

Clergy Perspectives On Domestic Violence

By Fr. Al Demos

When a couple comes forward to be married in the Orthodox Church they stand together as equals. Many beautiful and meaningful prayers are said for them, taken as excerpts from the Old and New Testaments. They exchange rings to express their eternal love and devotion for one another. They each hold a white candle. The white candle symbolizes the pure and holy Virgin Mary and the light burning from it represents Christ as the Light of their life.

The woman is asked to imitate the Virgin for the rest of her life, to be steadfast and preserver in faith, to be obedient *to God*, to be a shining example of love, hope and faith for her family. She should be a living example of true Christian womanhood and motherhood. The man is asked to imitate Christ, to be humble, kind, compassionate, merciful and understanding. He should be a living example of true Christian manhood and fatherhood.

When the priest recites the canon of the marriage the couple are united as one in their sacred union in Christ. Their hands are joined to seal the union. They are crowned: as king and queen of their own family, therefore they should treat each other with love, dignity and respect as their own distinct “royalty”. For in reality they are each the one, singular, unique and exclusive counterpart of the other. They are also crowned as “martyrs” in that they joyfully and enthusiastically do not hesitate to sacrifice in assuring that they both do everything in their power to fulfill the physical, mental and spiritual needs of their partner.

The couple drinks from a common cup to show that they will share all things in life, both the bitter and the sweet. It is a physical pledge of patient endurance in time of illness, difficulties and trouble; as well as a pledge to seek to share life fully and joyfully to the benefit of both partners, their children and families. They then take their first walk together as husband and wife, circling the table on which is placed the Holy Gospel (or in some cases the Priest will lead them while he holds the Gospel in his right hand). This first walk is sacred in that it centers on the word of God (the Gospels) as the two take their first steps together in the name of the Holy Trinity, and thereby glorifying God. They symbolically are requested to keep the Gospel at the center of their life. To be self-aware and self-focused, but always Christ-centered.

Their role is not to be ‘crutches’ for one another, but respectful supporters of everything and anything that will bring forth the full, wholesome potential of their partner. They should be there for one another to help each other find their full potential as a man, as a woman and as a couple. They should see their spouse as a completion and fulfillment of each other as one complete, united being, a sacramentally united couple, responsible to and for one another. As they leave the Church they begin their life long walk together in the Light and path of Christ, their Saviour. He will guide, enlighten and direct them in their way when they are open and accepting of His guidance.

Their crowns have been removed, but they each wear an invisible crown. Their main goal and purpose in sharing their life together is not only to love each other exclusively and to share their life uniquely, but to seek to provide the atmosphere and environment to help bring their partner to God's kingdom; to make their spouse's "invisible" crown a "Crown of Glory" in the Kingdom of God.

There is a point, however, in the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians which is read that states, "...and let the wife see that she respects her husband...") Ephesians 5:33

When a Greek Orthodox wedding reaches the point when this above quote is read, there are some men who look down at their wives as if to say, "remember these words, I'm the boss!" Unfortunately, some women have bought into that thinking and thereby allow themselves to be abused, beaten and battered, with no recourse. They often say that they have to keep peace in the family and endure their husband's wrath. They must remember, however, that while Christ and the Church do ask that we endure sufferings as Christians, that Christ and the Church never want you to be a victim! You are asked to forgive your enemies, but forgiveness never includes allowing anyone to abuse you. You have every right to be humble, but don't ever allow anyone to use you as a carpet that they can walk on. Just don't allow it! Do not tolerate it! Do not accept it! You are a valuable, important, significant person of immeasurable worth to God and to all those who truly love you.

God doesn't just let things happen to us. It is not God's will to see you or anyone mistreated with abuse. God wants us to love one another with understanding, compassion, mercy, dignity and respect. Abuse is devoid of all these qualities. You need to read the statement that is also found in Ephesians 5, which precedes the words of the Epistle. It refers directly to the man's role in marriage. It reads, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word; that He might present her to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself." Ephesians 5:25-28

In other words, when the husband loves his wife to the extent that he is willing to make any sacrifice for her; when he treats her with love, dignity, honor and respect - presenting her without bruises or blemishes, but whole, complete, loved, admired, adored and cherished as deemed by virtue of the position she holds as his wife - as his other self - as his completion of himself; **then** she should respect him (*in return*).

In this same Epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul writes, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by Whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, yelling and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God, in Christ, forgave you. Therefore, be imitators of God as dear children, and walk in love as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us....but fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you...neither filthiness, nor foolish talking...which are not

fitting...and have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather *expose them.*" 4:30-5:4 & 5:11

The Bible itself tells battered woman that one sure way to overcome the brutality of an abusive husband is by 'exposing him', by telling someone!

Psalm 55 can be interpreted to convey the betrayal of the spouse who abuses, "For it is not the enemy who reproaches me; then I could bear it. Nor is it one who hates me who has exalted himself against me; Then I could hide from him. But IT WAS YOU, *my equal, my companion and my acquaintance.* We took sweet counsel together, and walked in the house of God in the assembly."

The shock of the betrayal is more than overwhelming. It tears at the sacred union of husband and wife. Mutual faith, trust, and confidence are central to the success of a marriage. The betrayal of abuse can destroy a marriage. What happened to the "sweet counsel" and "the walk in Christ"? The Christian commitment of a wife can cause her great distress as well as confusion. What should she do? Will she be going against the Church by telling on her husband? Will she be unfaithful to her vows and the sacred commitment she made to him before God?

Here we see the victim, victimizing herself again, placing blame where it doesn't belong. She has to redirect the blame and realize that it is the abuser who is going against the Church. It is the abuser who is unfaithful to his sacred vows. It is the abuser who renounces his sacred commitment to her. It is the abuser that is wrong, not she!

Some friends will tell you to pray, and you should pray whenever you can. Our trust, faith, hope and love for God find clear expression whenever we turn to our Lord in prayer. But prayer in itself does not stop abusive behavior. We pray for peace in the world at every Liturgy, yet we cannot regulate the lack of peace found in people's hearts. Your prayers, though always meaningful, cannot stop the abuser from abusing you. Concrete, tangible help is needed. Someone must be told and the battered woman must seek help from others. Counseling sessions for the couple, on an **individual basis**, especially with a Christian counselor, may prove most helpful in resolving their problems. It has been strongly suggested that "couple counseling" could prove to be detrimental to the victim since anything the victim says may be used against her once they leave the counseling sessions. This would be the result of the abuser acting out his need to hold power and control over his spouse. What he really needs to do is to face and accept his responsibilities as an abusive perpetrator. He has committed a criminal act and must be aware of the seriousness of his actions. The abuser needs to seek help or else he will never overcome these faults and become healed.

If he refuses to seek counseling, if he refuses to accept that he has a problem, then the wife may have to seek a separation for a time to help him understand the seriousness of his situation. If there is still no improvement or desire to resolve his problems, then unfortunately, the wife may have to seek permanent separation or even divorce. For the Church and the couple, divorce is always undesirable, but sometimes it is completely

unavoidable. When a woman fears for her life and that of her children, then she must make serious decisions. It would be helpful for clergy to fulfill their responsibility by seeking to become completely aware of the dilemma involved in abuse and not to defend the abusing husband, by whitewashing a potentially dangerous situation with platitudes. The woman needs understanding, help and support, not an added guilt trip from her priest or from fellow parishioners. She, as well as her priest and her Church, must be concerned for her safety and the safety of her children

There are many types of abuse: verbal, mental and physical abuse. I would also add spiritual abuse, because the confusion brought on by the abuse diminishes and can destroy the spiritual life of a person as well.

Everyone should be more informed concerning the signs of abuse, as well as how to seek help for those who are victims of abuse. Don't stand up for the abuser; you only hurt him and his family all the more. Stand up for the victim, listen to her, believe her and take her to a knowledgeable and concerned Clergyman, Psychologist or Social Worker as soon as you possibly are able. They will take over from that point on, while you are ever available to listen, to understand, to be compassionate and non-judgmental, to be there for the person who trusts you and needs your help.

If you are interested in learning more about abuse, what it is and how it can be resolved, please call the Social Work Office of the National Philoptochos at 212-744-4774, or through HANAC Child and Family Counseling Service at 718-274-9007. They can provide you with printed materials concerning abuse, as well as offering effective, professional counseling to help you resolve any issues that concern you.