

"It has been my observation that many people enter into marriage with the wrong understanding, asking questions such as 'will it work?,' or thinking they will 'give it a try,' rather than with a determination to cooperate with God in making it right and holy. These people who start off on the wrong foot already are on the road to failure."

Fr.Dn. Daniel Swires

StartingPoint: Getting Teens Thinking about Orthodox Marriage

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Young people are "increasingly pessimistic about achieving marital bliss," according to the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University: only 64% of high school girls expect to be married for life (a drop from 68% in 1976), and 53% say it's "worthwhile to have a child out of wedlock" because of the high probability of divorce.

These survey results, reported in *Time* (12 July 1999, p. 80), highlight two hurdles Orthodox Christian parents must address as they guide their teens into adulthood: Our society as a whole misunderstands the very nature of marriage, and as a result, does not respect the institution of marriage - either from the outside (as a viable lifestyle choice) or the inside (as a permanent union, not subject to dissolution at the first sign of hardship)!

For an Orthodox Christian, marriage is not a mere legal contract! It is a "lifestyle choice" that can bring them closer to God!

The Orthodox Church teaches that **Christian marriage is holy, blessed, and eternal** in the sight of God. Through the mystery of marriage, a husband and wife are united as one by the grace of the Holy Spirit - strengthened and sanctified to help each other in the struggle toward salvation. Their marriage becomes **a reflection of the very relationship of Jesus Christ and His Church, that is, boundless love, tenderness, total intimacy, mutual understanding and sacrifice**. With God's blessing, their union grows stronger and "overflows" with love, to include children (and someday grandchildren), who are best nurtured in this Christ-centered, loving relationship.

To highlight the enormous difference in the definitions of marriage taught by the world and the Church, start by reading your teens the following Q&A from a popular syndicated advice column:

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Dear Ann,

I am 31 years old and living with a wonderful man. I want to marry "Raymond," and he wants to marry me, but he refuses to have a formal wedding. He said he has been the best man, usher and groomsman several times, and the married couples later divorced. As a result of all those failed marriages, Raymond is terrified of elaborate wedding ceremonies. He says he loves me and would be willing to be married by a justice of the peace, if I promise not to tell anyone until he's certain the marriage will last. We would then have a full-scale wedding with all the trimmings if I wanted one "just for show."

I love Raymond and am willing to go along with his proposal, but I am an only child and my mother would be extremely upset if she found out we were married and didn't tell her. What should I do?

Undecided in the South

At age 31, you should feel comfortable about leading your own life. It is not essential that your mother know about your secret marriage now, although if you decide to have a big wedding later on, you should tell her. If you are looking for approval, you have mine. Mazel tov.

*Excerpted from "Ann Landers," **Washington Post**, 14 July 1999, p. C 13. © 1999, Creators Syndicate, Inc.*

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Here are some ideas for guiding the heated conversation that's sure to result:

- What do you think Raymond expects from marriage? Why is he nervous?
- What do you think Raymond means by "formal wedding" and "elaborate wedding ceremonies" - a church service, or the hectic frenzy that surrounds the rehearsal and reception?
- How could an "elaborate" wedding affect the marriage that follows? (Think about the expectations the couple might have about their life together.)
- What might a couple's obsession with planning every detail of "a great party," selecting perfect dresses and tuxes, and registering for a mountain of gifts, reveal about their relationship?
- What do you imagine your own "perfect" wedding day would be like? Which part is the most important? The least? What about in the marriage that follows?
- Do you think Undecided in the South should compromise, and give up being married in her own church by her own priest or minister?
- Do you think Undecided and Raymond go to church? Do they go together?
- Do you think Undecided is uneasy or nervous about keeping their marriage secret?
- Is a secret marriage honorable? What does it say about the respect the couple has for their union? For each other? For their parents and family?
- What makes two people "ready" for marriage? Do you think Raymond and his girlfriend are ready? How will you know when you're ready for marriage?
- Why do you think they want to get married in the first place? What additional pressures have deciding to "live together" first put on them regarding possible marriage?
- What do you think of Ann's advice?

Read the Apostle Paul's teaching on the two Christian lifestyles: I Corinthians 7:1-17, 39-40 and Hebrews 13:4 (marriage); I Corinthians 7:25-35 (virginity/celibacy), then ask your teens to write their own advice-column responses to Undecided in the South... teens love to tell others what they think! Share your own response, emphasizing the teaching of the Church and the honor of marriage, after they share theirs.

Borrow a videotape of an Orthodox wedding service or dig out your own if you have one, and watch it with your family. Pay special attention to the prayers said for the couple (you can even read them from an Orthodox service book later), then continue your discussion:

- How would you describe an Orthodox marriage service? Is it "elaborate"? Do you think Raymond would be afraid of it?
- What is the focus of the service? Would this reassure Raymond?
- Do you think an Orthodox couple know what is expected of them as they are joined in a Christian marriage, based on the prayers said for them? Who is their role model and guide supposed to be?
- What does it mean to be betrothed? To be crowned?
- Would you change your advice to Undecided in the South after experiencing an Orthodox marriage service?

To "gear up" for a discussion with your teens, or to explore some of their inevitable questions together in depth, you could start with the following sources:

- Talk with your parish priest and spouse about Christian marriage, in general, and discuss how your own union has strengthened and grown in Jesus Christ.
- Look at the discussion, "Marriage," in *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993, p. 449).
- Ware, Timothy (Bishop Kallistos), *The Orthodox Church*, New Edition, London: Penguin Books, 1997, pp. 294-296.
- St. John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997.
- Harakas, Fr. Stanley S., *Contemporary Moral Issues Facing the Orthodox Christian*, Minneapolis, MN. Light and Life Publishing Company, 1982, pp. 69-124 (Sex and Family Issues).