

## **THE MINISTER FACED WITH DELICATE MARITAL CRISES: THE CASE OF A HOMOSEXUAL HUSBAND**

By

**Rev. Fr. Athanasios G. Melissaris**

Archpriest of the Ecumenical Patriarchate

Associate Professor of Pastoral Counseling and Psychology at the University of Athens

Licensed Psychologist – Doctor of Pastoral Psychology (Boston) – Doctor of Pastoral Theology (Athens)

### **Abstract**

*This article deals with the case of a homosexual husband, whose wife came to seek assistance from the author of this paper. She found herself at a painful crossroads after realizing her husband's sexual orientation, followed by meeting another man whom she felt fulfilled her needs. During their session the author, as a pastoral minister, attempted to determine the steps that she should take in order to gain control of her life again on both a spiritual and psychological level. At the same time, the minister sought to help the woman remove the hurdles that prevented her from attaining wholeness. There are many complicated questions, theological as well as psychological, involved in this situation, such as homosexuality and divorce, all generating feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Reflecting on what happened, the author claims that he would nowadays handle the situation differently. In addition, he decided that, given the insoluble impasse of her marriage, she should continue her life with the responsibility of her choice. Another important issue to be considered is the handling of the painful feelings that prompted her to see a professional, who could help her recover from the emotional trauma which had been ailing her. Her counselor's pastoral approach would also be important to help her realign herself with her church community and its teachings. Finally, through recourse to theological quotations an assessment is made concerning the implications of the divorce on a theological level, including the importance of confession, penance, and holy communion as sacramental aides towards healing and wholeness. Finally, it is explicitly pointed out that the Church allows divorce under certain conditions by exercising discernment, thus helping people to get out of desperate marital impasses and follow the way of Christ.*

**Keywords:** divorce, homosexuality, marital crisis, pastoral counseling, guilt, healing.

## *Introduction*

*“Because men can't endure the untried  
The brought from elsewhere and it's early, hear me  
It's too early yet in this world my love  
To speak of you and me” (O. Elytis)<sup>1</sup>.*

Marriage is rife with conflicts. That fact is well known and sounds like an insignificant fact. What is less known, perhaps, is the actual extent of the quantity and variety of conflicts that plague married life. According to recent estimates <sup>2</sup>, as much as half of the married or non-married couples experience serious conflicts on a regular basis, which is natural given that even taciturn, patient, and well-meaning spouses often disagree with one another on many issues. However, disputes take many forms and do not always involve disagreements. More and more, couples encounter surprisingly unexpected truths about each other. One such truth concerns the latent homosexual orientation of one of them, which is nowadays more frankly and openly discussed than in previous times.<sup>3</sup> The frequency of this issue forces pastors as well as pastoral psychologists to reconsider aspects of marriage and to seek novel ways of guidance to those concerned, in a spirit of pragmatism and enhanced understanding of the complexity of the problem.

Understanding is essential because many people remain unaware of the nature of sexual orientation and its origins. Because of this ignorance, people, including clergy, react differently to the issue in a way that can be harmful to clients and their families. With this still broader ignorance and prejudice, it is essential to establish a common context. David K. Switzer, Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at the Perkins School of Theology, at Southern Methodist University, in Dallas, Texas indicates the need for a shared understanding of the issue very tellingly. As he aptly pointed out,

*“The situation is difficult for the clergy and lay care workers in the church. We differ one from the other in various ways. We have different levels of knowledge, ignorance and prejudice. We have different attitudes and we have our own beliefs as to what is right and what is wrong. Denominations and faith groups have somewhat different positions on various matters related to homosexuality, homosexual behavior, and the role of homosexual persons in the church and among the clergy. Obviously, our own particular beliefs and convictions and personal emotional reactions are going to shape our response to the family which is in turmoil because one of them has recently been identified as being of homosexual orientation”<sup>4</sup>.*

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*, translated by Jeffrey Carson and Nikos Sarris, introduction, and notes by Jeffrey Carson (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University, 1997), p. 244.

<sup>2</sup> This article, authored by Siobhán C. Daly, Pádraig MacNeela and Kiran M. Sarma, “investigated the stories of heterosexual women who experienced a husband coming out as gay and a consequential marital separation. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used. Loss, anger, spousal empathy and concerns regarding societal prejudice were reported. Additional stress was experienced when others minimised the experience due to the gay sexual orientation of their husband. Experiencing positive communication with their husband during and after the disclosure aided the resolution of the emotional injury experienced by them. They all eventually ‘let go’ of their husband. This involved a process of reconceptualising the self as separated. Findings indicate the importance of supporting women to re-focus on their needs during and following marital dissolution. The importance of non-judgemental support for marital loss, rather than a focus on the gay sexual orientation of the spouse, was highlighted.” “The female spouse: A process of separation when a husband ‘comes out’ as gay,” *National Library of Medicine* 13 (2018): 8.

<sup>3</sup> In his article, Frederick W. Bozett, “based on in-depth interviews of gay men who had been married, focuses on the nature of the spousal relationship and the almost inevitable marital disruption. It describes the conditions which bring about the man's disclosure of his homosexuality, the means of disclosure he uses, the wife's response, and the interactional effects the disclosure and response have on the marriage relationship. Most of the marriages ended in divorce. Regardless of whether the wife was accepting or rejecting of her husband as a homosexual, she appeared to be an enabler of his transition to a homosexual lifestyle. Implications for counseling are discussed.” (“Heterogenous couples in heterosexual marriages: gay men and straight women,” *Journal of Marital and family Therapy* 8 (1982): 81-89.

<sup>4</sup> David K. Switzer, *Pastoral Care Emergencies: Ministering to People in Crisis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 180.

In my early days of pastoral ministry, I was approached by a young woman who had not come to me for confession, but to seek my advice on the problem she was facing. As I was on my way home, I asked her if she could see me the following day so that I could be available and devote more time to her problem. Therefore, very briefly, she clued me into the nature of her concern, which was her suspicion that her fiancé was probably gay, and that she did not know how to address the problem. She added that they had been in love with one another for many years and that they were about to get married, but she wasn't sure whether she should proceed with the marriage or cancel it or seek the advice of a counselor instead.

Having set up an appointment with her for a future meeting, I instantly recalled a similar incident that had been brought to my attention during my training as a doctoral student in pastoral psychology at Boston University. This previous case also concerned a heterosexual relationship in which a member (the husband in particular) had proven to be homosexual. The entire dialogue between the client and the counsellor was recorded and distributed to us as reading material on which we were asked to write a detailed reflection. So, I was asked to look in my files for any notes I might have kept on the subject. I discovered that there was a file of it in my notebook, and as I reviewed it, I realized that nowadays I would have handled that case with a little more discretion. This was in 1993, and I was in the very beginning of my academic study of pastoral ministry, so I was just an inexperienced novice. The following is a verbatim account of my exchange with my client, a distressed Catholic, along with a lengthy commentary and reflection on the whole case.

During the women's narrative, it emerged that her husband has begun to date another homosexual male at the Law School he was attending in Boston, while she had met another divorced individual whom she feels meets her needs. It was then that the woman reached a crossroads and decided to seek advice from her counselor.

### *The Conversation*

**Client:** We were young. Maybe we shouldn't have gotten married, but it was a pressure. Little girls get married. And it's better than being a sinner. So, we get married, and I'm a good wife, and I'm good for my Lord, and he's good for his Lord, and it happens. I mean, is it all a joke? Can I pray for something? Is anyone listening? What happened to you? Should I crawl and repent on the stairs?

**Counselor:** I sense your frustration, the guilt you are feeling. How does it feel to come to a crossroads after six years and think about what I did six years ago, what did I do? Perhaps you have a strong feeling of regret?

**Client:** Yes, as if I had wasted six years of my life, which I don't think is true because I learned a lot from him, and I love him. And I threw away a year and a half since he's told me he was gay—I should have just said, let's end this right now, you've got to figure out your life. But he's not certain. I was waiting to find out if he was actually gay. He's not sure. He's got no idea what God wants. And so, I have waited and waited, and my life awaits me. In the meantime, I could easily fall in love with this guy, Tom, but I want to get involved, but I don't care. I told him; you just have to make decisions about your life so I can move forward.

**Counselor:** Do you still feel as though you're communicating?

**Client:** Yes. I guess. I don't really ask him about his lovers. What more can be said?

**Counselor:** Therefore, you are still waiting. How do you feel right now?

**Client:** I sense I might get divorced and be hated by the church. It seems to me that you could kill someone and go to jail and come back and be forgiven, but you divorce, and that's it.

**Counselor:** Why do you feel that way?

**Client:** It seems that anyone who divorces in the church is scorned. As if they weren't strong enough to get away with it. Or they weren't intelligent enough. Or they didn't love

each other enough. Or maybe not praying enough. My God, I've prayed enough to fill a cathedral after cathedral.

**Counselor:** And that too makes you feel guilty?

**Client:** Guilty how? Praying?

**Counselor:** What divorce means.

**Client:** Yes, yes! What the heck! There's nothing else I can do. Will I live the rest of my life? Do I age with a guy who doesn't love me?

**Counselor:** Clearly not. If it's what you said that's making you miserable.

**Client:** "As you've expressed"? You think there's another matter?

**Counselor:** No, no. I don't want you to think I'm trying to be biased. That's not the kind of thing I'm trying to do. Based on what you told me, I have a feeling that you feel guilty, that you feel abandoned. Your husband can't fulfill your needs anymore. And you are looking for someone to nourish you, for someone who accepts you as you are, who will not abandon you. That's what I get.

**Client:** I feel like if I do get a divorce that I must leave my family. First, I was raised a Roman Catholic. My family, the people in this church won't understand that there won't be people here for me, and it's because everybody believes in the same church that we have to leave. So, I had this dream that I run off alone into a city, and I'm single and alone, and I never have to worry about security. I divorce quietly, I leave and I feel incredibly lonely, but know that I made the right decision. But I feel I have to run away, that I can't stay and be with my family, that I have to wear a big A on my chest like Hester Prynne.<sup>5</sup>

**Counselor:** So, you feel that if you get a divorce, you're going to feel a sense of rejection. How do you know that?

**Client:** Well, I guess all the things that I've said.

**Counselor:** Has your family ever said that to you? Did your friends ever tell you this?

**Client:** Well, I mean, it's clear from the Bible that divorce is wrong. My parents have been married for forty years, but don't get divorced. You get married and you're still married. That's why I'm not a good wife. I couldn't keep my man happy. I must be under some spell. Oh, you have to take yoga lessons. You believe in the new age, where it's all about fast food. Well, seven years is your average wedding. Either you're married after seven years or you're divorced.

**Counselor:** I agree you stay committed to your marriage. You have invested a great deal of time, effort and emotion. You shouldn't feel guilty about it. The ideal is marriage, the Church teaches. However, we also realize that we are all sinners, and we do not live up to the perfect ideal of what God would want us to do. And there's nothing to be embarrassed about. And for this reason, as we read in the Scriptures, divorce is permitted when things are not going as they should. Sometimes it's not up to us. It doesn't need to be what you did or what he did.

**Client:** How come people don't know that? Why is there a lot of judgment? It's not taught from the pulpit. What is preached from the pulpit is that you don't divorce -- that's how it is. And so, the people who make it are judged. And people told me to submit to your husband like God would have you submit to church. Over and over. And I want to. I want to be a good spouse. I do. But I'm trapped between two worlds. I stick with my husband, and I die slowly...

---

<sup>5</sup> Hester Prynne, protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterwork *The Scarlet Letter*, is one of the most important female protagonists in American literature. In the course of the story, as a resident of Colonial America, Hester is sent ahead to the "New World" by her husband, who later assumes the name of Roger Chillingworth, as he has some business to finish before he can join her. After he is shipwrecked and captured by Native Americans and presumed dead, Hester continues to live her life as a seamstress in the town. She seeks comfort in the local pastor; At some point passion emerges, culminating in the conception and subsequent birth of their child, Pearl. Because Hester has no husband with her, she is imprisoned, convicted of the crime of adultery, and sentenced to be forced to wear a prominent scarlet letter 'A' for the rest of her life.

## *Diagnosis and Reflections*

Before I add my first reflection on the earlier dialogue, I would like to add a few current personal reflections on the issue of homosexuality. The issue of homosexuality, which entails deep anthropological and theological implications, constitutes nowadays a serious challenge; one which requires of pastors, particularly those exercising Orthodox pastoral care and counseling, to devise a creative response to it. Pastors are called to reflect deeply on the entire issue based on the Gospel as well as to place their hands “on the marks of the nails.” After two thousand years, we Christians still have to face many prevailing misunderstandings.

Today, the Criminal Code does not condemn engagement with homosexual acts, as an offense in itself and by itself. Homosexuality and heterosexuality are expressions of sexual impulse. The legalization of homosexuality and its compatibility with marriage is a challenge of modern life. This is a reality for many people, while divorce is widespread as well. It is of no use to stigmatize homosexuals for the undermining of the institution of marriage.<sup>6</sup>

With these thoughts in mind, I will attempt to submit my reflection on the matrimonial issue entrusted to me. One of the principal tasks of this first encounter was to listen to the "story" of the individual. "Evoking story" is an extremely delicate and personal act. In many ways it demands the delicacy of a surgeon, as one literally enters this person's world; you see what "makes them work". This ability to evoke someone else's story is a very powerful tool that must be handled very carefully. The practice of pastoral care calls for great discernment. As Fr. Philotheos Faros, a longtime pastoral psychologist, wisely indicate in his book, pastoral "surgery" may often be necessary, but it should also be exercised as delicately as possible.<sup>7</sup> The pastoral counselor must take great pains to evoke the true meaning and interpretation of the story.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, as Gerkin points out, “From the standpoint of the pastoral counselor as interpreter, reflection and gathering of further impressions as well as factual data to support or alert, elaborate or add to the understanding we know have of narrative themes and issues in Susan’s or ‘anyone’s’ life story”. The acquisition of an adequate hermeneutic understanding of the speaker's story is of paramount importance.

In this first encounter, Charles Gerkin brings a lot of pertinent material to the counseling relationship. What I was told in that context was a story; and as Gerkin puts it, in that context:

*“All the stories told in a certain manner of frustrated desire to advance with the story of a lifetime. In each case there was a sense of blockage, as if the way forward in an imaginary plot for the person's life was obstructed. The flow of a line had encountered an obstacle or had been impeded in some way. The nature of the obstruction or obstacle varied enormously, but the sense of blocking seems universal...”*

Gerkin's description is extremely important here. Here there is a "hindrance", an "obstruction", (which is the revelation of her husband's homosexuality), which frustrates and blocks the continuation of his life. So that the wife feels as if she is in control of her life again it is necessary to.

1) identify exactly what the blockages are which are preventing her from moving towards wholeness and

---

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent account of the Christian sacramentality of marriage, see John Chryssavgis, *Love, Sexuality, and the Sacrament of Marriage* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> π. Φιλόθεος Φάρος, *Μαθήματα ζωής: Κατανοώντας το περιεχόμενο της ποιμαντικής διακονίας*, (in Greek) Athens: Armos, 2020, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Correctly interpreting the client's narrative is especially important. This kind of interpretation follows several phases. John Patton, executive director of the Georgia Association for Pastoral Care, points our attention to the significance of interpretation on behalf of the counselor. “The first type of interpretation to be discussed is the kind that assists a person in the discovery or rediscovery of his or her story. Humankind is presented in the Bible as existing as a part of history and in community. Persons are not isolated units moving from one experience to another. Normatively understood, they exist as a part of something. What the pastoral counselor sees, however, whether he or she practices ministry in a parish or counseling center, is many persons who have become cut off from their roots, their network of relationships, and they sense of direction. Without root, relationship, and direction, they have difficulty telling their story. Often, they can only present a problem. The memory of who they are and where they are going is dim.” John Patton, *Pastoral Counseling: A Ministry of the Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1984), pp. 197-198.

2) what steps must be taken to help the wife once again achieve this sense of wholeness and control in her life on both a theological and psychological levels. The worthy pastor will seek to liberate people from their fears, exhibiting a deep understanding and infinite amount of love towards them, so that they could enjoy inner peace and be prepared to face whatever crisis will hit them in life-- thereby proving their faith in God. It is then to identify these "blockages" that we must turn.

Marriage is a far-reaching commitment, which can have not only tremendous rewards, but also serious repercussions. In this note, it is unfortunately the latter that emerged after six years of marriage. There are plenty of complicated theological and psychological problems that are involved in this situation.

The first has to do with homosexuality. In St. The Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, we find a very harsh declaration against homosexuality:

*“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves, nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the Kingdom of God”<sup>9</sup>.*

In fact, it is maintained by many people, but Christ did not say anything at all about homosexuality, and that it was Paul who criminalized the Christian life. Indeed, it appears only in his letter to the Romans, St. Paul is also adamant in reprimanding homosexuality as an unnatural lifestyle:

*“Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion”<sup>10</sup>.*

As someone who must have gone at least to some extent to church and read the Bible,<sup>11</sup> it may be safe to assume that s/he has at least searched out the Scriptural position concerning homosexuality and would have at best found it as disturbing as she found the Christ’s words about divorce. Therefore, it can be safely assumed that at the theological level she has questions concerning the nature of homosexuality.

The second theological issue raised here is that of divorce. In the context of counselling, the wife vaguely quotes the synoptic understanding of divorce and declares that divorce is equivalent to adultery. Looking at this issue more closely, we read: “But I tell you that anyone who divorces his

---

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 6: 9-10. The standard, conservative view of the matter usually assumes their form of the following passage: “According to ch. 5 one of the members of the Corinthian Church lived in an incestuous union with his father’s wife. According to ch. 6 there occurred lawsuits between members of the Church, who thus sought the arbitration of unbelievers, i.e. heathen courts. Paul’s response to both of these challenges to Christian purity and honor is clear and definite. The actions of the individuals concerned have brought dishonor on the name of Christ, while the failure of the Church to correct these individuals, implies that the whole Church has been contaminated. For the first problem, that of incest, Paul prescribes separation from fellowship with the Church. The details of what exactly this means in practice are unclear, but what is crystal clear is the objective of the punishment: “that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord”. In other words, the incestuous person was in danger of losing his eternal salvation unless he repented. These two themes give Paul the occasion to administer to the Corinthian Christians a very sharp rebuke, and then to go on and warn them that sins like these will exclude their practitioners from the Kingdom of God. Among those who will be excluded are passive and active homosexuals who practise and persist in practising such acts. One important point here is that this time Paul distinguishes between the two roles, that of the passive (μαλακός), and that of the active homosexual (αρσενικοίτης), although both of them, according to Paul, are equally guilty. As if he wanted to underscore solemnly the consequences of such acts by the Jewish custom of judicially establishing a matter by two or three witnesses, he plays the part of a witness twice by solemnly averring once at the beginning and once at the end, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Cited from Chrys C. Caragounis, *Homoeroticism Ancient and Modern—And the Christian Church*, Revised Edition, Lund 2007, pp. 76-77.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 1: 26-27.

<sup>11</sup> The reader may find it useful to have in his or her disposal several biblical and theological resources about sexuality in general video here is a good one William V. Arnold, *Introduction to Pastoral Care*, chapter 14: “A Pastoral Approach to Sexuality” (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), pp. 204-214.

wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.”<sup>12</sup>

From an Orthodox and biblical perspective, it is clear that in its ideal form, marriage is an indissoluble bond and life-long covenant. The Church defends the ideal of the permanence of marriage, considering the Holy Sacrament of Marriage as a constitutive ecclesiological reality. Nonetheless, in her pastoral care and in her concern to help people, the Church has accepted certain exceptions allowing the dissolubility of marriage. Scripture emphatically points this out when we read, “*For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel.*”<sup>13</sup> However, it is equally clear that divorce was permitted due to weakness of the human condition,” Jesus said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the existence of divorce in the Greek Orthodox Church falls under the broad heading of God’s “*economia*”<sup>15</sup> and falls under two biblical concepts which have been thematically extended. The two grounds for divorce in Orthodoxy surround those which concern the death of the spouse and those which concern the adultery of the spouse.<sup>16</sup> In this instance, if the wife so wished, it would be permissible to allow divorce on the former and possibly also the latter as well.

On the psychological front, there are a number of emotional issues in this situation. First and foremost is a sense of inadequacy. Expressions such as “*I can't satisfy it*” or “*How can I supplement with men*” can indicate a sense of competitiveness in an athletic sense. In a way, she feels deficient about herself. (Indeed, it is also a deeper issue that must be addressed later.) She has personalized the issue of her husband’s homosexuality by trying to explain it in terms of what *she* is unable to do and thus put herself into a corner and dilemma.<sup>17</sup>

This feeling of inadequacy is starting to appear in this “other possible relationship”. Here, she feels that this other person is capable of responding to her needs, while her husband is not. This scenario reminded me most vividly of the story of Susan Clarke related by Gerkin in his sixth chapter. Indeed, Gerkin’s assessment of Susan’s situation as one where “the issue appears at this point to be not so much one of sexuality as of intimacy, self-expression, and integrity in relationships” may be equally applied here.<sup>18</sup> Thus, especially with this incident, it is important in this context to make use of the hermeneutical circle to help “*enlarge or enrich the arena of reflection within which the evaluation of behavioral choices takes place.*”<sup>19</sup>

The second proof of the psychological problem is culpability. Closely related to the previous question, she feels guilty about two things. The first relates to the marriage of a homosexual. This fact must be very disturbing for her, and in turn, evoke several subsequent feelings. Again, she feels

---

<sup>12</sup> Matt. 5: 32.

<sup>13</sup> Mal 2: 16

<sup>14</sup> Matt. 19: 8

<sup>15</sup> «Economy» is viewed as a «transitory leniency» by which the Church is a dispenser of divine mercy preventing worse consequences. Some further elaboration on the concept of divine economy is essential. As is stated by Professor of Canon Law at Hellenic College/Holy Cross Seminary Lewis Patsavos, “Unlike secular law, or Mosaic law the purpose of the church’s law is the spiritual perfection of her members. Mere application of the letter of the law is replaced by a sense for the spirit of the law, and adherence to its principles. This purpose is the determining factor when authority is granted to apply the law when circumstances warrant according to each individual case. The spirit of love, understood as commitment to the spiritual perfection of the individual, must always prevail in the application of the law. The abolition of the letter of the law by the spirit of the law has led to the institution of economy exercised in nonessential matters. Through ‘economy,’ which is always an exception to the general rule, the legal consequences following the violation of the law are lifted.” See, “The Canonical Tradition of the Orthodox Church,” in *A Companion to the Greek Orthodox Church*, Fotios K. Litsas, ed. Department of Communication, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, New York, 1984 p. 144-145.

<sup>16</sup> Such are the guidelines laid out by Rev. Fr. Theodore Stylianopoulos, Professor of the New Testament at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, in his article “The Indissolubility of Marriage in the New Testament: Principle and Practice,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 34 (1989): 335-345.

<sup>17</sup> “Interviews with 33 women, plus data from 70 more, explored wives’ reactions to being informed by their husbands that they were bisexual, the consequences of disclosure, and the factors determining those reactions and consensus. Findings suggest that wives struggled less with the homosexuality itself that with the problems of isolation, stigma, loss, cognitive confusion and dissonance, and lack of knowledgeable, empathic support or help in problems solving. Moreover, faulty assumptions about “disclosure” seem to have led to serious misconceptions about the wives, on the part of husbands, researcher, and therapist alike. These misconceptions and the “realities” are discussed.” Jean S. Gochros, “Wives’ Reactions to Learning That Their Husbands Are Bisexual”, *Journal of Homosexuality* 11, (2010): 101-114.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Gerkin, *The Living Human Document* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), p. 133.

<sup>19</sup> Idem. p. 141.

guilty because she invested in a relationship for six years, and that has now led to an inevitable impasse.

The second cause of this guilt is a strong sense of ostracism in even considering divorce. Whether it is parental pressure, familiar or social, it is clear that something has ingrained a profound sense that divorce is a "dirty thing" that will lead to its ostracism. Indeed, the fact that she feels it, especially on the part of the ecclesial community, is revealing of one of two things. Firstly, it is quite possible that the church community is actually very cold and judgmental. Secondly, however, the feeling of this pressure was so strong that it did not resist it. Now that the problems have arisen in marriage, we conjure up the same sentiments. It is very likely that this individual is not a very strong personality type and may either have a difficult time making decisions or it is quite possible that for her whole life she has had decisions made for her. This "inability" to make decisions was clearly manifested by his subtle hints to me to tell him to divorce. Deep down, she knows what is the answer which best benefits her and her situation; however, she is seemingly too preoccupied with other issues, which are preventing hers to make this tough decision.

A woman's story is incomplete. During the initial visit I tried to actively hear her situation and "evoke her story". I tried to intuitively listen and reflectively reinterpret her story. It was through this process that I arrived at those preliminary conclusions.

In that first and foremost visit, what was of crucial importance was to update Gerkin's statement where.

*"Pastoral counselors are, more than anything else, listeners to and interpreters of stories. Persons seek out a pastoral counselor because they need someone to listen to their story. Most often, the story is tangled, it involves themes, plots, and counterplots. The story itself is, of course, and interpretation of experience".<sup>20</sup>*

### ***Reflection on the task***

Thinking back to what happened, I would have opened up a bit differently than the original counselor. When a person comes into a counselling setting, they are often intimidated, and starting the session by diving headlong into the issue can be very intimidating for an individual. I should have asked more generic and casual questions to set the tone for the rest of the session.

The second thing which I would have done differently is to rephrase my questions regarding the assignment. In formulating the questions, as I did, I may have created a potentially "psychiatric" atmosphere and for many, this may be intimidating. Indeed, if the person feels that they are "being analyzed", this can lead to mistrust and a breakdown in the counselling relationship.

The third thing I would have done in a different way was with the husband. First, I should have asked her how he felt about the relationship and then secondly, I should have possibly thrown out the option of having the two of them come in together the next time so that more issues could be brought into a clearer light. As Fr. Philotheos Faros elaborates, we should strive to remember, but each version sees things differently, from his or her own perspective. Considering this, pastors should always listen to both sides before reaching any conclusion. It would also help immensely if we tried to remember that we often tend, as pastors, to side with women when they have differences with their husbands, a tendency that might help explain, to some extent, why men do not feel attracted much to the Church.<sup>21</sup>

I felt that I was attentive to this situation and I tried to accurately interpret the various signals that were being thrown at me. At the same time, I tried to keep Anton Boison's model of the "human person as a 'document' to be read and interpreted in a manner analogous to the interpretation of historical texts" as well as the further implication of his model "that the depth experience of persons in the struggles of their mental and spiritual life demanded the same respect

---

<sup>20</sup> Idem. p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> Φάρος, *Μαθήματα ζωής*, p. 95.



as do the historic texts from which the foundations of our Judeo-Christian tradition are drawn” in mind throughout the session.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to Boison’s model, Chrysostom’s dictum, “For the man does not exist who can by compulsion cure someone else again, he will”<sup>23</sup> was also a strong motivating factor in how I approached this situation. Indeed, I tried to make sure that the decisions (if any) would be made by her and her alone. I did not want to be put into a corner whereby I would have to make a choice for her, which may sometime down the road be looked upon by her with resentment. In fact, just by the statements she made of feeling “pressured” to marry and the like, there is potential here for her to blame individuals whom she feels have made decisions for her.

I am not sure that I have properly balanced the role of auditor and interpreter at this first meeting. Indeed, “*pastoral counseling may thus be understood as dialogical hermeneutical process involving the counselor and counselee in communication across the boundaries of language worlds*”. Therefore, I don't know how effective our communication has been in this particular case and in this context.

### ***Moving towards a Telos***

When moving towards a telos, it is important to ask "which telos are we moving towards?" Joseph Allen is correct in reminding us that in the pastoral relationship, we are striving for “wholeness”, or for “holiness” within oneself and between oneself and others. The telos we strive for are also described by Gerkin's signals for the end of an advice relationship. These signals are:

- 1) signals of integration and wholeness.
- 2) signals of altered behavior and altered relationships.
- 3) signals of clarity about continuous problems in the life of the soul.
- 4) signals of openness to transcendence and parabola.
- 5) signals of appropriation of *eschatological identity*<sup>24</sup>.

Therefore, with these models in mind, the last telos to which not only this, but every counseling relationship must strive for is wholeness on a physical, psychological, and spiritual level. That is the ideal. In this situation, the ultimate hope is to resolve problems with her husband, herself and the community in general.

The first problem which must be resolved is the relationship with her husband. At this point, it appears that no other issue can be addressed in this context unless it is addressed first. This will be a catalyst for her integrity and wholeness and help facilitate altered behavior and altered relationships. Hence, it seemed clear from her allusions that deep down this woman wants a divorce from her husband so that she can continue her life.

Above and beyond that, it would also be necessary to address her other feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and insecurity; and depending on how deep or serious these issues are, it may even be necessary to refer her to a professional who would be better equipped to help her through the emotional trauma which she has been experienced and will experience as this process proceeds. Actually, if I were in that situation, I wouldn't want to probe very deeply because of the possibility of opening very painful wounds. Because of my background, I would do more harm than good in this situation.

Once this has been done, it will be necessary to help re-integrate her into the community of faith. This final telos will be appropriating his *eschatological identity*<sup>25</sup>. Perhaps there are deeper

---

<sup>22</sup> Idem. p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> St John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, trans. Graham Neville (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), p. 57, as cited in Joseph Allen, *The Ministry of the Church: Image of Pastoral Care* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986), p. 117.

<sup>24</sup> Gerkin, pp. 184-190.

<sup>25</sup> The concept of “eschatological identity”, used by Charles V. Gerkin in his *Pastoral Psychology*, should not be confused with the “Ultimate Identity”, applied by L. Elhard, in the influence of Eric Erikson. See L. Elhard, “Living Faith: Some Contributions of the Concept of Ego-identity to the Understanding of Faith”, in: P. Homans (Ed.), *The Dialogue Between Theology and Psychology* (pp. 135-161), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968, 1969. The “eschatological identity” (Ch. Gerkin) is simply the orien-

spiritual difficulties here. In many ways, I felt very enigmatic about her faith since on the one hand, she tended to go to church, while on the other, it seemed as though her faith was easily destabilized. This session, however, was not sufficient to evaluate or even make a tentative judgment about his spiritual position.

### *Decisions on Pastoralism towards Healing and Wholeness*<sup>26</sup>

In the verbatim scenario, the visit ended with me recommending that the wife thinks about her situation and the things which we spoke of and then come to see me in about a week's time. In the upcoming meetings, there will be a number of issues that need to be addressed to help move this person towards healing and wholeness.

Unfortunately, there was not much that could have been done in terms of preventative ministry in this situation. As such, it is appropriate to apply Joseph Allen's supporting ministry plan to cope with this situation. The aims here will be:

- 1) belching, retaining or stabilizing the disturbed person, and
- 2) help the person himself to gain strength to cope with his problem.

Therefore, according to Joseph Allen, there is a six-fold pastoral response in a situation like this one. First the pastor must be a "*shoulder to lean on*"; secondly, the pastor must encourage the person to face the problem and grow from it (it was facing the problem which I tried to focus on in this encounter); thirdly, the pastor must help give a true and objective view of the situation; fourthly, the pastor must help build spiritual defenses; fifthly, discuss the meaning of the person's problem; and finally, be alert to helpful Scripture and other reading materials.<sup>27</sup>

In theological terms, we must discuss the theological implications of divorce. Here, I'll need to dig deeper to find out what she understands about marriage and divorce. Since I can assume from the first visit that she will repeat that divorce is wrong, I will need to explore two biblical texts with her. The first is *Deuteronomy 24*, in which we read:

*"Suppose a man enters marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife"*<sup>28</sup>.

Here, in the Old Testament, it is clearly stated that divorce is indeed permissible.<sup>29</sup> Although it says that the man writes the certificate of divorce, I will need to make clear to her that in that context, according to civil and cultural laws, it was the husband who issued the certificate, whereas in our culture it can be either. It will also be necessary to underline the sentence "something wrong" here. It will also be important highlight Christ's own teaching in Matthew where Christ says, "*But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery*". In this way we shall see that a lifetime marriage is clearly the ideal; however, Scripture is clear that in some cases divorce is permitted. As stated previously, we will need to explore the two tenets under which divorce is permissible in the Greek Orthodox Church—those of

---

tation of the human psyche to a divine future (q.v. *Kingdom of God*) as if to say that we see the present world "sub specie aeternitatis".

<sup>26</sup> "The Judaeo-Christian religious tradition has generally been mistrustful of sexuality, wherein homosexuality is not even a legitimate discussion. The psychological tradition has been heterosexist and homophobic. It is argued that only a creation-centered spirituality and a transpersonal psychotherapy can be truly supportive of gay men and lesbian women. A transpersonal model is presented that is integrated with creation spirituality. This model is applied to specific situations of gay men and lesbians with clinical examples. In this inquiry, the special gifts of homosexuals are noted." John A. Struzzo, "Pastoral Counseling and Homosexuality", *Journal of Homosexuality*, 18 (2008): 195-222.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, pp. 229-230.

<sup>28</sup> Deut. 24: 1-2

<sup>29</sup> For a theological reappraisal of divorce, see "A theology of separation and divorce?", in John Patton and Brian H. Childs, *Christian Marriage and Family; Caring for our Generations*, (Nashville: Abington Press, 1988), pp. 184-186.

adultery and death;<sup>30</sup> we will then need to see if either of this applies to her situation. In order to help her better understand her situation, supplementary reading material may also be necessary.<sup>31</sup>

It may also be necessary (depending on the avenues she would pursue in the future) to discuss the theological implications of her husband's homosexuality. Indeed, the vision of contemporary society and the Church on this matter is rapidly moving in divergent directions. Again, it will be necessary here to look at the issue and outline the Church's position so that she can come to a better understanding of not only her husband's situation in relation to the rest of Church life, but also, gain a better understanding of her own identity as a woman.

Other long-term theological decisions that may arise would be matters of confession, penance, and holy communion. My first impression tells me that this person may have never been to confession before; as such, to recommend this option may undermine the inherent aspect of repentance which is a pre-requisite of the sacrament. By the same token, to recommend this at this point may even further augment her feelings of guilt and separation and thus, at the outset, may not be a wise suggestion at this point. But at a certain point, it would be beneficial to help her return to full communion and reconciliation with God and with her.

Depending again on how frequently she receives holy communion, it may also be a good penance to have her not receive the sacrament for one month after the actual divorce from her husband. By enacting this small act of penance (and again if this could be combined with confession) the woman would be provided with both psychological and physical means of reintegration into her parish.

At first glance, this individual may also need some professional guidance to help her not only cope with what she has been through—being married to someone who has homosexual and then after finding out, all the subsequent emotions such as guilt, rejection, and inadequacy—but also to help in the process of healing and wholeness.

She must therefore take a concrete decision on what she wants to do with her marriage. But in the same way, it will also be necessary to put her husband in the picture and see where he is in terms of the marriage contract.

To summarize, this is a complex situation in which several emotional, psychological, spiritual, theological, and even sociological issues are present; it will inevitably take much time and effort in order to bring about a resolution. Given this, it is therefore appropriate to remember and reflect on the role of the pastor and thus close the circle. In his work *On the Flight to Pontus*, St. Gregory the Theologian puts it best when he said:

*“The scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings; to rescue it from the world and give it to God; and to watch over that which is in His image if it abides; to take it by the hand if it is in danger or restore it if ruined; to make Christ dwell in the heart by the Spirit; and, in short, to deify and bestow heavenly bliss upon one who belongs to the heavenly host”<sup>32</sup>.*

This is what a pastor should strive to accomplish in his ministry.

---

<sup>30</sup> See Theodore Stylianopoulos' article, "The Indissolubility of Marriage in the New Testament: Principle and Practice," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 34 (1989): 335-345.

<sup>31</sup> "The Church grant 'ecclesiastical divorce' is on the basis of the exception given by Christ to his general prohibition of the practice. The Church has frequently deplored to the rise of divorce and generally sees divorce as a tragic failure. Yet the Orthodox Church also recognizes that sometimes the spiritual well-being of Christians caught in a broken and essentially nonexistent marriage justifies it if works, with the right of one or both of the partners to remarry. Each parish priest is required to do all he can to help couples resolve their differences. If they cannot, and they obtain a civil divorce, they may apply for wash in sandwich jurisdictions of the Orthodox Church. In others, the judgment is left to the parish priest when and if a civil divorce person seeks to remarry. Those Orthodox jurisdictions which issue divorces require a thorough evaluation of the situation, and the appearance of the civil divorced couple before along listicle cord, where another investigation is made. Only after divorce is issued by the presiding Bishop can they apply for an ecclesiastical license to remarry." Rev. Stanley Harakas, "The Stand of the Orthodox Church on Controversial Issues," in *A Companion to the Greek Orthodox Church*, Fotios K. Litsas, ed. Department of Communication, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, New York, 1984 p. 221.

<sup>32</sup> P. Schaff and H. A. Wase, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the One Christian Church*, Series 2, vol. VII, S. Cyril of Jerusalem, S. Gregory Nazianzen: Orations, Sermons, etc. (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), p. 209.

## *Epilogue*

Pastoral care must be grounded in realism and not fantasized as a medium the Church, by permitting second and even a third marriage, does not deny the holiness in this agreement all character of marriage. On the contrary, it affirms both, yet at the same time it also affirms the simple truth that marriage cannot be a prison when it has ceased to exist in reality. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware says in a 30-year article

*“in permitting a divorce when the partners have become irrevocably alienated, the church does not bring the marriage to an end but he is a fairly complete. The marriage, as the sacrament of love, has already seized to exist; In their relationship to one another, the partners are already dead. While the sacrament of marriage is indeed the divine action, it is not a piece of magic, but also requires human cooperation. Sacramental gift of Christian marriage needs to be accepted and lived on the human side, and it can eventually be rejected. When this has happened, the church does not exist on the permanent continuation of a lifeless outward form, which has ceased to be a grace giver and has become mutually destructive...*

*Most important of all, in the Orthodox rationale of divorce, is the appeal to divine compassion and mercy. Whether Catholics or Orthodox, we are all agreed that the Church is not a juridical corporation, governed by the inflexible legal code, but it is the Body of Christ, the Pentecostal fellowship of the Holy Spirit. As ‘ambassadors for Christ’ (2 Cor. 5, 20), whether bishops, priests, or lay people, we are here to manifest in the world the loving kindness and generosity of the of the Savior. We take as our model Jesus with Zacchaeus (Luke 19, 9), with a woman taken in adultery (John 8, 11), with a woman ‘who was a sinner’ and who washed his feet with her tears (Luke 7, 47). To these and countless others he offered fresh hope, a new beginning, a second chance. Shall we not do the same for those whose marriage has failed? Humans make mistakes; persons enter into matrimony who should never have considered getting married to one another in the first place; or else a marriage that began by being reasonably happy turns sour and becomes poisoned. Is the Church to offer no remedy or hope of healing, so long as both the partners are alive? Surely this cannot be the way of Christ”.*<sup>33</sup>

## *Bibliography*

- Allen Joseph, *The Ministry of the Church: Image of Pastoral Care*, Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminar Press, 1986.
- Arnold V. William, *Introduction to Pastoral Care*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982.
- Bozzet W. Frederick Heterogenous couples in heterosexual marriages: gay men and straight women,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 8 (1982): 81-89
- Caragounis C. Chrys, *Homoeroticism Ancient and Modern—And the Christian Church*, Revised Edition, Lund, 2007.
- Carson Jeffrey and Sarris Nikos, *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University, 1997.
- Clinebell Howard, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth*, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1984.
- Chrysostom St. John, *On the Priesthood*, trans. Graham Neville, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984.
- Chrysavgis John, *Love, Sexuality, and the Sacrament of Marriage*, Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1996.

---

<sup>33</sup> Kallistos Ware, “The sacrament of love: the Orthodox understanding of marriage and its breakdown,” *Downside Review* 109 (1991): 90.

- Doehring Carrie, "Life-Giving Sexual and Spiritual Desire", *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 4 (1994): 49-69.
- Elhard L., "Living Faith: Some Contributions of the Concept of Ego-identity to the Understanding of Faith", in: P. Homans (Ed.), *The Dialogue Between Theology and Psychology* (pp. 135-161), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968, 1969.
- Erickson H. John, *The Challenge of our Past*, Crestwood, New York, 1991.
- Faros Ph. [Φιλόθεος Φάρος (π.)], *Μαθήματα ζωής: Κατανοώντας το περιεχόμενο της ποιμαντικής διακονίας*, (in Greek) Athens: Armos, 2020.
- Gerkin V. Charles, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical mode*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1984.
- Gochros S. Jean, "Wives' Reactions to Learning That Their Husbands Are Bisexual", *Journal of Homosexuality*, 11 (2010): 101-114.
- Harakas Stanley, "The Stand of the Orthodox Church on Controversial Issues," in *A Companion to the Greek Orthodox Church*, Fotios K. Litsas, ed. Department of Communication, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, New York, 1984, pp. 217-237
- Hildebrandt Achim, "Routes to decriminalization: A comparative analysis of the legalization of same-sex sexual acts," *Sexualities*, 7 (2014): 230-253.
- L' Huillier Peter, "The indissolubility of marriage in Orthodox law and practice," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 32 (1988): 199-221.
- Litsas K. Fotios, *A Companion to the Greek Orthodox Church*, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, New York, 1984.
- MacRae W. George, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism*, Wilmington, 1987.
- Ostenson A. Joseph, Zhang Michael, "Reconceptualizing Marital Conflict: A Relational Perspective," *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 34 (2014): 229-242.
- Patsavos Lewis, "The Canonical Tradition of the Orthodox Church," in *A Companion to the Greek Orthodox Church*, Fotios K. Litsas, ed. Department of Communication, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, New York, 1984, p. 137-147.
- Patton John, *Pastoral Counseling: A Ministry of the Church*, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1984.
- Patton John and Brian H. Childs, *Christian Marriage and Family; Caring for our Generations*, Nashville: Abington Press, 1988.
- Poling James N., "Response to Carrie Doehring", *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 4 (1994): 70-72.
- Schaff P. and Wase H. A., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the One Christian Church*, Series 2, vol. VII, S. Cyril of Jerusalem, S. Gregory Nazianzen: Orations, Sermons, etc., Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955.
- Siobhán C Daly, Pádraig MacNeela, K. Sarma, "The female spouse: A process of separation when a husband 'comes out' as gay," *National Library of Medicine* 13 (2018): 8-16
- Struzzo A. John, "Pastoral Counseling and Homosexuality", *Journal of Homosexuality*, 18 (2008): 195-222.
- Stylianopoulos Theodore, "The Indissolubility of Marriage in the New Testament: Principle and Practice," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 34 (1989):335-345.
- Switzer K. David, *Pastoral Care Emergencies: Ministering to People in Crisis*, New York: Paulist Press, 1989.
- Timiadis Emilianos, *Parish, Priest, and Renewal*, Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994.
- Ware Kallistos, "The sacrament of love: the Orthodox understanding of marriage and its breakdown," *Downside Review*, 109 (1991): 79-93.
- Williams J. Robert, "Toward a Theology for Lesbian and Gay Marriage", *Anglican Theological Review*, 72 (1990): 134-157.