



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of
the Southern United States

The Monthly Message
to the Priests' Wives
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Role or Identity (3)

We discussed in the last article that the parameter that differentiates between the role and the identity is **the parameter of the kingdom of heaven**. Roles are bound to specific goals that are achieved in the present age and they vanish in the eternal life as there will not be any need for them and nothing remains from them except their rewards, while identity which is the person's being endures. We also concluded that gifts are nothing more than roles that will vanish in the next age, while love that is present behind the gift itself is the identity that will endure. We agreed that priesthood, besides being a sacrament, **is a role and an identity at the same time**. The identity of the priest is that of a self-sacrificing loving servant, while his role on earth is completion of the service of the Sacraments. We also concluded that the "Priest Wife" is a role, but it is a role with a special nature and special prerequisites, hence a role with special challenges and "**special reward**".

Challenges of the role of priest and role of priest's wife

(1) The first challenge that meets the priest's wife, and also the priest, is that others are dealing with them only through that role. I mean that people that surround them in general, and parishioners in specific, vanish the identities of the priest and priest's wife and reduce it into that role. They retain them exclusively in it. A parishioner can totally forget that the priest (and of course the priest's wife) is **originally a human being in his identity**, and that he has other roles in life, like for example the role of the husband and the role of the father. This leads to heightening the ceil of expectations that parishioners demand from the priest, priest's wife and even their children. **They expect from the priest and his wife all what is absolute** and they never accept what is relative as regard care, interest, guidance, time...etc. **How they cannot do this while they see in the priest "The Messiah" and they project unto him the picture of the "Omnipotent God"?!**

There are different reactions of the priest and his wife to these expectations. **The most dangerous of them is that they respond to these absolute expectations in an absolute manner that acknowledges neither boundaries nor limitations**. I mean that they vanish their identities and reduce them into their roles as a priest and a priest's wife; and after they identify with these roles, they obtain their entire feeling of their identities from practicing these roles. Therefore, this

role takes the place of the identity and becomes the center of the entire life and its sole goal. As the man, even if he is a priest, is a human being with limited physical and psychic capabilities, it is then necessary that it ends up with that priest and his wife to be put under severe stress and to be burnt out under the load of absolute unrealistic expectations. At the end, they become attacked with boredom, frustration and even skepticism in the call of the priest to priesthood itself!!

Some can ask in an astonished or denying way: Does not God give to the priest and his wife a specific grace suitable to fulfill the prerequisites of the role of priesthood? Does not God commit much to the priest and his wife; hence much is required from them? Does not God rebuke in the Holy Bible the shepherds that do not attend to the people and does not He promise them with every woe?

Answers to these questions are present in the following texts and situations in the Holy Bible:

- Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, gave him an advice saying: *"The thing that you do is not good. Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourself out. **For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself....So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you**"* (Exodus 18: 17-18, 22).

What are you doing Jethro? How do you dare saying about Moses, the man of God, about whom God Himself testified that *"I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings"* (Numbers 12:8), that this thing is too much for him; this Moses whom God gave charge of the greatest role and worked through him the greatest exclusive wonders in history?! How can you prescribe him that he is not able to perform it by himself while he is supported and helped by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit?!

What a wonderful scriptural text is this text!! Look at Jethro giving Moses a lesson about how to be aware of the difference between his identity and his role. **By saying "So it will be easier for you", he drew his attention to the importance of respecting his human identity with all its boundaries and capabilities, and to avoid its vanishing and diffusion into his role.**

- During the period of His service on earth, Jesus Christ did not let His pastoral role to make Him forget His identity as the Son begotten of God the Father and of one essence with Him. He was very keen to go up on the mountain by Himself to spend the whole night in prayer, **this prayer which made His identity, made of light, to be transfigured before His disciples** on Mount Tabor. *"And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to*

pray" (Matthew 14:23); *"Now it came to pass in those days that He went up to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God"* (Luke 6:12); *"...and went up on the mountain to pray. As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening"* (Luke 9:28-29). **Here, Jesus Christ is teaching us that going into the room for prayer is nothing more than temporary renouncement of roles for the sake of coming in contact with the identity in the depths of the heart, the identity of son of man and son of God at the same time. This deep contact with the identity supports, in his turn, the good quality of role performance.**

- We find in many places in the Holy Bible that Christ restored to priorities the right ranking. **He gave the identity of the servant that is stuck to God and united with Him in love the priority over his role in ministry.** We can find this clear in the famous dialogue between Jesus, Martha, who was distracted with much serving (i.e. with many roles), and Mary who sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word (in contact with her identity stuck to God). Jesus saying: *"But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her"* (Luke 10:42) affirms that the parameter of endurance of identity and vanishing of roles in the next age is right.

We also find this priority of the identity clear in His saying: *"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world (i.e. through many roles), and is himself (i.e. his identity and being) destroyed or lost?"* (Luke 9:25), in His saying: *"The Sabbath (i.e. the role) was made for man (i.e. his identity), and not man for the Sabbath"* (Mark 2:27) and His saying: *"Come aside by yourselves (i.e. to be in contact with your identities) to a deserted place (i.e. away from all roles) and rest a while. For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat"* (Mark 6:31), also in His saying: *"Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven"* (Luke 10:20). **This means that after you accomplish your role in ministry, take care not to obtain your sense of identity and being from the success and bearing fruits in your roles as servants, but keep in peace as long as by anyway your names, that symbolize your identities, are written in heaven.**

(to be continued)