



THE DIOCESE OF THE SOUTH

Orthodox Church in America

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# Pastoral Guidance on Divorce and the Care of the Faithful

August 27, 2025

Venerable Pimen the Great

Beloved Fathers and faithful of the Diocese of the South,

While the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America has offered solid guidance *On Marriage*, and our *Clergy Guidelines* have solid guidance on the topic, it seems somehow appropriate to augment these with some guidance to our diocesan clergy that is specific to the unfortunate realities of broken or failed marriages.

The Orthodox Church holds marriage between Christians to be a sacred union in Christ between one man and one woman, established not as a human contract but as a divine mystery. This union is meant to be lifelong, indeed eternal, sanctified by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and oriented toward mutual martyrdom and salvation. While the holy canons of the Church speak on the matter of divorce with a particular focus on the clergy, the Church does not usually participate in the act of dissolving a marriage. Divorce, in every case, is a tragedy.

Yet, as shepherds of Christ's flock, we must face the sad reality that some marriages fail. When this occurs, our task is not to cast stones, but to accompany, guide, and care for the souls entrusted to us—always remembering that the Church is a hospital for the broken and a refuge for the wounded.

No Orthodox Christian should ever enter divorce lightly. It is always grievous, no matter the circumstances. Marriage is not a personal promise between two people but a sacramental union between one man and one woman and blessed by Christ Himself at the marriage in Cana. For this reason, the Church teaches that one who undergoes divorce must refrain for a time from approaching the Holy Chalice. This is not a punishment, but the sober acknowledgment that divorce wounds the Body of Christ.

In such a season, the faithful are called to humility, repentance, and patience, turning to Christ as the source of mercy and healing.

The historic teaching of the Church is clear: divorce should be considered only as a last resort. Our first responsibility is always to strengthen and preserve the bond of marriage—but never at the expense of personal safety or the sanctity of life. In situations of real abuse, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, the protection of the abused and of children is paramount. Nobody should be counseled to remain in an environment where their safety and well-being is at risk.

For all other cases of difficulty, the Church counsels:

- Encouraging couples to remain faithful to the life of prayer and the sacraments.
- Offering patient pastoral counsel, exhortation, and confession, so that repentance may bring renewal to strained marriages.
- Supporting couples within the parish community, without judgment, so that they do not carry their burdens in isolation.

Priests are called to exhaust every spiritual and pastoral means of healing before a couple contemplates separation.

In 1918, the local council of the Russian Orthodox Church, while upholding the indissolubility of marriage, acknowledged certain grave circumstances under which separation may be permitted. It outlined grounds for ecclesiastical divorce such as:

- Adultery
- Apostasy from Orthodoxy
- Incapacity for marital relations
- Serious or incurable illness (e.g., leprosy, syphilis)
- Unknown disappearance
- Incarceration with civic disenfranchisement
- Intentional desertion
- Endangerment of a spouse's health or life
- Incest or prostitution
- Mental illness

In modern times, additional grounds have been recognized, including chronic alcoholism, drug addiction, and abortion procured without the husband's consent.

Even when such grounds exist, the Church does not “grant” divorce in the worldly sense but rather recognizes the tragic breakdown of a marriage and, through pastoral discernment, may permit separation and even remarriage under conditions of repentance and penance.

Divorce often involves complex circumstances. In cases where mental illness or other grave struggles are present, the Church counsels compassion and not condemnation. It is not the Christian way to meet weakness with anger, or to pursue a devastating strategy that wounds all involved. Such behavior inevitably prevents proper repentance and harms children most of all.

Children must be shielded from the bitterness and resentment that often accompanies divorce. They need to see from both parents restraint, dignity, and a willingness to bear suffering with Christlike patience. To do otherwise is to scandalize the little ones whom Christ commands us to protect (Matt. 18:6).

## The Responsibility of Both Parties to a Divorce

I have never seen a marriage dissolve where only one person bore all the blame. Every marriage is the union of two sinners. Its unraveling exposes shortcomings on both sides. Each party, therefore, must examine their own heart honestly, confessing their sins, and seeking reconciliation with God.

When separation or divorce is being contemplated, it is the normal practice for each of the divorcing couple to refrain from the chalice. This is not intended as a punishment, but rather as a period of repentance, reflection, and healing before God. Without this honesty, repentance is impossible. And without repentance, peace and healing cannot be found.

At the same time, I entrust my pastors with leeway in discerning how best to apply this pastoral discipline in each particular instance.

If, after all attempts at healing and reconciliation, separation becomes unavoidable, let it be done with sobriety, restraint, and as little destruction as possible. The example of the Righteous Joseph should guide us: even when he believed the Virgin Mary to be unfaithful, “being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, he resolved to put her away quietly” (Matt. 1:19).

This restraint is the Christian way, even when hearts are deeply wounded. Divorce must never be carried out with vengeance, public scandal, or the drawing others into the conflict. Rather, it should be endured with humility, in the fear of God, and with the hope, however faint, of healing or reconciliation in God’s time.

## The Role of the Parish

Parish priests and communities must *never* become entangled in marital disputes. Divorcing spouses might each need one or two close confidants for counsel and support, but to involve the wider parish family in sides and factions is to spread the wound to the whole body.

The Church is not an arbiter of private disputes but a community of prayer. Our task is to pray for all involved, for husband, wife, and children, and to guard the unity of the parish family. In every circumstance, we must seek to be ministers of peace, carrying both parties before Christ.

## Clergy Guidance

To my beloved priests:

- Counsel couples early, before marriage, to understand its permanence and sacramental nature.
- When difficulties arise, exhaust every effort to preserve the union through prayer, confession, the sacraments, and patient guidance.
- Know your limits and insist upon counseling with a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist whenever possible (in cases of financial limitations, it is a good use of parish benevolence funds to aid in the costs of counseling for couples in crisis).
- Stay out of litigation and court proceedings – any exception to this rule must be submitted to the Diocesan Administration through your dean for formal written approval (these exceptions are limited to crisis situations where lives are in imminent danger, child abductions or other such extreme scenarios).
- If separation becomes inevitable, minister to both parties pastorally, ensuring that they do not lose hope for reconciliation in Christ or fall into isolation.
- Above all, guard the dignity of children, and protect the parish community from division.

Beloved in Christ, divorce will always remain a wound to the Body of Christ. Yet even in wounds, the Lord can bring forth healing. If approached with repentance, humility, and compassion, even this tragedy can become a path by which Christ teaches patience, forgiveness, and reliance on His mercy.

May the Lord grant us wisdom, restraint, and love in dealing with these most painful situations, that no soul may be lost through scandal, and that the peace of Christ may reign in our homes and parishes.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Alexander". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+ALEXANDER  
Archbishop of Dallas and the South

