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SINGLED OUT

Survey of Orthodox Christians

Four Russians share very diverse perceptions of life as a single Christian.

Mikhail V., 50, Sergei Posad

For you to understand about my impressions of being single, I must first tell you about my life:

It so happens that I have never married. Until they died, I lived with my grandmother, mother and aunt. We were Orthodox, and in 1937 my grandfather had been taken and shot by the Communists for being a priest. During my own childhood, also under the Soviets, my father suddenly disappeared. As a child I had rheumocarditis, a disease that makes a person an invalid, and in the 1960's someone advised mother to take me from our home in Kursk to Holy Trinity-St. Serguis Monastery near Moscow. We spent half a year there. I drank the water from St. Sergius' holy spring and when we returned to Kursk the doctors could not believe I was the same boy. Medical examinations showed not even the slightest trace of the rheumocarditis. But, because of the disease I had fallen behind at school and everything in my life was delayed, every aspect of development. When I was in my twenties I dreamt to enter Moscow State University, so I worked hard and studied. I wanted to live in Moscow and eventually I found a job there as a street-cleaner and the state gave me a room to live in. In the meantime my family moved from Kursk to Sergeev Posad where the monastery was. Everybody thought I was a dreamer, but at the age of thirty I finally managed to enter the University. I later returned to live with my family at Sergeev Posad because a neighbor in my communal Moscow flat did

not like me and made my life difficult. So, I got up early, went to Moscow, worked and studied, and then came back the one-and-a-half hours on the train every evening. I worked hard and was tired all the time. I had no strength to think about marriage.

There were some good women in Kursk whom I could have married, but it seems that I punished myself: all my thoughts were in Moscow. I wanted to live my life in this big city, like many people in Russia do, and I never considered the girls in Kursk as possible wives. I am sorry for it now, but I looked at them as second-class people and so I missed the time when people marry.

Still, I was happy living with my mother and grandmother. I left home early in the morning and mother got up at 6 o'clock to cook breakfast for me. When I returned to Sergeyev Posad late at night, both Mama and Babushka would meet me and make me feel cozy and comfortable, in fact, happy. Mama always wanted me to marry and she used every opportunity to find me a wife. There were lots of comical episodes connected with this. She could not see at all with one eye, and her other eye was not very good either. Very often when we traveled from Sergeyev Posad to Moscow and back in the train she didn't want to miss the chance of finding a wife for me. Seeing a woman who was travelling alone and who seemed to her to be a good match, she would take a seat beside her and begin to talk with this in mind, asking the woman questions about herself and then advertising me. But being half-blind she often made the acquaintance of women over sixty, thinking they were my age. (I was about thirty.) I was so embarrassed that I would tell her I was getting off the train at the next station.

On the other hand, I couldn't stay in Moscow even for one night because she was always so worried if I wasn't home by ten in the evening. So, I never let her worry. We were very close — we weren't just mother and son, we were friends. She had had a very hard life as the daughter of a priest during the Soviet times, and without a husband I was her only treasure. So, I worked, studied and went skiing with a club around Moscow. I also ran marathons, and exerted myself physically in work and sports. I didn't think of marriage. Now, I work in a museum in Moscow and still have my job there as a street-cleaner. I also work as a guide in the monastery at Sergeyev Posad. I have a twelve-hour-long working day, and over four hours traveling to my job in Moscow and back.

I have to mention another thing that greatly influenced me about marriage. When we lived in Kursk we had fifteen square meters of living space

for six people. Then the State gave us a flat where I had a room of my own. This room was a thing of incredible value to me, and I could not believe I was so fortunate. I thought that if I got a room something would happen to take it away from me — for example, a war would start. Around that time a friend of mine married and brought his wife to his flat where his family lived. Later she left him for a new husband, and then brought this new husband to live in the same flat (which was my friend's, but she had official registration and a legal right to live there.) Not only did she bring her new husband with her, but also his mother, father, brother and aunt. Seeing this I became frightened. For me it was an example, a warning about the experience someone had had with marriage. Looking critically at my room I felt that it was too small for such a bunch of relatives of my wife's possible second husband. Of course I was wrong, but you must understand how I felt about this room. For me it was the guarantee of my freedom and a normal life.

Eight months ago my mother died, she was 84. She died quickly, having spent only two days in bed. I felt so bad that if I had had time to think, I would have gone mad. When the days were long last summer, I went to my mother's grave every day, but now it is cold and it gets dark at 4 o'clock. I cannot walk five kilometers there and five kilometers back again after coming home.

When mother was dying, she said, "Be with the monks. They are your people." I know that priests and monks are all very different, but the monks I work with are like saints. They are young, they are filled with enthusiasm, they follow the Christian path with devotion and joy. They create such a light and simple atmosphere that when I go to work in Moscow I understand how different they are from the world and I cannot imagine a better atmosphere for me. I cannot become monastic myself because I am not young and I'm afraid I couldn't bear the long-long services and very hard physical work. But the work I am doing allows me to live a more or less morally pure life. I live normally. Unmarried life allows me to sin less.

Still, there are a few things that worry me as a single man. Who will take care of me when I fall into old age? Who will know if I die alone in my house? And who will pray for me? But people tell me that they are not sure that their wives and children will take care of them if they fall ill either. Other people say that it does not make sense to get married just to solve such problems. Of course, there have been women who wanted me for a husband, and not long ago there was a married woman who wanted to leave her husband and marry me, but I refused. They have a child and in general,

it would not have been Christian. So, this is my life. Maybe it will interest people who are in the same situation.

Andrew G. 41, Moscow

I was a single man for many years before I married. You can be single and quite happy if you have a mature personality, but you constantly have to work to maintain a balance. You can have harmony, but it is a harmony inside yourself. Marriage makes your life more stable, but living alone you have to create this stability. Also, being single, you can be closer to Christ in some ways. First, you share in His suffering when He prayed that God take the cup away from Him, and loneliness was part of that suffering. Secondly, your whole mind and soul can belong to Him alone. (But this is good only if you don't look down on family people, thinking that their life is just unnecessary fussing, and if you are not irritated by their constant problems and "insignificant" cares.)

If my spirit was stronger I would probably like to be one of those who don't marry, but live to serve God and other people in hospitals, in orphanages. Then I would come to my empty home in the evening filled with impressions, tired, but with a clear conscience and a peaceful heart. If I envy anyone, I envy such people. They go straight to salvation. If you live alone you need to be strong and open to people, always able to share their joy and grief, responsive to their needs. Then solitude will not destroy you, it will be creative.

There is also the experience of those who lived alone in the world — like St. Silouan of Mt. Athos before he was tonsured. I think it is good to read about them and take lessons for yourself. In general, living alone you need to be very creative; I know this from my own long experience of solitude. I know single people who are like humble suns warming everyone around...I think they've done a lot of spiritual work to become like this.

Irina P. 37, Moscow

As a person who has experienced both solitude and family life, I feel that I can compare them, and that it is a mistake to think that sorrows and temptations will vanish after marriage. When I was young and unmarried I suffered very much. I would count, "I'm thirty, so there are only about eight years left in which I can have a child. Next year I will only have seven years left, and in five years, I will only have three..." But, as I found out afterwards, although the temptations of unmarried people are like wasps which torment you day and night, the temptations of marriage are like extortioners waiting for you at every corner, liable to leap on you at any moment and you don't know where the next one is coming from.

One of the hardest things about marriage and a family is that you lose your inner freedom, you are tied fast to the earth by your children. You are no longer a pilgrim, but a deeply rooted tree. You think of their future day and night, knowing that you must work hard every hour of your life, not just to earn money, but in the wider sense that your mind and soul must work to help create their future. You are fearful that you will fall ill and die, leaving them, the silly things, alone in the world with no one to care for them. Unmarried, you observe life as you would a race, but married you are the running, gasping horse without any rest.

Reading this, people might think that married life is almost unbearable. It is not, of course, it is a great support in every way.

As a mother, anxiety is often the strongest feeling you experience, but it also makes you kinder, allows you to understand things more deeply and forms you as a person. Your desire to judge other people lessens, your selfishness hardly has a chance to survive, much less flourish. Although it is pressed and stifled and may wage war against you, it is doomed. This is one of the spiritual rewards for all the trouble, and children are your weapons against selfishness. However, if your selfishness is not so strong, God may give you another way to work out your salvation, for instance, through a solitary life of prayer and good deeds.

Maria, 28, Moscow

I am twenty-eight and I don't even have a boy-friend. This worries me and I often reproach my parents for having brought me up so unfit. Sometimes I even shout at them and this makes their life hard. I regret it so much afterwards. A priest once told me at confession that I must become a normal Christian, live an ordinary life of prayer and good deeds, and wait for a man who will not want close relations before marriage. I am torn between the desire to have a family and children and to be happy, and the unwillingness to break the Lord's commandments and live with a man without a church wedding. My parents tell me that if I am so desperately impatient to marry and cannot find peace of mind living alone, that I will have a lot of problems in my married life as well. My mother says that I first have to cope with my passions of impatience and pulsanimity, which force me to go mad about my solitude, or God will not send me a husband. She also says this temptation, my inability to get married, was especially designed to force me to overcome these bad characteristics. "First learn to be in a normal state of mind under your present circumstances, and once you are calm, God will show you how to find a husband, or He will send you one." This is what my parents say. Maybe they are right.

Also, when I try to go out with men, I always feel there is something wrong. I once had a fiancé who was a Moslem from Montenegro, a very good-looking and rather well-to-do man of my age. But knowing that I would never be able to share my faith with him, which is so dear to me, or even common historic and religious roots, I decided to leave him. There was also a young Russian man, an ambulance driver, but he was not interested in my spiritual life at all. When I was about nineteen, a boy wanted to marry me, but I was so filled with my newly-found faith that I could not hold any more feeling; I just wanted to be alone with God. Now I regret that boy who was so good and wise and decent, but I could not act differently then.

When I think of the future I often imagine myself as an elderly woman, living alone in a block of flats, and I feel sad. But I believe everyone who tells me that I still have many things to learn living alone. I am learning to overcome despondency, and I notice that my emotions and feelings are becoming softer. I want God to give me strength and wisdom to live a decent life alone, and a good husband when I am ready for married life. +