

# Married Greek Orthodox Clergy in Contemporary Society: Exploring the roles of the Priest and Presbytera in the Australian context\*

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Anecdotal evidence suggests the image and the roles of the Greek Orthodox Priest and Presbytera are surrounded by a tradition of vague ideas mixed with many stories passed down from generation to generation. Role ambiguity and confusion exists about the ministry of the Greek Orthodox Church in an Australian and global context. This research is an exploration of real experiences that could challenge some perceptions and expectations while drawing together the diverse and multi-dimensional roles of the Greek Orthodox Priest and Presbytera in the Australian context, identifying the tug-of-war of “what should be” and “what is”. The aim is to develop a better understanding of where the Priest and Presbytera fit in the overall substance of the Greek Orthodox Church through a synchronic view with polyphonic layers of their stories, in contemporary society. The first fruits of this labour have been divided into several categories: the Priest and the Church; the Presbytera and the Church; Marriage and the Church.

## Introduction

### *Preface*

Respondents were drawn from Greek Orthodox married clergy under the wing of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese across Australia. As the researcher and a Presbytera of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in Australia, my insider researcher status fosters a

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starting point to access other Greek Orthodox married clergy,<sup>1</sup> opening the door to a rich tapestry of stories providing an up-close and personal account of their perceptions and experiences in Australia today.

Anecdotal and personal evidence would suggest that people in general are not clear on what the Church is about; on what the Priest's role is and what he offers; on what the Presbytera's role is; and that there are times when the Priest and Presbytera are themselves confused in their roles as a married couple, married clergy and the interplay of these multi-dimensional roles within a range of conceptual context.

My research draws together the diverse and multi-dimensional roles of the Priest and Presbytera, filtering them through the marriage lens. It is an exploration of real experiences that challenges some perceptions and expectations while identifying the tug-of-war that exists between "what should be" and "what is".

Literature and Internet searches nationally and internationally have proven fruitless in this area. Furthermore, exhaustive supplementary searches for literature on the diversity of roles of married clergy in the Orthodox tradition and how those roles are perceived and experienced by the Greek Orthodox Priest and Presbytera produced no results.

### *Purpose*

It is envisioned that the sharing of these insights will provide married clergy with a voice enabling them to communicate the diverse and multi-dimensional aspects of these roles today, to the Greek Orthodox Church, to Church hierarchy, Church congregations, other faith-based and human service organisations and the wider community and those contemplating a life serving God. The aim is to develop a better understanding of where the Priest and Presbytera fit in the overall substance of the Church in contemporary society, by providing a synchronic view of the diverse and multi-dimensional roles of married clergy, as individuals and as a couple.

It is envisioned that the contribution of these insights into the roles of the Priest and Presbytera, could:

- Provide a basis for further exploration of the nature of Spiritual Work, community and social work and other work as perceived by the Priest and Presbytera;
- Impart new empirical evidence for on-going research, debates and self-reflexivity within the Greek Orthodox Church;

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<sup>1</sup> I take this opportunity to acknowledge the selflessness of the research participants. They all gave freely of their time and shared their stories with great passion and insight, never losing sight of the work they do for God and God's people. I must confess that the biggest surprise for me, as a researcher and a Presbytera, was the enthusiasm the Priests showed when approached to be part of this research endeavour. I was overwhelmed with their support and responses. Time and again the Priests said that they were never asked what they do, and they were more than happy to tell their stories. The Presbyteres too, were always supportive and enthusiastic.

- Contribute to the wider body of literature and discussion on the roles of married clergy in contemporary society.

### *Presupposition*

Modern (Orthodox) people have become more demanding and more knowledgeable, looking to the clergy with an inquiring eye rather than with faith (Tsirintanes, 1986; Molokotos-Liederman, 2003), viewing the Church as a “worldwide organisation” (Ware, 1991:21). One could argue that changes in contemporary society influence the Orthodox Church environment and as a consequence underpin pressures for change impacting on the roles of the Priest and Presbyteria. Taken a step further, this thought could lead us down a path where the Priest no longer has any influence in people’s lives and is even looked down upon by those who believe that if “poorly educated or humanly and spiritually untrained”, married Eastern Orthodox clergy are “no longer fitted to fulfil their ministry” (Clement, 1967–68:390). With this in mind we could compare modern (Orthodox) people with the “multitudes in the wilderness of Palestine [...] as sheep who have no shepherd” (Tsirintanes, 1986:49). This opens a door to the argument that the Church and its clergy must be relevant, particularly where people are disappointed with social systems, disappointed with themselves and hardened by the difficulties of life (Clement, 1967–68; Tsirintanes, 1986).

### **Preliminary findings**

While literature reviews and searches produced a wealth of information on the role of the Greek Orthodox Priest, Orthodoxy and the Church and faith-based organisations, there is limited literature available regarding the role of the Greek Orthodox Priest’s wife, the Presbyteria. Further, what literature there is on married clergy mostly refers to work-related stressors, burnout in married couples, personal coping strategies and pastoral care for the pastoral carers (Fyson, 1999; Meek, McMinn, Brower, Burnett, McRay, Ramey, Swanson & Villa, 2003; Westman, Etzion & Danon, 2001; Clement, 1967–68). It is interesting to note that these insights are from denominations other than Eastern Orthodox.

Our journey now continues in earnest. Picture the farmer as he enters his olive grove and moves from tree to tree, gently shaking it to see what fruit will fall, then with caring hands collects these fruits and proceeds to the selection stages of what will be kept and what will be set aside. As the farmer, I have moved from one olive tree to another (married clergy couples) and with much care and respect, gently shaken (asked them to tell me their stories). The first fruits of this labour have been divided into several categories: the Priest and the Church; the Presbyteria and the Church; Marriage and the Church.

I beg the reader’s indulgence as the scale of findings at this point in the process is heavily tipped on the side of the Priest. At the time of writing this paper the transcription of the interviews was incomplete, and the type of work the Presbyteria does was

as yet unexplored. This in no way reflects on the Presbytera's actual contributions to her husband's mission. It is important to bear in mind that the study is still very much a work in progress.

### *The Priest and the Church*

Role ambiguity and confusion exists about the ministry of the Greek Orthodox Church in an Australian and global context (Vaporis, 1983), particularly where the role is not clearly defined or there are unclear expectations surrounding a role. One could argue that a lack of clarity regarding the roles that married clergy are expected to play could result in role conflict, particularly when a person simultaneously holds multiple roles with competing expectations, and the perceptions, expectations and types of work (paid and unpaid) clash with what was originally implied. Add another layer to that, where the Priest and Presbytera bring with them their own beliefs, expectations and experiences of these roles (Lowery, 2005).

St Paul says, "obey those who watch over you [...] for they watch out for your soul, as those who must give account" (Hebrews, 13:17). This statement emphasises the heavy responsibility clergy in the Orthodox Church bear as the ordained spiritual leaders, the involvement Priests have with the people of their Church community and the importance of working towards making their Church relevant to the people of today (Barbour, 2003), as they will answer before God for the people in their care.

In the initial findings all respondents felt that the main function of their priesthood was the *liturgima* (λειτουργία), the service or function of their ministry. Respondents felt that this *liturgima* was the hardest work to carry out for the married Priest, because he has a wife and in most cases children, a family with home responsibilities; he also has responsibilities related to the Church he is assigned to, and to the parishioners. All respondents felt that in most instances the Church and its people took first place and the family second place. The Priests strongly emphasised that this is not intentional; it is just the nature of the work.

Listed below are the aspects of the Priest's life already emerging from the interviews:<sup>2</sup>

- *there is an extreme shortage of Priests, increasing the work load and making it difficult to have a rest such as annual leave*
- *this is not a 9am to 5pm job where you can just leave the office and forget about work for the night*
- *all Priests are on call 24/7, 365 days a year*
- *people call you at home all hours of the day and night — people need to be helped, regardless of my own need to rest and be with my family*
- *there is little support from colleagues*

<sup>2</sup> *Italics* portray the voice of the respondents.

- *there is an increase in the spiritual work*
- *there is an increase in the welfare work of the Church*
- *there is an increase in the need for the Priest to be more involved in the administration side of the Church and its welfare activities*
- *other problems that follow you home are problems with the committee(s) inside the Church*
- *people feel they have the right to call you at home even for the most trivial of matters — most times it could have waited until the next day*
- *there is a strong demand emerging that Priests speak English and Greek*
- *the only one I trust is my wife, my Presbyteria*

Other common elements in the Priest's everyday life included high levels of stress, burnout and health concerns that could not be dealt with until they reached crisis level. There is a strong emphasis placed on the loneliness and isolation experienced on a spiritual and emotional level.

### *The Presbyteria and the Church*

Although there is little written about the role of the Presbyteria, the Church's perceptions and expectations are expressed in the writings of the Eastern Orthodox Church Fathers who strongly believed that a major contributing factor in the establishment and cultivation of the service of an officiating Priest was his wife, the Presbyteria (Athanasopoulos, 2002). Placing this within a Social Work context, she can be defined as a frontline worker for those in need (Tsacalos, 2004). Interwoven within her responsibilities is the

benefit of the public (social) activity of the church [...] visiting and the general care for the sick, the elderly, the unemployed, the orphans, the spiritual strengthening and consolation of the grieving, and the support to families in crisis (Athanasopoulos, 2002:18).

This is the first picture we have of what the Presbyteria should do, in relation to what could be viewed as her pastoral duty as a co-servant to her husband's pastoral work, indicating that her dedication to the service of God begins with her husband and reaches to the last parishioner (Athanasopoulos, 2002). These descriptions highlight some personal qualities of character this woman may possess in order to carry out these expectations effectively (Tsacalos, 2004).

Many facets of the Presbyteria's life are already emerging from the interviews I have conducted:

- *there is no support for me (the Presbyteria, the wife, the woman, the mother) either from family, friends, the hierarchy or other Presbyteres*
- *the Presbyteria is in most cases the only comfort and support the Priest has*

- *we generally have to carry the burden alone, because we do not want to upset our husband*
- *we (the wife and children) have to share him with the people of the Church*
- *when he comes home from a very long day, the last thing my husband wants to hear about is the troubles the children may have had through the day, or my upsets*
- *the children have to be less demanding of their father's time, so I have to be there for them more*
- *the Presbyteria rarely has anyone to confide in, particularly if there are relationship problems*

Other common elements in the Presbyteria's everyday life include having to be both mother and father to the children; having to be patient when her husband has been away from early morning until late at night and is too tired to talk or listen; coping with people's expectations of her participation and commitment to Church activities; concerns for her husband's health and well being; being aware of her husband's path towards burnout and a feeling of helplessness to stop it; having to manage alone when her own health is failing because the Priest is too busy dealing with his parishioners. Regardless of these many facets of their life, all the Presbyteres believe in the work their husband is doing for God.

Honesty prevailed and all respondents said the most crushing emotion of all was a feeling of aloneness and isolation, on a spiritual and emotional level. While the Presbyteres emphasised they do have a Spiritual Father they talk to regularly for confession and other spiritual matters, most felt they could not talk to him about relationship issues as this could be seen as a betrayal of their husband, the Priest. The Presbyteres loosely alluded to the possibility that they struggled alone to make the marriage work.

### *Marriage and the Church*

There is very little written about marriage in relation to the Eastern Orthodox Church and married clergy, except in the writings of the great Fathers of the Church, who draw from the life and example set by the married Saints of early Christianity. It is through the living example of their lives that married clergy can seek guidance to help them in their own struggles and difficult times. For the Orthodox Christian, marriage is a life-long commitment to the person loved, not merely a social and civil arrangement of two people. It is a Holy Sacrament undertaken in the presence of God and is the oldest of God's institutions.

However, this does not mean that a Church wedding will automatically guarantee a successful marriage; nevertheless, we do believe that by inviting the Lord Jesus to enter the relationship we are given the opportunity, grace and power to be patient

when it is so easy to be impatient; to be loving when it is so easy to be unloving; to be forgiving when it is so easy to be unforgiving; to be kind when it is so easy to be insulting; to be understanding when it is so easy to be critical (Coniaris, 1982). Marriage is about the necessity of continual mutual respect between the spouses, and equality of rights and obligations where the main goal should always be unity. The perfect union will occur when God is in their midst (Moses, 1991).

The responses from both Priests and Presbyteres already give an indication of the ways in which the Priest's duties impact on his wife and family:

- *as the father (the Priest) I feel that I must take the family out and spend some time with them as there are times where I would not have seen them for days due to my duties and obligations and the needs of the Church*
- *very little time to be a family, or sometimes even husband and wife, no time to ourselves as a couple*
- *when the Priest finally gets home he doesn't want more problems from the family, so the wife has to be more understanding and provide that supporting role*
- *on the rare occasion he makes it home for dinner, the phone will often ring just as we are sitting down at the table, and he has to leave because of an emergency, for example, he has to go to the hospital because someone is dying or has died, or there has been an accident*
- *it would be nice to go on a family picnic and not have someone come up to talk to your husband about the last Church service, a meeting that they were at, or to voice a complaint about the Church*
- *the Priest needs respect from his wife as sometimes there is very little respect from those he deals with in his work*
- *the Priest and Presbyteres pray together for comfort and strength*

## On-going exploration

While it is not yet possible to compare the work of the Priest and the Presbyteres, as this facet of the interviews has not yet been fully explored (this will be my next task), we can look at the Priest's working day as the Presbyteres observes it:

The Priest may well start the day with a Divine Liturgy Service, then go to the hospital visiting the sick. From the sick-bed he is supposed to move to an administrative meeting, to planning a fundraising activity, to supervising the after-hours language school, to counselling, to praying with a family, to budgeting meetings of the welfare activities, to problems with Church audio systems, to personal meditation, to Church service preparation, to preparing and/or editing the Church newsletter, to staff problems (Sunday school, language school, any welfare activities of the Church, Cantors of the Church), to welfare projects, to conflict management and problem-solving,

to community leadership, to personal study, to funerals, to weddings, to preaching. The Priest is expected to be in charge but not too much in charge, to attend a wide range of meetings, to be an administrative executive, a sensitive minister, a skilful counsellor, a public speaker and spiritual guide, to have political savvy, meet with government officials, be in tune with government funding bodies and be intellectually sophisticated. Furthermore, he is expected to be first rate in all of these areas. The Priest must be up-beat, positive, strong, willing, and available at all times, he is not supposed to be depressed, discouraged, cynical, angry, or hurt (Gilbert, 1990). At some point he will drag his tired body and aching spirit home in the hope of a quiet meal with his family (if they are still awake) and some comfort from his wife (if the trials of her day have left her any energy). I feel tired just relating these roles, responsibilities and activities, and at times unrealistic expectations and demands on the man we call the Priest.

These are just a few of the diverse roles and responsibilities the Priest faces every day. I hope that my analysis of the interviews I have conducted will give the Priests and Presbyteres a voice, enabling them to shed some light with some of their realities on the shadows of their role ambiguity, confusion and conflict, giving a clearer picture of the roles of the Priest and Presbyteres in Australia today. We can see that clergy and quite often their spouses are in key supportive roles to members of their Church community, actively working towards creating a caring and faithful environment for their parishioners, through support and guidance (Gilbert, 1990). While acknowledging this on the one hand, if we listen closely to their responses we can hear some hidden truths, that the Priest and Presbyteres experience the same kind of joys, sadness, pain and brokenness as their parishioners (but must never show it).

One of the recurrent themes throughout the interviews with all the respondents was that clergy need more support than they are getting. Gilbert (1990) sees the Priest as a product of his gender, reluctant to depend emotionally on anyone other than his wife. So, this leaves us with an unspoken gender script for the Presbyteres (being a woman and expected to take care of everyone else), absorbing her husband's pain with few, if any, places to go with her own pain (Tsacalos, 2004; Gilbert, 1990).

Some questions that need answering: who cares for the carers? Where do the Priest and Presbyteres go to find support? What keeps them from finding the support they need? Who can they turn to when faced with personal problems? (Gilbert, 1990). The answers will unfold as the exploration continues. This will be my next task.

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