



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of
the Southern United States

The Monthly Message
to the Priest's Wives
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Role or Identity

The Priest Wife is a term that causes joy to some people, but can also trigger agony in some others, including the priest wife herself. Is the term *Priest Wife* denoting a role or an identity? In fact, the answer of this question carries in itself a resolution to the confusion and mix associated with this term.

To answer this question, we must first clarify the definition of both terms, *Role* and *Identity*, according to social psychologists.

- 1) **Role** is a group of human behaviors guided by certain expectations held both by the individual and by other people. This means that there are a set of goals, tasks and performances that are expected from him. Examples of role are: role of physician, role of engineer, role of mother, role of husband, role of man, role of woman....etc
- 2) **Identity** is a person's conception of his individual self and his expression of this individuality. This means the awareness of the person of his characteristics that distinct him as a unique being. The identity is formed along different stages until it is fully

developed. Sometimes, this development is subjected to some obstacles leading to some aberrations like: *Identity diffusion* and *Identity Crisis*.

What is then the difference between *Role* and *Identity*?

It is clear from the above two definitions that *Identity* is the being of the person himself and his awareness of this being, while *Role* is a group of behaviors performed by this being guided by some expectations required from this *Role*. *The Identity* is then deeper and more comprehensive than the *Role*. The *Identity* is single and unique, while the *Role* is multiple. This means that every person has a single identity while he performs many roles. Michael, for example, is a single unique being but he performs at the same time the role of son, the role of husband, the role of engineer and the role of servant at the church.

Confusion between the *Role* and the *Identity*, and even confusion between roles themselves, is one of the most dangerous things that lead to the development of many psychic and social problems. For example:

- 1) **Reduction of one's identity into a specific role and his identification with that role.** This means that the required distance between his being and his role is totally vanished to the degree that he obtains the sense of his being and his identity from his performance of such a role. Therefore, if he is deprived from this role for any reason, his identity will then be broken and all his being will be crashed. This is a very dangerous thing because it leads to reduction and amputation of the entire human being

and its enclosure in a very narrow rigid frame causing a lot of psychic and social troubles.

To clarify this matter, let us take the **example** of a person who is in charge of a high post like being a president of a country, manager of an organization, head of a denomination or a leader of a an affiliation....etc. He, without being aware, identifies between his ego and his role or job. Therefore, his self concept is absolutely restricted to being "*The president of.....*". He then adopts an aggressive revenging attitude towards everyone trying to criticize his role because this constitutes a threat to his entire being that he had been reduced to that role. He gradually loses his humanity and his contact with the human reality. If it happens that he becomes deprived of this role, he is then broken down and he even becomes mad.

Another repeated example is the identification of the woman with the role of wife and the role of mother where she does not see herself except in the frame of such roles and she does not obtain her self-esteem and her self-identity except through these roles. If it happens, for any reason, that the woman does not marry, does not conceive, is abandoned by her husband or her son dies she is then collapsed and totally broken.

*If you want to test yourself to know if you are identifying between your identity and your roles, you have then to ask yourself a very simple question: *Who am I?* If the first answer that comes to your mind is: I am Dr. ..., I am the wife of Fr., or I am the mother of, then you have to know that you are

counted among this category and that you are at high psychic, social and even spiritual risk.

- 2) **Exaggeration in performing certain role on the expense of other roles** without considering the balance between different roles required from the person. For example, one can exaggerate in playing the role of a physician on the expense of his roles as a husband and father.
- 3) **Conflict between the different roles of the person** like the conflict expressed by a working woman towards fulfilling her role at work and her roles as a wife and mother; and like the conflict expressed by the priest towards his role as a priest and his roles as a husband and father.
- 4) **Strain of the role** where the person feels severe difficulty in fulfilling the tasks expected from his role. May be the expectations required from the one who will perform this role exceed the ability of the person and he then feels frustration and low self-esteem. For example, it is expected from the one who takes the post of CEO of a big organization to perform certain delicate tasks that require specific skills not possessed by everyone.

Now, I repeat my question in a different way:

After the person and his wife accept the divine call of priesthood and he is ordained as a priest, does his priesthood become a *Role* or an *Identity*?

I will leave you to think about the answer of this difficult question in the light of what had been explained above and through the grace of God we will discuss the answer in the article of next month.

(to be continued)