



**Coptic Orthodox Diocese of  
the Southern United States**

**The Monthly Message  
to the Priests' Wives  
October 2018**

## **Intrusive Questions**

**My dearest sister in Christ,**

When I was a teen, I was fascinated with languages—all kinds of languages. French and Japanese, HTML and JavaScript, Sign Language and Morse Code. Language itself was amazing to me. How can all these completely different squiggles and lines come together to create meaning for different groups of people?

One time my father caught me writing in a journal in code—a code I had completely invented myself. I was so proud of myself, but he said to me half-jokingly, “People write in code when they’re trying to hide something—what are you trying to hide?”

When my husband was first ordained, I wanted to protect his privacy. People would ask where we were going (on a vacation, for example), and I felt an immense pressure to say, “That’s private” or “I can’t tell you” or whatever other immediate defensive response came to my head.

People were taken aback. I had assumed they were prying (and maybe they were), but they were affronted at my bluntness. I was trying to write my life in code, but, much like my father, they wondered even more what I was trying to hide.

One of the hardest things about being the wife of a priest is learning how to protect your privacy gracefully. Members of the congregation sometimes wrongly expect your life to be completely open to them. They ask awkward and intrusive questions; they make strange requests.

The worst part is not knowing who is trustworthy and who is liable to gossip. Who will hear about your trip to Italy and feel offended—“We must be paying Abouna too much if he can afford a European vacation!”

Who will hear about your son’s mission trip to Mexico and start making nonsensical connections between him and the prodigal trip of an average college student on Spring Break? Who will hear about your daughter’s recent low grades and mock her intelligence or

question your parenting?

Who can we trust? And if we're private people, how can we protect that privacy?

I can only offer my small experiences.

Lying is a sin. Bluntness is offensive. So, we must find a middle way and not veer from it to the left or to the right. This middle way will look differently when you do it than when I do it. But let me share how I do it.

First, I have found that people are asking questions for three different reasons:

1. Curiosity (Does life at Abouna's house look like life in any average house?)
2. Comparison to a model (Are we doing things wrong in our own house and Abouna knows a better way?)
3. Projection (I am stressed about something and wishing someone would ask about it!)

None of these reasons are malicious. They can become malicious, but they are not at outset intended to be. Nearly everyone who asks a prying question is doing it with a clear conscience—even if their question is outrageous to us.

Don't assume the worst about people, especially your congregation. Your congregation is not your enemy; they are your family. When you start with a positive attitude towards them, you can get much farther and actually protect your privacy a lot more.

Second, I strive to have a clear conscience about the things I do with my life. I examine my own intentions. "For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light" (Mark 4:22). I make it so that I have nothing to hide.

This doesn't mean I don't make deliberate decisions about what kinds of information I share and don't share. For example, I have a policy that I don't talk about my kids' grades at all—good or bad. But I do make sure that I am taking care of their schooling, so that my conscience is clear before God.

When I am asked a question directly that I prefer not to answer, I don't lie. I do keep my answer as simple and non-informative as possible, and either make an excuse to leave the conversation or I change the subject—which brings us to the final step—

The last step I have learned is to steer conversations about my family business back to how things are going in household of the person asking (see reason #3 above). Most people asking questions about you are wishing with all their heart that someone would ask questions

about them, that someone would care enough to listen to their problems and be supportive to them. To paraphrase Dale Carnegie “Nobody cares about you—they care about themselves.”

So, while I don’t talk about my kids’ grades, I do talk about what to feed them. It’s a very easy way to get the other person to talk about what diet they’re currently trying or what they feed/fed their kids.

They asked a prying question about my homelife, but we spend 45 minutes talking about their homelife instead. Because that is what they really want—someone to listen to them. That is the code they’re writing in the questions they ask about you. The words sound like accusations, but the meaning of them is their own loneliness—and often pain.

Give them what they really want—a trusted friend. Affectionately,  
Ni-ni

*Note: Tasoni Ni-ni is a fictional character, a compilation of events and advice gathered through research and interviews. Not everything Tasoni Ni-Ni says or does can be attributed to one person.*