



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of
the Southern United States

The Monthly Message
to the Priests' Wives
January 2014

Role or Identity (4)

(2) The second challenge that meets the priest's wife is what is called **the discrepancy between the Private Self and the Public Self**. The private self is what we already are and what we feel internally, while the public self is the self that we show to others. The private self is the part of self we want to keep hidden, while the public self is the part of our self we want others see and know. Our behavior is influenced by both selves as there is a difference between our state when we are alone and our state in the presence of others. When one behaves according to his private self, he is then spontaneous and is capable of easily exposing the most private and weakest parts of his self before his beloved. He is also capable of being in touch with his self and of being aware of it. On the other hand, when one behaves according to his public self he is then more sensitive to being rejected by others, more

submissive to their expectations from him, keener to follow the traditions and rites of his community and he gives more attention to the impression he has on others.

If behaving according to the public self constitutes a psychic stress for the regular person as it implies homeostasis and keeping boundaries, then how much psychic energy of the priest, his wife and his children is depleted while facing such a matter?!

Before the ordination of the priest, he and his family are just members of the church, but as soon as he is ordained strong light is thrown on them all. **This entry into the circle of light implies them to behave according to the public self more than the private self.** As members of congregation expect from the priest, his wife and his children to be exemplary in everything and that the priest becomes everything to everybody, then being an offense is the most things a priest and his family are afraid of. Therefore, the priest and his family have to renounce many things after his ordination, not because they are evil in themselves but because of considering the honor of priesthood and the convenience. For example, the general appearance and ethics that are accepted from a regular wife

may not be accepted from a priest's wife. Some behaviors that are accepted from a regular child may not be accepted from a priest's child. **The reason lying behind this is that the members of the congregation consider the priest's wife and child as an evidence and proof of the genuineness of his teachings. They also see that the way a priest treat his family members, they treat him and treat each other is the parameter that must be used to measure the degree of fake in his sermons.**

As much as the priest and his family members are pushed to behave according to the public self, they are also much more obliged to strengthen limits and boundaries surrounding the private self. This may be a consequence of the fondness of some people of crossing boundaries of the priest's privacy, of their intense curiosity and intrusion.

In such a case, reactions of priests' wives and children are variable. **Some of them surrender to this necessity and even exaggerate in giving priority to the public self over the private self.** Therefore, they hinder their spontaneity and lose contact with their humanity. These in turn either generate frustration and tension inside them or

make them indifferent and blunted to the degree that they are transformed into semi-robots. On the other hand, some others exaggerate in insisting on holding their private selves and choose to totally withdraw away from every participation in any activity that can throw light on them. Even some of the priests' wives and children intend to attend prayers and service at a church other than that the priest ministers at in order to maintain a greater degree of privacy and freedom.

A priest's wife and children do not have to become upset, as such a diminution in spontaneity and hindering of gullibility is nothing more than a burnt offering offered by all of them and smelt by the Lord as a sweet aroma. They must take the example of St. Paul who said: *"We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed. But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses"* (2Cor.6: 3-4). **It is, of course, a narrow gate and a difficult way, nevertheless, its reward is great.**

(To be continued)