



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

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

Dearest Sister in Christ,

Whether it's the demands of the congregation, of both of your work schedules, or of the kids, sometimes it can be hard to keep the romance alive in the priest-priest's wife relationship. The strange hours, drop of the hat emergencies, and days away can really wear at a relationship.

But there's no earthly relationship more important to you and your husband's emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual health than the relationship you have with each other. Your family's health *and* the health of the congregation depend on the health of your relationship.

I don't want to tell you to "say I love you" or "kiss goodnight" or whatever you have already heard a million times. I want to share some real pieces of advice mined at ground zero of a marriage that is growing (instead of diminishing) in love.

Here are seven important ideas to keep in mind to strengthen your bonds. It doesn't matter if you're new(er) to marriage or new to the priesthood or if you've been at both for a long time. It's always a good idea to remember these small ways to keep your love strong.

CHANGE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

There are so many expectations put on a couple by society, by social media, and by the couple's own past. If you want to keep the romance alive in your marriage, throw off those expectations and form your own ideas about enjoying a good time together.

Here's just one example: the image of a married couple in love often includes "date night." You dress up and go to a fancy restaurant and then take a walk under the stars. Maybe before the priesthood and before having children, this was something you did occasionally together.

Personally, date night attempts have been a total failure. Each time they failed, I felt like a failure. You see, after a certain age, I was very sleepy by 8 or 9 p.m. There was no way I wanted to go to some restaurant and pretend to be awake for another three hours or so. Add to that a schedule that had Abouna working evenings and kids with no one to watch them, and you have a recipe for repeated disappointment.

Now, I completely believe you should spend romantic time away with just your spouse. But trying to fulfill some social cliché based on scenes in television dramas or newly engaged couple's social media posts can be painfully silly when your real-life circumstances are completely out of sync.

I can't speak for you. I don't know what expectations you feel pressured to impose on your current romantic life. But I can tell you what we got rid of date night. My husband and I converted late night dates into weekly lunch dates, and the benefits could be felt immediately.

I'm not telling you to switch to date lunches. What if you're working a 9-to-5 office job? But I am telling you to look at the expectations you are trapping your relationship in and to think instead outside the box. You **can** find solutions that work for the two of you.

APPRECIATE YOUR SPOUSE

We talked about the expectations we can have for our romantic life, but what about the expectations we impose on our husbands. Once again, social clichés and social media images can muddy the waters and keep us from seeing our own wonderful husbands clearly.

Appreciate your spouse for who he is. So, he doesn't buy you flowers or he doesn't make dinner or whatever it is you see *that* husband over *there* doing. But what if instead you look for the things he does—no matter how small—that you do appreciate. You'll see that they add up.

My mother likes to tell this story of how she realized at some point that if she asks dad for a cup of water—at absolutely any hour—he will always get up and get it. No matter how late, no matter how asleep. She decided to never take that for granted.

What are the ways you can appreciate your spouse, the one you have, the one God gave you? He may seem to fail to live up to someone else's standards, but exceeds yours in so many ways, if you stop and notice.

UPDATE YOUR PICTURES

Speaking of expectations, take new pictures of the two of you together. If the only picture you have on your walls or bedside table is from your wedding—or even from ten years ago, find someone to take a picture of you TODAY.

There was a time when all of the photos of us in the house were of being madly in love before the priesthood (and before the beard!). I expected that every time I looked at the photos, I would be reminding myself of how much we loved each other.

But instead of remembering that we love each other now, I was reminding myself of "the good old days" (as if they were somehow better). "Back then, we could..." became the refrain every time I passed a photo. I was being conditioned to believe that our early love was stronger than

our current love (which was nonsense). It took me a few years to catch on to the damage this was doing to our relationship.

Finally, I had someone take a picture of us, cozy and in love, and I put that up. All of a sudden, I felt so secure in our relationship. It's not that he used to love me. He loves me now. And I love him now too, black robes and beard and all. When I walk by the photos, I don't think, "Look at how great our honeymoon was." I think, "Wow! Last year was awesome, wasn't it?"

It seems like such a small thing, but it can make a massive difference in your mood and attitude in your marriage.

SEEK HEALTHY ATTENTION

And on the topic of mood, there's nothing that makes mine turn sour than jealousy. Sometimes when I watch my husband deal extensively with a couple struggling with their marriage (many visits over many weeks) or sitting on the phone for what feels like forever listening to the complaints of a husband or wife about their spouse, I can feel the envy rise within me. When was the last time I had someone to complain to for an hour or more (never mind that I don't have that much to complain about)!! Especially if we've skipped our date lunch for a few weeks in a row, I can get so moody and jealous.

There's this very irritating fact among good students that the principal only knows the names and faces of troublemakers (who spend a lot of time in his office). You might have met children who act up (or are tempted to act up) in order to get the attention only given to "bad" kids.

I call this "The Good Son" syndrome (Luke 15:11-32). Like the Good Son, we watch our father run off and hug our wayward brother. He puts the robes on him. He has the fatted calf killed. And all we can do is watch, bitterly.

There our husbands go running to some weeping and frustrated person who isn't us. "These many years," we think, "I have been serving you." And we think, "Does it take a problem to get your attention? Should I make trouble so you pay attention to me?!"

Do the 99 sheep in the fold roll their eyes when the shepherd goes after the lost one? I am ashamed to say that sometimes I do.

Don't be tempted to become the good son, to give in to that jealousy and to feel slighted. Remember that you are blessed with a husband who appreciates you even more because of the struggles he sees others endure. Remember that he is always with you and that all he has is yours. Remind yourself that you are blessed because you are in the fold! Don't let the devil tempt you to cause division where there isn't any.

Instead, learn to communicate your needs and set healthy boundaries without jealousy. Take the time to figure out your needs. Then, sit with your husband and establish boundaries together that make you feel safe and secure.

There's this old Southern saying: If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy. Sometimes you hear this as "happy wife, happy life." When you make these small changes to make sure you are connecting with your husband and that you are feeling secure in the relationship, everyone who comes in contact with you both will benefit. Choose one thing to work on this week, so that you can both see the benefits.

Your sister in Christ,

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