

Family Counseling



Fr. Tadros Y. Malty

Family Counseling Of the Fathers of the Early Church

By:
FR. TADROS Y. MALATY

Mary Hany Dawood
Salwa Wahba

A Unique Family Structure

Unlike all the other heavenly and earthly creatures, man distinctively belongs to a unique family structure. He feels that he is a member of the human family, which extends from one end of the world to the other and from Adam to the end of times. He is proud of his fathers and ancestors, and feels that he owes them for all the development and advancements that they brought upon him throughout the generations. He also feels responsible, and is happy, to work for the best interest of the next generations, even if the fruits of his work would only be gained long after his departure from the world for many years or even generations.

Furthermore, in His ultimate love for mankind, God said: “I have said, you are gods; and all of you are children of the most High” [Psalms 82:6]. He wants every man to realize that he, personally, is very valuable to God, for –with God’s grace- he is His son and a member of the family related to God, the Father of all believers.

Thus, it is proper for the family, with all its levels: the entire family of mankind, the family of the global and the local church, the family of the one nation, the small household family, the family of the abbey, etc., to respect the thoughts, capabilities and talents of each of its members regardless of his age or gifts. On the other hand, it is proper for each member to be proud of his confidence in the Lord, but also to respect his family, its arrangement, and the experiences of others, especially during the counsel.

Turning to the family counsel does not imply suppressing one’s freedom, nor condemning his thinking, but rather it involves wisely, humbly, and lovably enjoying the family life.

Counseling of the Fathers of the Early Church

With the spirit of love and modesty, the leaders, like the followers, need counseling.

If man seeks counseling, he will discover the enemy's plans; and if he obeys the counsel, the devil will run away from him unable to spread his webs around him. This is why the enemy is always impelling people not to obey or even seek counseling. It is easy for the devil to capture the person that depends on his own thinking and trusts only his own will, but he stands powerless before the person that follows counseling in all his actions.

The devil plants evil inside man through his hatred of counseling, because, then, he would fall as leaves.

St. Dorotheos of Gaza

Every person should take care not to deviate from the advice of his counselor, lest the earth of disobedience opens her mouth and swallows him, like those, who didn't obey Moses and the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up. **St.**

Philoxinos

Let the secularist (one of the people) sermon and the bishop listen, so that the bishop, too, would learn from the secularist.

St. Ambrosios

Counselor Women/Mothers:

Even amongst the families of the abbey, there were counselor men and women. One of the most famous counselor women is the virgin and honorable Sarah of the desert of Sheheet. She was a very kind, wise, lovable, and loved mother. She got very famous for her wisdom until she became a center for the spiritual life. Many people used to come to her seeking her counseling after being enlightened by the fathers of Sheheet and Netariah. Every person, who sought her, came back, full of spiritual joy over what he had heard from her.

Moreover, when the Pope Athanacios, the apostle, wanted to reveal the greatness of the sanctity of nun, St. Sinkletiki, the mother of celibate virgins, he wrote her biography himself. Thus, he became the one, who wrote the biography of St. Antonios, the father of monks, and that of St. Sinkletiki, the mother of nuns.

The Need for Counseling to face the Collapsing of the Roman Family

When the Christian church was found, it called for getting married to one woman only, as it considered any extra marital physical relation, either by man or woman, adultery. This was a new and strange matter to the Roman Empire, which was characterized by familial collapsing. The roman family was suffering from a great lack of newborns at a time when the emperors were in need of extra people to join the army and protect the empire. Caesar Augustus tried to formulate several laws to support and strengthen the roman family, but failed.

One of the most important reasons behind the collapsing of the roman family was the absence of the husband and the father of the children, for in one of the battles in the year 9 A.D. more than 81 thousand men were killed, while others used to run away from marriage, either because they were busy with their trading activities, which required lots of long traveling at that time, or to avoid their financial responsibility toward the family due to economic turndown of the empire.

Quintillian, a roman speaker in the first century, commented on this situation, saying: “Wasn’t it us, who spoiled our children! We weakened their childhood by offering them a spoiled and luxurious life... We rejoice when they utter improper words. When we hear the expressions, which we shouldn’t even allow the young, effeminate people of Alexandria to utter, from our children, we smile at them and kiss them... They became a disaster of our own making. The males, to whom we were so kind, behold the dining rooms full of libertine songs, things that we should be ashamed to see (or hear). These exercises create habits; habits that become an integral part of their nature. Unfortunately, the miserable children get to learn this sinfulness even before they understand that they are vice”.

Sinica, the famous narrator, who was contemporary with Christ, the Lord, said: “The face of a woman is not reddened of shame, when the end of her marriage is mentioned before her. The most famous women learned to calculate the dates of the year by the names of their husbands (i.e. a new husband every year)”.

The Family Counseling And the Fathers of the Church

The fathers cared about the importance of counseling in the spiritual life, in general, and within the family, in particular. They wrote many articles, homilies, and letters about the family. Furthermore, several instructions about the family can be found in many of their writings, e.g. in their sermons and explanations of the Holy Bible, as an integral part of the other subjects.

For example:

1. St. Gerome wrote many letters concerning the family life, among which is a letter to Laeeta instructing her how to bring up her little daughter. It came in this letter: “Be like a teacher to her, an example to follow in everything you want her to become like in her childhood... Don’t do –you or her father- anything that if she duplicated it would have committed a sin... With your actions and behavior you can teach her a lot more that with your advices and instructions”.
2. St. John Golden Mouth wrote many articles that were translated into Arabic that were titled “Converses about Marriage”.
3. St. John Golden Mouth gave a homily and an article titled: On Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring up their Children”.

In this article, St. John looks upon the child with great admiration and pride. He sees in the children that they are philosophers in their nature, wrestlers in their training, and citizens that are being prepared and set up to the eternal dwelling in heaven (Chapters 38 & 39). He sees great skills and capabilities in them that prevail through their serious preparation.

He looks upon the child as upon a city with many gates and entrances, for the soul could be ruled and inhabited by righteous rulers and judges, but also by evil and unrespectable ones. Thus, the child is in great need of laws to govern and control the wrong behavior, for laxity would cause the destruction of the city. (Chapters 23-26). The gates to the city that need to be guarded and protected are the five senses: the tongue (the taste and talk), the sight, the smell, the touch, and the hearing (Chapters 27-37).

St. John considers what the apostle said in: “provoke not your children to wrath” [Epistle to Ephesians 6:4; Epistle to Colossians 3:21] as a call unto everyone not to ask the child for what is above his capabilities, for it is not proper to over-educate him (Chapter 52) that he would not get terrified and intimidated.

Who are the Counselors?

I would like to make it clear here that family counseling –as presented by many of the church fathers- is not just about conversing with educated and experienced people, but rather it requires turning to many sources. These include:

1. The Founder and Sanctifier of Marriage, God, Himself, and His Word:

In order for the believer to implement his family membership, he should turn to God, first, and make a deep internal relation with Him through prayers, fasting, worshipping, and studying the Holy Bible.

The family is the small house of God. In Christianity, “Marital Love” is a sacrament exercised by the believer from a lively, trustful prospective, and not just to satisfy his sexual instincts; otherwise, marriage would turn into tolerable adultery as others wrongfully believe. Furthermore, marriage is not about satisfying a person’s social needs; i.e. he should not be after it to set up a home and a family through the law of nature; rather it is, above all, accepting the divine work of God in his life to satisfy him in every way here on earth and to lift him up to behold the joyful eternity. If heaven, in its nature, is about sharing love and the unified life in the Lord, the Center of heaven, then the true marital life, in its core of nature, is a unified marital love, through which two become one.

* Marriage is much greater than to be human; it is a miniature kingdom that is a small house for the Lord.

* Our Savior went to a wedding in order to sanctify the basis of the human life.

* Who are those two or three, who when gathered together in the name of Christ, there in the midst of them He would dwell? Aren’t they the man, his wife, and their child; for the man and his wife are unified with the Lord?

* Marriage is a sacred image that must be kept pure and chaste from whatever that could defile it. It is proper for us to arise with Christ from our slumber, and to go back to sleep giving our thanks and prayers.

* The hearts of the lovers have wings... Love could turn to hatred if reasons for mutual disrespect crawl down to it.

* He, who seeks the physical lust alone, turns marriage into adultery.

St. Eklimandos of Alexandria

When the wise man said: “a prudent wife is from the LORD” [Proverbs 19:14], he meant that the Lord, Himself, is the founder of marriage, and not that He joins every man with a woman, because we can see many men and women joined together in evilness, even though through the law of marriage. We cannot attribute such cases to God.

St. John Golden Mouth

2. Church, especially the Confession Priest:

How can we properly describe marriage, which the church organizes, the brunt offering strengthens, the blessing seals, the angels attend as witnesses, and of which God declares His approval?

Tertelian, the Erudite

Here, we should not forget what Pope Alexandros (19th) did: Looking out of the balcony of the Patriarchy, he saw Athanasios (20th Pope), the child, pretending to baptize his friends on the sea shore. He called for him, and as started to talk to him, he like him a lot and accepted him as a student, and later as his personal secretary.

3. Resorting to the Thoughts of the Fathers.

4. Resorting to the Seculars and the Experienced Scholars.

5. Familyl Conversations:

i.e. conversing with other experienced family members with the spirit of mutual love and modesty, and not with stringent and rigorous commands and orders.

Wish that the man leads his wife as a captain of the ship, honor her as his life partner, and share with her as an heir in God's grace.

A man without his wife is like a person without a home.

St. Ambrosios

(To the husband) If your wife disrespects, disregards, and disdains you, rest assured that your pride towards her, your kindness and gentleness will pacify her to you, for nothing is more powerful in gaining one's favor than these bonds, especially between a husband and his wife! Indeed, despite whatever you may be suffering because of her, do not reprimand her, because Christ, too, didn't do that.

We care about our belongings to bequeath them to our children, yet we never care about our children, themselves! What kind of ridiculousness is this?! Build up the soul of your son straightly, and he shall get whatever is left afterwards. If your son was not upright, he will not make use of any richness you might leave him; but if he was righteous, he will not get harmed from poverty.

Would that we don't prevent them from doing what is acceptable, but what is harmful; and we don't ignore them as if they were discarded, but deal with them as our children.

St. John Golden Mouth

Practical Examples of Family Counselors

After highlighting the central role of God, as the primary source of counseling regarding the matters of family relations, and the role of the church and the other specialized counselors, I would like to present some practical examples of other family counselors; especially the sister, mother, and wife, so that everyone would realize that each member plays a vital and significant role in creating a joyful family atmosphere and in supporting the other members.

1. St. Macrinae:

When Basilios died at an early age, he left his sons and daughters at their grandmother Macrinae's, and their mother Emilia's care. These women –the grandmother and the mother- were known for their Christian life that is flared with the Holy Spirit and with righteousness. Macrinae –the daughter-, who bore the name of her grandmother, helped them in taking care and in educating her sisters and brothers that she was called “the family angel”. She had a great and significant influence on her two famous brothers, St. Basilios the Great and St. Gregory Bishop of Nisus. The latter called her “my tutor”, and wrote a book about her life and called it “Vita Macrinae”.

When he broke down from grief over his brother, Basilios, she got a grip of herself, though she was in her last days and had a tiny body, and told him that it is not proper that we grieve over those, who had passed on, as if we have no hope. What might be the most beautiful thing that she gave her brother right before she passed away was the joyful life, as a feature of the spiritual person. St. Gregory wrote about how she used to hide her moaning and her pain from hard breathing, to reveal the bright and joyful side of life. She used to talk to him and answer all his questions. In one of their talks together, they mentioned their brother, Basilios the Great, which affected St. Gregory very much, and made him cry painfully that he was on the verge of a breakdown; but she did not crash over his grief, but rather was able to turn the talk about their brother into a talk about the heavenly wisdom...

She was able to lift her brother's heart from the bitter memories to flaringly desire the upper life. He said: “My soul seemed to rise completely from its human nature –under the effect of what she told me- and to stand before the heavenly holinesses”. She was an amazing counselor for her brother, the bishop!

2. St. Nonna:

Her family was a life example for the Christian family that lives with the true faith that works through love. She was born at the end of the 3rd century, and got married to Gregory, the governor of Nizianza, in the non-Christian Cambodia. She didn't just attract him to believe in Christ, the Lord, but also to become a priest, and then a bishop. They lived together as a brother and a sister. Her husband is now known by "St. Gregory the Great, of Nizianza".

St. Gregory praised his father, Gregory of Nizianza, and his mother, Nonna, signifying that they were called the Abraham and Sarah of their time. He praised her as a counselor for her husband, the bishop, saying: "Behold, the good shepherd was the fruit of his wife's prayers and counseling. He learned from her how to lead a perfect preaching life. At first, he ran away from heathen idolatry, and afterwards the devils started running away from him... They became equal in their reason and brightness, jealous for each other, supporting each other, and flying above all... They had two bodies, but they lived as if their bodies have turned into a spirit". "I just want to say one thing about them: each of them was truly and lawfully assigned to his gender: he was assigned as a beautification for the men and she for the women; and not just beautification, but also an example of the virtuous life". St. Nonna was an example of the virtuous woman, whose husband has praised, and whose children have called: "The blessed mother".

3. St. Gorgonia:

She was the daughter of St. Nonna, about whom we talked earlier. St. Gregory, her younger brother, used to look up to her as a live example of the Christian believer. He was very much affected by her, and was fond of her virtuousness and piety. This saint has supported her husband, Alypius, and has led him to a life of virtue and righteousness. As for her sons, both of them became bishops. When her brother, Bishop Gregory, stood to read her obituary in the presence of her godfather, Fostinos the bishop of Ikony, and her husband, he realized that no words could express what she has reached.

"Her hometown was the heavenly Jerusalem [Epistle to Hebrews 12:22-23]... which is inhabited by Christ, the general assembly, and the church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven..."

"Although she was tied to the body, she was never separated from the spirit; and although her husband was her head, she never forgot her top and primary head, Christ the Lord... She won her husband over to her side, and was able to make a humble servant out of him instead of a cruel master".

"She was able to make the fruits of her body –i.e. her children and her grandchildren- become fruits of her spirit dedicated to God; not just her own soul, but her entire family and household".

"What greater reason resided in her than her quietness?! With regard to her quietness, I have to point that it is the most important virtue for the proper women, because it is considered the most important matter of service in these days. Who had better understanding of the divine matters and commandments than her?!"

"The life of this saint showed us that the nature of women could exceed that of the men in the one struggle towards salvation. She showed us that the only difference between men and women is physical, but not spiritual!"

4. St. Monica:

St. Monica got married –against her will- to an evil heathen man called Patrosious. Her parents were deceived, for he had a very distinctively important job in the state. His mother was an evil envious woman, and so were the servants, too. However, she realized, after her marriage, that God wanted her to bear this cross; and thus she never whined about the evilness of her husband and her mother-in-law, but rather she used to show them the beauty and kindness of the Christian life.

Her mother-in-law got defeated by her humbleness and serenity, and stopped the servants from calumniating Monica before herself or before Patrosious; even more she asked her son to scourge the evil servants.

Monica used to endure her husbands' furious agitation with quietness, serenity and patience. Then, when he had calmed down, she used to delicately and kindly complain to him about what he did to her during his fury that he started to blame himself and promise her to change.

When her son, Augustinos, had reached the age of puberty, he started to walk an impure path and to deviate from the upright behavior that he started to have relations with many women; he even got an unlawful son. Her counsels and advices to him were completely useless.

After his repentance, St. Augustinos raised a prayer to the Lord, saying:

“My righteous mother has spoken to me, and now I realize that her voice was just an echo of Yours. When she severely persisted on demanding my quitting from the prostitutes and all the other kinds of adulteration, I never cared to listen to her, because she was a woman; but now I realized that these words were actually coming from You. Thus, my negligence towards her was actually negligence towards You, and my disrespect of her was actually a disrespect of Your words”.

She put all her energy and strength in her tears, her prayers, and her fasting, so that God would bring her back her son. St. Augustinos said: “My mother used to cry over me with grieve tears that exceeded those of the mothers who have lost their children to physical death. But You, my Lord, had listened to her; and her tears that she used to cry in her prayers to You never faded away, for she used to wet the face of the earth with her tears”.

She used to run after him from one country to another, for he was the errant son, and ask him time and time again without whining or despair for 20 long years.

After his repentance and returning to God, St. Augustinos still remembered his mother and her rich tears. He prayed to God, saying: “She was Your servant, who had carried me in her body that I would be born into the temporal light; and who had carried me in her heart that I would be born into the eternal light. She is my mother, of whom I trust that the life that lingers within me is because of her and her faithful never-ceasing tears. My mother gave me her tears so that I will not perish”.