

Retrieving the Tradition

GOD'S GIFT OF LIFE AND LOVE:
ON MARRIAGE
AND THE EUCHARIST¹

JOHN PAUL II

“[L]ive at the heart of the sacrament of the Covenant,
your marriage nourished by the Eucharist and the
Eucharist illumined by your sacrament of marriage;
the future of the world depends on it.”



Dear brothers and sisters,

You have chosen as a light to illumine your pilgrimage to Rome
the Lord's word: “If you knew the gift of God.”

You were inspired in making this choice. This pressing
and joyous question traverses the entire Bible and reaches us all:
“If you knew the gift of God!” If you knew, you who seek to
drink, who are motivated by an earthly thirst, if you knew the
inexhaustible source! It is near to you, but will you be able to
recognize it?

1. This originally appears in a slightly longer form as “Address to the Mem-
bers of the Teams of Our Lady Movement” (23 September 1982). Reprinted
and translated with permission.

This question concerns you too, Christian spouses. You know it well, you who keep and develop the task of returning to the source of your love and your grace under the patronage of Our Lady, Mother of fairest love.

THE MYSTERY OF THE COVENANT

1. From the beginning, God's gift to man is life and love. And this gift, this grace is expressed in the grace of a countenance, of a woman, Eve, the mother of the living—an imperfect image, but an image nonetheless of the new Eve, Mary, full of grace. The joy of Adam, who, his waiting fulfilled, exclaims, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!" (Gn 2:23). Both of them rejoice in the face of shared love and life when their first son is born: "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord!" (Gn 4:1). And yet they do not suspect the breadth and depth of the gift of God (cf. Eph 3:18–19).

This grace, this gift of love and of life is only a first step. The Lord wants to bind himself to humanity, to be "in accord" with it. He makes a covenant with his chosen people: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:2–3). But this covenant is neither a simple contract nor a political alliance: since, in it, the Lord commits his Word and his Life, it calls for love and tenderness. *The covenant is expressed through the sign of marriage.* The prophets delve more deeply into this mystery of the covenant through the stormy history of YHWH's fidelity and the infidelities of his people, at times even through the prophets' own conjugal lives (cf. Hos 2:21–22). Jeremiah goes as far as to proclaim a new covenant (Jer 31:31).

And in fact, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman . . ." (Gal 4:4). Christ espoused the human condition in the womb of the Virgin Mary—"the Word was made flesh"—an indissoluble Covenant, for nothing can separate man from God any longer, united forever in Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 8:35–39). It is still in terms of marriage that the mystery unveils itself: Jesus performs his first miracle at the wedding at Cana (cf. Jn 2:11); then the Gospel gives us to understand that he is the true Bridegroom (cf. Jn 3:29; Eph 5:31–32). Jesus

goes to the end of love (cf. Jn 15:13; 13:1), he seals the Covenant in the blood of his Cross, and “gave up his spirit” (Jn 19:30) to the Church, his Bride.

The Church thus appears as the end-goal of the Covenant: filled with the gift of God, she is the beloved and fruitful Bride who generates new children until the end of time. The “universal sacrament of salvation” (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 41, 1 and 42, 3; *Lumen gentium*, 1, 1 and 48), she leads humanity step by step, through the proclamation of the Word and through her sacraments, to live fully the gift of God in the Covenant offered to it.

THE EUCHARIST AND MARRIAGE

2. The sacraments are thus the places of the celebration and the accomplishment of the Covenant. The Eucharist is this in a pre-eminent way (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 5), but marriage, “intimately connected” to the Eucharist (John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 57, hereafter cited as *FC*), has a particular connection with the Covenant. The Old Covenant was expressed in the sign of human marriage; *but the reality of Christian marriage is as if indwelt and transfigured by the New Covenant.*

In the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, dedicated to the family following the synod of 1980, I stressed how necessary it is “to rediscover and strengthen this relationship” (*ibid.*). Your pilgrimage to Rome gives me the occasion to open a few paths, which it will be your task to explore further.

COMMUNION

The Eucharist makes the Covenant accessible to us, [it is] simultaneously the gift and he who gives himself. As the supreme sacrament of the Covenant, the Eucharist is a mystery of communion, of unity, in respect for each person: “He who eats my flesh remains in me and I in him” (Jn 6:56). “Just as . . . I live because of the Father, so he who eats my flesh will live because of me” (Jn 6:57). It manifests the communion of the Father and the Son in the Spirit, drawing into this communion the faithful,

who thus find themselves to be in communion with one another (cf. 1 Cor 10:17). Through the flesh of the Risen Christ, communion in the Spirit is accomplished: "He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Cor 6:17).

The fulfillment of the Covenant in the Eucharist has repercussions in the conjugal covenant. Doesn't the sacrament of marriage also establish a communion in which unity in the flesh leads to communion of spirit? Like Christ's Covenant, the conjugal covenant leads the spouses to live fidelity in "tenderness and mercy" and at the same time in "justice and righteousness" (Hos 2:21). "The marriage of baptized persons thus becomes a real symbol of that new and eternal Covenant sanctioned in the blood of Christ. The Spirit which the Lord pours forth gives a new heart and renders man and woman capable of loving one another as Christ has loved us" (*FC*, 13). "In this sacrifice of the new and eternal Covenant, Christian spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage covenant flows, is interiorly structured, and continuously renewed" (57).

From the Lord, they learn to love "to the end," in gift and forgiveness. And since he himself lives an indissoluble Covenant, they learn from him an unfailing fidelity to the word and the life they have been given.

The Covenant not only inspires the life of the couple, but it is accomplished in it, in the sense that the Covenant unfolds its own energy within the life of the spouses. It "shapes" their love from within: they love one another not only *as* Christ loved, but already, mysteriously, *with* the very love of Christ, since his Spirit has been given to them . . . to the extent that they allow themselves to be "shaped" by him (cf. Gal 2:25; Eph 4:23). At Mass, through the ministry of the priest, the Spirit of the Lord makes of the bread and the wine the Lord's Body and Blood. In and through the sacrament of marriage, the Spirit can make of conjugal love the very love of the Lord; if the spouses allow themselves to be transformed, they can love with the new heart promised by the New Covenant (cf. Jer 31:31; *FC*, 20).

"Appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will" (*FC*, 13)—through the Lord's gift, human love can be completely irradiated by the Source of love and truly manifest the new and eternal Covenant that shines through them.

We are certainly very far here from a basic, instinctive impulse or a simple, temporary agreement linked to the predictable and immediate interests to which many people today tend to reduce this gift of the Lord that is love!

3. I said: "If the spouses allow themselves to be transformed," for the gift that God proposes does not encounter only consent: from the beginning, it encounters rejection and pride. The ever-renewed attempts at a Christianity without sacrifice are condemned to failure: they collide with the reality of sin. Christ's mission is the fulfillment of the human person only through his death and Resurrection. The Eucharist reminds us ceaselessly that the blood of the new and eternal Covenant is "poured out . . . for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28). The Covenant is sealed in the blood of the Lamb.

So it is not surprising if the sacrament of marriage commits the spouses on a path on which they will encounter the Cross: the cross within the couple, the sacrifice of one's egoism, refusals, weaknesses, disappointments that call for forgiveness, ruptures; the cross that comes from children, from one another's limits, one another's infirmities, one another's infidelities; the cross of childless families; the cross of those whose fidelity to the covenant provokes mockery, irony, or even persecution. We do not live in an innocent world! Love, like every human reality, needs to be saved, redeemed. But frequent reception of the Eucharist allows the spouses to make of their trials a path of communion, a participation in the Lord's sacrifice, a new way of living the Covenant. And beyond the Cross, beyond all the forms of death that mark their existence, it allows them to attain joy: *Christian marriage is a Pasch.*

4. The Lord's sacrifice in fact leads him to the Resurrection and to the gift of the Spirit. It flows into thanksgiving and praise of the Father. This is the original meaning of the word "Eucharist," in which we take up the "cup of blessing" (1 Cor 10:16). The blessing of the covenant of Adam and Eve finds its completion in the blessing of the new Adam and the new Eve. Immersed in the Covenant of Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:25ff.), the conjugal covenant too opens out onto joy, gratitude, and thanksgiving. Also in this sense, every Christian family is called to become a "little church," a place that resounds with praise and adoration (cf. Eph 5:19). In it, the spouses ex-

ercise their baptismal priesthood. Gratitude, thanksgiving, and joy based not on an illusion, but on the truth of the gift and of forgiveness, also have a role to play in the world: clutching at that which it conquers, this world risks losing a sense of gratuity. It thus closes itself to gratitude and thanksgiving, sources of joy, forgetting that it is not only "right and just" to give thanks, but also "our salvation"!

BUILDING UP THE CHURCH

5. I would like to insist on the ecclesial dimension of your conjugal vocation. The new and eternal Covenant is offered to the "multitude" (Mt 26:27). However personal each Christian's encounter with the Eucharist may be, it concerns the entire Body. "The Church makes the Eucharist, but the Eucharist makes the Church." Beyond the diversities of race, nation, sex, or class, the Eucharist bursts boundaries, the eucharistic body of Christ builds up his mystical Body, which is the Church. The celebration of the new and eternal Covenant gives full consistency to the Christian assembly: the latter "makes up one body" in the body of Christ (Cf. 1 Cor 10:17). But far from closing off this assembly in the intimacy of some far-off chamber, the Eucharist makes it explode to the four corners of the world. The Spirit of the Risen Christ ensures at the same time communion and mission (cf. Acts 1:13, 2:4; Mt 28:18–20).

"In the eucharistic gift of charity the Christian family finds the foundation and soul of its communion and its mission: by partaking in the eucharistic bread, the different members of the Christian family become one body"; at the same time, the Eucharist nourishes the family's "missionary apostolic dynamism" (*FC*, 57). In the sacrament of the Covenant, the domestic church that is the family will live communion intensely: a communion not at all folded in on itself in distorted intimacy, but entirely open to mission. A cell of the Church open to other communities, the Christian family is not a closed chapel, a cenacle. This is why you must take care to work in strict communion with your bishops and with the pastors of the Church, beginning with your parish priests.

Your vocation as those who "build" the Church begins

with a generous gift of life (even in the Church, many families no longer know that “children are the most excellent gift of marriage” [*Gaudium et spes*, 50]). It matures in the various activities that each couple can carry out according to a particular vocation, from catechesis to animation of the liturgy or to apostolic action in all its forms. Each family will learn to discern its own vocation by confronting its tastes, talents, and possibilities with the needs and calls of the Church and of the world. For the most urgent missionary service goes beyond the frontiers of the Church. This world that has grown old no longer believes in life, in love, in fidelity, and forgiveness. It needs signs of the new and eternal Covenant that reveal to it authentic love, fidelity to the cross, the joy of life, and the power of forgiveness; it must learn again the price of a word given and kept in a life that is offered. Through the fidelity of the spouses, it can glimpse the fidelity of the living God.

UNTIL HE COMES

6. Finally, the Eucharist proclaims and prepares for the Lord’s return and definitive fulfillment of the Covenant. The Eucharist is nourishment for the way: it prepares for the time when the Eucharist itself will no longer be necessary, because “we will see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:2). Far from leading us to despise the time that passes away, it allows us to prepare for the eternal with the temporal but at the same time keeps us from getting stuck in the present by reminding us of our condition as pilgrims on this earth (Heb 11:9–11; Phil 3:20; 1 Pt 2:11). We are a people oriented toward the City of God, toward the heavenly Jerusalem, in which we will be filled with the gift of God.

This eschatological perspective of the Eucharist is also reflected in marriage. The latter bears the mark of the ephemeral: “The form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31). Yet the body is more than the body, it is the sign of the spirit that dwells in it (cf. John Paul II, General Audience, 28 July 1982); Christian marriage is more than marriage. “Love is more than love” (Paul VI, Address to the Teams of Our Lady Movement [4 May 1970], 6). Transfigured by the Spirit, love builds up eternity, for “love never passes away” (1 Cor 13:8). But at the same time, an authentic conjugal love, molded by tenderness and fidelity, keeps

itself from ending in the spouse in undue adoration: it leads from the conjugal covenant to the divine Covenant, from the image to its Source. This is why it knows itself to be inseparable from another sign of the Covenant: celibacy for the Kingdom (Mt 19:12; cf. John Paul II, General Audience [30 June 1982]). The latter reminds all that *the supreme gift of God is not a creature, however beloved, but the Lord himself*: “Your husband is your Maker” (Is 54:5). The true Bridegroom of the definitive wedding feast is Christ, and the Bride is the Church (cf. Mt 22:1–14). Consecrated virginity, the sign of the world that is to come (*FC*, 16), resounds as a call in the hearts of all Christian families. It is neither fear nor repression, but the call to a greater love (John Paul II, General Audience, 21 April 1982). I would like to recall that, in this sense, “the Church . . . has always defended the superiority of this charism to that of marriage” (*FC*, 16), even if this is poorly understood today. This tells you the importance that the Church attributes to a certain climate in Christian families so that the call to leave everything for Christ’s sake may flourish there, in freedom and joy.

JOURNEYING

7. “If you knew the gift of God.” Brothers and sisters, all your conjugal lives will not be enough to explore the incommensurable gift of God that has been given to you in your sacrament of the Covenant. During her earthly journey, the Church will never finish exploring the gift of God, “the breadth and length and height and depth” of the love of God, “which surpasses all knowledge” (Eph 3:18–19). All the more reason to set out on this task from this moment in your families and in the Church.

Yet recalling God’s plan for the marriage of his children might feel oppressive to you: how does one take up such a mission amid the men and women of today?

You are right to recognize your limits: humility is the first step toward sanctity. But you must not reduce God’s ambitions for you. How could love subsist if it did not reflect the holiness of its source, in fidelity and fruitfulness? “If Christian marriage can be compared to a very high mountain which places the spouses very near to God, we must acknowledge that climb-

ing this mountain requires a lot of time and effort. But is this a reason to suppress or raze the mountain?” (John Paul II, Homily in Kinshasa, Zaire [3 May 1980]).

The disproportion that you perceive between what the Father awaits and your poor responses must not paralyze you but rather make you still more dynamic. You know from experience that a true mother does not make herself an accomplice in her children’s refusal to eat, to work, or to love! Without weakness or harshness, she urges them to go forward on the path of life with a tender and merciful command. But you also know from experience that a loving father does not oppress his children because they grow slowly! In the apostolic exhortation, I spoke not of a “graduality of the law,” since the demands of the creation and the redemption of the body regard all of us from today onward, but rather of the graduality of an “educational growth process” (*FC*, 9). Doesn’t all our Christian life have to be thought of in terms of a journey?

In all the areas in which you encounter obstacles, in love and its expressions, its hesitations and recoveries, in the difficult problem of the regulation of births—to arrive at conjugal relations informed by “self-mastery and respect for the ends of the marriage act” (John Paul II, Address to the Centre de Liaison des Équipes de Recherche [3 November 1979]) and always maintaining an absolute respect for human life—and also for that which is your role in the Church and the world, I repeat to you what Paul VI said in his famous address to you in 1970:

The spouses’ path, like every human life, involves many steps, and difficult and painful phases . . . also have their place in it. But we must say clearly: anguish and fear must never dwell in souls of good will. Isn’t the Gospel in the end also good news for families, and a message that, even if demanding, is no less profoundly liberating? (Paul VI, Address to the Teams of Our Lady Movement [4 May 1970])

Your spiritual combat and even regret for your sins, entrusted to the Lord in the sacrament of reconciliation (*FC*, 58), still have a role to play: they can make you more fraternal toward your brothers and sisters tried by all kinds of failures, by the abandonment of a spouse, solitude, or disequilibrium. They can help you, without denying anything of the couples’ vocations to holiness, to accom-

pany these brothers and sisters and help them to move forward.

8. These last reflections have not distanced us from the Eucharist; on the contrary, they lead us back to it. Isn't the Eucharist a viaticum ["food for the path"] for those who are journeying? Isn't it the encounter with him who is the Truth and the Life, and at the same time the Way (cf. Jn 14:6)?

So, beloved brothers and sisters, live at the heart of the sacrament of the Covenant, your marriage nourished by the Eucharist and the Eucharist illumined by your sacrament of marriage; the future of the world depends on it. Despite your limits and weaknesses, humbly and at the same time proudly, may your light shine before men. The people of our time crowd around so many polluted streams! May your whole life lead them to Jacob's wells, may your life as a couple and a family question them: "If you knew the gift of God!" In watching you live, may they glimpse the Lord's enthusiastic "yes" to authentic love! May your whole life make them hear Christ's call: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (Jn 7:37–38).

May Our Lady obtain for all of you [the grace] to welcome the gift of God and to give it to others, as she did!

And with a full heart, to all your families, as well as to the priests and the religious who accompany your reflection, I impart my apostolic blessing.—*Translated by Michelle K. Borrás.* □

POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II (1920–2005) was canonized by Pope Francis in April 2014.