



## A Letter from the Bishops of the Orthodox Church in Germany to Young People concerning Love – Sexuality – Marriage

*On the day that God made Adam, He made him in the likeness of God.  
Male and female He made them,  
He blessed them and He named them 'Man'. (Gen 5:1-2)*

Dear young Orthodox Christians in Germany,

As bishops of your Church in Germany we wish to speak about some topical issues in this letter which is written specifically for you. The world is moving ever closer together. And the burning issues of our time come increasingly to the fore. They are of profound concern to human existence – your existence: God places the present and the future in your hands.

1. We live in a country in which the individual has the opportunity to develop in **freedom** and dignity. In the course of human history that was not always the case. In many countries of the earth it is still not the case today. The fact that we live in Germany, where peace, freedom, democracy and human rights are taken for granted, can be considered as God's blessing.

Against the background of religious extremism, which in many places is threatening to intensify, we are called as Christians to do all in our power to defend those values. They are in accord with the concept of man which is expressed in Holy Scripture and in the Tradition of our Church: that man was made in the image of God (Gen 1:27). In the ability of human beings to decide for themselves, we see one of the characteristics of this divine image.

2. This freedom is a gift of immense value which is necessarily associated with complete **responsibility**. Responsibility is inseparably bound up with freedom. This applies to all areas of life, including the question of whether to live one's life alone or within a partnership, and of course to the search for a partner. With that is connected a series of questions, e.g. concerning sexuality, marriage, the difference between marriage at a

registry office and marriage in the Church, etc. These questions concern each one of us profoundly and personally, since everyone has the freedom to determine his or her own way in life.

The following considerations are intended to provide support, since every individual ought to be free to decide his or her own way in life. They encourage a responsible approach to tackling these questions and promote the dialogue within our Church.

3. One of the best-known and best-loved passages in the Bible is Chapter 13 of the First Epistle of the Holy Apostle Paul to the Corinthians, also called the 'Song of Love'. There, the Holy Apostle describes **love** as a power which leads to the overcoming of a person's own egoism. How? *«Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails».* (1 Cor 13:4-8) Consequently love leads to the perfection of one's own personhood and to recognition of the truth. So it is more valuable than every other virtue: *«And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love».* (1 Cor 13:13)

In this spirit, love towards another person is an unconditional gift: When I love, I no longer place myself at the centre of my existence. Love is entire and dynamic and more than 'butterflies in the tummy'. It assumes and translates into action the following words of Christ: *«For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So then, they are no longer two but one flesh».* (cf. Mt 19:5-6)

4. In modern times many young men and women have sexual relations before marriage. Against this background, many people ask how the Orthodox Church judges the situation. The role of our Church is to accompany her faithful with spiritual advice, not to formulate rules in a mechanical way. This is not a charter for sexual permissiveness. We emphasise: It is very important to behave with responsibility; responsibility concerning one's own **sexuality**, the sexuality of one's partner, and also the consequences of sexual life; responsibility towards oneself, to society and before God. In this spirit the Holy Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: *«Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own».* (1 Cor 6:19)

This chapter of the letter to the Corinthians is devoted to the freedom which comes from association with Christ and which can be lived in marriage which is blessed by God. Thus we wish that your love will be crowned by a church wedding, that in consequence a Christian family will come into being, and that you will learn to honour, protect and support life, including newly developing life. In this context we point out that from the time of conception the embryo is a human being.

We appeal to you: Don't withhold your questions. Give them voice. Discuss them with competent people. Open discussions can help us to know ourselves better and to arrive at a decision. Talking is beneficial for the soul. We call upon you especially to seek a dialogue with an experienced spiritual adviser. Our Orthodox Church has a long tradition

of spiritual and therapeutic dialogue. Today also, in an age of electronic media, this can be a great help.

5. We live in a country in which as a rule an Orthodox Christian marriage only takes place after the couple have been married at a registry office. The civil marriage has the purpose of giving the husband and wife the protection of the civil law.

For us Christians, **marriage** is to do with God's love which Jesus Christ showed by His incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. Therefore for a person who believes in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, marriage is more than a worldly matter, and obviously much more than the wedding celebrations. It actually requires a promise of lifelong faithfulness, and that the relationship between the marriage partners should be brought into a union with Christ. Marriage partners are called upon to accept their relationship as a gift from God, and to perceive it as one form of expression of the mutual love which is to be lived in the Church of Christ. The extent of this is made clear in the wedding service as well, by the crowning of bride and bridegroom with each other and for each other. In order to give expression to this understanding, the Holy Apostle Paul goes back to the image of the union between Christ and His Church, and calls it a mystery: *"This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church"* (from the Apostolic Reading at the Office of Crowning, Eph 5:32).

In a wedding service there are also prayers at several points that God will grant fruitfulness to the married couple. Our Orthodox Church blesses the desire for children and regards the child as a gift from God. However, even without children a marriage is holy and complete. We are of the opinion that it is a necessary part of a responsible Christian life to consider the size of one's family. It must be remembered here that for Orthodox Christians, abortion, i.e. the killing of a living organism, cannot and must not come into consideration, either in family planning or otherwise.

Marriage preparation with the Parish Priest will cover all these aspects. Such conversations are more than a formality before the wedding and should take place before starting to make practical preparations for the marriage celebrations.

6. In a pluralistic society such as Germany, **marriages between Orthodox and other Christians** are not uncommon. These are described as 'inter-denominational'. In recent decades such marriages have contributed to meetings and mutual acquaintance. Furthermore they show that it is possible to bring up children with respect towards differing traditions. Practical questions concerning inter-denominational marriages were dealt with in the documents that we have approved together with the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church in Germany. But they also require the accompanying discussion.

These marriages also have their challenges: thus, in the documents just mentioned, the question of reception of Holy Communion together remains unresolved. The position of our Church is still: Such reception is only possible if there is complete unity in faith. Such unity is not present in inter-denominational marriages. Here we are all confronted with a situation which is painful and manifests itself as a theological challenge. This has to be

acknowledged in all honesty. And so we ask God to help us soon to overcome the separation and to find our way to the unity of all.

7. The situation is still more complicated with the question of a **marriage with a non-Christian partner**. Such marriages are called 'inter-faith'. Here a common Christian foundation is lacking. In some cases inter-faith partnerships and marriages trigger conflicts which can lead to the exclusion of the affected person. Here again the treasure of the freedom which God has given to human beings should be called to mind. The compulsion to distance oneself on religious grounds from the person one loves is not in keeping with the freedom which every human being has received because he or she was made in the image of God. (Gen 1:27) For inter-faith partnerships, civil marriage forms a practicable way. It represents a legal safeguard and guarantees that the marriage partners have the same rights. But for people who believe in God and are of the view that their marriage should stand under the blessing of God, civil marriage is as a rule too little. They long for a religious ceremony through which it becomes definite that God blesses their relationship. Such a ceremony on the part of our Church is in fact not possible, because the basis of the celebration of the mystery of marriage is faith in the Triune God. But we regard this longing as fully justified. For this reason the Orthodox Church in Germany will also accompany inter-faith couples on their journey through life, provided that this is welcome, and is always ready to support them with word and deed. Furthermore we encourage these couples to talk completely openly and constructively with each other, before and after the wedding, about questions which arise out of their religious difference, e.g. bringing up children.
8. A burning issue today is the question of **homosexuality** and homosexual partnerships. That this topic is discussed openly in our society can in principle be seen as a good thing. For homosexual men and women were ignored for centuries, and even oppressed and persecuted, as for instance in the time of National Socialism.

In Holy Scripture, both in the Old Testament and also in the New Testament, there are statements against homosexuality. The value of these statements is the subject of controversial debate today. In the tradition of our Church too, numerous expressions against homosexuality are to be found. Like any physical inclination, this one too is overcome by exercising restraint, the moderation of unbridled passions, and chaste asceticism, such as we learn in fasting. What is certain is that we are largely in ignorance about how homosexuality arises. It is possible that, for instance, genetic, psychological and cultural factors might be involved, but in reality there is no clarity about what role these factors play or what relationship they have one to another.

Since according to Orthodox understanding the mystery of marriage requires a union between man and woman, and goes beyond a purely social view, the marriage of homosexual couples is not possible in our Church. Frank questions relating to homosexual men and women belong in the realm of spiritual welfare and tactful guidance by the Church. For all men are made in the image of God. Therefore all people are to be accorded that respect which is in keeping with the existence of this divine image in mankind. This applies also to our parishes, which are requested to show love and respect to *all* men and women.

## Conclusion

9. In the society in which we live, there are constantly changes taking place. Those ones in which we see the spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we welcome. Today, though, the traditional family faces radical challenges. Faithful to the word of the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians: *“Test all things; hold fast what is good”* (1 Thess 5:21), we are all, dear young Orthodox Christians, continually called upon afresh to represent, and above all to live out, the human image of our Orthodox faith.

The description of the family as the ‘Church in miniature’, the primordial cell of the Church in its totality, is still for us forward-looking.

God bless you!

Frankfurt am Main, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2017

+ Metropolitan Augoustinos of Germany,  
Exarch of Central Europe

Chairman

and the other members of the Orthodox Bishops’ Conference in Germany