



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF DENVER

February 3, 2009

Protocol 09-03

The Reverend Clergy of
The Holy Metropolis of Denver

Beloved in the Lord,

One of the tragic realities in our contemporary society is the breakdown of marriage and family life. A flawed or damaged interpersonal relationship does not merely affect the emotional well-being and happiness of only the individual man and woman involved. It has a profound impact on society, on the Church community, on children, and on other family members. Most importantly it has serious consequences regarding the eternal salvation of the individuals concerned and also of those touched by their lives.

Marriage is a great blessing given to man by God. Its first purpose is for companionship and procreation. God said, "It is not good that man should be alone" (*Genesis 2:18*), and "be fruitful and increase in number" (*Genesis 1:28*). Its second purpose is even more exalted. As Christ turned water into wine at Cana of Galilee, He also transfigured the purpose of marriage. The divinely-ordained purpose of Christian marriage is transformed from mere companionship and procreation into being the normative relationship, and the Christian milieu, in which a husband and wife work out their eternal salvation.

The impact of the flawed relationship of cohabitation before marriage (fornication), and of the broken relationship of divorce after marriage, can therefore not be minimized. This is as equally true for the individuals concerned, as it is for their families, for the local church community, and indeed for our whole society. Cohabitation and/or intimate relationships before sacramental marriage are an affront to the sanctity of marriage. Divorce after sacramental marriage is a tragic sin against the sacrament itself.

As pastors your challenge is both to help the faithful entrusted to your care avoid these serious circumstances, and to help them remain connected to the life of the Church as much as may be possible and proper during and after their occurrence.

To assist you in this, let me first restate the tradition of the Orthodox Church which has been consistent throughout Her 2,000-year history.

First and foremost, we never judge those who are cohabiting without the benefit of sacramental marriage, nor those who have been divorced from their spouses. Rather, we reach out to them in love. We seek to help them regain a proper relationship with one another and with God through His Church. In doing so we assist them reconcile with God for the salvation of their souls and for eternal life.

Although we do not judge, we nevertheless have a sacred obligation to teach all the faithful about the spiritually deadly dangers of cohabitation, fornication, and adultery. It has always been the teaching of the Church, from the very Apostolic era (cf. Acts 5) that those Orthodox

Christians who are cohabiting ("living together") without being married, and those who choose to marry civilly but not ecclesiastically, have alienated themselves from the Church and its normative life. For the sake of the individual and of the local Church community, these individuals may not receive Holy Communion, they may not be godparents at the Sacrament of Baptism, they may not be sponsors at the Sacrament of Marriage, and they may not have a Church funeral after their falling asleep. Within our Archdiocese they also may not be elected as members of the parish council.

There are, of course, pastoral circumstances that guide the priest's application of these guidelines with either strictness (*akriveia*) or lenience (*oikonomia*).

Special consideration is given, for instance, in the case of an individuals who convert to the Orthodox faith. If a married individual chooses to be received into the Orthodox faith by Baptism and/or Chrismation, their existing marriage, whether civil or religious, is respected. His or her subsequent full participation in all aspects of Orthodox Church life is understood to be with the blessing of their father confessor. They should also be invited and encouraged to be married in the Orthodox Church if the non-Orthodox spouse willingly agrees and is eligible to do so.

In the case of a married couple who convert to the Orthodox faith, their catechesis should include instruction on the blessings of a sacramental marriage. Their existing marriage, whether civil or religious, is respected but they must be sacramentally married in the Orthodox Church at an appropriate time after their reception by Baptism and/or Chrismation.

The situation of an Orthodox Christian who chooses to cohabit, or to be married civilly or religiously outside the Orthodox Church, is more complicated. Sometimes this may occur because the person they love refuses to be married in the Church, or refuses to marry them at all. This does not, however, justify their actions, and they are removed from the normal life of the Church.

If an Orthodox Christian is cohabiting, or has been married outside the Church, they must be encouraged in a pastoral manner to regularize their relationship, or their civil marriage, sacramentally with the Orthodox Church. Those who refuse to do so, or are unwilling to do so, may not receive Holy Communion, be a godparent or sponsor, or receive an Orthodox funeral.

In the case of an Orthodox Christian who regrets having married outside the Church and is repentant of their sin, but whose spouse refuses to be married in the Orthodox Church, their situation must be treated with great pastoral care and sensitivity. It may be possible, under some circumstances, to admit the Orthodox partner to Holy Communion after they have availed themselves of the Sacrament of Holy Repentance. Typically they may subsequently only receive Holy Communion at Pascha and Christmas after having fulfilled the appropriate fast. When dealing with these situations, I invite you to consult with me so that the decision made for these individuals will not be yours alone.

Orthodox Christians married outside the Church or cohabiting should nevertheless always be encouraged to frequently attend the services of the Church. They must never be judged or

looked down upon because of their situation. In accordance with our ancient tradition, however, they simply may not participate fully in the sacramental life of the Church.

Regardless of the circumstances, the children of a union outside the Church are in no way responsible or accountable for the actions of their parents. They should be fully welcomed into the life of the Church as any other child in the parish would be. They may, of course be Baptized and Chrismated, and they should attend the Liturgy with their parent(s) and receive Holy Communion regularly with the parish.

It is common that individuals suffering marital difficulties often quit coming to church when they are in the process of applying for a civil divorce. This is tragic because it is in times of affliction and sorrow that we most need the grace that comes to us from the Church. Nonetheless the breakdown of a marriage and the practice of civil divorce is, in principal, a sin against the Sacrament of Marriage. It consequently places those applying for a divorce outside the normative life of the Church and its sacraments.

Once it has been established that a marriage is irretrievably broken, and that there is no possibility whatsoever of reconciliation, the priest should assist individuals in applying for an Ecclesiastical Divorce.

Always keep foremost in mind that we are never to judge those who are cohabiting, or those who are married outside the Church, or those whose marriages end in divorce. Instead we invite them, and welcome them, specifically because the Church is a spiritual hospital. Moreover the therapy of the Church applied in these situations has long been established by our Sacred Tradition. This therapy must nonetheless be applied to their particular situations, and this application varies from person to person.

May our merciful and compassionate Lord guide you in your pastoral ministry for the spiritual edification and salvation of His people.

With Paternal Blessings,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Metropolitan Isaiah of Denver". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

✠ Metropolitan Isaiah of Denver