

## Policies Statements on Contemporary Moral Issues

Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Diocese of the USA, Canada and Australia

Bulgarian Patriarchate

### **Bioethics**

Owing to the vast complexities of the field of scientific and medical research, it is very difficult to stay fully informed concerning the ethical implications of all medical procedures. The field of bioethics is a complex and rapidly changing field. However, as Orthodox Christians, we have an approach that helps us to navigate our way, and that is the worldview of the Orthodox Church.

When a question or need arises which would involve a major medical intervention in our lives, or involve us as practitioners of medical/scientific research, we need to consider the following: How does this affect our salvation? Will any part of the process require us to sin, to one degree or another? Are we tampering with the divinely established order of His Creation? Is this process dependant upon someone else committing sin? Does sin have to be committed in order for this process to even be possible? Does my having this process deprive someone or another of the possibility of receiving beneficial treatment?

All of these considerations will give us a foundation upon which we can make a decision in good conscience and in a God-pleasing manner.

### **Homosexuality**

The practice of homosexuality is unacceptable according to the teachings of the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, those who express hatred, ridicule or animosity towards people with a homosexual orientation act contrary to the central Christian ethos of love and compassion for all people.

A person with homosexual inclinations can live a God-pleasing life if he or she wars against this passion. The Church offers support, prayer and assistance for those who repent and seek healing.

The Diocese in accordance with the view of the Orthodox Church does not recognize same-sex marriage and declares that marriage is possible only between a man and a woman.

### **Euthanasia**

Euthanasia (from the Greek “a good death”) is defined in our modern society as “the act or practice of killing or permitting the death of hopelessly sick or injured individuals in a relatively painless way for reasons of mercy.” The Orthodox Church teaches that we are not to participate in the deliberate cessation of the life of others, which includes the terminally ill. The moment of death should remain in God’s hands. Therefore, modern

euthanasia, the intentional medical termination of life, is equal to murder or suicide (depending on whether the patient participates in the decision or not), and is therefore not permissible from an Orthodox Christian standpoint.

### **Cremation**

Cremation is an unacceptable way to treat the body of the reposed according to Church Tradition. In all cases the Diocese affirms the Orthodox Christian order of funeral and burial of the body, which has been the ancient custom and practice of the Church from the beginning. Therefore, the clergy of the Diocese will not perform a funeral service if the body has already been cremated and is not present.

### **Abortion**

Old Testament and New Testament Scripture, the Teachings of the Apostles and later Church Fathers, and Canon Law all concur that abortion is a sin as serious as murder, and is therefore prohibited under all circumstances.

The Church affirms that life begins at the moment of conception, and once this new life has begun in a woman, even in cases of rape or incest, she can no longer think solely of herself. Her life and the life of the baby are in the hands of the Lord. While rape and incest are grievous sins, the Church does not permit one sin to be resolved by allowing for an even greater sin to follow.

Yet, as with any sin once committed, the Church provides forgiveness and reconciliation for those who recognize abortion as a grave sin and confess it in a spirit of repentance.

### **Crime, Punishment and Reformation**

The purpose of Christ's coming into the world was to announce the Good News of salvation to sinners in need of God's mercy, including those who have committed a crime.

Any crime committed, being condemned by the law, presupposes a fair punishment, based upon a just law. Punishment is seen by the Church not as a means to get revenge, nor merely as a deterrent, but primarily as a way to bring about repentance and inner purification in the one who committed the crime.

The Church does not deny the state's right to practice capital punishment in the extreme cases of criminals who are convicted of heinous crimes and who militate against the safety of society and the common good. But this allowance is not to be seen as the highest good; rather, it is an exception to the rule of mercy and reformation.

The Diocese supports the development of prison ministries to preach the Good News and, at the same time, extend a hand to the family members of inmates who may desire counseling and comfort.

### **Freemasonry**

The Diocese recognizes the incompatibility of Orthodox Christianity and Freemasonry. Membership in the various Masonic groups is not blessed for Clergy or laity, and Masonic membership constitutes a barrier to full communion. Inclusion of Masonic rituals or regalia is not permitted in Orthodox funerals of this Diocese.

### **Organ transplantation**

Organ/tissue transplants should never be commercialized, nor should the death of the donor be hastened in order to harvest material for transplant. The Diocese can and will support organ/tissue donation when it is done as an act of love, made in consultation with appropriate medical professionals and one's spiritual father. In all cases, respect for the body of the donor, whether living or deceased, must be upheld, and the decision should never be coerced, but made in the context of free and informed consent.

### **Education of our Youth**

The Diocese takes seriously the command from our Lord to “suffer the little children to come unto Me” (St Mark 10:14; St Luke 18:16) as a command that relates to the upbringing and education of our children. Their participation in the life of the Church, their experience of the Church lived out in their home, and their education at school should work together to bring them to the goal of education, which is sanctity.

To help accomplish this goal the Diocese encourages families to lead a Church-centered life and to strive to educate the children first through example and then by encouraging them to fully participate in Church, in Church School, in the Orthodox Christian Day Schools, where available, and in BOYA events such as conferences, pilgrimages and retreats.

Parents, godparents, pastors and educators should be particularly attentive to the education of the children of the parish and diocese, though we all in the Diocese are responsible for passing on the flame of the Faith.

### **Marriages**

The Orthodox Church affirms the sanctity of marriage as one of its mysteries—the union of an Orthodox man and an Orthodox woman in Christ. The couple to be married must come to the decision to marry of their own free will. They are expected to prepare for marriage through instruction under pastoral guidance.

According to the Canons of the Church, marriages should not be solemnized on Saturdays or fast days unless the diocesan Bishop gives special blessing for this. A marriage can only be performed if all canonical and legal requirements are fulfilled.

### **Mixed Marriages**

A “mixed marriage” between an Orthodox faithful and a non-Orthodox person may be allowed as an exception to the normal Orthodox practice, with the expectation that the non-Orthodox will become Orthodox in the near future. Clergy must receive the blessing of the Bishop each time before performing a mixed marriage. The couple must also sign

an agreement that the children of the union will be baptized and raised as Orthodox Christians.

### **Divorce and Remarriage**

While upholding the sacredness of the marriage bond and encouraging perseverance, the Orthodox Church may under certain circumstances recognize divorce. These circumstances may include adultery, abuse, alcoholism, drug addiction or abandonment.

In cases of divorce the Church allows for a second marriage and, in exceptional cases, a third marriage with the appropriate penance as prescribed by the canons. A fourth marital union is not allowed under any circumstances. The ruling Hierarch should always be consulted regarding these requests and decisions.

### **Interaction with non-Orthodox**

We have many opportunities in our daily lives for interactions with non-Orthodox people. While these encounters take various shapes, in each we are called to be faithful to the canonical tradition of the Church and at the same time to the command of our Lord to go forth *"and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."* (Matthew 28:19-20)

Following the canons of the Church, Orthodox priests of our Diocese may not join non-Orthodox clergy in public worship or co-celebrate with them in marriage, baptismal, eucharistic or funeral services. Nevertheless, it is natural that in the course of our lives we will be invited to social events in the lives of our non-Orthodox friends, some of them with religious settings. As Orthodox pastors, we are obliged to follow the Holy Canons of the Church and to guide the faithful in such situations. When necessary, guidance should be sought from our Diocesan Prelate.

*"Out of love we reject Ecumenism, for we wish to offer to the heterodox and to non-Christians that which the Lord has so richly granted to all of us within His Holy Orthodox Church: namely, the possibility of becoming and of being members of His Body."*

(The Inter-Orthodox Theological Conference: "Ecumenism: Origins – Expectations – Disenchantment." Department of Pastoral and Social Theology of the School of Theology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki & the Society of Orthodox Studies, September 20-24, 2004. Conclusions, page 12.)