

CHRISTIAN DATING

BRING CHRIST INTO YOUR RELATIONSHIP



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CHRISTIAN DATING

As a priest, I have many occasions to meet and talk with couples. Whether dating or married, couples, as well as singles, often have questions about how to be in a relationship while also being faithful to God. We all know that most relationships are not very “spiritual” and lack practical Christian faith. The reality is that there are not many resources on what “Christian dating” should look like, while we are inundated with images and information about non-faith-based relationships from social media, our friends, and other sources. When working with couples, I draw from my own experiences, the teachings of Holy Scripture, and our Church Fathers to help individuals develop themselves and their relationships. While by no means comprehensive, this booklet will answer some practical questions and provide reliable guidance for those interested in cultivating Christ-centered relationships in accordance with the teachings of the Armenian Orthodox Church.

One might honestly ask: *Why should I care about the Church’s view on dating and relationships?* The Church is often viewed as an authoritative and old-fashioned, if not outdated, institution. People assume its many rules and behavioral norms are there to make one a “good Christian.” The truth is, there is no such thing as a good Christian. As Christ says, only God is good

(Mark 10:18). Rather, Christ calls us to a new way of thinking and being in the world, to recreate our lives in a way that sets us apart for a higher purpose. In one of my favorite movies, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Captain Barbosa, when speaking about the “Pirate Code” says, “The code is more what you’d call guidelines, than actual rules.” In a similar way, the “rules” of the Church are guides or beacons, lighting our way to “the way,” who is Christ. Everything the Church recommends is done so to lead us to God, to model our lives after the pattern set by Christ. Advice the Church gives on dating, then, is not meant to thwart our desires and control us. Moses said it best when he told the Israelites that by following the commandments of God, their lives would be blessed. All the guidance the Church provides is meant to lead us to a place where we experience our lives as God created us to: blessed, joyful, and renewed.

WHEN TO START DATING?

Growing up, my parents told me I couldn’t date until I was older and only if the girl was an Armenian Christian. This cultural and religious emphasis is something we’ll discuss later, but what did they mean by “until I was older”? There is no Church “direction” or guideline as to the proper age to start dating. Each one of us matures differently and so each one of us is ready at a different

point in our life. Some of us may be ready in our teens, while some of us might be better off waiting until we are a bit older. If we are below 18, it is best to listen to the advice of our parents and priest (yes, you can ask your priest these questions). They are far more experienced and care for our well-being.

Dating is not a matter of age but rather purpose. The “when” therefore, can be answered when we have clarified the “why.” Whether we are dating as teenagers or later on, our reason to date shouldn’t be “peer” or “community” pressure. We might feel obligated to be in a relationship because our friends are or because our communities tell us we should be. However, God has a time and purpose for each one of us. Therefore, be patient, no matter how many of your friends are dating or how many times the *nenés* or *medz mamas* (grandmas) at Church ask you, “When are you going to get married and have babies?”

Similarly, we shouldn’t date simply because we think there is something to gain from the person we are with. Our value is not defined by the things we have or the people in our lives. You are a beautiful person, created fearfully and wonderfully in the image and likeness of God (Psalm 139:13-14; cf. Gen. 1:26-27). God’s love reveals to us our value. That is why before we start dating, we need to recognize *our own value* and God’s love in our life. In the Gospels, Jesus says, “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31), meaning we need to first love ourselves. Before

dating we should take time to value who we are as a person and work on things we need to improve rather than look to others to fill our voids. Why? Because loving ourselves means we take care of ourselves, our mind, body, and soul, by eating well, exercising, studying, praying and developing as an individual. Only after developing our self as an individual are we ready to share real love with others. So what is the purpose of dating? Love, sex, friendship? We'll see more in the coming sections.

WHAT IS LOVE?

Like all transcendent things, love is difficult to define. Poets, philosophers, and singers define love in different ways. In 1963, Johnny Cash wrote, “(Love) Ring of Fire” whose lyrics are:

“Love is a burnin’ thing,
And it makes a fiery ring
Bound by wild desire
I fell into a ring of fire.

Chorus:

I fell into a burnin’ ring of fire
I went down, down, down
And the flames went higher,
And it burns, burns, burns,
The ring of fire, the ring of fire.”

Here, Johnny Cash is referring to erotic love, which is only one kind of love. While English is more limited in its vocabulary for the various kinds of love, other languages, such as ancient Greek (the language the New Testament was written in) have words for different kinds of love:

Storge – empathy bond (Family)

Philia – friend bond (Friends)

Eros – romantic love (Spouse)

Agape – unconditional, ‘divine’ love (God)

All four forms of love should be present in a full life. Romantic, or erotic, love is not only expressed in physical acts like kissing, hugging, or sex, but also in vulnerability. That is why sex is sacred to marriage and not to be had outside of marriage. When a husband and wife come together and are united as one, they are vulnerable, intimate, humble, faithful, and obedient to one another. (But we will look at the importance and beauty of sex in marriage in section 5)

John 3:16, one of the most well-known passages of scripture says, “God so loved the world He gave His one and Only Son...” God gave, God created, God made, God protected, God blessed, God had compassion, God knew, etc. If God is love and God is all these things, it means that love is action, love is lived out in how we treat ourselves and others. That is why in Christian dating and marriage we don’t lay emphasis on

feelings, whether falling in or out of love. We commit to growing into becoming love. I truly recognized how much my wife loved me when she took care of me when I was extremely sick. Love is lived!

DOES DATING MEAN MARRIAGE?

Most adults who are dating are looking for a life partner, whether directly or indirectly. Teenagers and young adults, for the most part, are not dating with marriage in mind. This is neither wrong nor right. However, whether we accept it or not, dating is a pathway towards marriage and as Christians we need to always remember this when we date. When we date, we are sharing and opening a part of our life with someone else that we wouldn't normally share with others. We spend time together, share our likes and dislikes, and form a deeper bond with the person we are dating.

Now you might think, I'm too young to think about marriage, I'm just casually dating. Casual dating today, even if it doesn't lead to marriage, creates a bad habit which is not in line with Christian values. Society tells us that we should be happy in our relationships (nothing wrong with that) and if we aren't, then we should just break up and move on (that's what's wrong). This is one of the reasons why divorce is so rampant. Casual dating at a young age instills in us the hab-

it of easily breaking up, cutting ties, and moving on to find happiness or the next exhilarating experience with someone else. However, Christian marriage is about growing together, compromising, forgiving, learning and being humble. Yes, dating is a path to marriage, but that path is travelled with God's guidance, and prayer. Regardless of the age of when we begin dating, our hearts and mind need to prayerfully ask, "Can I build a faith filled life with the person I am with?"

A very important note to add – Any form of abuse (verbal, physical and/or psychological) is ABSOLUTELY NOT ACCEPTABLE, and health and safety are far more important than remaining in an abusive relationship. Seeking help from clergy, doctors, family and when necessary, law enforcement is recommended.

OKAY, WE'VE BEEN DATING FOR "X" YEARS, CAN WE LIVE TOGETHER?

Something that is very common in North American and Western European societies (not as common in other parts of the world) is couples living together after they have been dating for a while. This could be because of financial or various other reasons. When a couple lives together, they learn how to work together on a deeper level. There is the added benefit of spending

more time together, sharing life experiences, and learning how to get along with the other person in ordinary, everyday life. This is not a problem. If living together were wrong, then we shouldn't have roommates or live in dorms. Living together is not the sin but rather the sexual transgression which often accompanies it. You might say, "We're only living in the same building but not sleeping together" or even, "We don't need to live together to have sex." Couples must consider the importance of purity of mind and body in the development of themselves and their relationship with one another and with God.

The truth is we can't avoid all temptations. Christ teaches us, "Temptations to sin are sure to come..." (Luke 17:1). Whether we are dating or single, we all are going to face different temptations. However, in the Lord's prayer (*Hayr Mer*), we ask God to not lead us into temptation. Living together causes unnecessary temptations on a daily basis, which arise from a very natural and good desire for sexual intimacy. However, the Church teaches that this intimacy is to be experienced only in marriage. When we want to lose weight, we get rid of junk food from our home, when we want to give up smoking, we throw away the cigarettes. Likewise, though living together is not a sin, it makes temptation a constant presence in our lives and we do ourselves a favor by avoiding the daily temptation this brings.

MAKING LOVE

People often mistakenly think that the Church or God is against sex. This could not be further from the truth! Sex is an act created by God. It is an intimate experience of love given by God to humans as a sacred blessing to be experienced in marriage only. The reason for this is not because sex is bad or because that's how pregnancies happen, but rather because sex is more than a physical act. Sex is complete vulnerability. Sex while dating is problematic because it devalues and desacralizes this sacred gift of God. Society today often considers sex only a physical act. That is one of the reasons why many couples are left dissatisfied with their sexual life, leading to the use of pornography and other sexual outlets that ultimately lead to disconnection with one's spouse, all of which contributes to the high rate of divorce.

One of the main purposes of sex is the growth and deepening connection between a husband and wife. Of course, sex is also the means by which couples have children — the fruit of the love that a husband and wife share between one another, just as all of creation is the fruit of the love the three persons of the Trinity have for one another. In fact, when a husband and wife have kids, the Church Fathers say we become co-creators, doing as God does.

What about if you can't have kids? Even if sex does not result in procreation, it remains as

a bonding and unifying element of married life. St. John Chrysostom writes, "The goal of sex in marriage is spiritual union. Through the joining of two physical bodies in marital love comes a unique oneness of soul...Their intercourse accomplishes the joining of their bodies, and they are made one, just as when perfume is mixed with ointment."¹ According to Chrysostom, sex is sacred and holy when practiced in the sanctity of marriage (however, it isn't the purpose of marriage). In the same way that our spiritual communion is with one God, likewise, our erotic union should be to only one spouse², and not a sporadic, careless, or casual act with any person we may be attracted to.

The intimate experience of sex in marriage has the potential to reveal the love of God for us. It is not only for the physical intimacy of a husband and wife but is also a way of seeing the union and intimacy of God with his people. The beautiful prayers of the wedding service speak of the love of God for the Church in language that positions the groom as Christ and the bride as the Church. The Church becomes complete with God, humble and trusting in the will of God. God is self-sacrificing, humbling Himself out of love for the Church. Marriage and the sex that comes with it, become a path by which we grow to understand God's love for us, faithful and true no matter what. This is another reason why the Church teaches us to reserve sex for one committed, life-long relationship.

In the Old Testament, the emphasis of sex was on procreation. When God blessed couples of the Old Testament like Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, etc., the command was to “be fruitful and multiply... (Genesis 1:28; 2:15, 19–20).” In the New Testament, St. Paul says that the husband and wife should not abstain from sex or forbid sex from one another, except when they agree to do so for the purpose of prayer or fasting (1 Corinthians 7:1–7). The conditions of the contemporary world make it more unsuitable to have as many children as was common in ancient cultures. As mentioned above, procreation is not the only reason to have sex in marriage, since sex is also one of the unique ways that husband and wife experience and express love to one another.

BRING CHRIST INTO YOUR RELATIONSHIP

(DATING OR MARRIAGE)

If our faith is important to us, then we need to honestly ask ourselves, “How much time do I give to growing in my communion with God?” Bringing Christ into your relationship is a matter of choosing to share that prayer life, attending Church, etc., with the person we are dating. If we are willing to stop going to Church or stop praying because of what the person we are dating might

think of us, then why would they ever value our faith? If we are willing to compromise the sanctity of sexuality and our bodies, then why would the person we are dating not take advantage of us? Bringing Christ into our relationships is a conscious decision. It's a matter of making faith a priority in our relationship in the same way we make romantic gestures or date night a priority.

Scripture says, "We shouldn't be unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14)." The yoke is a farming tool that is put on the shoulders of a pair of oxen. They would stand shoulder to shoulder and pull the yoke to till the ground or carry a heavy load. Being equally yoked means dating someone who you can stand shoulder to shoulder with as you go through life. Dating or eventually marrying someone who doesn't believe in God makes it difficult for us to grow in our own faith. This isn't because they are a bad person but rather because faith is not a private matter but something that is shared, especially in the most difficult valleys of life. If we are in a relationship with someone who doesn't share our faith, how can that person accept help us "carry the heavy loads" in our life? Tertullian, one of the Church Fathers, says about the ideal couple, "*They pray together, they worship together, they fast together; instructing one another, encouraging one another, strengthening one another.*"² This doesn't mean the person we date must have the same level of faith or can't have questions and doubts. But anyone who practices a different religion or denies God

altogether won't be able to stand shoulder to shoulder with us through life.

THEY'RE THE ONE

Over time, as the individuals in a relationship deepen in their knowledge and affection for one another, is it natural to ask, "Is this the person I see myself spending the rest of my life with?" The truth is you don't know if you don't know yourself. Earlier I mentioned how my parents told me that the girl I date and eventually marry should be an Armenian Christian. Is this important and practical? For me, my culture and Christian values have shaped who I am, even before becoming a priest. I have always loved Armenian cooking, music, dance, and parties, attending Church, and serving at the Holy Altar. While I didn't agree with or love everything about the Armenian Church, I found things there that I valued so much that I wanted to keep them a central part of my life. My parents didn't force me to date an Armenian Christian and I dated non - Armenian and non-Christian girls, but I did not find them to be compatible with what I wanted for the rest of my life. When I did finally meet the girl who I would marry (we met online by the way - nothing wrong with that), I wasn't head-over-heels crazy, googly-eyed, can't-eat-can't-sleep in love with her, when we first started dating. Rather, I grew

in my love for her when I saw in her the values that I held near and dear to my heart. I knew she was the one for me, not because of a feeling but because I saw that we could build a life together that would endure the rest of our lives, consistent with our faith, family, tradition, values, expectations and desires for life.

ARMENIAN OR NOT?

A desire to marry someone of your own culture is natural. However, living in North America, this isn't necessarily always possible. There are plenty of examples of Christian families with "mixed" marriages (of different cultural backgrounds). There is nothing in Church tradition that tells us we are to date or marry someone who is Armenian. This is more of a cultural and societal practice, common to other cultures as well. The most important thing is a shared faith and values. The Armenian Church is for everyone, Armenian or non-Armenian. It is not uncommon for non-Armenian spouses to be even more involved in their parishes or more appreciative of certain aspects of Armenian faith and culture that their Armenian spouses may take for granted.

A perfect relationship doesn't exist. As for everything in life that is valuable, there are many challenges. If we desire to live a Christ-centered life, whether in dating, marriage or as singles, then we must start by learning about Christ's

love for us and by developing and maturing as a person of faith first. Make God a priority in your life today and see how he will take care of you tomorrow.

Take Away Points:

- 1) *It's not the age we start dating but whether we are ready ourselves. No need to rush because of social or cultural pressure.*
- 2) *Though love is expressed in many different ways in the various relationships we have (family, dating, marriage and God), love is not a feeling but an action that requires effort, work, time and dedication. Love is lived, not just talked about.*
- 3) *As a Christian we don't casually date. Though dating doesn't necessarily mean marriage, our attitude in dating will also influence our approach to marriage and so we should always date with seriousness and in an honest quest to find a life partner.*
- 4) *Cohabitation is not a sin. However, as Christians we pray for God not to lead us into temptation. When we live together outside of marriage, the temptation of sex outside of marriage (which is a sin) naturally occurs. Avoid temptation by avoiding the situation!*
- 5) *Sex, as an act, is not a sin. It is a blessed*

form of intimacy and vulnerability and a union of body, soul, and mind that should only be practiced between a husband and wife. Sex is sacred and if we use it casually, we devalue it and ourselves.

- 6) *Sex is for more than just procreation. When a husband and wife have built a life together, sex remains a natural part of desired intimacy. Therefore, using contraceptives is permissible.*
- 7) *Bring Christ into your relationships by making faith a priority. Ultimately, if you remain faithful, faith will be present in your life, whether dating, married, or single.*
- 8) *There is no such thing as “the one.” There is knowing what you value and finding someone who shares those values so that together you can grow in love and build a life together that will last a lifetime.*
- 9) *Christ welcomes us all. If we happen to date or marry someone who is not Armenian, they are equally as loved and an important member of the Holy Church. Language and culture don’t define God’s love for us.*

Some Helpful Scriptural Passages

Old Testament	New Testament
1) Gen. 2:18 2) Psalms 37:4 3) Proverbs 5:18-19 4) Proverbs 15:22 5) Proverbs 18:22 6) Proverbs 31:10-11 7) Ecclesiastes 9:9	1) Matthew 22:37-39 2) John 3:16 3) John 13:35 4) Romans 12:9 5) 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 6) 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 7) Galatians 5:22-33 8) Ephesians 5:21-33 9) Philippians 2:1-2 10) 1 Thessalonians 5:11 11) 2 Peter 1:5-7

How to Learn More:

1. Talk to your parents and trustworthy elders and married couples.
2. Talk to your priest.
3. Be active in Church life and learn what the Church actually teaches.

NOTES

REFERENCES

1. "12th Homily on Colossians" in Fr. John Mack, *Preserve Them, O Lord* (Ben Lomond, California: Conciliar Press, 1996), 119.

2. Tertullian, "To My Wife" *THE BEAUTY OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE*, (ACW 13, p.35-6)

Cover Image: Female Troubadour with Saz (fragment),
Matenadaran M6288, Horomos, 1211



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