

*CHRYSOSTOM
BETWEEN TWO VIRGINITIES*



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Chrysostom Between the Two Virginities

Preface

Robert Payne in his book “Holy Fire” describes St. John Chrysostom as: *“Two Johns: one was the priest of Antioch, the other the Patriarch of Constantinople. The first held his temper in check, calm and fitful and brilliant... [The second] as soon as he became Patriarch, he began to sweep Constantinople with his broom...he reformed the life of the clergy...”*¹

It would be more accurate to state that there were three Johns: the first was the monk whose life as a strict monk introduced him to the Scriptures and shaped his thoughts in Christian wisdom. The two other Johns were what Mr. Payne has described above.

This distinction of the three is very clear and evident in his writings and actions in the three periods of his life. We notice this in his teachings regarding marriage and monasticism as a monk and later as clergy as David C. Ford states: *“especially in his later*

¹ Robert Payne, *“the Holy Fire, the Story of the Early Church Centuries of the Christian Church in the Near East.* SVS Press

writings, that it is possible for married people even to surpass the monks...and how his descriptions of marriage were significantly more positive during his pastoral ministry than before (when he wrote the two exhortations to his friend Theodore as for example).²

Would these descriptions undermine his early works or his authenticity as a Father of the Universal Church? No, not at all, he stays the “Golden Mouth” who spoke during each period according to his strong faith and beliefs for the sake of the listeners. He was the right person at the right place. We might say that his vision became more mature and more realistic when he had met and indulged himself with the life of his fellow citizens and audience.

² David C. Ford “*Women and Men in the Early Church, The full Views of St. John Chrysostom*, St. Thikon’s Seminary Press

Prologue and general comments:

My preliminary study and exposure to St. John Chrysostom's teachings led me to some comments that, I believe, are appropriate to include in this work of comparison between the two Virginities: the physical (fleshly) virginity and the mystical (spiritual) virginity of the being.

First of all, I like to highlight that St. John's utmost concern was the welfare of the faithful when he was delivering either a general or a specific topic in the three periods of his life and even later on, when he was exiled. He wanted in each period and in each work, the transformation of his listeners into different beings; he didn't want them to be mere passive faithful but rather to become deeply involved either in prayer or good deeds.

By combining the teachings of the three Johns we achieve a better study of the thoughts of the Golden Mouth. We have to take the whole of Chrysostom's work to understand and to fully appreciate his teachings before judging and labeling him, for example as an anti-Semitic or misogynistic. However, we have to discuss at the

same time, each letter or subject separately to conclude his preference and his intention from this specific writing. In both cases, we have to carefully study his works taking, into consideration the historical issues that created the atmosphere of their deliverance before reaching any verdict. And we also, should free ourselves from any personal ambition or justification while studying the texts and comparing them to both good and bad critics.

Our defensive or offensive actions should not stem from a blinded defense of our faith to support our inherited ideas nevertheless where the truth lies. When we critique, we have to be neutral regardless of the status of the person. Our studies should lead us to the brilliance of his words that would come forth and shine illuminating our dark and shaded areas leading us to learn and distinguish the right way of life according to the Scriptures and the Faith of the Church.

We have to keep in mind at the same time that St John didn't offer us a complete work in order to criticize his "philosophy"; he is not a philosopher. His intention as a preacher and as a

writer was directed towards specific subjects that inspired and bothered him to educate his audience and the recipients of his letters. He didn't intend to invent for us a solution to the world's problems but rather he merely used his talent to clarify the Scriptures and Church teachings.

It is worthy to note that St. John's teachings can be used in our contemporary society. His golden words can give us solutions to the problems and issues that confront our selfish society. His homilies are still relevant today to Christians. His actions and deeds are deeds of mercy and of dignity to the planet that are still needed even now in the 21st century. I firmly believe that our Saint would not had changed his words to his listeners if he were living among us today.

In all what has been said above, I believe that St John failed to deliver a message to us that there are two equal ways of life that could lead to salvation: Virginity and Marriage. His appraisal of the fleshly virginity, made him put it as "the way" to eternal life and marriage, the contrary of virginal life, is an acceptable way that is better than a life of adultery. He failed to deliver to us

that there are two Virginities: the virginity of the flesh and the virginity of the being in which the latter is more important than the fleshly one and it should not be affected by it. This virginity is “purity”: the virginity of the heart, soul, mind and body. Thus this purity is the scale of worthiness regardless of the physical state of the person.

We should not neglect that his preference to one way of life over the other has depended on his thought that virginity is an easier and safer way than the other way. He has directed others to the monastic life because of the responsibilities and the burden of married life. This is clear in his second letter to Theodore. We can also conclude from his dialogue with St. Basil in the “Priesthood” that he fled from the priestly life for the same reason.

So, my intention in choosing this subject is to explain what is needed is the virginity of the being according to the teachings of the Church and that monasticism and marriage are two ways leading us to this state of purity of the whole being depending on our acquaintance with the Gifts of the Holy

Spirit. Both ways lead to the “Way”. This quest is an answer to St. John’s condemnation of adultery to his friend, Theodore, who broke his vow to God by deserting virginity and desiring married life when he wrote to him: *“But it is no longer possible for you to observe the right conditions of marriage. For if he who has been attached to a heavenly bridegroom deserts him, and joins himself to a wife the act is **adultery**.”*³ This like is saying that you cannot contemplate God while you are married. In these words, St. John considers that Theodore is committing adultery by his marriage because he had already attached himself to God and was now removing himself from this attachment; he therefore was breaking the marriage between himself and God; this is adultery and a sin. St. John means that once you have made a vow to God you can not break it and engage yourself in another vow even though it is marriage. Do other engagements break our engagement to God? Does marriage specifically lead to a break up between the person and God? Does our vow to God mean separation and alienation from other engagements?

Why can the vow to God not be continued in the life of the married couple?

³ Second Exhortation to Theodore

Before I embark on my questions and my findings, I would like to clarify that it is not my intention to criticize the writings of one of the Greatest Fathers of the Church but I am exposing them in order to illumine my naïve understanding by plunging into the ocean of his teachings searching for the finest pearls of his treasure. Meanwhile, I ask forgiveness for my doubts and my questions and I pray that I will be directed to a better understanding in order to put on freely Christ over my “coat of skin”.

CHAPTER I

Virginitv 1: Virginitv of the Flesh

“The appeal of Chrysostom, combined with the efforts of his other friends, was not in vain. Theodore once more renounced the world and his matrimonial intentions, and retired into the seclusion of the fraternity.”⁴ This statement has rekindled my inner debate between Virginitv (Monasticism) and Matrimony. Virginitv and Marriage were always two competitors in the eyes of the faithful and even more in the eyes of the Holy Fathers. They offer two ways of life in which the prior is considered as safer than the latter.

This competition began on a large scale just a couple of decades prior to St. John’s birthday, exactly when Christianity became the religion of the state during the reign of St. Constantine the Great, even though the roots of Monasticism had sprung in much earlier time.

⁴ *Introduction to the letters to Theodore, The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, First series, Vol. IX*

At that time, the two ways were not yet institutionalized and the preference of one over the other was a personal choice. Even now, at our present time when the two ways exist side by side in the life of the Church this preference still depends on the seeker's free choice. Why then was St. John weeping over the falling of his friend Theodore from the *"proper rank"*⁵ to the rank of the normal believers who chose to be married and have a normal life?

There is no doubt that St. John preferred life of Virginitiy over of that of Matrimony, the opposite life to virginitiy. It was clear from his personal living and practice when he turned his house into a small monastery. He lived an austere and an ascetic life from his youth through to when he was an Archbishop. He lived it in his own home before his seclusion in the Monasteries on the top of the mountains. The life of Virginitiy, Monasticism, was his *"race for [the] heavenly things."*⁶

It was also very clear that Virginitiy and Monasticism were two different words for the same way of life. It was so obvious in his writings and homilies

⁵ Letter II

⁶ Ibid.

that St. John was impressed by the words of his hero the Apostle Paul but I am uncertain that he had followed his words to the letter and he had imitated his choice and followed his preference.

Until I read his second exhortation to Theodore, I didn't have any issue with his choice of life. In fact, his life at home and even when he became an Archbishop had impressed me to lead an ascetic life in my own home with my wife in the midst of all the friends, enemies and the challenges of the secular life. It had supported my learning from the teachings of St. Symeon the New Theologian and St. Gregory Palamas, among others, in which they consider that the ascetic life is accessible to everyone and that, it can be lived in any place.

These findings have fed my thoughts and have introduced me to the virginity of the being and not only of the flesh. That was my understanding until I read St John's exhortations that led me to his work on Virginity and his homily 19 on 1 Corinthians chapter VII.

My first reaction was a defensive one in order to reason his point of view. But in the light of the reasons given to

Theodore to neglect his marital desire and passion, I have found myself puzzled and faced with many questions.

Did he consider Virginité and therefore Monasticism superior to marriage because of the sinful state of the flesh? Certainly not, for this will label him a heretic and St. John was on line with Orthodoxy in all his teachings.

Did he consider Virginité a recluse from the responsibilities of marriage and its consequences? This is possible, but he didn't react in the same manner when he pursued his friend Basil to Priesthood. Yes, Virginité is an easier living way than marriage, but the life of these two are much easier than the priesthood way of life.

Virginal life was not strange during St. John's era. It was practiced by the Jews and it was even selected as a way of life by pagans. St. John condemned Jewish and paganism's way of virginité in his work "On Virginité". Its root can go back to the time of the Phoenicians and the Pharaohs; virgins were offered as sacrifices to please their gods and save them from the floods of the rivers.

However, Christian virgins understood virginal life differently and perceived it

as the preservation of the flesh from any injury and keeping it undefiled because there was no need for this defilement and they certainly could live without it; there was no need to live otherwise.

Certainly, St. John has preferred the virginal life for reasons that were obvious for the hermits and the seekers of such a way of life. He didn't explain it in his letter to Theodore because Theodore knew these reasons that led him to forsake the normal life and join the monastic way of life. He followed the "true philosophy" because it is a redemptive solution based on the meaning of the desert as a reconciliatory place. He would have continued staying at home living the virginal and the ascetical life after the death of his mother if the desert didn't have a deeper meaning. He wouldn't have gone up to the mountains after he had proved that he was able to live this life while in the world.

St. John as well as the Fathers of the Church those who preceded him and those who came after him was in favor of ascetical life. They favored the seclusion in the desert, the wilderness and the mountains to be away from the

noise of the world in order to commit their life to ceaseless prayer. It was not a kind of fearing and fleeing the temptations of the world but rather it was a kind of gaining control over their lives, submitting themselves to the simplicity that might aid them to be connected solely to God. They were led to the desert *“not to cause them to flee from the world, but on the contrary to bring them to its heart so that there, in the hardest place of all, they may manifest [God’s] victory and rights.”*⁷ The desert, the seclusion, allows seekers the time and space to become alert to others and to themselves. The monks see the virginal life as Barsanuphius states: *“Being alone and laboring a little is of more benefit to [the world] than being with others.”*⁸

Virginity was and still is for Christians, an imitation of Jesus’ life when He was withdrawn to the desert and proclaimed His victory over evil for the Glory of⁹

⁷ J.J Von Allmen, *vocabulary of the Bible*, Lutherworth Press, London, 1958, p. 283, copied from John Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*. SVS Press, 1974, p. 6

⁸ *Letter 359*, copied from *proceedings of the Colloquia of Orthodox Theology of the University de Sherbrooke 2005 and 2006*, from a presentation by Rev. dr. John Chryssavgis. GGC Editions 2007, P. 104

God. It was a flight to the desert to assault evil. Virginity in the desert is a kind to return to the virginal life before the fall. The whole creation was in a virginal state, even Adam (female & male). There was no need for something contrary to this state. The only desire and passion has to be a longing for God and intercourse with Him.

The deterioration of Christian life after Christianity had become the official religion of the state was one of the reasons that have encouraged Monasticism and led Basil and John to submit their beings to the virginal life. They and the monks deserted the cities in order to separate themselves from the turmoil and to become an elite group whose zeal was the saving of the Church from her absorption into the Empire; *“monasticism provided a symbol against the reconciliation of the established Church with the world.”*¹⁰

For them and as well for the monks, being a virgin is keeping the being intact, whole and perfect for a reason. This reason is God. In the mind of the Fathers this virginity begins with the dedication of the flesh to God. It is an

¹⁰ John Chryssavgis, *the Way of the Fathers, Exploring the Patristic Mind*, 1998, p. 41

offering of the self in its wholeness and perfection as an act of thanksgiving. It is the return of the own to its Creator; it is a vow of bonding and sealing. They look as St. Peter of Damascus looks at virginity as something *beyond nature*, and to those who live in virginity are those who are *transcending nature*. In virginity the monks give God all what they possess, all what they own and what is an essential part of them and not something that is added to them, which is outside them. They are giving away to God their will to live the natural way.

“*Apatheia*”, the dispassion from earthly things is another reason to value Virginity as a way of life: it is practiced by the monks as a sign of detachment from the normal way of life and to help them in their “*constant refraining from treating physical things as ends in themselves*”¹¹. This detachment begins with the detachment from all earthly care in order to train the being to be detached from all fleshly passions and desires. These needless fleshly desires became, for the normal persons, as ends in themselves while our end is supposed to be in God and no one

¹¹ David C. Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church*, St. Tikhon, 1996, p.43

else. The monks were trying to prove that these desires can be controlled and can become as means to achieve our destination. They are our free acts to propitiate our blessed Master as St. Maximos the Confessor explains: *“we are required by the commandments to love God and our neighbor...and when we transgress these commandments, we are condemned. But we are not commanded to live as virgins...to renounce possessions, to withdraw into solitude. These are of the nature of gifts, so that if through weakness we are unable to fulfill some of the commandments, we may by these free gifts propitiate our blessed Master.”*¹²

St. John Chrysostom enlightened us eloquently by the vision and the meaning of Virginity that were planted and nurtured by the hermits, for Monasticism was not the great invention in his time as some scholars say. From his words we can highly appreciate and know the level of this tradition. Theodore when he left the brotherhood has *“desola[ted] a sacred soul”* that is a *“temple*

¹² *The Philokalia, the Complete Text*, Compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Macarios of Corinth, Vol. II, trans. By G.E.H Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware.

holier...glistened...with the grace of the Spirit.”¹³ St John called him to come back to the Monastic life, the “former luster... the pinnacle and height of virtue”¹⁴ in which, Theodore’s return will be “an ascent to the former altitude [where his] body enjoyed so much attention and cleanliness... [and] preserved the marks of the royal image...[the] freedom [and} honor.”¹⁵

These few descriptions give us a glimpse of the vision that the hermits perceive as the life of virginity. Our interpretation will fall short and hold us from seeing those things because we have not personally experienced them. St. John and the monks spoke by their experience that cannot be understood by other beings.

Thus, the virginity of the flesh is necessary for the life of the Virgins; it holds and captures a deeper meaning that surpasses the intellect of those who did not experience it for God’s glory. It is the first step of the ladder towards the Kingdom of God. What description is higher and more

¹³ *Letter I from The Two Exhortations to Theodore after His Fall.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

meaningful than the words of Gregory of Nyssa when he said: “*Virginity exists with the whole of other-worldly nature and associates with superior powers; it neither separates itself from things divine nor does it attach itself to their opposites*”?¹⁶ This virginity is “[likened] to the virginity of God Himself and to that of the Arch-virgin, Christ.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Treatise on Virginity*, in the Fathers of the Church, trans. Virginia Woods Calahan (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1967). Copied from *The Ontology of Virginity in Gregory of Nyssa*, Andrius Valevicius, *Journal of Eastern Christians Studies*, vol. 38 (1997)

¹⁷ *The Ontology of Virginity in Gregory of Nyssa*, Andrius Valevicius, *Journal of Eastern Christians Studies*, vol. 38 (1997)

CHAPTER II

Marriage: Is it a Contrast to the Virginity of the Flesh?

In this chapter we will discuss the holiness of the married way of life, the mystical relationship between the two who become one in which we can conclude that marriage is not a mere contrast to virginity. This oneness, if it is kept holy and pure, is similar to the oneness of the undefiled and pure virgin and therefore, it should not confuse our engagement to God if a virgin wants to leave the monastic life and join the Holy matrimonial life.

God has made us in His image and likeness; He created us Virgins, new, fresh and incorporeal. Our life is a life in the likeness of the Triune God; a life of love, action, mingling and abiding in each other without confusion and neither dissolution. It is a life of the oneness; it is not a life of unity or union. Unity is uniting different things to become one by an agreement. Their differences are abided by the rule of this agreement. Such an agreement can be annulled if either one or both parties decide to go on his own. Marriage rather is a harmonious life in complete freedom; it is the mode of

their life together not abided or restricted by any agreement. This is the way they are and exist; they are fully one. Even the word one is a limitation and does not convey the meaning of their oneness. It is far beyond the arithmetic explanation.

God made Adam by His hands; He has made him one as male and female. He didn't create him like the whole creation by saying: "let there be light, firmament¹⁸, etc." but He did say: "let us make man in our image, after our likeness."¹⁹ God mixed man by His hands and gave him His breath making him one person and one entity. Man's oneness as male and female was in the image and likeness of God; it was in the likeness of His oneness with a basic difference that God is the Eternal Creator, but man is a free creature.

The concept of virginity and marriage was not known at the time of creation; the Scriptures don't reveal or indicate any hint to this meaning. These two words, marriage and virginity, were born when the harmony between the creation and the Creator was broken by the actions of the "made" man. The

¹⁸ Genesis, 1: 3 & 6

¹⁹ Genesis, 1: 26

Fathers of the Church say that there was no need for sexual activity in paradise for any reason including procreation because of our ethereal spiritual beings; there was neither desire nor passion except for God. In fact, St. John in his homily “On Virginity” says: *“thousands of angels serve God, and thousands of archangels assist him, and not one of them exists by generation, by birth, by the pain of labor, or by conception.”*²⁰ Therefore, can I not say that there was no need even for the life (concept) of virginity also?

As a result of the fall we understand the need for reproduction and the arousing of sexual desire and passion. The two states of life, virginity and marriage, didn’t exist prior to the fall and therefore, we cannot, in my opinion, value virginity over marriage because of the sexual activity or the burden of the responsibilities of married life. Thus the difference between the two states of life, the mark of the flesh, is not a degrading and sinful sign.

The breaking of the seal is not “marriage”; in fact marriage is the

²⁰ John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, PG 48:544

sealing to cover the broken seal. Therefore, losing virginity in the flesh (for both males & females) is not an act of marriage and marriage is not limited to the sexual activity. St. John and the Fathers of the Church didn't degrade marriage, in fact they praised it, we can hear the Apostle Paul saying that "*marriage is honorable and the bed undefiled*",²¹ and Tertullian in his letter to his wife says these beautiful words: "*where we are to find words enough fully to tell the happiness of that marriage which the Church cements, and the oblation confirms, and the benediction signs and seals which angels carry back the news of to heaven, which the Father holds as ratified?*"²² Even the blessed Augustine says: "*the first natural bond of human society is man and wife.*"²³

St Gregory the Theologian takes us into a new space when he says that "*marriage was a union of virtue no less than of bodies*"²⁴. We will discuss this

²¹ Hebrews 13:4

²² Tertullian to his wife.II.viii, PL 1.1302A-B (ANF iv,p.48)

²³ Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage.I*,CSEL 41,p.187(NPNF 1,III,p.399)

²⁴ On The Death of His Father.7 (Orarion XVIII), PG 35.993A (NPNF 2, VII, p.256)

in the next chapter, as a basic teaching about marriage, about this union between two genders of the fallen created being. Marriage is higher than the thought of joining two persons together who cannot deprive themselves from the sexual desire and the passions of the flesh. It is also higher than the thought of forming a family or that it is blessed to regulate the sexual intercourse. It is not a way of life that is inferior to the Virginal life because the latter is easier to live in order to contemplate God. In any of these suppositions we are degrading a life that Jesus Christ has blessed. At the wedding of Cana He revealed Himself with power for the first time in the community, and He changed the course of His earthly ministry at His Mother's request.

The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary, the Encyclopedic Edition, explains the meaning of marriage in this manner: *"the institution under which a man and a woman become legally united on a permanent basis...the entering into the married state as a religious rite, an intimate linking together, a true marriage of minds."* A true permanent marriage of minds; two minds united that will speak one language, and act

together on behalf of the two for the sake of the two. This dictionary didn't say anything about the intercourse between the two persons. This sexual activity could be the result of the union of the two minds that will lead to the union of the two "coats of skins", the two fleshs. This is what we can expound from this secular meaning, so imagine how a marriage would develop when God enters this union and becomes its cornerstone.

The late Alexander Shmemann in his *Mystery of Love*²⁵ said that marriage has to be restored in Christ that it *"means in His life, death, resurrection and ascension to heaven, in the Pentecostal inauguration of the 'new eon', in the Church as the sacrament of all this."* Marriage for Christians is a Sacrament, and the Sacrament is a transformation of the will of the beings into the will of God by His presence in the liturgical act. Christian marriage is an act of the Church, the community. It is not a private service as unfortunately is happening. It is an act in the Kingdom of God. It is fulfilled only when the two Christians partake together of the Eucharist, from the common cup. It is performed in the

²⁵ Alexander Shmemann, *For The Life of the World*, SVS Press, 2000

Church as the assembly of witnesses of Faith agrees, accepts, approves and protects this union. The ceremony is celebrated in the presence of the whole Church: God, the Bible (Old and New), the Saints, the Celebrant, and the assembly in its two wings those who are lying asleep and those who are living. What a mystery! What an action! What a joy! This sacrament as any sacrament of the Church is a mystical encounter between God and His people. However, it is His answer to the request of His people.

The rubrics and the symbolism of the rite of marriage (as it is celebrated at the present time in the Orthodox Church) enlighten us with the importance of this state of life in the life of the combatant Church. God, the candles, the rings, the crowns, the Bible, the Cross, the dance (the procession), the common cup and the words of the prayers are in the heart of the wedding celebration for they signify a meaning and they represent that each being is accepting wholly and unconditionally the other as his/her own life in its wholeness. The candles signify the light of Christ that purify and illumine this new life, the exchange of the rings means that the two are

exchanging their weaknesses and their strength to support each other taking into consideration that their total support is from God. The crowns symbolize the glory and the honor of God that are bestowed on the couple to become the king and the queen of their own small church (home). The drinking from the common cup symbolizes the participation as one in the Eucharist: eternal life. The dance around the table is led by the celebrant taking the couple, teaching and guiding them from the words of the Bible and the lessons of the Cross that led to the resurrection.

So what happens in this sacrament? Where the transformation does occurs? The couple enters the Church as two persons and exits it physically as two and not as one. It is very important to realize that each one enters alone to the building of the assembly at different times but they leave at the same time together. The transformation happens mystically and is unseen in this togetherness. Now after the participation in the sacrament the two became a trinity; the individualism of the genders as the consequence of the fall has been restored through Jesus Christ and they

become as one entity in the image of the “made” man in paradise. St. John Chrysostom specifies it: *“The properties of the love such as the two lovers are no longer two beings, but only one... they are not only joined together, but what it means that man-woman is an “Adam” in the biblical interpretation²⁶ [because] love changes the substance of the things”.*²⁷

I cannot find a better explanation than what Paul Evdokimov wrote in his superb piece “l’amour et le sacrement de l’amour”: *“The marriage is defined: the unit of two people in only one being, only one substance; or: union in a body and a soul, but in two people. The definition is important, the “me” marital does not eliminate the persons, but according to the image of the Trinity: the union in only one nature of the Three Persons forms only one Subject, God One and Triune at the same time; in the same way the marital union of two persons forms a dyad-*

²⁶ P. G. 61, 280 ; 62, 387, transl from « *propriétés de l’amour sont telles que l’aimée et l’aimant ne forment plus deux êtres, mais un seul... ils ne sont pas réunis seulement, mais sont un ; ce qui veut dire homme-femme, un “ adam ” dans le sens biblique* »

²⁷ P.G. 61, 273, trans from » *l’amour change la substance même des choses* »

*monad, two and one at the same time united in Third divine term.*²⁸

St. Paul says that marriage is a great mystery. *“It is a total obedience in love”*²⁹ these words of Shmemann who continues in his explanation: it is *“not obedience and love, but the wholeness of one as the totality of the other. Obedience, taken in itself, is not a virtue; it is blind submission and there is no light in blindness. Only love for God...frees obedience from blindness and makes it joyful acceptance of that alone which is worthy of being accepted. But love without obedience to God is ‘the lust of the flesh, and the*

²⁸ Paul Evdokimov, *“l’amour et le sacrement de l’amour*, trans. *Le mariage est défini : l’unité de deux personnes dans un seul être, une seule substance ; ou encore : l’union en un corps et une âme, mais en deux personnes. La définition est importante, le moi conjugal ne supprime point les personnes, mais selon l’image de la Trinité : l’union dans une seule nature des Trois Personnes forme un seul Sujet, Dieu Un et Trine à la fois ; de même l’union conjugale de deux personnes forme une dyade-monade, deux et un à la fois unis en Troisième terme divin.*

²⁹ Ibid.

lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 Jn. 2:16).”³⁰

The couple, in different words, should seek God in each other. They will discover God while they are discovering themselves; their openness is an opening to God’s grace, mercy and love. God is the one who is uniting them. Their belonging to each other is the belonging to God in the first place. Their life with and for each other is an imitation of Christ’s love for us. His obedience to God in love has allowed Him to seek us by descending to become a man, getting crucified, being resurrected and ascended into heaven. He died for His beloved; the Bridegroom died for His wedded Bride.

The marriage of the couple is to let the “I” and the ego die for the sake of the beloved as a thanksgiving action to God. It is to let the other enters wholly when the “I” diminishes and at the same time, the “I” of the other has diminished so, in both as oneness, God is increasing.

For Christians, marriage is a sacrament that will not disengage us

³⁰ Ibid.

from our vow to God, but rather it will solidify it. In marriage we will not be deserting God unless we want to desert Him even without getting married. The hermit may desert God even when he is in his deserted cell and without getting into other commitments. All our attachments will be sanctified when we first engage ourselves to God and we marry the heavenly Bridegroom. The attachment to the heavenly Bridegroom is a personal transcendence and is completed because of God's grace. It may be achieved by the married couple as well as by the monks wherever they live. It is not limited to a time, a place or to the human being status. Christian marriage is therefore a oneness and thus the life of the couple is an ascetic life where God is the one who joined them and mingled them in each other. Therefore the engagement to God is possible in both ways, virginal and married, and there is no brokenness of engagement when some one chooses to leave the virginal life and join himself with his beloved under the umbrella of the sacrament of marriage.

CHAPTER III

Virginity 2: Virginity of the Being

Every Christian is a monk; he is a mono contemplator of God; for each Christian being is unique and his relationship with God is personal. Jesus Christ, whom we have put on at our Baptism, is our restorer to the image and likeness of God. We are all called through God's grace to become partakers of the divine image instilled in us. This is our duty as Christians.

We saw in the first chapter that St John Chrysostom applauded the Virginity of the flesh as a superior way to contemplate God and we said that this virginity should be only the first step in the virginal life, monasticism. In the second chapter we discussed the holiness of the marriage in their sacramental and mysterious union in the image of the Triune God, so the couple becomes one without any dissolution or confusion.

Are the two states of beings, virginity of the flesh and the union of marriage, guarantee salvation? Certainly they do not. Salvation is a Gift from God and our call is to deny ourselves, carry the

cross of love and follow “the Way, the Truth and the life”. The Scriptures direct our steps and enlighten our way leading to the destination. Salvation depends on our way of life as virgins or as married. It is a life of virginity of the whole being, that is in flesh, soul, heart, mind and all the particles of this complicated, but yet simple, being.

The intercourse, the relationship with God is not physical, for we are not of the same nature. The vow of the intercourse with Him is not of fleshly nature but one but of purity. He covers our sins and our coat of skins by his purity and his uncreated energies. How can the Uncreated essence physically intercourse with the created essence but by bestowing on him and blessing him with His grace, mercy and love? So the mark of the flesh in the married couple is blessed and has to be kept pure and their undefiled bed has to become a temple of worship and love. They will contemplate God in their oneness and not as two individuals.

The same can be said for the mono person who decided to keep the virginity of the flesh. His bed has to be kept undefiled too for his fleshly wholeness is not a mark of purity. His thought has to be kept pure and stay

vigil against *“the burning heat and pleasant lusts subsequent to the fiery furnace.”*³¹ It is like the state of marriage; this state is not a guarantee against fornication because both can commit adultery in their thoughts and their misuse of the sexual desire. St. John in the same homily warns those who achieved *the great state of virginity* (the five foolish virgins) and had *“bridled the intemperance, competed with the heavenly powers, despised matters pertaining to this life, after they had brought the great burning heat under their own power, conquered in the trenches, flown from earth to heaven; after they had preserved the seal of the body...”* that what they have achieved and acquired are not enough and the foolish virgins didn’t enter the bridal chamber because *“they didn’t possess almsgiving along with virginity.”*³²

So the virginity of the flesh is not an end by itself and neither is marriage. Both are ways of life that need vigil, prayers, purification and transformation. Both ways are a progressive process to acquire the

³¹ Homily 3, *Concerning Almsgiving and the Ten virgins*

³² Ibid.

Holy Spirit in order for the being to become the temple of the Holy Spirit. Then, the dwelling of the Spirit will purify and enlighten the person and approach him/her to the Creator.

Let us hear St. Basil the Great, Chrysostom's friend, saying: *"I have not known a woman and yet I am not a virgin."*³³ And this from Ft. Diadokos of Photiki: *"what is good for a man keeping the virginity of his body if he lets his soul commit adultery with the demon of disobedience."*³⁴ St. Peter of Damaskos expounds more on it very well when he says: *"ascetic practice is a good thing, but only when done with the right goal in mind. We ought to think of it not as the real task, but as a preparation for the real task; not as the fruit but as the earth that can, with time, labor and the help of God, bear trees from which the fruit will come- the fruit that is purity of intellect and union with God."*³⁵

The final task for both ways of life is the contemplation of God no matter where and in which physical state the person is. The right goal is to become

³³ *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p.77

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 266

³⁵ *The philokalia*, Vol. III, p. 238,239

pure regardless of the vocation because He has bestowed His grace and gifted it to all and it is up to the bestowed to become ready and aware to grasp this grace and allow it to purify him/her.

What we really need is to purify our whole being, to become once again virgins in our relationship with God as it was prior to the fall. What has distorted the image of God in us is not a sexual relationship (there was none) but rather the brokenness of the virginity of our being.

CHAPTER IV Chrysostom Between the Two Virginities

Certainly St. John, as we saw in the first chapter, didn't think that virginity was limited to the physical aspect only. But in his early writings he made us believe in such an aspect. Yet, there is nothing against monastic life but certainly, in my opinion, it is not a status higher than its opposite. Even St. John, later on, exclaims that some married couples can surpass virgins. It all depends on the relationship to God in both vocations.

St. Symeon the New Theologian has recognized the variety of individual vocations when he said: *"we cannot speak in the abstract of any one form of life higher as than another- of the hermit life, for example, as superior to the coenobitic- for the best and highest form of life is, for each one, the particular way to which he or she is personally called. The fullness of contemplation is accessible to married people living in cities as well as to the desert-dweller."*³⁶

³⁶ *The Philokalia*, Vol.IV, p.14

St. Ambrose says: *“marriage is honorable but chastity is more honorable...That then, which is good need not to be avoided, but that which is better should be chosen.”*³⁷ Is chastity found only in virginity? Do the virgins alone exercise chastity? Can the married couple exercise chastity in their bonding of love? St. Methodius clarifies my opinion in his words: *“There is not a class of souls sinning by nature and a class of souls practicing righteousness by nature; but both act from choice.”*³⁸

I don't know what marvelous jewels the Golden Mouth would have produced if he would have married? His description of the exalted life of Virginity when he talked about the burning desire that attacks the mono has made me understand why he values virginity over marriage. He spoke from a personal experience; he didn't describe something that was alien to him. These vivid descriptions have made me wonder what his position would be if he had experienced married life. There is no doubt whatsoever that our Saint knew

³⁷ Concerning Widows XII. 72,

³⁸ Catechetical Lectures.IV.20,PG 33,480C-481A (NPNF 2,VII,p.24)

and experienced both virginities. He spoke eloquently about both of them. For him and the Christian hermits the two virginities complete with one another and at the same time, they consider marriage as adultery if it is not preserved with pure deeds and chastity. The goal of our life is to be connected to God by means of contemplation and worship transforming ourselves to become temples of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, St. John Chrysostom who favored the life of virginity inspires us with a universal vision that is demanded from every Christian when he says: *“certainly, the fullest possible expression or experience of the Christian life was not meant only for monks”*³⁹ and in another place he gives us the pure gold by saying: *“often I have prayed that there would be no need of monasteries, and that such good order would reign in the cities that no one would ever be forced to flee to the desert.”*⁴⁰

³⁹ Homily VII on St. Matthew, NPNF 1,X,p.49

⁴⁰ Against the opponents of the Monastic life.17