

THE THEOLOGY OF GIFT AS SOURCE, MYSTERY,
AND GOAL OF MARITAL SPIRITUALITY

Alain Mattheeuws

In all societies, relationships between men and women have been the subjects of institutions with their values, their rites, their laws and their interdictions. Sexuality as procreative act has never been left purely to the arbitrary will of the individual. All societies have recognized that the man-woman relationship and procreation play a specific role for the common good. Some have sealed it with a contract. This “institutional” aspect of the relationship between men and women is unavoidable: it clearly shows how much this relationship carries a “sense” for all humans. This relationship is a sign within the various cultures and in the “institutional” expressions which it marks in human history.

Marriage has also been understood as a religious act in many cultures. In the relationship between man and woman there lies a mystery, a sacred character that we feel is connected to the divine. It is a question of connectedness, in religion as in marriage. To feel attached to one another, linked to a reality that goes beyond each individual, to the phenomenon of transmitting life over the span of generations: this seems to be the “sacred good” about which we must talk. Doesn't the Quran say: “The one who marries has fulfilled half of his religion”?

Contemporary debates on the definition of marriage put this “sign” to the test. When a man and a woman unite and promise each other love and fidelity “until death do them apart,” what are they the sign of today? What do they vouch for in the love that unites them with each other and with their brothers and sisters across the generational divide created by a newborn child? These questions clearly show what is at stake in the natural sacramentality of the man-woman relationship.¹ It also suggests how much the “sign” must be saved by the One Who is its source and its end.

¹ We are thinking here of the foundational work by Edward Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1976; 2nd ed. 1988).

What is the Christian *proprium* of marriage? Our reflection starts on the post-conciliar horizon of the sacramental economy (1). We will then demonstrate the natural and historical foundations of Christian marriage (2) before briefly seeing them confirmed by the *lex orandi* (3). Finally, we will sketch the grace offered to the husband and wife in the Church (4).

1. The Logic of Sacramental Gift

To enter the order of faith by baptism is to enter the sacramental “economy.” This reality of our lives, at once visible and invisible, concerns the whole personal life in space and time, based on and renewed through the person of Christ incarnate and resurrected. In Christ the natural signs not only “signify” but represent the *res* in the person who lives them. Marriage is one of the seven sacraments but, as L.-M. Chauvet underlines, this sacrament is “not like the others.” It imprints itself in a particular way “upon” and “into” a fertile reality. It has a singular anthropological density.² Since it takes on the reality of man and woman in its most concrete components, from the biological to the spiritual, it is strongly incarnated. Here, the “sexual” is directly linked to the “spiritual.”

Christ, the First Sacrament

Christ is the first sacrament, the face of the “Beloved,” gift of the “Father.” The gift of Christ prevails over the ancient gifts which are mere “figures” of the true gift that is the Son. The world of the “One who was sent” is a world of gift. His presence inaugurates a “new” era. The sacramental economy finds its source in Him: in his words, actions and deeds from his incarnation to his glorification. This insertion in our history is not only “figurative”: it is “representative” (Jn 19,34). The sacraments are acts of the risen Christ, today, in his Church. They have an “efficacy” attached to the power of God who has come into human history. The “mysteries of the life of Christ” unite Him to the whole of humanity and make us enter into the love of the Trinity. Jesus is “the gift” *par excellence* handed over to humankind “for the sake of the world.” Every gift and every way of self-giving finds its origin, meaning and purpose in Him.

² Louis-Marie Chauvet, “Le mariage: Un sacrement pas comme les autres,” in: *La Maison-Dieu* 127 (1976), 64-105, at 64-65.

The Church as Sacrament

In this handing over of Christ, acceptance by the Church is essential. The Church deliberately says “yes” to the gift of the Son, to the measure of the gift of God. If God comes first and always prevails over our movements, He can only be actively and freely chosen. This act of acceptance is marked by both a passivity and an activity that meet the human being at the root of his or her being. Such is the spiritual movement of conjugal love. The Church symbolizes the mystery of the Bride who says “yes.” A community is thus necessary in order to reveal and live in love. The dimensions of the sacramental universe are directly Christ-like and Marian. Christ gives Himself and is welcomed into human history. By saying “yes” the Church is “in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”³

Sacrament, Body of Christ, People of God, Temple of the Spirit, Spouse of Christ – the conciliar images we use to define the traits of the Church are many. In this study we privilege the Church-Bride image. It will help us clarify the affirmation of *Lumen Gentium*. As Spouse, the Church consents to the love of its Bridegroom. It accepts to be vivified, purified and guided by Him. This spousal structure of the Church, of total trust, is fundamental to the understanding of marriage.

All sacramental liturgies find their rhythm in the self-abandonment of the Church to its Bridegroom. We can already see how each marriage contributes to building this up. All the “yeses” of our baptism are freely inscribed and carry the fruit of grace in the “yes” of the Church. Every sacrament is intersubjective (and marriage especially so!), but this intersubjectivity goes deeper than might first appear. It is about the personal relationship of each person with Christ and his Church. By underlining the nuptial structure of the sacrament, we are not only evoking the human covenant but also the spiritual covenant of Christ and his Church. What is at stake in the sacrament goes beyond the singularity of any one couple. It concerns the whole Church. Such is the heart of marital spirituality.

The Spirit

If Jesus is the Gift of the Father welcomed with love by the Church, his Bride, the Holy Spirit is the womb in which and by which that gift and its acceptance

³ *Lumen Gentium*, 1; available online from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html; accessed 21 October 2007.

takes place. The actuality of the nuptial structure of the sacrament can only be accessed in the Holy Spirit. “As a sacrament, the Church is a development from the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s ‘departure,’ living by his ever new ‘coming’ by the power of the Holy Spirit within the same mission of the Paraclete – Spirit of truth.”⁴ The Spirit confirms the surge of love of the Church toward her Bridegroom. He allows this love to renew itself and find eternal youth in history. It is with the Spirit that the Church awaits the return of the Bridegroom. The love between the Bridegroom and the Spouse does not wither and die in human history, thanks to the Spirit. On the contrary, it takes root there and develops until the glorious return of the Son. The Spirit is intimately present in the gift because he is himself an uncreated Gift: he is the person-gift. This gift is the “new law” of the existence of the husband and wife, the foundation and the strength of the moral life of the couple and the family. The Spirit who gives life is the One by which God communicates Himself to all human beings and makes them contemporaries of Christ. The Spirit is at the origin (Gn 1,2). He is the Spirit of Jesus from his conception to his resurrection and his ascension to the right of the Father. He is the promise of Jesus which is accomplished in his Church from Pentecost. The Spirit confirms all love.

To discuss the sacrament of marriage on this horizon is to emphasize the importance of living a conjugal spirituality that measures up to the gift received. Marriage is a “primordial” sacrament because it is a “sign” since the beginning of creation, even if it is in the Passover of Christ that we taste its ultimate flavour. It is also “primordial” as an “archetype” of all sacramental economy: this major sign strengthens the Church and thus establishes at its heart all conjugal spirituality.

2. The Covenantal Gift of the Spouses

A Natural “Symbolism”

Even before knowing the “name” of God, every human being can recognize his or her own createdness from the existence he did not give himself, entrusted to the universe and to his brothers and sisters in humanity. This recognition of the “symbolism of creation” runs through the body that the human being does not originally give himself. This corporeal and sexual condition is a privileged sign that calls for an interpretation (work of the intelligence) and an acceptance (work of the free will). The cosmos and this condition – at once corporeal,

⁴ John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 63; available online from http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0142/_INDEX.HTM; accessed 21 October 2007.

sexual and spiritual – of humanity attest, to all who wish to become aware of their own existence and activity, that there is something “beyond” the sizeable material world and the reality visible to our senses. The created condition shows that the human being is “in covenant” from the very beginning: waiting for a communion with his Creator and with the living. The commentaries on the first chapters of the book of Genesis have all given accounts of the beauty of the man-woman relationship at the very beginning. The catecheses of John Paul II that ran every Wednesday from 1979 to 1984 have enriched this tradition and pointed to the “design of God at the origin.”

The human being in his or her body is in spiritual expectation, waiting for communion by the gift he or she is from the beginning: “Man appears in the visible world as the highest expression of the divine gift. With it he brings into the world his particular likeness to God; with which he transcends and dominates also his visibility in the world, his corporeality, his masculinity or femininity, his nakedness.”⁵ Original grace was in fact offered to the first Adam out of consideration for the Beloved and Unique Son. The first human being received grace from Christ and with Him in mind. Indeed John Paul II went on to speak about the “primordial sacrament” to qualify the original relationship between man and woman.

“Connected with the experience of the nuptial meaning of the body, original innocence” enables the human being “in his body as male or female, [to feel] he is a subject of holiness.” This sanctity originally granted to man by the Creator belongs to the reality of the sacrament of creation. The words in the book of Genesis 2,24 “a man (...) cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh,” pronounced against the background of that original reality, constitute marriage in a theological sense as an integral part of and in a sense central to the sacrament of creation. It may also be that they confirm the character of its origin. According to these words, marriage is integral and central to the sacrament of creation. In that sense it is a “primordial sacrament.”⁶

A Marital Spirituality in History

The spirituality of the gift of love between husband and wife is not merely natural, physical, psychological, or cultural. From the very first pages of the book of Genesis we sense how significant the man-woman relationship is for the whole of humanity and for every other relationship. The invisible mystery

⁵ John Paul II, “General Audience of Wednesday, 20 February 1980,” in: *L’Osservatore Romano* (25 February 1980), 1, at no. 3; available online from <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/jp2tb18.htm>; accessed 21 October 2007. See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 203.

⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 4.

hidden in God for all eternity (Rom 16,25) is effectively transferred into the visible world by the “primordial sacrament” from the beginning. Marriage constitutes from the very beginning a figure through which the structure of the whole economy of salvation is built. However, as God creates all things in Christ and for Christ, this figure is in a sense over-determined when the Word of God “unites with our humanity” and becomes “flesh of our flesh.” This nuptial symbolism is historically signified in the new creation in Christ.

We sense this in reading the Old Testament where the relationship between God and his people is regularly described in terms of a covenant of love. “In the Old Covenant Yahweh appears as the Bridegroom of Israel, the chosen people – a Bridegroom who is both affectionate and demanding, jealous and faithful. Israel’s moments of betrayal, desertion and idolatry, described in such powerful and evocative terms by the prophets, can never extinguish the love with which God – the Bridegroom ‘loves to the end’ (see Jn 13,1).”⁷

Christ fulfils this vetero-testamentary symbolism of marriage. At Cana he shows us his respect for marriage. He vigorously defends its unity and indissolubility (Mt 19,1-9). On several occasions he presents himself as the Bridegroom of his people. “Can the guests at the wedding fast while the Bridegroom is with them? As long as the Bridegroom is present they may not fast” (Mk 2,19). Jesus consummates the wedding and the divine alliance by offering himself on the cross, by love. His death for the sake of his beloved is living proof that he gave everything. Nuptial love goes all the way. These deeds and these words are at the basis of the Pauline mystery of marriage as it is developed in Ephesians 5,32: “This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church.” In qualifying himself as the Bridegroom, Jesus reveals his divine identity and confirms his love for humanity as a spiritual being. Spirituality is put into act from the communion love which unites the creature to his Creator and to his Saviour.

So the spiritual life of the husband and wife appears to us as participation in the divine love revealed in Christ within history. Christ himself sanctifies the couple and makes it symbolically a partner in the new and everlasting covenant with his Church. His grace meets the historical condition of each person, each individual man or woman. Matrimonial spirituality is “historically defined” by the gift of the Beloved and the union of God and of all humanity in Christ. It “redefines” itself and so rediscovers its visage in each generation through the work of the Spirit in the hearts of the bridegroom and of the bride who are betrothed to one another.

⁷ John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 19; available online from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families_en.html; accessed 21 October 2007.

A Confirmation in the Lex Orandi

The conjugal union fortifies and draws together the mystical Body of Christ, the covenant and the mutual gift, the mission of the husband and wife. The gift of the husband and wife following the logic of the gift of Christ is an offering for the Church and for the world. The sacrament of marriage is a “gift of and for the Church.” This “logic of the sign” is deciphered through the sacramental liturgy: the mutual gift of the husband and wife is proof of the reality of a personal love that can be found by giving oneself freely.

The movement of the liturgical celebration of marriage leads the engaged couple on the path to recognize the source of all gift and all love in God himself. Whatever the story of their personal encounter, the sacramental act is a deeper memory of the love relationship. Before being a conquest, a complementarity and a seduction, the relationship between the man and the woman must recognize itself as preceded by a gift of love. *The other is a gift of God for me.* The sacrament will signify in the eyes of all that Christ gives the bride and groom to each other. The celebration is the recognition by the spouses and the community of the ultimate source of the gift. The husband and wife receive each other from God himself. The Church welcomes the new couple with joy as a “sign” and a “proof” that God always gives himself and unites nuptially to his people. The rhythm of the celebration is an alternation of giving and receiving: between the couple and the Church, between the husband and wife themselves, between the couple and God, between the couple, the Church and God. These alternations reach their highest point in the mutual consent and in the abundance of benedictions sprinkled throughout the liturgy.

The husband and wife as “beings of gift” (*êtres-de-don*)⁸ are the ministers of the sacrament. This astonishing fact in the sacramental order expresses a spiritual trait of their ecclesial engagement. The priest testifies to the objective truth of the gift they offer to each other. He signifies the insertion of this mutual gift in the great mystery of the Church, the Bride of Christ. God thus transcends the promised gift while staying inside the reciprocal gift. The priest reminds the couple that the gift comes from beyond themselves, from Christ in them. “Christ the Lord abundantly blessed this many-faceted love, welling up as it does from the fountain of divine love and structured as it is on the model of His union with His Church.”⁹ If there is a Eucharistic celebration, the priest is also the one

⁸ This expression comes from the philosopher Claude Bruaire when he describes the being of the human spirit and lays down the foundations of his onto-do-logy. See his *L'Être et l'esprit* (Paris: PUF, 1983), 9-86.

⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 48, 2; available online from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html; accessed 21 October 2007.

who in the spouses' and in Christ's name "gives back to the Father" the new couple's gift of love. He expresses the joy of God for this "offering of great value" that is the consent of the husband and wife. By the *epiclesis* of the Spirit the priest transfigures the offering of their freedom and their bodies. The priest assures the husband and the wife that none of their love must be wasted and that everything can be "offered" to God.

The priest calls upon human liberty in the name of Christ: "Have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?" This verification of free consent is fundamental to the validity of the sacrament. Conferred by the free decision of the husband and the wife, it is this consent, the visible sign and signifying word of the persons who give themselves, that makes the sacrament. Only a free person has self-determination (CIC 1983, can. 1057 § 2). In this liturgical dialogue, the priest recalls what is at stake in the act of liberty and the scope of the "gift" and the promise that is about to be made: "fidelity for life, responsibility as spouse and parents."

By asking the future spouses if they are ready to welcome with love and educate the children that God may give them, the priest reminds them that they are associated with the creative power of God and that they must cooperate in the coming into the world of new human persons in the image and likeness of the divine. By committing themselves, the husband and wife realize the essence of marriage as an act of giving oneself to another through Christ in his Church. The word given by the husband and the wife is a performative action which "acts" on them: the gift which is "said" makes them spouses in the eyes of God, of the witnesses and of themselves. For the husband and wife, grace perfects nature. "If we keep our word, the Word will keep us."¹⁰ The sacramental word realizes what it says and links the human to the divine. This love is sealed by the divine Love which "has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5,5). The Holy Spirit operates the distinction between the "before" and the "after" of the consent, for the Holy Spirit gives all his weight to the commitment of the "*êtres-de-don*" in the instant when it is expressed. He renews the spouses in the power of the gift. This gift takes them beyond themselves in the mutual welcoming of the gift that they are and the recognition of the gift of the child who is an integral part of the conjugal gift. From the moment of consent, the child is part of the promised gift.¹¹

In the name of Christ the priest invites the fiancés to exchange their consent. The linking of hands acquired a deep liturgical meaning in France from the thirteenth century onwards. Over time, the priest has come to replace the father

¹⁰ Xavier Lacroix, *Le mariage* (Paris: Ed. de l'Atelier/Ouvrières, 1994; Tout simplement), 40.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 10.

in performing the act of giving the bride to the groom.¹² This deed was accompanied by words of mutual giving. Since the seventeenth century in France the priest invites the fiancés to join their hands instead of doing it himself. The joined hands express the mutual gift and the sworn fidelity. The words accompanying this gesture are essential. The mutual giving is “active and dialogued.” Several formulas allow the fiancés to say in public the gift they offer each other. The “I” and the “you” appear in all their beauty: the subjects give and receive themselves mutually. The verbs also express the active nature of the gift: it is about receiving the other as he or she is and giving oneself entirely: “I take you to be my husband/wife. I promise to be true to you (...) love you and honour you all the days of my life.”

In the expression of consent, the other is first perceived at the root of his/her being as a nuptial “gift” that “I” receive. The other is able to receive with dignity the gift that I am and that I offer. The logic of the act of giving cannot be dissociated from the logic of the act of receiving. The gift becomes “effective” in its reciprocal acceptance. From giving to the receiving of the gift: these are two steps of the same process, an attitude that is complementary and indissociable, that unites the man and the woman, the parents and the children, God and his creature, Christ and the Church. The gift of creation was already nuptial (Is 54,5). In the sacramental commitment, following the risen Jesus, the nuptial aspect of the gift is confirmed: the man and the woman now represent the “yes” of Christ to his Church and the answer of the Church to her divine Bridegroom.

There is a link between these liturgical words that seal the marriage and the conjugal act that accomplishes the word in the flesh. The sexual union of the newly married couple holds a special place in the new conjugal relation: it consummates the gifts and the acceptance of the gift of the other. The man and the woman become a “word of love” for one another in their body. The consummation clearly shows that the matrimonial covenant is different from any other type of contract: it concerns people first of all and not goods. The conjugal act that comes after the consent realizes the promised gift and definitively inscribes the life of the spouses in their mutual and exclusive gift. It takes up the whole space and time, the entire lives of the man and the woman. Thus, the conjugal act attests and confirms that the union of the husband and the wife is integrated sacramentally into Christ’s work of salvation. Every conjugal act symbolizes the life of the couple. Its openness to the gift of life engages the possibility of a child and a new visage for human history and for eternity. The consent opens the door to a new and irreducible spiritual adventure.

¹² Jean-Baptiste Molin & Protais Mutembe, *Le rituel du mariage en France du XII^e au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974; *Théologie historique*, no. 26), 101.

3. The Exchange of Consent as the “Instant” of the Gift

The conjugal union (consummation) confirms and seals the consent expressed in the “contract” between two persons of the opposite sex. The promise of the spouses is the same for everyone, while respecting the singularity of each one and the originality of every couple. It is a contract freely entered into where the gift of the persons assumes the face of sexual intimacy and of permanence over time. What is the face of this gift?

Fidelity in Unity

The expression of consent as the “instant” of the gift is called to become flesh in the body of the husband and wife and in the consummation of the marriage. The conjugal relationship always takes part in this original gift made in Christ and in his Church. The gift of the spouses engages them completely: it is exclusive and definitive. The promise of fidelity is a promise of “remaining gift for each other” in the image of the gift of Christ for each one and for the new couple. Fidelity will thus be growing in the gift and in the circulation of the gift. The gift calls the gift. The violated gift calls for forgiveness.

At the source and on the way to this fidelity lies the act of Christ who gave himself at the same time as the husband and wife. The fidelity promised by the couple is not only theirs. It participates in the promise of God, in the gift that God makes of himself to the married couple over time. The sacrament says more than our poor human words ever can: it teaches that God through Christ will always come before the husband and wife in the logic of the mutual gift. The *sacramentum* is established by Christ himself in the pure gratuity of his engagement, the pure gift of himself, source and term of every other gift. The human gift of the married couple takes part in the gift of God.

Fidelity in Indissolubility

“The gifts of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11,29) and so the gift between husband and wife, sealed by the divine gift, possesses this strong quality of indissolubility. “As gift of God in the sacrament of marriage, the union is an act of God himself.”¹³ God is faithful to his gift. The indissolubility of the gift of the husband and wife expresses the might of God through the fragility of our human commitments. Christ as Gift is himself the personal link between the married couple. The Gift that He is and that He has made of himself in each one and in

¹³ Jean-Claude Sagne, “La fidélité au lien conjugal comme exigence inscrite dans la filiation,” in: *Oser dire le mariage indissoluble*, ed. Xavier Lacroix (Paris: Cerf, 2001), 125-142.

the couple cannot be destroyed. By giving the man to the woman and vice versa, God gives himself and gives them the token of an indissoluble bond in the history of humanity. He remains among his people under the guise of the Bridegroom. The gift of the husband and wife in Christ embraces the person of the other as gift, considered as “another Christ” in his present as well as in his future.

Fertility: Sign of the Gratuity of Love

Living the gift of marriage is a path of salvation and sanctification for the couple. To talk about fertility is another way of showing the place of Christ in mutual giving. “If love can be defined as gift, fertility is like the gift of this gift, its incarnation, as if it were doubled.”¹⁴ The sacrament is the space and the time where the couple grows “in age and in holiness”: by giving themselves to each other, they give themselves to God and answer his original gift of love and the gift of his Son. In this way, they grow in their being children of God as Christ in human history.

Fertility is not limited to procreation and the education of children, but the husband and wife have promised to be open to the children that “God may give them.” This “gratuity” is essential. The couple does not have a “right to children.” The child does not belong to them but is entrusted to them. The welcome of parental love must be just and education must “elevate” the child toward his Creator.

Gaudium et Spes contains a sober definition of this element of marriage: “Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents.”¹⁵ The child “crowns” de facto what is already given. It expresses the surplus, the overabundance, the confirmation of spousal love. It is not “owed” but a “gift.” The child cannot be an instrumentalisation of the love between the husband and the wife nor can it be absent or permanently excluded from the relationship. The child is the fruit of plenitude and overabundance of love. It intimately belongs to the gift of the bodies sealed in the sacrament. Welcoming the child is the seal of all conjugal spirituality. The coming of the child “crowns” the liberties that are given with love. The child is a “personal sign” of God’s gift of love for the couple. It still bears the mark of the absolute Gift that is its Creator and Giver of life. The child is a gift which always calls for a recognition that is proportionate to what it is. The “domestic church” is a privileged place for welcoming the child.

¹⁴ Lacroix, *Le mariage*, 115.

¹⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 50, 1.

4. Grace and Spirituality

All spirituality is the work of the Spirit of Jesus. Let us express, by way of a conclusion, some of the characteristics of this spiritual adventure for married couples.

(1) By the sacrament, each spouse appears as the one whom God gives to and places in the hands of the other. The loved one is not only the one who has been seduced or met by chance but, first and foremost, the one given by God. In the light of the New Testament each Christian senses that the model for every love and for every gift lies in the Trinitarian gift of the divine Persons. Love finds its beauty in the giving of one person to another: it is born from the One who is gift. In Christ and the Church husband and wife are a gift for each other, created in the image of the triune God. In human history, the conjugal union expresses the plurality of the divine unity. If there is indeed “only one being”¹⁶ in marriage, the people who consent to it are neither merged nor dissolved in it. The love of man and woman is a mutual promotion in their being, in agreement with the charity that in God comes from God and turns to God. The sacrament seals that unity and the harmony between the persons. The body echoes the inner music of the gift of each of them.

(2) God gives himself in the sacrament of marriage by establishing a bond of grace between Christ and husband and wife. Their mutual gift expressed in the consent is grafted onto the gift of Christ. The covenant of Christ with each one of them and with the couple is definitive and irrevocable. In the sacrament of marriage the Lord becomes a spouse to each of them by engaging in the couple’s mutual giving. In their gift without return, Christ fills them with his joy. In the love of husband and wife, Christ praises God as do the husband and wife themselves. This surge “forces” each spouse to return the love he or she has received. God precedes them in that loving. The sacrament of Christ and his Church manifests this divine “primacy.” In return, it invites them to make that “disinterested gift of themselves.” To love is to give. To love is to receive and to give back to God what we have freely received.

(3) In the whole of their life, the sacramentally united couple represents the *nuptial gift of Christ to his Church*. Husband and wife are a sort of “stained glass window” of this love. Their love is the love of Christ himself and so they mutually sanctify each other. In the Christ-Church relationship as well as in the man-woman relationship, love is “circulation of the gift”: gift and acceptance of the gift in “personal gratuity.” Love is not an emptiness that needs

¹⁶ Paul VI, “Allocution aux Equipes Notre-Dame,” in: *Documentation Catholique* 67 (1970), 502-506, at no. 5: “One flesh, one couple, we could almost say one being, the unity of which will take a social and legal shape through marriage and will manifest itself by a community of life of which the bodily gift is the fertile expression (...)” (free translation from the French).

filling but a surplus of life to offer. The sacrament “signifies” that dynamic of the Gift and the divine love, handed over to humankind. Molded by the gift of Christ on the cross and by the power of his resurrection, the sacrament of marriage is the time and the place of a very specific gift. The love of Christ, the royal Bridegroom, promised to the holy and immaculate Church, transfigures the nuptial dynamic. In the history of the sacrament, consent has been called “the donation.” The exchange of consent, which breathes life into the “beings-of-gift” who will give themselves to Christ by offering themselves to one another in the Church, makes the beauty of the gift spring forth publicly. Christ consummates his union with the Church by giving himself to the Father under the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church – and in it husband and wife – tends toward the Beloved by taking, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the path of love that He has opened: a path of humility, of renunciation and obedience to the Father. For Christian spouses the path of real and deep union follows that movement of return to the Father in the offering to Jesus and under the inspiration of the Spirit. They are destined to be its witnesses (Eph 5,25). The great *mysterium* passes through them and at the same time they make “it” visible.

(4) Conjugal and parental love is a *path of sanctification* for the married couple. This call to matrimonial sanctity and to its testimony concerns the whole of life. The daily life of the family, the conjugal relationship, the effort to sustain the home, ensure its security and enhance its living conditions, as well as the interactions with the civil society, are the most common situations in which husband and wife have to sanctify themselves and be a “sacramental sign” of the charity of God. The sacrament of marriage lived day to day is truly “God with us”: “Emmanu-el.” Every moment of life together is a moment of grace, of a possible union with God under the gaze of the partner and with his or her help. Indeed, each one now has to live not only for oneself but for others. The partner is the true “neighbour” received from God. This gift is a call: be part of the partner’s fulfillment, of his or her spiritual journey and his or her growth in sanctity.¹⁷ To grow in conjugal charity and in mutual gift is to grow in the love of Jesus. The spousal structure of the human being is actualized by the exclusive gift of oneself to the other: the other truly leads to God. The sacrament also heals wounded love. The human fragility of the gift is assumed in the power of the Spirit as infinite and uncreated Gift. The gift of love always expresses itself in the forgiveness that heals, fortifies and comforts.

¹⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 11; John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 56; available online from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html; accessed 21 October 2007.

(5) With the sacrament, husband and wife can be icons of the Church, a community which saves¹⁸ with its own mission and its own gifts. The sacrament builds the couple as a new unity in communion with the Church and offered for the world, an *ecclesia domestica*. “For this reason the Second Vatican Council, using an ancient expression, calls the family *the Ecclesia domestica*.¹⁹ It is in the bosom of the family that parents are ‘by word and example (...) the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children (...).’²⁰ The child is the “most excellent gift of marriage.” Its presence signifies the gratuity of the love of God. To welcome the child with that gratuity in mind is to recognize *in concreto* a particular presence of the Spirit of love among the partners. For them it is to unite themselves with the act of divine creation. “Holy Orders and Matrimony are directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so.”²¹ This *cor unum* (Ac 4,12) freely built with God by the married couple and through their consent is an “entity of flesh,” specific and spiritual. It is “body” in the Body of Christ. In their life husband and wife sacramentally symbolize the union of Jesus Christ with his Church: they represent that communion and that mission. They collaborate in the advent of the new Man (Eph 4,24). They make the Church visible and credible to the eyes of the world.

Marriage is a total and permanent sacrament (even though it does not confer a “character” (like baptism): a sacrament of the whole person who is gift and sign of the benevolence of God for the partner; sacrament of the entire life of the person, witness of the permanence of the gift of Christ to his Church; sacrament of the foundation of a “cell of the Church” which every family is. The debates about the sacrament of marriage are based on the word of God and tradition. The passage in Ephesians 5,23-32 is a crucial junction of these. An important analogy springs from the text, “in which marriage as a sacrament is presupposed on the one hand, and on the other hand, rediscovered. It is presupposed as the sacrament of the ‘beginning’ of mankind, united to the mystery of creation. However, it is rediscovered as the fruit of the spousal love of Christ and of the Church linked with the mystery of the redemption.”²² In this sense the analogy is not an intellectual concept: as true grace, the analogy engenders a spirituality. The sacramental marriage in the “new” economy unites the nup-

¹⁸ See John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 49.

¹⁹ See *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1656; available online from http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.htm; accessed 21 October 2007.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1534.

²² John Paul II, “General Audience of Wednesday, 15 December 1982,” in: *L’Osservatore Romano* (20 December 1982), 9, at no. 1; available online from <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPAL-DOC/jp2tb102.htm>; accessed 21 October 2007. See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 526.

tial and the redemptive. It is because Christ gave himself to the Church that man can give himself in truth to his wife. Marriage symbolizes the spousal relationship between Christ and the Church.

By linking humanity's origin to redemption, the gift of Christ to the gift of the Creator, we trace the path of the free gift of God's love for humanity. Everything is gratuity from beginning to end. In human history the Gift of Christ is the unsurpassable foundation of all other gifts. The gift of husband and wife rests upon the gift of Christ to his Church. The sacrament of marriage is a gift of the Bridegroom to his Bride. Each couple who lives it manifests this gift in a new and permanent way. Therein lies the mystery of all human love: it unveils the singularity of all human life and reveals the nuptial structure of the relationship between God and his creatures. Man is therefore destined to know the mystery of woman better and vice versa. In so doing he or she lives the mystery of the covenant of God with his People. The sacrament of marriage is a gift from God. It concerns the Church as a whole because it unites the spouses to the entire sacramental economy and to the mystery of the Church as sacrament.

(Translated from the French by Monica Sandor)

Suggestions for Further Reading:

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