

Monastic Marriage

By Stephen Muratore

*Heavenly King,
Comforter, Spirit of Truth,
Who art everywhere present, and fillest all things,
Come and abide in us,
And cleanse us of all impurity,
And save our souls, oh Good One.*

After leading the brothers in the chant *Heavenly King* facing an icon in the corner of the room, the Director General asked them all to be seated. Brother Joseph, among the other men stationed in San Francisco, took his seat.

“Brothers,” said the Director General, “we now convene the first of a series of classes on marital monasticism. Let me begin by reading from the life of Abba Philotheos, one of the desert fathers.

One of the brothers approached Abba Philotheos, and said, ‘Abba, your words are as honey to my soul, but the teachings of my own spiritual father are as vinegar poured into open wounds. Is he not the wrong father to instruct me?’

To this, Abba Philotheos replied, ‘It is not the task of your father to fatten you with honey, but to cleanse you of the infection of sin. Moreover, if you take on a *podvig* he gives you in faith, he will break your will so that the Holy Spirit can come and abide in you.’

The Director General closed the book, and placed it on the lectern before him. “Brothers, as you know, a *podvig* is a spiritual discipline taken on, usually in obedience to a spiritual father, for the breaking of one’s will. It is a path to humility and to the blessings of the Holy Spirit. The best-known practitioners of spiritual discipline for many hundreds of years have been celibate monks living in monasteries or hermitages. It is my task in this series of classes to show you that, when it is approached with an ascetical mind, marriage also can become a *podvig*, a spiritual discipline for the breaking of the will, and an arena in which you can work out your salvation.”

The Order had changed greatly in the ten years that had elapsed since Joseph served his novitiate, . Under the leadership of the Director General, the Order shed its syncretistic, new age-Rosicrucian teachings and adopted much of the dogma, doctrines, and spiritual practices of the Orthodox Church. Also, when Joseph had taken his first vows, most of the brothers and sisters were in their mid-20s, single, and ready to be assigned to any mission in any location at a moment’s notice. Back then, marriage was allowed, but not strongly encouraged, as it was an impediment to the flexibility of the organization. Now, most members were in their mid-thirties, and the sisters could hear the ticking of their child-bearing biological clocks. Order members needed clear guidance about the role marriage and family life could play in their lives from this moment on. They needed to understand clearly whether getting married was an abandonment of the spiritual quest they each had embarked upon when they joined.

In the ensuing series of classes, the Director General showed that romantic love was a fiction invented by some Renaissance poets, that God created males and females in such a way that any male could pair with any female, and that the best spiritual partner for a marriage would be the person most capable of breaking one’s will—not necessarily a person to whom one was attracted. The Director General finished the last class in the series with a mandate to all the brothers: “Brothers, many of you do not want to become monks, but you do want to continue your spiritual journey. Choose either of the spiritual paths open to you: monasticism or marriage. If you do not have a monastic vocation, get married. Don’t be fussy. You need a foil, not a romance, and there are lots of good sisters going to waste.

In the Order's newsletter, Joseph had seen the photo of a sister then stationed in the Midwest. She had a small, sensitive chin, and large perceptive eyes. The photo caption named her Sister Artemis. Joseph wished he could settle the Director General's challenge with Sister Artemis.

Divine intervention reassigned Sister Artemis to San Francisco a few months later. Brother Joseph and Sister Artemis talked, and played music together, she on zither, he on recorder. Once, during a holiday celebration, Joseph kissed Artemis' cheek. Sister Artemis said she would like more of that. That was the first time Joseph had kissed anyone since before he had joined the Order, when a TV-set-bra-wearing cellist in New York had kissed him. Sr. Artemis was creative, impulsive, talented, capricious, mercurial, maddeningly self-contradictory, radiantly beautiful.

It was not to be. Br. Joseph and Sr. Artemis both swam constantly under one another's unspoken words, each feeling for the hidden self of the other.

Joseph was the first to surface, gasping for breath. "No more! I love you, but our minds are too similar. If we keep this up, we will drive one another crazy."

Sr. Artemis joined a convent, and quickly became its Abbess.

Joseph married Artemis' best friend, whom, it seemed, had been prescribed for him by God for the breaking of his will: Marla, a Midwestern gal bent on nest building, religious observance, and family values.