



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

**The Monthly Message  
to the Priests' Wives  
November 2019**

Dearest Sister in Christ,

For a priest's wife, there's very little in life more frustrating than having someone come to you to criticize your husband. They come to you, the person who sacrifices in little and big ways every day so he can be present for *them* to complain that what you two are doing is in some way inadequate.

I don't know about you, dear sister, but situations like that really upset me. I'm not very good at responding. I tried to google "what to do when people criticize your spouse," but that only brought up articles about critical husbands (not criticized ones). It was not until I added the keyword "pastor" that suddenly all the results reflected life as we know it.

You see, there are many ways that being a priest's wife is like marrying someone of some other profession. Like a doctor, who's on call often. Or a businessman who travels for work. Or a fireman who keeps long and unusual hours.

But I am struggling to think of another profession where the people being served come to you *his wife* to vent about his work. No architect's wife gets a call about how the house wasn't built the way they wanted. No pharmacist's wife sits through detailed analysis of how the drugs were sorted in one way or another. I'm struggling here, so do let me know if you come up with an example.

In short, this is one of those struggles that is really unique to our lives. There aren't a lot of people who understand our situation and who can give us guidance on how to react.

Do we defend our husbands? Do we listen quietly? Do we leave the conversation—or the room?

One pastor's wife described rising in a meeting where he was being fiercely criticized, giving a very brief emotional defense of her husband, and then bursting into tears and running from the room. I imagine that's not the way any of us would want that scenario to play out.

I have tried in this letter to put together some step-by-step tips and advice to help us handle this with grace.

## **1 - EXPECT IT**

Being a leader means being criticized. It's inevitably going to happen, so expect it—and be prepared with a plan (see the points below)!

Accept the fact that the criticism that comes to you won't always be logical or consistent. People will complain without all the facts. Different people will give you opposite "advice." That's completely normal; everyone has a different perspective.

Also, remember that criticism CAN be a blessing! If you can take useful criticism, it might help avoid some of the really bad repercussions that come from ignoring a real problem. It might be an opportunity to grow or course correct.

When King David was cursed by Shimei, Abishai volunteered to cut off Shimei's head. But David said, "Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the LORD has ordered him" (2 Samuel 16:11). Who knows if God is allowing this criticism to come to you to warn, encourage, or strengthen you?

So, first, expect that you and your priest-husband will face some criticism.

## **2 - Calm Down**

Your initial instinct when someone takes you aside to "discuss" Abouna might be anger or defensiveness or sorrow. Take a deep breath and give your emotions time to calm down.

Give the person a small concerned frown and nod your head slowly, as if to say "I understand." This will create a buffer time where you can focus your mind and quiet your feelings. It also helps to signal to them in this way (small frown and nod) that you genuinely care about them and are listening.

If possible, start by finding points to agree on. "Oh, yes, I can see what you mean" and "I'm sure that's frustrating" are helpful phrases. If you can find points of agreement that are not disloyal, use them to steer the conversation to a more positive place.

## **3 - It's (Not) Personal**

Criticism of him can often feel like direct criticism of you. Your role in his life is to help him maintain balance between work and family. When someone complains Abouna isn't spending enough time on one service or another, you might start to feel guilty that you ask anything of him at all.

The person complaining is probably not thinking of you in that way. More likely they find you gentler and less intimidating than Abouna, and so they come to you because they trust you and not because they are challenging you or criticizing you personally. Remembering that can help you keep a level-head in this kind of very tough situation.

#### **4 - Keep It Together**

One piece of advice that I found that rang really true to me was "Don't let them add something you said or did to the list of complaints." When they walk away from you, you want them to feel heard and loved. That way, they don't walk off to the next person to complain about your husband AND you AND your reaction, too. Keep it together, girl!

This is a true spiritual test and battle. Do everything you can to win the spiritual battle within you. Don't worry too much about the stormy complaints outside.

Some complaints are easy for you to handle (if you stay calm). If they complain there's no service for the youth, remind them of the Bible study just for youth on a particular day. You might discover they just haven't been getting the announcements. Don't assume they are trying to be cranky; instead seek to be helpful.

#### **5 - Seek the Kernel of Truth**

Once the conversation has ended, when you're safely away from the emotional storm, try to see if there's any truth or helpful information in the criticism. With humility and a gentle spirit, you might actually benefit from something this person has said.

#### **6 - Forgive Them**

One pastor's wife said, "At the end of the day, you have to forgive." And you do. For the sake of YOUR soul and YOUR salvation, for the sake of the peace and unity of the church you love, you have to forgive those who complain and criticize.

I know this is the hard one, especially when you know they are in the wrong about something. Remember that the battle is for your soul and not about this small issue that will be forgotten in a week, in a year, in a decade. We are all working out our eternal salvation.

#### **7 - Be Careful How You Pass It On**

Be careful how you transfer the criticism to your husband. Don't join the group to complain about his handling of something. Find the right part of the information (the kernel of truth from above), give it to him at the right time—and in the right way.

Sometimes, your job is just to support and NOT report. For example, he was there already (like at a meeting). Or he heard from this person at some other time (like hours long phone conversations). Your role is to support your husband—not to police him—and certainly not to police him for others.

If you can help, help—within your OWN boundaries. It's tempting to take on a lot of extra services to help your husband keep all these complaints away. But if you don't respect your own time and boundaries, this will serve to build resentment. Others can serve and help, too. It's not all on the two of you.

## **8 - God Is the Judge**

Remember what Saint Paul said in 1 Corinthians? "It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court" (1 Corinthians 4:3). It's a small matter to be judged by the people we serve. We shouldn't make a big, dramatic deal about it.

Saint Paul continues, "In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord" (1 Corinthians 4:3-4). Which of us can rightly judge ourselves? "Who can understand his errors?" (Psalm 19:12). With our conscience clear before God, we can only rely on His judgment and His mercy.

Our judge is God and not the people. He is the One who knows our hearts, our intentions, and the truth of our efforts. Keeping this in mind helps us get through these testing conversations without losing our peace.

Your sister in Christ,

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