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The Christian Family in the Thinking of Father Dumitru Staniloae

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Abstract

The family has always been central to Christian teaching. It represents the most precious and holy intimate setting for cultivating and practicing the love of Christ the Saviour for His Church from the inside out. The spiritual and moral upbringing of children is essential and is the basic form of its existence and one of its main purposes. Today, when “models” foreign to the Christian ethos are proposed, the Church must support more firmly and promote the moral and spiritual values of the family. The present text wants to capture the beauties and depths of Father Dumitru Staniloae’s thinking regarding conjugal life that argues the biblical and patristic idea according to which man and woman make up complete humanity. Starting from the model of the unity of the Holy Trinity Persons, he supports the incessant progress in the spiritualization of the family and its ascension through Christ. The Romanian theologian protects the unity and communion of marriage, protecting it from various dangers and “traps” of contemporary society.

Keywords

family, communion, unity, love, Church

I. Introduction

The marriage of a man and a woman, namely the founding of a family, is “a holy act of divine origin”, instituted by God the Father in heaven (cf. Genesis 2, 18.21-24) and commanded by the Son of God in the New

Testament: “But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10, 6-9).

People do not married because they want to, but because this is how God ordained in the law of nature, just as people are not born because they want to, but because God first called them to life. Man and woman accompany each other freely and God gives them His grace to unite and strengthen them in everything they do. Through divine power their connection and union is elevated from a physical and material to a spiritual one. Their full unity is realized *in the Church*, according to the words of St Apostle Paul, when the man “identifies” himself with the Saviour Christ, and the woman with His Church.

Russian theologian Pavel Florensky stated that the Church (and society) is made up of dual units (“dyads”), that is, families, not individuals or isolated persons, and Father Dumitru Staniloae made a comparison intuiting that the Church is made up “of molecules rather than atoms”¹. Florensky noted that the “human atom” shatters the unity of the Church, instead the “community molecule”, family molecule, gives greater homogeneity to ecclesial life. He even talks about “a new antinomy: the person-dyad antinomy”².

The family is the one who builds the Church because mysterious things happen in the family, and sometimes holy things, as we find in the Church. The family has a *mystery* of its own, a mystical part, an intimacy and an inner beauty that no one can enter. Even the Church herself, the one that sanctifies the family, does not enter very deeply into the mystery of the family, but advises and urges the family with divine pedagogy, common sense, moderation and pastoral tact. She constantly maintains a *special connection* with the new family, through the Mystery of Holy Confession.

Father Staniloae also stated that “their union in Christ is a small church, as St. John Chrysostom explains, or a part of the Church, for the Church too is made up of these kinds of units married in the Holy Spirit, who

¹ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*. Vol. 5: *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, Transl. Ioan Ionita and Robert Baringer, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, USA, 2012, p. 183.

² Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 218.

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breathes into the Church³. And Saint John pointed out that always marriage “is a mystery and a type of a mighty thing... It is a type of the Church”⁴.

It is especially important to turn our family into a “small” church, a mysterious, prayerful and soothing church for all the problems and disturbances that threaten it from the outside or the inside. The family must be an oasis of peace or a “land of salvation”, as the Church was considered during the pastorate of St. John Chrysostom, as Archbishop of Constantinople⁵. In the family, the atmosphere of the Church with all its spiritual components must be found.

The wedding is in the same time the realization of a dream but also the beginning of a *totally new path*. Everyone dreams of finding the right half and having a beautiful “fairytale” wedding. Sincere will and personal effort are absolutely necessary at the beginning of the new family journey, helped and sustained by God’s mercy and grace.

Through the marriage, the man is called “to apply the graces of the remaining sacraments in an appropriate way within the concrete familial and social situation in which the vast majority of them lived by nature”⁶, says Father Staniloae. He is referring here to the grace of Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist and Repentance. Especially in the life of his family, man must teach children from an early age with faith in God and the power of the Holy Spirit. In the family, we see God indirectly through others, husband, wife and children. Christ Himself states: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes Me” (Matthew 18, 5). The image of the one next to us is a *reflection* of the image of Christ. We can see ourselves better and we can even understand each other better by looking carefully and lovingly at others and understanding them.

Only in this way can our love for the other *progress* and never run out. If we limit ourselves to seeing the other *only* as simple “otherness”, we cannot grow in love with him. But if through the other we see and understand the image of God in man manifested in an inexhaustible form of meanings and deeds, we can always love him, without getting bored of

³ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 178.

⁴ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 178.

⁵ SOCRATES, *Viața lui Ioan, Episcopul Constantinopolului*, în *Viața Sfântului Ioan Gură de Aur în relatările istoricilor bisericești: Paladie, Teodor al Trimitundei, Socrates, Sozomen și Fer. Teodoret al Cirului*, transl. Pr. Prof. Dr. Constantin Cornițescu, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2001, p. 191.

⁶ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 168.

his presence. The human person “is a purpose in itself, always a subject, never an object, being a meeting point between two worlds”⁷. Father Staniloae stated: “Only because Christ as God is transparent in the other and beautifies the other does this other show himself to us as worthy of an unending love; the love for this other is never exhausted”⁸. Only the Son of God can give strength and meaning to our love for others, because otherwise, “apart from Christ a permanent love for a concrete person would be impossible”.

II. Man and woman compose the complete humanity

According to the teaching of the Church, “only together do man and woman form humanity in its completeness”⁹. Marriage is the mystery that fully realizes this goal. The unity of the spouses in the family is achieved after the unity of the Divine Persons in the Holy Trinity. God Himself is not alone, but is Triune in Persons. This is the Supreme Model of communion and the family is a call to communion. It is called to such a perfect union that it becomes a physical and spiritual unity. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”, says Christ the Saviour (Mark 10, 7-8). Only in this unity of communion can husband and woman truly achieve remarkable things in life. The greatest fulfilment is the birth of another person that is done naturally and genuine, that is, according to our human nature only in this mystery of communion, in the mystery of the family.

The construction of a “house” is really carried out only in this unity of communion; the man decides the strength and durability of the house, and the woman chooses its utility, beauty and splendour. According to this model of the “house”, which in a way *imitates* the construction of a temple of God, that is, of a church on a small human scale, all the other plans and projects of the family will materialize. The most important of these is raising and educating children, which can only be done fully in the family. Nothing can replace the family as well in the education process. Man and

⁷ Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Taina iubirii. Sfințenia unirii conjugale în lumina tradiției ortodoxe*, transl. Gabriela Moldoveanu, Ed. Christiana, București, 1994, pp. 22-23.

⁸ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 169.

⁹ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 170.

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woman, father and mother, can perfectly fulfil this supreme ideal only because they complement each other fully.

A goal of complete unity is to avoid *loneliness*. God also created the woman from Adam's rib to protect man from loneliness, to have someone to complete this person, not just to increase the number by multiplication. The woman is not just *another* man, but she is *someone else*, completely distinct: she raises, beautifies, and gives meaning and colour to life. "The charisma of her internalized and universal «motherhood» sends any woman to the hungry and in need and admirably specifies the feminine essence: virgin or wife, every woman is a mother *in aeternum*"¹⁰.

If it had been only men or only women, there would have been a *unilateral loneliness*, but it would still have been loneliness. Therefore, "the Lord God said, «It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him»" (Genesis 2, 18).

If He had created another Adam, the help would not have been "appropriate" for the first Adam and the circle of loneliness would not have closed completely, but would have been a *linear loneliness*, as we feel when we are arguing with our husband or wife for a long time. In the family, the circle of loneliness closes completely expressed by the symbol of the wedding ring, which also embodies the endless love of the spouses. The communication between them is strengthened by their communication, by the dynamics of the dialogue that can take place precisely because they are different. "Partners in a dialogue must have something in common but also something that is different, of a difference greater than that which exists between one individual member of the same sex and another"¹¹, affirmed Father Staniloae.

The appearance of the child completes the relations of communion and communication, giving them an *endless dynamic*. "If the «I» without any relation can be represented as a point, and the relation between two subjects as a line drawn from one point to another, their relation with a third subject can be represented as a surface, or rather as a triangle, containing within it the all"¹², states Father Staniloae. The child deepens the mystery

¹⁰ Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Taina iubirii*, pp. 41-42.

¹¹ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 170.

¹² Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. 1: *Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, transl. Ioan Ionita and Robert Baringer, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, USA, 1998, p. 267.

and raises the parents to perfection and completion. And this is only true in the family. Outside the family, the child deepens the suffering of both the “parents” (of each one, sooner or later) and his personal, as he grows up.

The distinction between the two, the man and the woman, is a fundamental one that belongs to the deep interior of the human being. Everyone lives humanity differently. It is the same humanity but lived distinctly be man and woman. This does not mean that each is less human but that only the two of them, the man and the woman, complete each other “in a mutual complement”. The child is born with this instinct that is part of his being, of communion with the other and of completion with the otherness of the other of the opposite sex, from the age of maturity for life.

The family accomplishes the complete humanity of the two spouses because each of them seeks and finds in the other, step by step, the perfect achievement of his person. This continuous search and unceasing discovery can make each one love the other with a total dedication and forever. The essential condition for this “long journey of love”, which is marriage, is that the other be seen and understood as a person, not as an object. Because the object is finite and limited in its possibilities, but the human being is “an inexhaustible person – a person who is eternally new in his or her capacity and imagination for self-giving”¹³.

When we look at our wife as described above and cunningly seek new (inexhaustible) meanings, then our family is a *permanent ascent* to God’s heaven. This lives the joys of life and hardens through its sufferings, no matter what itinerary God will give us. “Marriage is thus a path toward the spiritualization of the two spouses not only in the relationship of the one vis-à-vis the other but also in all their relationships with all other human persons”¹⁴, affirms Father Staniloae. Ultimately, the path is set by us, God remains only the *ultimate goal*. Not to be understood by this the fact that we (two, three, four) ascend alone to God; because, in a real and concrete way, He is our “Way and the Truth and the Life” (*John* 14, 6). So it is with monks.

The theologian Paul Evdokimov likens family life to monasticism, finding common characteristics and principles of life, according to the thought of some Church Fathers.

¹³ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 171.

¹⁴ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, pp. 178-179.

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“In marriage, the nature of man is changed as it is changed, in another way, that of the one who wears the monastic robe. The greatest inner affinity unites the two states. The promises exchanged by the fiancés introduce them to a kind of particular monastic state, because here too there is a death of the past in us and the birth to a new life”¹⁵.

German philosopher Friedrich Schiller stated that “love arises not between two souls who make the same sound but between souls that sound in harmony”¹⁶. Marriage can become the “spring symphony” of life in several acts or it can be transformed into major disagreements and a total fiasco; *it's up to us*. It all depends on our attitude and our relationship to God's Word. The father of Romanian theology argued that “love enriches each because it receives and gives without ceasing, while hatred impoverishes, because it gives and receives nothing”¹⁷.

Each person separately manifests one or more weaknesses, but both taken together are strengthened because “in love, they both become strong”. In marriage, the completion of the husband and the wife is fully accomplished. The husband receives and understands in his wife the entire other half of the species and vice versa. Consequently, “neither one has need of another man or another woman”¹⁸.

By living together every day, the man and the woman recompose and complete their individual qualities of their own person and that of the other. We actively form our own self in family life, but just as actively and often indirectly we form or “deform” the self of the other person next to us and, of course, that of our children. Therefore, Father Staniloae uses a new term, “co-person”, declaring that the family is “a co-personal unity”¹⁹. In a word, we are responsible for ourselves and those around us. We cannot be good and they are bad, nor can we be bad and they are good, because either our goodness extinguishes their wickedness, or their wickedness “eats” our goodness.

¹⁵ Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Taina iubirii*, p. 88.

¹⁶ *Apud* Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 171.

¹⁷ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, pp. 171-172.

¹⁸ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 172.

¹⁹ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 172.

Therefore, in the family the moral and spiritual traits of one “pass” gradually to the other and the spouses begin to resemble each other and physically by the facial features and attitudes of the body. “In those who love one another and are found within a reciprocal interiority, the face of the one is stamped with the features of the other and these features shine forth actively from within him”²⁰.

Why do we have to get married? Why do we come before God to form one family, when we are two distinct identities? Man has a predisposition to communion because this is how he was created by God, having in him the longing to seek communion: with his parents, with his half, with his family, with those close to him, with those who knew, with God, etc. He cannot do much alone on his own without the help of the other. Human being was built in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1, 26), the One Who is Triune in Persons, Who continually communicates with One another. Following the same model, the human person is constantly seeking communion with others.

The lonely man becomes selfish because he loves only himself and pursues only his own self-interest. Communion in two people can also become selfish over time, as can the singular existence of the individual. Only when the third person appears is the communion perfect, because the second one no longer reflects back only the love of the first, but “transmits” it further to the third, and he can return it simultaneously to the two by uniting them more and more in their love and communion. In this way, love gradually receives the character of sacrifice. According to this divine model, the human family functions. The family works and constantly transforms the principle of communion in every stage of life.

III. The Ascension of the Family through Christ

Christ the Saviour is par excellence the only Person who can raise and perfect the Christian family directly because “human nature must undergo a change; it must be more and more transfigured by grace in the way of sanctification, which has a range which is not only spiritual but also bodily – and hence cosmic”²¹. All His words, all His gestures and actions

²⁰ Dumitru STANILAOE, *Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, p. 226.

²¹ Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1976, p. 18.

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strengthen and fulfill the family. The Son of God performs the first miracle when starting a family not by chance.

“Christ strengthens anew the bond of marriage between man and woman and raise it up from the order of nature to the order of grace, and through His participation in the wedding at Cana, He enshrouds marriage in the atmosphere of grace that pours forth from His Person”²², affirms Father Staniloae.

He elevates the family from the material plane and seen, in the immaterial plane, unseen and spiritual. Jesus Christ gives meaning to marriage for the rest of the life and leads this meaning into eternal life.

Our Saviour remind us that man and woman were created by God in the beginning in the family life and for the family life. Their cross as distinct persons and of the opposite sex had in view precisely the search by each for full unity with the other and, at the same time, for the realization of complete humanity through the other.

“God Himself has united them through the fact that He made them male and female, and hence through the fact that each becomes wholly human in union with the other, and this unity that each has found cannot be disintegrated and then refashioned with another partner”²³.

The Son of God recalls the original act of creation and clarifies the doubts of the tempting question of the Pharisees about the dissolution of marriage: “Haven’t you read, He replied, that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said: For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matthew 19, 4-6).

The first people received God’s blessing in family life. “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1, 28), God told them. Here we must be very careful because the first exhortation is to “be fruitful”, to rise, to grow, to develop, to progress incessantly in our

²² Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 173.

²³ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 174.

becoming and towards God. The term does not only mean physical grow in weight or height. After that, He gives them the command to multiply and to rule the earth and, through it, all the material things.

The raising of family and love between husband and wife to a higher level involves accomplishment of love between the two in deeds and concrete actions in daily life. Just as the human soul does not live only as an immaterial spirit, but is constantly manifested through the body²⁴, so the spiritual love between the two must not remain only in the sphere of spirituality. It must be expressed in deeds, gestures, attitudes, initiatives and concrete involvement in all problems and needs of the family. Father Staniloae observed that “the body of each becomes for the other a transporence of his or her spirituality; it acquires an ever-greater spiritual depth and clearly becomes his or her place. Each becomes a mystery for the other, all the more known but at the same time all the more indefinable”²⁵.

Appreciating the deep meaning and significance of the human body, Paul Evdokimov states that “the body is not something that can be suppressed by the spirit or silenced; he is the biosphere in which the spirit is embodied, offered to its transfiguring powers or an open tomb in which you can bury yourself alive”²⁶. Blessed Augustine established a permanent and transparent inner connection between soul and body, signalling that “he who is not spiritual even in his body, becomes carnal even in the soul”²⁷.

According to the teaching of the Church, the ascension of the family through Christ is done in fact by the *gradual rise* (ἀνάστασις) from the level of physical love between spouses to the level of spiritual love. When the two remain in the plane of carnal love, boredom is automatically established in their souls after a period of time. Passing into the spiritual

²⁴ “Because neither soul nor body exists separately, even for an instant, Christian teaching prefers to speak not of the spirit of man, but of his soul. For by «spirit», an entity could be understood that owed nothing of its makeup to its coexistence with the body. Hence, for Christian teaching the spirit is not an entity in man distinct from the soul, but rather, consists of the higher functions of the soul that are dedicated less to the care of the body than to a kind of thinking that is capable of rising even to the thought of its Creator”. Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. 2: *The World: Creation and Deification*, transl. Ioan Ionita and Robert Baringer, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2005, p. 73.

²⁵ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 175.

²⁶ Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Taina iubirii*, p. 22.

²⁷ *Apud* Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Taina iubirii*, p. 22.

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plane of love, the family is not only no longer killed by boredom and routine, but it becomes inexhaustible in its meanings and significations, because a human person is himself inexhaustible in his depth and mysteries. The love for the other and the search for the other's mystery continue and amplify endlessly. "The feminine is always sought but never fully found within the giving of it fully and for all one's life long, and the same with the masculine"²⁸.

The spiritualization of love between spouses implies in itself the *increase of the responsibility* for each other, especially for the needs and weaknesses of the other. The Romanian theologian intuited that "in this gradual pneumatisation of the couple's bond, an important role is played by the exercise and growth of the responsibility that the one bears for the other". The two Christian virtues of love and responsibility cause each other and support each other. "Love grows through the exercise of this reciprocal responsibility, and the responsibility grows through love"²⁹. The love for the one next to us is actualised in life and daily needs and becomes "the motivation behind ceaseless acts of responsibility for the good of the other".

The spiritualization of love and the increase of responsibility are fully realised by living the two in Christ, that is, by assuming the continuous and real presence of the Saviour Christ in all aspects of their lives. The family of the two spouses and their home must be imprinted with the work and words of the Son of God. And this is done only in the Church, because she is the mysterious body of the Saviour Christ. This is why St Apostle Paul concludes by talking about the family and the unity of the spouses: "This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the Church" (Ephesians 5, 32). In a very special way, Clement of Alexandria intuited the experience of the family in Christ, declaring: "But who are the two or three who are gathered together in the name of Christ, and in whose midst is the Lord? Does not the Lord speak of man, woman and child, through the three, because through God the woman is united with the man?"³⁰

²⁸ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 171.

²⁹ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 176.

³⁰ CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Stromatele*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* vol. 5, transl. Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1982, p. 216.

IV. Family self-worship

Unfortunately, today, a great sin and a misfortune of humanity is the self-worship of the family, namely raising it on a pedestal of “veneration” totally inappropriate to its designation and purposes, as transmitted for centuries by Christian spirituality and universal culture.

An increasing number of families set as their sole purpose the achievement and cultivation of a “well-being” *only* for their members, in a narrow and restricted sense, without having a minimum openness or concern for other families and people around them and to society. They think only of themselves and their needs. “Me and my family” is beginning to become a *leitmotif* of the hyper-technological and globalised society, which has as its first major interest *only* its well-being reduced only to material and consumer goods.

They do their best to do everything “for the family”: they work overtime, they start working on weekends, they take two jobs, and they go abroad to work living their children at home with their grandparents. They are constantly thinking about what investments do make in order to generate additional income for their children, they buy studios and apartments for kindergarten children (“for the time when they will grow up”), they invest in mutual funds (pensions, study incomes or scholarships in private banks or financial groups), etc. But they forget that an important purpose of the family is to help the poor, to support a child without parents or to help a needy family with many children.

We have forgotten the words of the first prayer of the Holy Matrimony of blessing of the bridegroom and of the bride:

“Do Thou, the same all-holy Master, accept our prayers, of Thy servants... and grant to these Thy servants, (Name) and (Name), a peaceful and long life, wisdom, mutual love in the bond of peace, long-lived offspring, a crown of glory that does not fade away... and give them of the dew of heaven from on high, and of the fruitfulness of the earth. Fill their houses with wheat, wine and oil and with every good thing, so that they may give in turn to those in need”³¹.

³¹ *The Holy Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. The Sacrament of Baptism. The Sacrament of Matrimony*, transl. Prof. Dr. Lucreția Vasilescu et. al., Ed. Sfânta Arhiepiscopie a Bucureștilor, Bucharest, 2007, p. 75.

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This is why Father Staniloae had been warning since the last century that the family should not become “a monad selfishly taken up with its own interest alone”³². Today, more and more care and concern for the *other* is being lost.

The closure of the modern family itself is an “enclosure” that no longer “opens up” to society and the others, as would be normal and as the Church has always urged in its tradition. By giving birth and raising children, the family is forced to open up to society, because it is in great need of it; that is the only way it can raise its children. The famous philosopher Constantin Noica stated:

“Everything that is good in the world represents an enclosure that is opening up. The life is the closure in a genetic code and the opening through it; the language is the enclosure in a grammar and opening through it; the number is the closure in a base and opening through its powers, 10x10, 10x10x10; the wave is the enclosure in a vibration and the opening through its expansion; friendship is the closure in an affection and the opening through it to the human”³³.

Instead, “the devil only knows about closures that close”. It seems that today’s family no longer sets a goal of being open to others.

Houses are being built bigger and bigger, and families are getting smaller and smaller and their numbers are dwindling. The house is no longer a place of joy and light that radiates to the world, but becomes a place of “group selfishness”, restricted, which has long abandoned the care for others and the help of outsiders. The same author noted: “With its windows, its doors and its bridges over the loneliness to the world, the house is truly a closing that opens”³⁴. Globalization, digitalization and excessive technology restrict these natural openings and return the concerns of the family only within it.

Today’s family forgets the troparion that was sung at the Mystery of Holy Matrimony: “O holy martyrs, who fought the good fight and have

³² Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 186.

³³ Constantin NOICA, *Simple introduceri la bunătatea timpului nostru*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1992, p. 11.

³⁴ Constantin NOICA, *Simple introduceri la bunătatea timpului nostru*, p. 11.

received your crowns: entreat the Lord, that He will have mercy on our souls”³⁵. The family no longer aims at perfecting its members and orienting them towards higher ideals, which also adds attention to others and their service, and if necessary even sacrifice for their own, but only well-being and comfort. The cross is increasingly taken out of the life, deeds and attitude of the family. So are the icons! As Father Staniloae pointed out, today the family is beginning to become “capable of going outside the walls only to plunder and acquire, never to give”³⁶.

In this context, divorce seems to become more and more natural (and more frequent), being even significantly facilitated in its development by the new laws and regulations of the Civil Code on the family and its “disintegration”. Divorce is no longer considered a gesture against moral and religious principles, but a “right” of every citizen. “Character mismatch” and incompatibility are the most common reasons for its pronouncement.

Many couples (young people), who leave together for years, do not get married, so as not to divorce. They prefer to be assured that they are not “pressed” by the “need” to separate, if they no longer understand each other, once they are not married. They no longer want to be “bound” by an act or by God’s blessing, to have the “door open” at all times, to leave at any time, in case of any misunderstanding or “mismatch”. “The so-called «free» coexistence, especially promoted in our time, misinterprets and falsifies from the beginning the importance of the communion of love”³⁷, says the Greek theologians Gerogios Mantzaridis.

These couples are often “confused” by the children who “appear” in their midst and gradually begin to understand that the “open door” is closing more and more. There are many cases when young people perform the Baptism of their children before their Mystery of Holy Matrimony, and if they are asked about their religious marriage, they answer nonchalantly and impassively that they “have not yet thought about it” (sic!). All these states, in fact, are clear manifestations of the self-idolatry of the family and of individual or dual selfishness within it.

³⁵ *The Holy Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. The Sacrament of Baptism. The Sacrament of Matrimony*, p. 81.

³⁶ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 183.

³⁷ Gerogios MANTZARIDIS, *Morala Creștină. Omul și Dumnezeu. Omul și semenul. Poziționări și perspective existențiale și bioetice*, transl. diac. drd. Cornel Constantin Coman, Ed. Bizantină, București, 2006, p. 292.

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Christ's entrance into these "equations" with (often) "unknown" terms and "unexpected" results means the normalisation of things, their natural placement, their perfection, and their ascension. Once again the Apostle of Gentiles reminds us that "this is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the Church" (*Ephesians* 5, 32), in Christ, the One who said "apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15, 5).

If every family (or couple) read the Gospel of John (it has only 21 chapters or 30 pages!), each season or year, things would change radically.

V. Holy Confession – The Mystery of Family *Unity*

Above all, the Church meets all Christians, families and each member through an inexhaustible source of holiness, divine grace and full forgiveness: the Mystery of Holy Repentance. One of the seven Holy Mysteries of the Church, the Mystery of Confession offers forgiveness of all sins declared and acknowledged by the penitent through the direct work of the grace of the Holy Spirit and "strengthens anew the union with Christ in the one who, through his sins, has created a distance or a division between himself and Christ"³⁸.

If "in the other mysteries grace works on the plane of the objective, the ontic, of the roots of being itself, but often in a manner not perceptible to the senses", in the Mystery of Forgiveness "grace works through a more thorough and vibrant commitment on the part of the penitent, through confession and repentance"³⁹. The Mystery of the Confession of sins becomes laborious and effective in the spiritual life of the Christian, in his relationship with God, "Priest of mystical and undefiled marriage, and Ordainer of the law of marriage of the body"⁴⁰, as "in this relationship Christ Himself is invisibly present but transparent and perceived in a mystical way"⁴¹. He Himself works through the mouth and hand of the priest and offers the forgiveness of the Christian's sins. At the same time, with the presence and work of Christ in the Mystery of Holy Repentance,

³⁸ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 113.

³⁹ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 119.

⁴⁰ *The Holy Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. The Sacrament of Baptism. The Sacrament of Matrimony*, p. 75.

⁴¹ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 121.

the personal work of the Holy Spirit is also present, as Father Staniloae confesses: “This mystery causes them to make a leap from the plane of the soul to the divine plane, where the Holy Spirit is active. For this reason, the priest is called the *duhovnic* (spiritual father) in this sacrament, and his activity in it is a spiritual (*duhovnicească*) activity”⁴².

By divine power, *all* sins confessed by the penitent in the throne of repentance are forgiven (John 20, 23), regardless of their nature and manner, for the tradition of the Church does not know sins that cannot be forgiven.

Holy Confession is one of the best and most direct methods of guiding and shepherding the Christian family. It penetrates alone with much respect and pastoral (and psychological) tact into the deepest intimacy of married life. In the confessional, the slips and problems of the family are listened to, examined, corrected, and forgiven, through the divine work of the Holy Spirit. The regularity and sincerity of the confession always keep under the attention of the clergy the good running of the Christian family and the upbringing and good education of the children.

The presence of the very well-trained counsellor, in the person of the spiritual priest, as “the visible representative of God”, who has “a considerable moral authority” and “a good knowledge of the manner in which the different human weaknesses can be cured”⁴³, along with the divine work of grace, have a permanent efficiency for the family, especially for young families at the beginning of the road. Therefore, two things are needed here: on the one hand, full responsibility and maturity on the part of the priest for the guidance to Christ with great skill of the souls entrusted to him. And on the other hand, sincerity and openness on the part of the spouses before the clergyman, realizing the unseen but real presence of Christ, and the “search” for a good guide before whom they can open their souls, who can understand them and to be able to lead them with much patience to full communion, harmony and salvation. In this sense, it is absolutely necessary for both spouses to confess to the same priest and for the family to keep a single spiritual priest for a long period of time.

All sins, passions and moral slips related to family life can be forgiven by God through the Mystery of Confession. There is no sin or passion that cannot be forgiven. The presence of Christ becomes effective

⁴² Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 122.

⁴³ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 120.

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especially through the penitent's state of repentance, before, during and after confession, giving birth in his soul the desire to fight against the passions and not to repeat them. According to St Basil the Great, this state of repentance and personal struggle against sin is the most important part of Confession, because it transforms man through the work of grace into his ultimate interiority.

Vices become in man, by their frequent repetition and by the habit of them, a "second nature" or an inauthentic, artificial way of existence, which replaces the natural one of human nature. Of great importance is therefore the awareness of the Christian and his firm desire for continuous personal struggle against the habit of sin. Just repentance or an emotional state that superficially regrets the vice is not enough, but

"the emotional experience hostile to sin must take concrete form in deeds and attitudes opposed to these weaknesses, in order to weaken the habits they have created and form other habits within the person's nature. At this point, the phase of confession comes to an end, and there begins the phase of the penitent's repentance; this phase helps him to develop his contrition and regret for the sins committed and to deepen his decision to sin no more"⁴⁴.

From another point of view, the Sacrament of Holy Confession strengthens and sanctifies communion and good understanding within a family, because "this mystery is the mystery of a communion like no other"⁴⁵. After each confession, the family is strengthened in communion by establishing a lasting bond with the spiritual father and by restoring communion with Christ. "Together with the priest, the penitent realizes the greatest communion that can be realized with a fellow human being", affirms Father Staniloae. This is

"the mystery of reestablishing full communion between a believer and the priest as the visible instrument of Christ and as the representative of the Church. Hence it is the mystery of bringing the penitent into communion with Christ and the

⁴⁴ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, pp. 124-125.

⁴⁵ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 121.

Church, of preparing him for his communion with the body of Christ⁷⁴⁶.

Since the husband and wife form a (single) unity of the family and are one body, as our Saviour says, the spouses may sometimes be confessed together by the spiritual priest, especially during periods of distance or quarrel, in order to observe the homogeneity, cohesion and level of spiritualization of the family. These discussions, known in some quarters as “spiritual counselling”, are intended to restore unity and understanding of the family and to prevent them from slipping or divorcing.

Here the spiritual father must be extremely careful to understand the nature of the problems in their essence, by deepening some important topics, where appropriate, and avoiding others that do not have a special relevance for family problems. He must be strong and vehement enough at the same time not to let the discussions degenerate into accusations, insinuations, verbal or mental violence. It is absolutely necessary to avoid superfluous and inefficient details and to focus on the reasons that led to the misunderstandings between the two spouses, as well as on the nuances that these problems have manifested over time. The root causes should be carefully identified and corrected in essence.

It would also be very useful to read prayers⁴⁷ for the two spouses (by the priest) for the call of God’s mercy and help, for the increase of the love and peace, for the uprooting of hatred and enmity and for the reconciliation of quarrelsome spouses.

It should be taken into account by each one the decision to research and analyze these issues with great patience and indulgence and without any haste. Their solution is done only in time, little by little, and the grace of God works in man and becomes effective only with the passing of time.

VI. Conclusion

The patristic thinking of Father Dumitru Staniloae represents an everlasting source of moral principles and Christian teachings regarding

⁴⁶ Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 121.

⁴⁷ These prayers are available especially in the newest edition of the *Molitfelnic*, published by Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, in 2019, a much improved and updated edition.

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the importance, deep and inexhaustible meanings of the Christian family. It always keeps alive the unceasing love of Christ the Saviour and the Most Holy Trinity for men and for all creation.

Orthodox theology and ecumenism should use more and more the contribution of Father Staniloae and other illustrious modern theologians to this issue. His writings and ideas are a permanent “source” of arguments, answers, explanations and clarifications regarding married life and the formation of children and young people. As we have seen, here we find exposed the biblical and patristic ideas according to which man and woman together form the *complete humanity*, they are obliged to sustain the unceasing progress in the *spiritualization* of the family and have the responsibility to seek its *ascension* through Christ.