moment, pause, pray, and try to listen to your spouse with empathy. One way to do this is the phrase: "Help me understand why this matters to you."

As a reminder, the four dimensions of empathy are:

- Perspective taking—attempting to imagine what life is like for another person, at least for a given moment in time. Respecting their perspective as how they see the world.
- Nonjudgment.
- Recognizing emotion in other people.
- Communicating recognition of another's emotion.

Empathy is a practical way of letting God love your spouse through you, and of letting God love you through your spouse.

Slide 13

Look for an opportunity to frame a criticism as a request.

A request focuses on a specific behavior or event and has three parts:

- Here is how I feel . . .

- About this very specific situation, and
- Here is what I need/want/prefer.

It may help to begin with the statement: “I have a request.”

Reminder: non-defensiveness is an act of humility.

I will be sending out a link to a brief post-session three survey. The questions pertain only to this module. Please complete it within the next two weeks.

See you in two weeks when we complete our deep dive into conflict and communication.

Session Four: Mutual Martyrdom

Slide 1

Introduction

Welcome to Session 4 of “The Good Wine.”

As a reminder, the goal of this program, part of my Doctor of Ministry final project, is twofold:

1. To ground participating couples in the Orthodox Christian theological vision of marriage;
2. To reframe the common, everyday marital challenges in the areas of communications and marital conflict in light of that vision.

In this session, we will conclude our exploration of how we as couples can live out the Church’s theology of marriage in practical terms when it comes to the areas of communication and conflict.

Slide 2

First, a brief recap of what we have covered so far:

During the first session, we established our theological foundation by focusing on the Church’s theology of marriage and framed marriage within the context of our journey toward salvation:

- The primary purpose of Christian marriage is the mutual salvation of the spouses—husband and wife help each other to enter the Kingdom of heaven.
- Toward this purpose, Christian marriage is a journey that creates the unique conditions that will allow each spouse to grow in holiness and for the couple to develop together into the likeness of God—IF they choose to embrace the Church’s vision of marriage.

- This journey is a mutual martyrdom in terms of bearing witness to Christ to each other by growing daily in authentic Christian love that is self-sacrificing.
- This is a journey that leads to becoming fully and authentically human—human as Christ revealed humanity to be.
- This journey involves struggle, a struggle against our own selfishness as we try to acquire perfect love for our spouse.

During the second session, we discussed marriage as a journey of healing:

- In marriage we are provided with an opportunity for the healing and transformation of our passions as well as from behaviors we do not fully control.
- Marriage is an ascetical journey, which means that in marriage we learn to practice self-control and love, patience, and stillness in order to transform the passions hidden within us:
 - Two things we need most for this journey are repentance and humility.
 - Repentance is the choice to resist the impulse of our passions and involuntary behaviors in difficult moments and instead turn to Christ.
 - Humility is an awareness of our limitations and a willingness to confront them and allow God to heal them.
- Empathy is a practical way that we allow God to love our spouse through us and allow God to love us through our spouse:
 - Empathy means taking the perspective of our spouse, without judgment, recognizing their emotion, and communicating that recognition.

Our third session was an attempt to dive down into more practical elements of communication and conflict, with an emphasis on the dynamics of communication:

- Marriage is a path not only to healing but to our transformation in Christ as well:
 - As part of our transformation, we seek to become aware of the perceptions and defense mechanisms we have that stand in the way of Christlike behavior.
 - Becoming more aware of our perceptions and defense mechanisms allows us the possibility of choosing different behaviors.
- Challenges in communicating with our spouse are opportunities to love each other with Christlike love and to move from conflict to cooperation:
 - The Four Horsemen—Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling—can stand in the way of these opportunities.
 - Learning to communicate as spouses in ways that are direct and honest, yet without defensiveness or criticism, is key.

In the remaining sessions after this evening will focus on mutual sanctification and turning towards one another as a pastoral theology of marriage.

For this session, focused on some of the dynamics of conflict in light of the theological vision we have been exploring, our key topics are:

- Attitudes, Perceptions, and Reality
- Bad Fights and Good Fights
- The CORE of a Good Fight
- Mutual Martyrdom

We will be revisiting a lot of the themes and concepts from our previous session.

Slide 3

Attitudes and Perception

Attitude is so important because it drives our perceptions:

- Attitude serves as a lens through which we view reality.

Our perception, which is driven by our attitude, drives how we navigate conflict:

- Our interpretation of our spouse's words, thoughts, and actions frames our outlook and drives our behavior.
- One problem with this is that we believe that our perception represents reality.
- The truth is that just because we perceive something to be a certain way does not make it true. It simply makes it our perception.
- Spouses having different perceptions of the same situation is the basis of a great deal of conflict in marriage.
- One of the ways we can exercise humility in marriage is by being open to the idea that our perceptions may not be accurate.

Perceptions and Navigating Conflict

Research has shown that most fights are based on one of two fundamental issues:

- 1) Perceived threat
- 2) Perceived neglect

In one research project involving 3,539 married couples ranging in age from 18-85 and years of marriage from 1–61 years, every argument came down to two fundamental complaints:

- 1) One spouse felt they were being unjustly blamed or controlled for something having nothing to do with the actual argument itself.
- 2) One spouse feeling neglected by the other.

If our perception of our spouse is that they are:

- Aggressive, demanding, critical, overly controlling, or that they are blaming or attacking us, we will feel threatened.

Whether or not the threat is real, the brain's limbic system will kick in:

- This triggers the fight or flight response, which means we will tend to become defensive and may even counterattack.
- In a situation like this, if we may fail to recognize the underlying issue of feeling threatened.

If our perception of our spouse is that they are:

- Uncaring, uncommitted, neglectful, selfish, or disengaged, we will feel neglected.

We tend to focus on surface issues in marital conflict:

- This means deeper issues, the real issues for our conflict, can go unaddressed.
- When we can identify the thing that is causing us to feel either threatened or neglected, we are better able to examine the underlying issue at the heart of the conflict.

Resetting Our Attitude

Our attitude can cause us to struggle when it comes to our marriage:

- If our attitude is not aligned with the concept of marriage as our path to holiness and healing by means of mutual martyrdom and mutual sanctification, we will struggle to live out a Christian vision of marriage.

When we make room for God's grace to act in us and in our marriages our attitude can change:

- One way we can do this is by making the choice to perceive the best motives in our spouse and put the most favorable interpretations on their actions.
- If we can do this, we may find that the reality of our marriage is transformed as our spouse begins to respond to our newly expressed perception of him or her.

Here are a few specific examples of what this can look like:

- We can decide that we will look for good things about our spouse, our marriage, and positive solutions to our challenges.
- We can refuse to be a victim, realizing that self-pity is something that drains the energy from our marriage.
- We can give up grudges, as bitterness and resentment stand in the way of our ability to think in positive terms about our spouse or our marriage.
- We can choose patience. Our attitude may not change as quickly or as consistently as we might like, but each new day is an opportunity for a fresh start.

Before we dive into the topic of bad and good fights, we are going to watch a short video which will introduce the topic as well as serve as a brief recap of our discussion of the Four Horsemen from our last session.

Slide 4

Activity #1

- Video – How Do Couples Have a Good Fight?
- Five-minute discussion: How do your attitudes and perceptions help or hinder the “Four Horsemen”?
 - Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, Stonewalling

Slide 5

Let's watch a brief video with Christian Psychologists Drs Les and Leslie Parrot. After the video, discuss briefly with your spouse: How do your own attitudes and perceptions help or hinder the Four Horsemen as discussed in the video?

<https://youtu.be/HJjhFIHgtqQ>

Slide 6

According to research the average married couple argues about small nagging things as much as 312 times a year:

- This means that couples experience some kind of conflict on a nearly a daily basis.

In the heat of conflict, we can easily think that our spouse is the issue:

- The fact is conflict in marriage arises because we are forced to confront ourselves.
- Our spouse is like a mirror, and through them we can see our behaviors and attitudes in ways that we never have before.
- Our exchanges with our spouse, especially those that are more difficult, can help us to grow—if we are willing to exercise humility.
- In this way we can grow in self-awareness and better align our thoughts, words, feelings, and actions.
- These exchanges can help us identify when we are failing to love our spouse with Christlike love.

Conflict can erupt without warning on regular basis, but what matters is how we address it when it happens:

- As couples we have to understand the difference between what Christian Psychologists Drs Les and Lesli Parrot call a "good fight" and a "bad fight."
- The good fight is:
 - Helpful, not hurtful;
 - Positive, not negative;
 - Clean, not dirty.
- Bad fights are
 - Arguments where one spouse of the other becomes defensive or stubborn or withdraws;
 - Arguments in which contempt or belittling is used;
 - Unproductive and toxic to the marriage.

Think back to our last session and the discussion of the Four Horsemen.

Note: according to one study unhealthy marital arguments contribute significantly to higher risk of:

- Heart attacks
- Headaches
- Back pain
- Other health problems

So, what are the elements of a “good” fight versus a “bad fight”? Let’s look at a comparison.

Slide 7

“Bad” Fights versus “Good” Fight		
Goal	Winning	Resolving
Topic	Surface Issues	Underlying Issues
Emphasis	Personalities and Power Struggles	Ideas and Issues
Attitude	Confrontational and Defensive	Cooperative and Receptive
Motivation	Shift Blame	Take Responsibility
Mode	Belittle	Respect
Manner	Egocentric	Empathic
Demeanor	Self-righteous	Understanding
Side-Effect	Escalation of tension	Easing of tension
Result	Discord	Harmony
Benefit	Stagnation	Growth and Intimacy

I will give you a moment to scan the table in this slide, then I would like you to watch a short video. Feel free to pause the video briefly to take a closer look at the table or discuss this with your spouse.

<https://youtu.be/HJjhFIHgtqQ>

All of the elements that make for a "bad fight" can be summed up in a single word:

- "Pride."

According to research:

- A spouse will continue an argument 34 percent of the time they know they are wrong or even if they cannot remember what the fight is about.
- Even if they know if it is a losing battle, 74 percent of spouses will continue to fight.
- Again—a single word: PRIDE.

The elements of a "good fight" can be summed up with the acronym "CORE:" Cooperation, Ownership, Respect, and Empathy.

Slide 8

Let's watch another video. Drs. Les and Leslie Parrot will explain the CORE of a good fight.

After the video spend about three minutes discussing ways you see your pride getting in the way of practicing the elements of CORE.

Note: This video was recorded early last year, and they are applying what they are saying to dealing with conflict arising in marriages in light of the early stages of the pandemic, lockdowns, etc. What they are saying can easily be applied more broadly in our marriages.

<https://youtu.be/04yevwz4Xlg>

Slide 9

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Slide 10

Now that we understand the CORE of a good fight, we are going to talk a little about how we can try to cultivate these elements in our marriage.

Cooperation

The key to cooperation is reframing conflict from win-lose to win-win, which requires an attitude oriented towards mutual benefit:

- Learning to cooperate during conflict is a skill that we have to learn.
- It is a way of demonstrating that our marriage itself, and our underlying relationship as husband and wife, is more important than the issues over which we are disagreeing.
- If there truly is no win-win, then the next step is to agree to disagree.

Rules for cultivating cooperation

Share the things you tend to hold back:

- One way to do this is to write two things your spouse has done in the past forty-eight hours that you sincerely appreciate and did not acknowledge.
- Next write one thing your spouse had done in the past forty-eight hours that has irritated you.
- After both have written the statements, take turns sharing them.
- One very important rule is that the person on the receiving end can only say "thank you" after each statement, even the negative one.
- This allows couples to share things that bug them without fearing a blowup or a defensive reaction, and, more importantly, it allows for critique within the context of affirmation.
- Another important rule is that discussing the negative item is not allowed for thirty minutes, in order to allow time to shift from reacting to responding, thus allowing for more objectivity.

A second rule to help foster a spirit of cooperation is to rate the depth of your disagreement on a one-to-ten scale, from "no big deal" to "over my dead body":

- This allows us to have a better sense of whether the issue is worth getting into a disagreement over and, more importantly, how important it is to our spouse, which is a key element of cooperation.

A final rule for cultivating cooperation—agree to disagree when necessary:

- When you are having a conversation that is making no headway, no one is changing their mind and you are going in circles, it may be good to agree to disagree.
- A wise person I know has a saying: "Not everything is a problem and not everything has a solution."
- Research has shown that many problematic issues for couples are never solved but are simply managed.
- This can be especially the case when there are personality differences to be managed.

Ownership

When we blame our spouse, we shift responsibility and sometimes can even counter-accuse, which serves only to escalate the conflict:

- Ownership takes courage and demonstrates our willingness to own up to our own contribution to the current conflict.

Cultivating ownership begins with the courageous step of admitting our mistake:

- It can be helpful to remember that the issue is not who is wrong but what is wrong.
- There are two basic rules that help foster greater ownership:
 1. Apologize when you mean it.
 2. Practice the "XYZ" formula.

Telling our spouse "I am sorry" has the power to repair harm, mend relationships, and heal hurts:

- It can also defuse anger and prevent further misunderstandings.
- Finally, it can diminish the negative effects of past actions.

An apology should have three Rs:

- Responsibility—I know I hurt your feelings.
- Regret—I feel terrible that I hurt you.
- Remedy—I won't do it again.

Apologies should be brief lest they seem insincere:

- It is important to refrain from making excuses or even trying to explain, which can be misconstrued as self-justification.

Pride is one thing that can stand in the way of a good apology:

- Because of pride we sometimes fail to apologize when we should.

Because every conflict begins with a criticism, it can be helpful to learn to make an effective complaint, focusing on a specific behavior versus a character attack, and using "I" language instead of "you" language:

- Les and Leslie Parrot recommend the "XYZ" formula:
 - In situation X, when you do Y, I feel Z.
- This is a way that allows us to simply state how our spouse's behavior is effecting us, rather than projecting our frustration on our spouse.

Respect

According to noted marriage researcher Dr John Gottman, the single most detrimental element to marriage and the greatest predictor of marital turmoil is contempt:

- This can be manifested by any belittling remark.
- It can even be non-verbal, like rolling the eyes or making faces.
- Contempt can be summed up by the word “disrespect.”

In contrast, respect creates safety within the relationship and is an inoculation against disrespect:

- Perhaps more importantly, respect creates an environment in which even if we fail to say the right things, we refrain from saying the wrong things.

The first rule for cultivating respect is to avoid contempt, which is a word researchers use for cruelty:

- As criticism is a barrier to ownership, contempt is a barrier to respect.
- Expressing appreciation can serve as an antidote to contempt.
- The more a couple begins to look for and acknowledge positive things in their relationship, the more they genuinely like each other.
- Appreciation can help to build admiration and fondness and serve to reduce if not eliminate contempt.

The second rule is to take a timeout if needed:

- Whenever either spouse is in a place where they are too upset or negative to engage in problem-solving effectively, it's time to take a break.
- To make this effective it is important to agree in advance to take a time out if things become overwhelming for either of you.

There are a few key points for making time-outs work well:

- Agree to resume the conversation in twenty-four hours.
- The spouse calling for the time out affirms the intention of solving the problem together.
- The discussion ends immediately, and the spouse needing the time out goes somewhere else to calm down. Note: It takes the body at least twenty minutes to slow itself down after being upset.
- Do not spend time thinking about the conversation—instead do something relaxing.
- Giving a deadline for the timeout is critical: Tell your spouse when you will be ready to resume, even if by text or email.
- If possible, share an everyday activity together before resuming the conversation in order to resume a close, calm connection.

Empathy

Empathy is our ability to see the situation accurately from our spouse's perspective:

- Attempting to exercise empathy is a powerful act of love.
- Research has shown that ninety percent of marital conflict can be resolved if the husband and wife accurately see things from each other's perspective.

The first rule for cultivating empathy is to learn to actively try to understand what our spouse is thinking and feeling:

- Although we are constantly observing facial expressions, body language, and other cues, we can often misunderstand our spouse's intentions or feelings.
- In one research project married couples were only able to guess thoughts and feelings with 35-percent accuracy.
- If either spouse is at risk for making an assumption or reading something into what has been said, they can say simply, "I'd like to read your mind" and then offer your guess at what they are thinking.
- Next your spouse rates the accuracy or inaccuracy on a one-to-ten scale and shares what they are thinking.

The second rule is to pray for your spouse:

- Prayer changes us.
- When we pray for our spouse, it lowers our defenses and opens our eyes to our spouse's perspective.
- It joins our spirits together when differences threaten to divide.
- A University of Austin study found that 83 percent of couples who pray together describe their relationship as very happy, compared to 69 percent among couples who did not pray together.
- Another study, from the University of Michigan, found that prayer for one's spouse reduces stress and pain in the person who is praying, thus making empathy easier.

Slide 11

Activity #3:

- Two Short Videos
 - Stop an Argument in Its Tracks – <https://youtu.be/QZq0oqSTjDE>
 - XYZ Formula - <https://youtu.be/iLKJUzTGxtY>
- Five-minute discussion: How might either of these approaches help you better navigate conflict in your marriage.

slide 12

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Slide 13

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Side 14

Growing in Virtue

I mentioned in our last session that St Clement of Alexandria held up those who were married as opposed to monastics as exemplars of the struggle for maturity in Christ:

- According to the patristic understanding, the virtues we develop as we grow in the Christian life are a manifestation of our being in the likeness of God.
- The potential for being in the likeness of God is revealed in the prayer "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."
- To this end another aspect of our healing as persons and growing in our capacity for Christlike love is learning to surrender our desire to control others.
- To renounce our desire to control others means that we are willing to accept the cross of love.
- To paraphrase St Paul in Gal 2.20: We can say to each other as spouses, "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who love my spouse, but Christ who loves my spouse through me."
- This requires a willingness to grow in virtues, beginning with humility.

The Cross as a Choice

The concluding prayer of the marriage service, prior to the final blessing, includes a prayer for God to receive the couple's crowns in his Kingdom:

- This image is meant to serve as an encouragement for the newly crowned couple to follow the ways of the martyrs and married saints on the path to salvation.

The crown is also a reminder:

- A new cross has been given to the couple now united as one, as opposed to the specific cross given to each individual.
- This new cross will require the couple to work together and is something that can only be carried in service to Christ through the spouse, by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Choosing to work together as a couple, to carry our shared cross, is a choice we are called to make daily and to continually re-affirm throughout the day.

Transforming Our Attitude

Our attitudes drive our perceptions:

- If we have a particular mindset, everything and everyone will be viewed through the lens of that mindset, either for good or for ill.
- What we may not realize is that our perceptions are not always accurate.
- In our marriages this will translate into finding that which we are looking for.
- If we tend to be critical in our attitudes towards our spouse, we will find reasons to be critical.
- If we tend to be forgiving, we will find reasons to be forgiving.

When it comes to challenges with conflict and communication in marriage, the only attitude consistent with the theological vision we have been discussing is humility

- The Four Horsemen of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling are unleashed through pride.
- Only through humility can we embrace the CORE elements of a good fight, which serve to corral the Four Horsemen.

We are going to conclude with a video about a way you can reduce the overall level of tension in your marriage and possibly foster greater humility at the same time.

Slide 15

Let's do our final activity.

<https://youtu.be/KUzmsxoCtXQ>

Briefly discuss with your spouse if this is something you are up for trying? Every marriage is different, but this might be a helpful exercise.

Slide 16

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Slide 17

Lord, love my spouse through me.
Let me love my spouse through You.
And be loved by You through my spouse.

Insert name.

It's not about you, but about Christ present in your spouse.

Sharing Withholds

Make time once a week to share withholds:

- One way to do this is to write two things your spouse has done in the past forty-eight hours that you sincerely appreciate and did not acknowledge.
- Next, write one thing your spouse had done in the past forty-eight hours that has irritated you.
- After both have written the statements, take turns sharing them.
- One very important rule:
 - The person on the receiving end can only say “thank you” after each statement, even the negative one.
 - Another important rule is that discussing the negative item is not allowed for thirty minutes, in order to allow time to shift from reacting to responding, thus allowing for more objectivity.

Sharing withholds allows couples to share things that bug them without fearing a blowup or a defensive reaction, and more importantly allows for critique within the context of affirmation.

See you in two weeks for our next-to-last session.

Session Five: Mutual Sanctification

Slide 1

Introduction

Welcome to Session 5 of “The Good Wine.”

As a reminder, the goal of this program, part of my Doctor of Ministry final project, is twofold:

1. To ground participating couples in the Orthodox Christian theological vision of marriage;
2. To reframe the common, everyday marital challenges in the areas of communications and marital conflict in light of that vision.

As our next-to-last session, this will be something of a review of a few key highlights from previous sessions.

In particular, as we begin to wind down the series, we will try to focus especially on the idea of mutual sanctification in marriage, or husband and wife helping one another grow in holiness, through the experience of navigating struggles in the areas of communication and conflict.

Slide 2

First, a brief recap of what we have covered so far:

During the first session, we established our theological foundation by focusing on the Church's theology of marriage, and framed marriage within the context of our journey towards salvation:

- The primary purpose of Christian marriage is the mutual salvation of the spouses—husband and wife help each other to enter the Kingdom of heaven.
- Towards this purpose, Christian marriage is a journey that creates the unique conditions that will allow each spouse to grow in holiness and develop together into the likeness of God—IF they choose to embrace the Church's vision of marriage.
- This journey is a mutual martyrdom in terms of bearing witness to Christ to each other by growing daily in authentic Christian love which is self-sacrificing.
- This is a journey that leads to becoming fully and authentically human, in the full sense of the word—human as Christ revealed humanity to be.
- This journey involves struggle against our own selfishness as we try to acquire perfect, Christlike love for our spouse.

During the second session, we discussed marriage as a journey of healing:

- In marriage we are provided with an opportunity for the healing and transformation of our passions as well as from behaviors we do not fully control.
- Marriage is an ascetical journey, which means that in marriage we learn to practice self-control and love, patience, and stillness in order to transform the passions hidden within us:
 - Two things we need most for this journey are repentance and humility.
 - One way we can understand repentance in this context is as the choice to resist the impulses of our passions and involuntary behaviors in difficult moments.
 - We can understand humility as an openness to discovering our limitations along with a willingness to confront them and allow God to heal them.
- Empathy is another useful skill in this journey:
 - It is a practical way that we allow God to love our spouse through us and allow God to love us through our spouse.
 - Empathy means taking the perspective of our spouse, without judgment.

Our third session was an attempt to dive down into more practical elements of communication and conflict, with an emphasis on the dynamics of communication:

- As a path to our healing, marriage is also a path for our transformation in Christ:
 - As part of our transformation, we seek to become aware of the perceptions and defense mechanisms that stand in the way of Christlike behavior.
 - Becoming more aware of our perceptions and defense mechanisms allows us the possibility of choosing different behaviors.
- Challenges in communicating with our spouse are opportunities to love each other with Christlike love, and to move from conflict to cooperation:
 - The “Four Horsemen” (Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling) can stand in the way of these opportunities.
 - Learning to communicate as spouses in ways that are direct and honest, yet without defensiveness, criticism, or contempt, is key.

In our fourth session we examined a way to corral the Four Horsemen by adjusting our attitudes and perceptions, and discussing the idea that there are good and bad ways to have a disagreement or argument in the context of marriage:

- A healthy argument is based on the principles of CORE:
 - Cooperation: Approaching marital conflict with an attitude of mutual benefit and learning to agree to disagree as necessary.
 - Ownership: Accepting our own role in the conflict and admitting the ways in that we are at fault instead of only blaming our spouse.
 - Respect: Avoiding contempt, which is corrosive to marriages, and learning to create a culture of appreciation within the marriage.
 - Empathy: The ability to see accurately from your spouse's perspective (remember—according to research, 90 percent of marital disagreements can be resolved if husband and wife learn to see things accurately from each other's perspective).
- Marriage, as a mutual martyrdom, is a path to humility:
 - We have to accept the cross as it comes to us in the midst of the struggles of marriage, thus allowing us to grow in virtue and leading to transformed attitudes.

In this session we are going to revisit:

- Marriage as a Journey
- Marriage as a Journey of Salvation
- Marriage as a Journey of Healing
- Marriage as a Journey of Mutual Sanctification

Our final session will be on the topic of “Turning Towards One Another as a Pastoral Theology of Marriage.”

Slide 3

A Journey of Love Leading to *theosis*

Marriage is a journey of love:

- Through the mystery of marriage, we come to love in a divine way.
- Human love is transformed in union with divine love.
- "It is no longer I who loves my spouse but Christ who loves in me," cf. Gal 2.20.
- This is not about the external dimension of two people who never fight but a transformation internally of the husband and wife who participate through grace in the divine nature of God (2 Pet 1.3–4).

Marriage transfigures human love into a new reality of heavenly origin:

- It transfigures the unity of man and woman into the reality of the Kingdom.
- Through the transformation of our love for our spouse, we become a different person.
- We learn to love more purely, more selflessly.

This is the mystery or sacrament of marriage:

- Lived concretely in the husband and wife.

Mutual Sanctification

Marriage has no other end than for the couple to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of God:

- Husband and wife are joined in marriage to participate in self-giving love.
- The Orthodox vision of marriage is enlivened by the couple as they acquire a new identity through marriage.
- A distinctive of Christian marriage from the Orthodox perspective is the fact that the unity of husband and wife can be transfigured.
- Marriage becomes a manifestation of the reality of the Kingdom through kenotic (self-emptying) experience.

The aim of Christian marriage is to lead the couple to salvation:

- In order to have a Christian marriage, you must have a Christian man and a Christian woman who are both committed to living a Christian life in Christ and in his Church.
- The heart and mind must be transformed, committed to the real nature and ultimate purpose of Christian marriage, and seeking fullness of life in God.
- Becoming one through the sacrament of marriage husbands and wives can overcome the limitations and shortcomings of this world.
- Through self-sacrificing and self-giving love.
- This love takes time, effort and patience to develop.

Mutual Martyrdom

In the wedding service, bride and groom are crowned and summoned to bear witness to Christ in their lives:

- Sacrificing their lives for each other daily.
- Dying to their own desires over and over again for the sake of the other.
- Which the Church clearly recognizes and honors as a form of martyrdom.
- Which is a central part of the asceticism of married life, which is the asceticism of love.

One definition of asceticism is "the forceful practice of self-control and love, patience, and stillness" that will "destroy the passions hidden within us":

- One motivation for asceticism is our desire to draw closer to Christ, to encounter him in and through our spouse.
- Lived out in marriage, this asceticism looks like spouses learning to be humble and patient with each other as they work hard to resolve issues through mutual trust, forgiveness, tenderness, and kindness.
- Marriage as a healing path requires a dedication toward spiritual growth in addition to ascetical effort.
- This is another dimension of the martyrdom of marriage.

We can summarize all of this by saying that on the journey of marriage Christian spouses are working together to grow in love, and this growth in love makes them more and more Christlike over time. As part of this growth, they are working to help each other grow in holiness and as authentic witnesses to the self-sacrificing love of Christ. This can really only work as it is intended to when husband and wife make the decision to support one another and encourage one

another in this journey. This is not a one-time decision, but a decision that is constantly renewed in marriage.

Slide 4

Activity #1

- Five-minute discussion
- What is one way you might more effectively support and encourage your spouse on your journey towards the Kingdom of Heaven?

Slide 5

Growing in Authentic Love

St John Chrysostom calls marriage the sacrament of love:

- Marriage expresses something fundamental about who we are as human persons.
- We are created in the image and likeness of God the Trinity.
- God is love (1 Jn 4.8).
- This not self-love but a shared love, a communion or koinonia of three persons loving one another.
- If God is love then the human person is also love, not self-love but shared love.

He (St John Chrysostom) considered the work of marriage to be an equal partnership, challenging both the husband and wife to be self-emptying like Christ for the sake of each other:

- The spouse is the personal revelation of Christ.
- Christian marriage involves a day-to-day struggle to live out the ideal.
- The task for the married couple is to pursue divine communion, being united to one another in Christ, no matter the effort or how often there is a failure to live the ideal.
- Husbands and wives find their fulfillment through being united in Christ and as they grow in Christ.
- The love for Christ is expressed through love for spouse.
- Love for spouse witnesses the love for God.
- Marital struggles are the struggle to love our spouses as we love the Lord (Eph 5.20–22).
- When it comes to navigating struggles with conflict and communications as Christian spouses, the goal is not to remain married but to be united with God, perfected in love, and to inherit the Kingdom of God.

Perfect and true love offered selflessly and unconditionally is the basic element of marriage:

- Seen as a practical application of the mundane affairs of married life.
- Marriage involves loving the other as they are while at the same time loving them as grace may make them.

- Husband and wife each submit to the other in a sacrificial self-offering of love, motivated by their love for God.
- This is their imitation of the divine humility revealed by Christ and how they actualize the divine love that exists from all eternity among the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

We are not self-sufficient but are made to be in relationship:

- Created in the image and likeness of a communal and perfect God, we are created to live in community.
- When God presents Adam and Eve to each other, he is granting them the opportunity to love one another.
- Without each other, we would be alone and unable to love (Gen 2.18).
- Our relational nature reflects who God is.
- In community, the other person is a gift.
- This allows us to complete our nature as persons who can love as God loves.

St John Chrysostom suggests that the self-giving love of husband and wife in marriage can correct and transform the fallen image of God:

- Through the transformation of our love for our spouse, we become a different person.
- We learn to love more purely, more selflessly.

Growing in Authentic Humanity

In the patristic tradition, Christ is the true image of God:

- Christ is the model and archetype of true human life (1 Jn 3.2; Col 3.10).
- The truth about being human is to grow into relational existence.
- Two baptized and communicating Christians who marry in the Lord live this out by mystically becoming one flesh.
- Souls and bodies commingle without confusion or change, without ceasing to be male and female and yet still becoming one being, a single substance.

If we define what it means to be human in terms of the love Christ shows by laying down his life, then we understand that being human requires a life as asceticism and an acquisition of the virtues:

- Marriage is the way Christian spouses can attain the full stature of being human as demonstrated by Christ by means of the Cross.
- True love, perfect love, is revealed by Christ.
- The work of our salvation is the work of becoming more and more like Christ over time, and thus more and more truly human over time.

We can summarize all of this by saying that in Christian marriage, the type of love that husband and wife attempt to foster between themselves is a sacrificial love that is oriented toward the good of the other person. This is an ideal toward which we strive with varying degrees of success.

Slide 6

Activity #2

- Five-minute discussion: What is one way in which you are struggling to grow in authentic love and authentic humanity?

Slide 7

Spiritual Transformation

The aim of Christian life is deification or *theosis*, to attain the likeness of God:

- For married couples, every interaction in marriage is a potential opportunity to grow more into the likeness of God.
- Growing in the likeness of God is a process of purification and healing.

Purification and healing are the work of the Church, through the Holy Mysteries, such as marriage and confession:

- Purification and healing are helped by Christian asceticism.
- One definition of asceticism is "the forceful practice of self-control and love, patience and stillness" that will "destroy the passions hidden within us."
- One motivation for asceticism is our desire to draw closer to Christ, to encounter him in and through our spouse.
- Another is our desire to be healed and to regain the likeness of Christ.
- This process of healing helps us to heal and transform our passions.

The term "passion" comes from the verb *pascho*, which means to suffer and denotes the sickness of the soul.

- The most basic passion from which all others flow is self-love.
- Husband and wife help each other overcome self-love.

Marriage is an opportunity to transform the passions into virtues through self-knowledge:

- One of the obstacles to both virtue and self-knowledge is pride, described by St Maximus the Confessor as self-love.
- Pride understood as self-love keeps us from confronting areas in which we need to heal and grow.
- Although there are many aspects to the spiritual struggle as lived out in marriage, the battle with pride is the toughest.
- Marriage as a path of healing and transformation is an opportunity to learn how to overcome pride and recover the likeness of Christ in ourselves so that we can see the likeness of Christ in our spouse.

Personal Transformation

Another way we can cooperate with God's grace in marriage for the sake of our healing and that of our spouse is to try to become more aware of behaviors we do not fully control:

- The less self-aware we are in this area, the more limited we are in terms of both our spiritual growth and loving our spouses with perfect love.

One source of these behaviors are unresolved emotional wounds, which can act as roadblocks to spiritual growth:

- If we attempt to navigate through life without seeking insight into issues and struggles that negatively impact us and those with whom we are in relationship, we can find our *theosis* stunted.
- Embracing the cross in marriage includes the difficult work of resolving past experiences that have wounded us.
- Sometimes we take pain from past events and layer them over current relationships, reacting to present people and events as though the past were still affecting us.
- We can even unconsciously recreate conflict patterns and harmful dynamics from the past.
- Choosing to address these issues can help us better carry the cross in a God-pleasing manner.

Unresolved issues can actually inhibit our ability to love our spouse with Christlike love:

- They can show up as unconscious fear, anger, and other strong emotions.
- This can lead to easily projecting unintended meanings onto otherwise harmless statements or those who make them.

Other ways our past can haunt our present include:

- The tendency to easily over-react to situations or find ourselves constantly on guard.
- Assigning meanings to the actions and words of others:
 - These meanings are not always accurate if the past is leaking into the present.
 - If we learn to separate the past from the present in our daily interactions that will help us in our spiritual life.
- Difficulty letting go of certain interactions, events, or something someone has said.

Being aware of such tendencies allows us to bring them to confession and resolve them.

Relational Transformation

If pride is an inflated sense of self, we can describe humility as the willingness to see our limitations or self-knowledge:

- Humility, as an aspect of spiritual maturity, encompasses the desire to accurately perceive our own imperfections and face them without turning away.
- In order to be cured of the passions, as well as harmful emotions, thoughts, and habits, it is essential to feel that one is ill.
- One who is not aware of being ill will not go to the doctor.
- Self-knowledge is the first step towards being made well.

In a similar way, when we encounter the inadequacies, limitations, and weaknesses of our spouse, this is an opportunity to exercise humility and love them without judgment:

- We can see this is also an opportunity to turn towards Christ present in our spouse.

Humility and repentance work together in the spiritual life and in marriage as the means by which we learn to recognize and confront our own challenges and shortcomings when it comes to the ability to love our spouse perfectly:

- As we grow spiritually and our self-knowledge increases, we are better able to address these challenges for the sake of our own *theosis*.
- Growing in our ability to love as Christ loves, we become better able to love our spouse with the perfect love of Christ.

To summarize: Spouses work together to create an environment in marriage, over time, in which both feel safe and comfortable addressing their challenges, hurts, and roadblocks, either with each other or with others who can help with the process of healing. As spouses work on their own spiritual and personal healing and transformation, they are better able to love each other with Christlike love, thus transforming the marriage itself more and more into a reflection of the Kingdom.

Slide 8

Activity #3

- Five-minute discussion: What is one way marriage is helping your spiritual or personal transformation? Is there a particular roadblock for you?

Slide 9

The goal of the incarnation is to allow all of creation to become holy through the God-Man, Christ:

- Mankind has a special role in this process, serving as the royal priesthood through whom creation is lifted up to God in thanksgiving and received back with a blessing.
- Spouses live out this dynamic in their marriage.
- They cooperate in their own mutual transformation and the transformation of their marriage as they learn to lift up every aspect and experience of their marriage with thanksgiving and receive it back with a blessing.
- Even during difficult moments of miscommunication and conflict.

In this light, experiences in marriage such as struggles with intimacy and the of everyday challenges of married life can help create a greater awareness of the unhealed places within us:

- Spouses can help each other along the path of healing to the extent they foster creation of a "sanctuary" space within the marriage.
- Such a space exists for encountering each other in a non-judgmental way.
- This requires both self-awareness and a range of different skills, all of which can grow through the discipline of self-examination, ascetical effort, and prayer.

- This requires both effort and the willingness to fail and try again, repeatedly, but with a deep quality of gentleness and mercy.
- This gentleness and mercy can only come as a result of the practice of confession, forgiveness, and the willingness to face the limitations of trying to be married without the help of God's grace.

This means that the challenges of marriage, especially in the areas of communication and conflict, are opportunities to grow spiritually, emotionally, and as spouses.

Challenges as Opportunities to Grow

When husbands and wives experience those inevitable moments of hurt, disappointment, stress, or the challenge of confronting problems that have no real solution, they are faced with the limits of their own capacity to love one another with Christlike love:

- At moments like these it is easy to fall into a cycle of mutual blame and judgment and focus on each other's faults and shortcomings.
- Another alternative is to exercise patience and prayer for our spouse and their shortcomings.
- When we do this, we actively participate in our own transformation towards perfect love.
- This means that challenges in marriage are opportunities for growth in prayer and transformation towards the perfect love of Christ.

Marriage as Cross and Repentance

Husband and wife come to know the heart of Christ by sharing the Cross:

- One aspect of this is willingly bearing the suffering inflicted by one another, confessing their own sins, forgiving in love and praying for one another.
- In this way the hurts inflicted as part of the martyrdom of the ascetical endurance of love becomes a path of transformation and leads to the joy that surpasses all understanding.

A fundamental truth of the Orthodox Christian Faith and way of life is that the past can be undone and our mistakes corrected:

- We repent because we realize our weakness and inability.
- Repentance is a humble acceptance of our own limitations before God.
- In repentance we acknowledge that we are responsible for our own condition, and we seek God's mercy.
- We are going to talk about repentance in general, and then more specifically about the life of repentance in marriage and in the Holy Mystery of Confession.

Repentance means becoming aware of our inner spiritual condition, being prepared to make a total commitment to change our way of life, to renounce sin and everything that keeps us from the Christian way of life and our communion with God:

- It also includes a resolution to sin no more and to actually get up and return to the Father, as did the Prodigal Son (cf. Lk 15.11–32);
- In terms of marriage, one aspect that can drive our repentance is becoming aware of our failure to recognize the image of Christ in our spouse and to love our spouse with Christ like

love.

When one lives in sin, he or she is not in their right mind:

- In order to repent, they must first come to their senses.
- In the same way, when we fail to acknowledge and respond to the image of Christ in our spouse and love them with Christlike love, we are not in our right minds as spouses and must come to our senses.
- Consciousness of our failings is the starting point of a return.

One obstacle to repentance is insensibility, of feeling there is nothing for which to repent:

- In examining ourselves, it can be helpful to focus on more than just the sins and faults we have committed.
- It is more helpful to focus on the good we have failed to do.
- This good should be framed within the context of Christlike love and care for our spouse.

Another obstacle is despair:

- This is feeling that we can never be forgiven for whatever reason.
- The remission of our sins is not predicated on what we have done but on God's infinite mercy.

A third obstacle is shame:

- St John Chrysostom teaches that shame follows sin, while repentance takes courage.
- The devil reverses the order so that we feel. courage in sin and shame in repentance.

A final obstacle is simply postponing our repentance:

- Through temptation we often engage in a sin or fault today and labor for virtue "tomorrow."
- This repeats, so that we never reach "tomorrow."

Requesting and Granting Forgiveness

Let's talk about repentance and forgiveness in marriage.

In the words of the late Fr Thomas Hopko, "Love means always having to say you're sorry":

- Marriages require constant attention and ongoing maintenance.
- One dimension of this making attempts to repair harm we have caused, which requires offering mercy and forgiveness to each other.
- For spouses to live "in Christ," it is critical that they have a full awareness of the power of forgiving love and unity.

Marriage is a crucible that provides the conditions for God's transforming grace to work in the lives of the spouses:

- As part of this process, each spouse must take personal responsibility for their own inability to love as they are called to love.
- This is at the root of many of the challenges we have discussed during previous sessions.

- This taking of responsibility can lead toward mutual confession, which in turn fosters an environment of love, intimacy, and vulnerability in which husband and wife can begin to share their own sins or restraints to love.
- This shift is a movement from attacking one another to supporting one another in the shared struggle to for becoming holy.
- With this shift couples can even begin to develop strategies together as opposed to criticizing one another.
- Mutual confession and forgiveness can move couples from the Four Horsemen to CORE.

Through marriage spouses help each other to grow by asking and granting forgiveness:

- Words such as "I am sorry" and "Please forgive me" provide a way out of the cycle of blame.
- Forgiveness is a path to both transformation and healing.
- It also helps spouses to realize they are not so different from each other, as both will find themselves in need of forgiveness from the other.
- This can help spouses to grow in their ability to appreciate one another's struggles and better empathize with each other.
- Each spouse has to diligently work to create and maintain an environment of mutual help and encouragement where one is never afraid to apologize or ask forgiveness.

Three attitudes in particular can help with practicing forgiveness in marriage:

- It is important to make an effort to focus on fondness and admiration.
 - Without this focus there can be a tendency to hold grudges for things in the past.
 - Choosing to forgive your spouse allows you both to benefit from the lifting of the heavy burden of bitterness.
- Being thankful is another route towards forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a process, not an event:

- We have to work through emotional memories and process them, which can only occur with time.
- A failure to work through emotional memories can lead to fear, which often brings anger and resentment in its train.
- To forgive is to "withhold judgment, forswear vengeance, renounce bitterness, break the silence of estrangement" and actually wish the best for the person who has hurt us.
- This is not for the faint of heart as it is an act of bravery.

Forgiving includes withholding judgment, letting go of vengeance and bitterness:

- Practically speaking, forgiving means giving up control, letting down our defenses, and making the decision to be vulnerable.
- This is accompanied by a decision to no longer live in such a way as to be controlled by hurt that has occurred or letting hurt and anger define the life God has given us.
- This is a help in our life of *theosis*, as it is a decision to no longer let that particular detour delay our transformation in Christ.
- Through confessing to one another and granting forgiveness, and through the sacrament of Confession, all the crosses and places of struggle in marriage can be transformed, becoming

places of light, joy, reflection, peace, and hope.

When the sins and mistakes of one spouse have pushed a marriage to its breaking point, if the offended spouse can show loving patience and forgiveness, in concert with inspired prayer, things can change, and the couple can live the miracle of a situation transformed by God's grace:

- Such patience is only born of love.

The Sacramental Dimension

Mutual confession and repentance between spouses should be accompanied by sacramental confession.

The quality of the marital relationship depends on the caring, forgiving and sacrificing love of the spouses:

- Personal faults and failures can be resolved through confession as the Church is a place of healing.
- Spouses will continuously receive blessings essential for family life through their participation in the sacramental life of the Church and by living an authentically Christian life.
- The distance between spouses because of disagreements and differences of opinion can affect their relationship with God in particular and their spirit lives in general.
- The sacrament of confession is the most powerful aid to repentance and reconciliation.

When we evaluate our spiritual state and take responsibility, we do not focus on our failures and imperfections so much as the perfect love of Christ:

- This means that confessing our sins is really a proclamation of faith in Christ, making the future the primary orientation of our repentance and confession.
- The future is now brighter in light of divine mercy, forgiveness, and our hope for newness of life.

We have spoken about marriage as a healing path:

- As our own healing continues and we grow in self-awareness, we can become more aware of the times and ways in which we have caused hurt and suffering to others because of our own unresolved past hurts.
- These insights can even come in prayer.
- With prayer we ask forgiveness of the Lord and then we bring our new insights and awareness to Confession.

Confession is also a time for accountability, allowing us to reflect on the condition of our soul:

- More specifically, it is an occasion to take inventory of how well we are separating our past from our present and making sure others have not been hurt by us because of our own triggers or unresolved experiences.

Because confession is an opportunity to maintain the insights we have gained, we should be careful to avoid turning confession into an opportunity for shame:

- We focus on the behaviors as opposed to categorizing ourselves.
- "I did" or "I behaved" statements versus "I am" statements.

Our path towards mutual salvation in marriage is by means of the acquisition of the Holy Spirit:

- The presence of the Holy Spirit is revealed in prayer and love for others.
- From the struggle to pray and love we enter ever more deeply into the depths of repentance.
- Through this process we repeatedly receive the gift of forgiveness and mercy begins to flow from our own heart as it is crushed and humbled.
- We grow in our ability to offer ourselves for the life of the world as Christ does, through living as a self-offering to our spouses.
- Committing ourselves to the will and guidance of Christ and his Church through repentance and confession is also an act of self-offering.

When husband and wife repent, acknowledging their failures before God, they gain the freedom to make new choices that lead to the possibility of a restoration and a renewal of their personal communion and experience of the divine life:

- This ongoing movement of freedom is a path followed by both saints and sinners and is not a fixed and static reality but one that is dynamic and ongoing.
- Repentance is always a beginning, an invitation to a new life with an ever-renewed beginning but no end.
- At the end of his long life, Abba Sisoës told the spiritual children surrounding him that he needed more time to repent. When his disciples said, "You have no need to repent, Father!" he replied: "I am not sure whether I have yet even begun to repent!"

Slide 10

Activity #4

- Five-minute discussion: Is there an area in your marriage where repentance and confession might be helpful?

Slide 11

Lord, love my spouse through me.
Let me love my spouse through You.
And be loved by You through my spouse.

Insert name.

It's not about you, but about Christ present in your spouse.

Sharing Withholds

Make time once a week.

Write down two negative and one positive thing you have not shared.

Start with a positive, then a negative, then a positive.

The only response is "thank you."

Thirty minutes – no discussing the negative withhold.

Slide 12

Lord, love my spouse through me.

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Mutual Confession and Forgiveness

Try to practice this as part of your nighttime prayers as a couple.

Session Six: Turning Toward as a Pastoral Theology of Marriage

Slide 1

Introduction

Welcome to Session 6 of "The Good Wine." This is our final session together.

As a reminder, the goal of this program has been to:

1. To ground participating couples in the Orthodox Christian theological vision of marriage;
2. To reframe the common, everyday marital challenges in the areas of communications and marital conflict in light of that vision.

As our final session, we are going to try to tie everything together in order to show what our theology of marriage looks like when we live it out in a daily, practical way. This is what we mean by a pastoral theology of marriage.

Slide 2

First, a brief recap of what we have covered over previous sessions:

During the first session, we established our theological foundation by focusing on the Church's theology of marriage and framed marriage within the context of our journey towards salvation:

- The primary purpose of Christian marriage is the mutual salvation of the spouses—husband and wife help each other to enter the Kingdom of heaven.
- Towards this purpose, Christian marriage is a journey that creates the unique conditions that will allow each spouse to grow in holiness and develop together into the likeness of God—IF they choose to embrace the Church's vision of marriage.
- This journey is a mutual martyrdom in terms of bearing witness to Christ to each other by growing daily in authentic Christian love which is self-sacrificing.
- This is a journey that leads to becoming fully and authentically human, in the full sense of the word - human as Christ revealed humanity to be.
- This journey involves struggle against our own selfishness as we try to acquire perfect, Christlike love for our spouse.

During the second session, we discussed marriage as a journey of healing:

- In marriage we are provided with an opportunity for the healing and transformation of our passions as well as from behaviors we do not fully control.
- Marriage is an ascetical journey which means that in marriage we learn to practice self-control and love, patience, and stillness in order to transform the passions hidden within us:
 - Two things we need most for this journey are repentance and humility.
 - One way we can understand repentance in this context is as the choice to resist the impulses of our passions and involuntary behaviors in difficult moments.
 - We can understand humility as an openness to discovering our limitations along with a willingness to confront them and allow God to heal them.
- Empathy is another useful skill in this journey:
 - It is a practical way that we allow God to love our spouse through us and allow God to love us through our spouse.
 - Empathy means taking the perspective of our spouse, without judgment.

Our third session was an attempt to dive down into more practical elements of communication and conflict, with an emphasis on the dynamics of communication:

- As a path to our healing, marriage is also a path for our transformation in Christ:
 - As part of our transformation, we seek to become aware of the perceptions and defense mechanisms which stand in the way of Christlike behavior.
 - Becoming more aware of our perceptions and defense mechanisms allows us the possibility of choosing different behaviors.

- Challenges in communicating with our spouse are opportunities to love each other with Christlike love and to move from conflict to cooperation:
 - The “Four Horsemen” can stand in the way of these opportunities: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling.
 - Learning to communicate as spouses in ways that are direct and honest, yet without defensiveness, criticism or contempt is key.

In our fourth session we examined a way to corral the Four Horsemen by adjusting our attitudes and perceptions. We also discussed the idea that there are good and bad ways to have a disagreement or argument in the context of marriage:

- A healthy argument is based on the principles of CORE.
 - Cooperation: Approaching marital conflict with an attitude of mutual benefit and learning to agree to disagree as necessary.
 - Ownership: Accepting our own role in the conflict and admitting the ways in which we are at fault instead of only blaming our spouse.
 - Respect: Avoiding contempt, which is corrosive to marriages, and learning to create a culture of appreciation within the marriage.
 - Empathy: The ability to see accurately from your spouse’s perspective (remember—according to research, 90 percent of marital disagreements can be resolved if husband and wife learn to see things accurately from each other’s perspective).
- Marriage, as a mutual martyrdom is a path to humility.
 - We have to accept the cross as it comes to us in the midst of the struggles of marriage, thus allowing us to grow in virtue and leading to transformed attitudes.

In our fifth session we spent time reviewing the idea of marriage as a journey of mutual salvation, mutual transformation, and mutual sanctification:

- The practice of mutual confession and forgiveness is the practical outcome of learning to navigate challenges in communication and conflict.
- This practice includes bringing the challenges of marriage to the Holy Mystery of reconciliation.
- All of this is part of the transformation of husband and wife more and more into the likeness of Christ and the transformation of their marriage into the reality of the Kingdom.

In this session we are going to touch on:

- Journeying Together Toward Healing
- Bearing the Cross Together
- Turning Toward One Another
- Seeking the Kingdom Together

Slide 3

Journeying Together Toward Healing

Marriages are only as healthy as the spouses

Our marriages are only as healthy as we are as individual husbands and wives:

- Skills and techniques are important and helpful, but at the end of the day we still need emotional health.

Healthy is not the same as happy, although you cannot be happy without being healthy:

- Healthy is not an absence sickness and emotional health is not the absence of dysfunctional emotions.
- Healthy people deal with depression, stress, anger anxiety and all the rest but are able to manage their emotions so that they do not dictate the future.
- Healthy people are able to exercise self-confidence and empathy for others.
- Healthy people are able to admit shortcomings.
- Healthy people study own personal flaws, wounds, and idiosyncrasies.
- Healthy people realize they have blind spots and look for better insight.
- Healthy people are committed to seeing themselves truthfully, but shortcomings and limitations do not inhibit growth:
 - This is in keeping with the concepts of humility and repentance as we have discussed them in previous sessions.

The most important thing we can do for our relationships is get healthy:

- As marriage itself is a means of our healing, getting healthy is part of the journey of marriage if we are open to the action of the Holy Spirit.
- Healthy characteristics versus unhealthy:

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Healthy	Unhealthy
self-aware	self-absorbed
proactive	reactive
resilient	inflexible
optimistic	pessimistic
empathic	insecure
humble	entitled
grateful	resentful
growing	passive

- Everyone is on a continuum regarding these qualities.

- We seek to grow as far as healthy characteristics and allow the Holy Spirit to move us beyond unhealthy characteristics over time:
 - All of which inhibit the growth of Christlike love.
 - In a word, the unhealthy characteristics we have listed are all manifestations of self-absorption.

Healing, growth in health and wholeness come through relationships.

An encounter with the grace of God through the Holy Spirit is necessary for our transformation, enabling us to enter into authentic relationship with others:

- Marriage begins this ongoing.
- Authentic encounter can only occur when we meet the other in and through Christ and receive Christ through them.
- Think back to the Dia-logos prayer we have been practicing these many weeks.

Three elements of health and wholeness to consider in the context of our relationships:

- Significance—relationship with God
- Authenticity—relationship with self
- Love—relationship with others

Marriage creates the conditions in which we learn to grow in our relationship with God, we increase in self-knowledge, self-acceptance and healthy self-love, and we grow in our capacity for Christ like love.

Slide 5

Activity #1

- Five-minute discussion
- In the context of your marriage, where do you see yourself on the continuum between self-absorption versus sacrificial, Christlike love?
- Is there one particular area of growth of which you are unaware?

Slide 6

Bids for Connection

Happy marriages are based on a deep friendship, which fosters mutual respect between husband and wife, enjoyment of one another's company, and an abiding regard for each other:

- Expressed in big and small ways day by day.

Dr John Gottman, one of the foremost marriage researchers in the U.S., has discovered that happily married couples have as many problems and difficulties as couples that are in distress:

- The difference is that healthy couples maintain their connection and intimacy through the small and simple exchanges that are a part of daily life together.

- He describes these small exchanges, things as simple as a question, a gesture, a look or a touch expressing the desire to be emotionally connected, as "bids for connection":
 - Which are a fundamental unit of emotional connection.
- He describes the heart of marital union as hundreds of small bids for connection between spouses:
 - Not simply exchanging or sharing information.
 - These bids communicate attentiveness, interest, acceptance, and solidarity with your spouse.
- Daily communication in marriage is not just about sharing information but nurturing connection and intimacy.

When our spouse is in the midst of anger or another negative emotion, it is easy to miss a bid for connection.

- When we are tempted to respond defensively towards our spouse it can be helpful to:
 - Make the effort to search for a bid for connection hidden beneath harsh words.
 - Then focus on that bid versus the delivery.

When it is hard to not react defensively one strategy is:

- To take five deep breaths, counting slowly as you inhale and exhale,
- and then saying something like, "I want to respond to you positively," or,
- "Can you tell me what you need from me right now?"

Repair Attempts

Healthy marriages develop effective strategies for remaining connected when they are stuck:

- A repair attempt is any statement or action that prevents negativity from escalating out of control.
- Couples with a strong friendship become experts at sending each other repair attempts as well as reading repair attempts sent their way.
- Repair attempts can move couples out of the cycle of the Four Horsemen.
- As spouses move from the cycle of hurt, blame, and judgment toward mutual confession and repentance, problems may remain, but tensions will ease and the capacity to connect will open up.

It is good to remember that couples often ignore each other's emotional needs out of mindlessness, not malice. Technology can be one reason we can miss bids from our spouse.

Bearing the Cross Together

As couples journey together through marriage and encounter the normal stresses of married life tension in marriage can increase:

- The problems of marriage, even unsolvable ones, can contribute to the tension between spouses.
- These are opportunities to turn to Christ for healing and transformation through God's love more than they are problems to be solved.

Often times, the self we have to offer is angry, frustrated, hurt, or overwhelmed:

- This means that there are times when spouses cannot or do not want to turn toward each other.
- The work of acquiring Christlike love for our spouse and to turn toward them as toward the Lord at all times is impossible, humanly speaking.
- This creates a tension between the call to acquire Christlike love and the challenging feelings we experience in marriage.
- This tension is an experience of the cross of Christ.

In the midst of this tension, we are called to turn toward our spouse and confess to both our spouse and Christ:

- In the midst of the tension, we encounter Christ, we are crucified with Christ, and we rise with Christ.
- The journey of marriage is the way of the cross, and the way we engage in that journey is by turning to Christ by means of prayer, confession, and repentance.

The encounter with the Cross is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be encountered and lived:

- The Cross of Christ is not our spouse or our unmet needs but the tension between our vocation to love and the painful experiences we encounter.
- The goal of marriage is not to change our spouse to meet our needs but to allow the Holy Spirit to change us as we learn to live within that tension and turn to Christ and our spouse in the face of disappointments and unmet needs:
 - With God's help we can learn to see encounters with our powerlessness as the space in which God can act.
 - This is a space where we can most clearly see God's providence and activity.

Slide 7

Activity #2

- Five-minute discussion:
- Do you feel like you recognize your spouse's bids for connection and repair attempts?
- Do you respond to them?

Slide 8

Real-life romance in marriage is fueled by the ordinary, everyday practice of letting your spouse know he or she is valuable during the stress and strain of everyday life:

- Part of this is the fact that in marriage couples are always making "bids" for each other's attention, affection, humor, or support.
- The response is to either turn toward your spouse or to turn away from them.

- Turning toward partner is basis of trust, emotional connection, passion, and satisfying marital intimacy.
- One study of newlyweds showed that couples who remained married on average responded 86 percent of the time to bids for connection, whereas those who divorced responded 33 percent of the time.
- Turning towards is funding the emotional bank account.

Turning Away

- The Latin root of "divorce" means "to turn apart."
- Turning away from our spouse refers to distracted, preoccupied disregard or interruptions.
- All of which communicates a lack of interest.

Turning Against

The stresses of life, personality differences, and disagreements in marriage create tensions that can tempt spouses to turn against each other:

- As opposed to realizing that these tensions are the cross of marriage as a mystery to be lived versus a problem to be solved.
- Spouses can be tempted to turn against each other when angry, overwhelmed, feeling stressed out, hurt, or tired.
- Turning against our spouse refers to contemptuous put downs, belittling, as well as combative, contradictory, domineering, critical, defensive, angry, or blaming responses.
- It communicates disdain, disrespect, and hatred.
- Think back to our conversations about the Four Horsemen and defense mechanisms—These are examples of what turning against our spouse looks like.

Turning Towards

Although moments of feeling overwhelmed or angry are common experiences in marriage, these should be opportunities to turn toward our spouse, not against our spouse:

- It is an act of openness, of opening our heart to Christ, and an act of prayer.
- In short, it is a self-giving act of love.
- No matter what we are experiencing at any given moment in marriage, we have the choice to fall away or towards Christ by means of our spouse.

Turning toward our spouse, or rather the presence of Christ in our spouse in marriage, is a self-giving act of love, and an offering of self both to Christ and to one's spouse:

- Deep self-reflection is necessary to learn to love as God loves as authentic love cannot exist in the midst of falsehood and self-absorption.

The first step in turning towards each other is realizing the importance of daily moments as far as building and maintaining trust and an ongoing sense of romance:

- Everyday interactions make a great difference in the quality of the marriage as they operate under the law of "positive feedback."

The process of mutual turning toward Christ in the face of problems fosters a greater connection between spouses, because in Christ struggles become the means through which couple grow in their capacity to love each other.

Slide 9

Activity #3

- Five-minute discussion:
- Do you tend to turn away from your spouse when you are angry, tired, or feeling some other negative emotion?
- Are there situations in which you can more effectively turn towards your spouse?

Slide 10

The purpose of the Incarnation is for creation to become holy through Christ, with humanity serving as a royal priesthood through whom the entire creation is continually lifted up in thanksgiving and received back as a blessing:

- In light of this, sin can be understood as a consequence of the freedom we have to become fully alive as persons.
- At the same time, it is an indication as well of our spiritual immaturity.
- The struggles of our heart to grow from selfishness to love help us to mature.
- This is a dynamic we live out in the context of marriage.

Mutual Reverence

The opening lines of the wedding service epistle begins with the following: "Give thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (cf. Eph 5.20–21):

- Against this backdrop, husbands and wives are called to care for the needs of one another as a way of building the Kingdom of Heaven in their marriage as well as bringing each other to salvation.
- In order to encounter our spouse as a revelation of God's presence, we have to approach them through Christ.
- We have to recognize Christ present in them.
- Because my spouse has received the Lord into himself or herself in the Eucharist, the only proper response to them is to fall on my face in repentance before them in my heart.

Christ is between husband and wife, loving each through the other, and each spouse is being loved by Christ through the other.

If I seek my spouse, or take my spouse's body, without regard for my spouse's person, I turn my spouse into an object:

- Instead of acting as a priest of creation and lifting my spouse to God as a blessing in order to receive my marital relationship with my spouse back as a gift, I become a slave to creation.

- Through sin I transition from being in the Spirit to being captive to the created order.
- As often as we fall into the trap of turning our spouse into an object of our needs and desires, our anger, and our selfishness, we must turn, confess, repent, and begin again.

Confession as a Way of Turning Toward

Marriage is a journey of returning to the Father's love like the prodigal, and as such the sacrament of confession is at the heart of the marital journey:

- The Orthodox approach to confession is therapeutic, and we see confessing to God as turning toward God.
- In addition, we open ourselves up to the healing that comes from his ceaseless bids for connection.

Marriage is not about solving problems so much as it is about learning how to love our spouses in the face of challenges:

- The fact is that marriages thrive as couples cooperate with God for the forgiveness of sins and allow the transformation in Christ of their reactions, passions, and desires for the sake of healing and transformation in Christ.
- The struggle of this transformation is a struggle against our passions (cf. Gal 5.13–25), although we can sometimes think it is against our spouse.
- These struggles are the path through which marriage grows, and through which we acquire Christlike love for our spouses.

Confession is a turning toward, a bidding for connection with God and spouse, and nurtures intimacy and connection:

- Confessing brokenness (turning toward), rather than acting out of our brokenness (turning against), communicates that we care about our spouse, that they are important, that we love them.
- The goal of marriage is not to stay married but to turn toward Christ at all times.
- Turning toward Christ requires meekness as well as speaking up and setting appropriate boundaries when necessary.
- Chrysostom contends that it is better to break up a marriage for the sake of righteousness than suffer abuse.

Confession is the response to the tension that exists within us and between our spouses, as well as our participation in the sacramental life of union with God:

- Couples who seek to return daily in the sacrament of married life "become the image of God himself."
- Couples who are conscious of this are a theophany.

Seeking the Kingdom, Together

To facilitate their growth towards Christlike love it is important for spouses to worship together, pray together, go to confession together, seek the kingdom of God daily:

- Essential aspects of prayer include attentiveness in daily life, forgiveness, and self-offering love:

- In the words of St Gregory Palamas, someone who has no concern for prayer at home as well as places other than in church, does not even really pray when in church.
- Through this process couples learn to turn toward Christ, so that they can offer him their pain and suffering, as well as ask forgiveness of their sins.
- This enables a greater capacity for forgiveness of sins and enabling greater love.

The end result of this journey of Christian marriage is that Christ begins to love our spouses through us:

- The journey can be challenging as most spouses do not get married in order to be married to Christ, to be perfected in Christ like love, or to be transformed by the Holy Spirit.
- Most couples do not choose a spouse that will help them save their souls.

Authentic love and sacramental marriage go far beyond the initial feelings of attraction:

- Marriage is a journey that is sustained by the Holy Spirit for the sake of transfiguring the spouses through an encounter with divine love.
- This encounter is ultimately a journey toward the Kingdom of God.

Slide 11 and Slide 12

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slide 13

Please catch up on your surveys if you are behind.

There will be a lesson-six survey, as well as a survey for the overall series, and a repeat of the initial thirty-question survey to allow me to compare the results.

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