



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of

the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Priests Wives

January 2020

Dealing with Unsupportive Family

Dearest Sister in Christ,

Have you ever faced an unsupportive friend or family member? Someone who doesn't understand your devotion to your service, a decision you make with regards to your kids (like homeschooling), or maybe your career choice (or career change)?

We all will face a situation like that at least once in our lives, if not multiple times. Even in small decisions, those who are close to us might have different opinions—and voice them loudly.

Here are three things I want you to know about unsupportive family members or friends under normal circumstances (that is, they are not abusive or manipulative, and you are not making a truly destructive life choice).

1 - THEY DO IT OUT OF LOVE

People who don't love you will rarely feel the need to speak up about a decision you make. People who don't love you won't worry about you or ask questions that feel critical and pointed.

Sure, we can be judged by strangers, but here I am talking about a close family member or friend that you confide in or share your announcement with. When they react, remind yourself that they are first reacting out of love for you. Now, it might not be the kind of love you want or need (or maybe it is!), but it is still love.

We would all prefer it if everyone in our lives just nodded along with all our decision, but that is unrealistic and actually very dangerous. No one wants to be surrounded by yes-men. So when someone you love, who loves you back, doesn't wholeheartedly agree with a decision you make, don't recoil or react. Accept it as a form of love.

Once, friends of mine threw me a surprise party. I hate surprises and had clearly told these friends I did not want a party, but out of love, they did it anyway. I was furious at first. I called an old friend who lived far away to complain, and she laughed at me.

"We don't get to decide HOW people love us," she said.

Now I keep that in mind all the time, especially when I feel criticized or attacked. It has saved me from a lot of unnecessary heartache.

Accept people's love in whatever form it's offered (you know, outside of actual abuse). For some of the people you love, asking probing questions about the viability of your choices is a kind of love—even if it feels rude at first.

In Proverbs, it is written, "Where there is no counsel, the people fall; / But in the multitude of counselors there is safety." (Proverbs 11:14) Consider carefully the advice your loved ones share, in prayer, and discern God's hand in your choices. Use their questions to guide your thinking. Show respect to their concerns.

2 - RESPECT AND BOUNDARIES ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE

Though you should respect your family or close friend's questions and advice, it does NOT mean that you have to throw out your boundaries. Just because they ask a question or offer advice, doesn't mean you have to take it. Respecting them and their offer of love means considering their question, considering their advice—not following it wholesale and without your own thinking.

It is very important to take ownership of all decisions you make in your life. Your life is yours and before God only you can answer for your choices. You have to know yourself and your situation. And when you make a decision, you have to accept responsibility for it. This means that you should never make a life decision lightly based on someone else's recommendation. No one else will be responsible for your life (and, more importantly, your salvation) than yourself.

"Therefore, we make it our aim... to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:9-10).

Make decisions that are pleasing to God, and if your decision is well-pleasing to God, trust that your family will grow to understand your perspective.

3 - DISCOVER THE UNDERLYING ISSUE

There is a quote that I love that says, "Advice is a form of nostalgia. Dispensing it is a way of fishing the past from the disposal, wiping it off, painting over the ugly parts and recycling it for more than it's worth."

In short, it means that when someone is giving you advice, they are looking back at their own life, at their own unfulfilled dreams and mistakes, and pulling out of it what they can offer you.

Even me, my sister, when I give you advice here, I am often looking back at my own life and my own mistakes and trying to glean wisdom I can share. It is never a judgment of you but of my own past.

This is true for the mom who says, "Why are you doing that?" or the uncle who says, "That will never work!"

While it can be difficult and exhausting, what unsupportive family members and friends really need is reassurance. They need to know that you're going to be okay. If you're starting a new job, a few months in, share how happy you are and the results of a project you're working on. If you're doing something different with the kids, share pictures of how well they are doing at intervals.

Or, if this family member is feeling neglected while you serve, give him or her evidence that you won't be abandoning them or care less about them. Call your grandmother, text your brother, check in with that friend from back home. Remind them that you are there for them, even if your life is heading in a different way, even if you're abandoning all to follow Christ's call.

The fifth commandment says, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12). We honor them by making good, informed decision, in the fear of God, while also fulfilling our duties towards them.

In short, my sister, assume the best about those around you. Assume they are speaking out of love and not malice. Listen respectfully while also acknowledging that your choices need to be of a clear conscience towards God. Finally, give them what they need—the love, reassurance, and evidence that you did make the right decision and that it isn't affecting you or them negatively.

Until next time, I am...

Your sister in Christ,

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