

The Nuptial Mystery at the Heart of the Church

Angelo Scola

"[M]ystery" does not designate the Unknown, but rather the One who communicates himself in a real way, remaining veiled in order to involve human freedom in a dynamic of fruitful love.

I. Nuptiality and the "Debate Concerning the Humanum"

"The only analogy nature seems to offer to the intimacy with the divine truth is the union of the sexes, though the analogy holds only if we omit the time interval between the union of the two persons in one flesh and its result in the birth of a child."¹ The attempt to grasp this assertion by Balthasar—which at first seems paradoxical—gives us a way into our theme, namely, the nuptial mystery at the heart of the Church.

The mystery of nuptiality indisputably constitutes one of the essential aspects of the human person,² considered both in himself

¹H. U. von Balthasar, *Prayer* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 64.

²The Christian understanding of the human being in fact represents the possibility of a full understanding of man, since, as the Second Vatican Council teaches us, "in reality, it is only in the mystery of the Word made

Angelo Scola is Bishop Emeritus of Grosseto and Rector of the Pontifical Lateran University.

and against the horizon of Christian revelation. Without attempting a complete definition, it is sufficient to note that the expression "nuptiality" refers in the first instance to the relationship between man and woman. There are, however, broader meanings of the term documented in the history of Western thought, linked to the image of the "couple" seen from the point of view of eros: from the "sacred marriage" between heaven and earth³ to the Judeo-Christian theme of the nuptial relationship between Yahweh and his people or between Christ-Bridegroom and the Church-Bride. Such an image has, indirectly, given rise to some of the boldest speculations on the spousal relation in the domain of christology and even regarding the Trinity.⁴ Incidentally, we may point out that the diversity and depth of the various meanings suggest one of the reasons we call the nuptial relation a mystery.

In today's society, our view of marriage and our behavior toward it have been profoundly affected by the astounding technological and scientific possibilities of genetic engineering. I am referring, for example, to the phenomenon of cloning⁵ which may lead in the not-too-distant future to the systematic dissociation of procreation from sexuality. In this context, the citation from Balthasar that we began with would seem *ex abrupto* naive and at odds with popular thinking. In the mentality of today's man or woman—which perhaps finds its most sophisticated expression in the Anglo-Saxon world, educated as it has been by centuries of thought to attend to the concrete in a manner that is at once simple and critical⁶—the Swiss theologian's theory would

flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (*Godium et Spes*, 22). This understanding is an essential part of the work of the cultural institutions in the Church. These institutions are called to "re-affirm the primacy of God, entering into the debate concerning the *humanum*" (John Paul II, "On the Occasion of the Opening of the Academic Year 1996-1997," November 8, 1996 *Nuntium* 1 [1997]: 15).

³Cf. R. Graves, *I miti greci* (Milan, 1983), 21-28; G. Bataille, *Visions of Eros: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, vol. 14 (Minneapolis, 1985), as cited in G. Loughlin, "Sexing the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 79 (January 1998): 18-25.

⁴Cf. L. A. Schoekel, *I nomi dell'amore: Simboli matrimoniali nella Bibbia* (Casale Monferrato, 1997).

⁵Cf. P. H. Caspar, "La pecora Dolly e lo statuto dell'embrione," *Nuntium* 3 (1997): 111-18.

⁶If I have correctly grasped the nature of this mentality, it would seem to be well expressed in Chesterton's sharp observations, taken from his novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*: "What could have happened to the world if

seem to express more an unrealistic fantasy than an examination of the real data in all of its even brutal facticity.

Allow me nevertheless to set out the terms of the challenge which Balhassar's statement raises to today's dominant mentality, even if I acknowledge that the battle is so disproportionate that it recalls that between David and Goliath. Balhassar proposes to look at nuptiality as the inseparable intertwining of three factors: sexual difference (man/woman or gender), love, and procreation. Current thinking, on the other hand, has for quite some time conceived love and sexuality as two separate realities and is already heralding the separation of procreation from sexuality as a great victory.

On the one hand, we note from the outset that the text from Balhassar is a single affirmation drawn from the context of his work as a whole. Time and again over the course of his voluminous writings he returns to this general theme and to the organically unified vision of human sexuality in particular. This confirms the fact that the author to whom this paper is devoted articulated this bold thesis deliberately and with full awareness that it represents a radical departure from the dominant mentality.⁷

On the other hand, the positions and questions which sustain the opposing theses are well known.⁸ If the dream of

Nothing Hill had never been? The other voice replied—"The same that would have happened to the world and all the starry systems if an apple-tree grew six apples instead of seven; something would have been eternally lost. There has never been anything in the world quite like Nothing Hill. There will never be anything quite like it to the crack of doom. I cannot believe anything but that God loved it as He must surely love anything that is itself and unreplaceable" (G.K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* [New York, 1978], 193).

⁷Cf. H. U. von Balhassar, *Theologik*, vol. 3, *Der Geist der Wahrheit* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1987), 147: "Imagine for a moment that the act of love between a man and woman did not include nine months pregnancy, that is, the aspect of time. In the parents' generative-receptive embrace, the child would already be immediately present; it would be at one and the same time their mutual love in action and something more, namely, its transcendent result"; see also id., *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 411ff.; id., *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5, *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), 85ff.; id., *Il tutto nel frammento* (Milan, 1990), 266-73.

⁸It should be said that this mentality would seem nowadays to be singularly related to the utilitarianism referred to by famous authors in the Anglo-Saxon world (for example, P. Singer, *Practical Ethics* [Cambridge,

Goethe's Faust to produce man in a laboratory⁹ were to become technologically possible on a large scale, what would be the consequences for human sexuality and procreation? Would not the anthropological perspective that has always accepted the intrinsic link between sexuality and procreation show itself after all to have been an illusion, due solely to partial and limited scientific and technological knowledge? More specifically, would not the Catholic insistence, forcibly reasserted by Balhassar,¹⁰ on the indissoluble connection between the unitive and procreative meaning of the conjugal act seem arbitrary precisely because it is incapable of taking into account the fact that procreation and sexuality can be separated? Will this not run the risk, as some have already maintained,¹¹ of making the Church less credible when she announces the central propositions of the faith regarding the one and triune God, Jesus Christ savior and redeemer of mankind, precisely because the magisterium would venture to make assertions contrary to scientific data and invade the delicate sphere of individual freedom?

The mystery of nuptiality, which rests on the interconnection of sexual difference, love, and fruitfulness, thus appears at the center of the "debate concerning the *humanum*," which, as

[1993]), which is presented as the most effective revival of that which Heidegger called *the calculating thought* understood as the result of scientific mastery given in the various technologies now common (see M. Heidegger, *Che cos'è la metafisica. Poscritto*, 9th ed. [Florence, 1985], 50-57).

⁹Cf. Goethe, *Faust II*, Second Act, 6819ff.

¹⁰This belief is found in its most concentrated form in Paul VI's prophetic and controversial encyclical *Humanae vitae*, vigorously taken up and developed in its anthropological and ethical foundations in the various discourses of John Paul II (*Familiaris consortio*, *Mulieris dignitatem*, *Veritatis splendor*, *Evangelium vitae* and the *Wednesday Catechesis* [recently published as *The Theology of the Body* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1997)]. This has also been organically developed in important aspects by the Instruction of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum vitae*. For useful references with regard to this subject see, *Humanae vitae 20 anni dopo: Atti del II Congresso Internazionale di Teologia Morale* (Milan, 1989) and A. Scola, "Imago Dei e la sessualità umana: a proposito di una tesi originale della *Mulieris dignitatem*," *Anthropotes* (1992): 61-73.

¹¹This objection is examined in L. Scheffczyk, "Responsabilità e autorità del teologo nel campo della teologia morale: il dissenso sull'enciclica *Humanae vitae*," in *Humanae vitae 20 anni dopo*, 273-86.

John Paul II reminds us, lies at the heart of the Church's mission.¹² Moreover, precisely because it involves delicate and decisive questions in our current historical situation, the nuptial mystery sheds new light on the Church's own mission, the basic purpose of which is to show how Jesus Christ, *Lumen Gentium*, is contemporaneous with all people in every period of history. The wonderful mystery of grace and freedom that forms the *humanum* belongs by rights to the Church because humanity finds its decisive paradigm in Christ.

II. Towards the Center of the Nuptial Mystery

In order to proceed further along this path in specifying the general content of the nuptial relation and its burning relevance today, we must address two questions.

First: wherein is the dimension of mystery in the relationship between sexual difference, love, and procreation that forms the foundation of the nuptial relation? It is not difficult to intuit this dimension, since each of us has some experience of it, even if, as with all essential aspects of human existence, we find it justifiably difficult to articulate. In the same way, it is much easier to form an idea of what it means to know or to love than it is to explain how the dynamisms that constitute these elementary factors might reach their objective. In any case, humanity, throughout the whole of its history, has shown that it realizes that the word "mystery" does not first of all come into play in order to identify how much in these constituent factors it surpasses or escapes us.¹³ Instead, the word "mystery" reveals that in this *ensemble* of factors, the infinite¹⁴ in some way makes itself present in the most intimate experience of the "I." Thus the substance of the mystery, present even in the basic experience of nuptiality, does not in the first place refer either to the aspects of the phenomenon that are still unknown in themselves or to the subject who experiences them. I would like to quote a short passage from the last book written by one of the most influential Catholic thinkers of this century, the French philosopher Jean

Guitton. With a stroke of genius full of subtle self-irony, he describes his death, his funeral and God's judgment on his life. He imagines that his soul, now separated from his body, converses with philosophers, poets, popes, and politicians. In the conversation that turns to the theme of love, the philosopher speaks to his wife and the poet Dante. Here Guitton writes this brilliant dialogue: "Some get married because they love each other, others end up loving each other because they are married. The best would be to have both occur in every marriage." "Why do they end up loving each other after they are married? Is it perhaps the need to keep the promise we made?" asks Guitton. His wife answers: "If we're talking about love, there has to be something else to it." "Marie-Louise, what is this something else?" "It has to do with time and eternity."¹⁵ Love reveals, on the one hand, that the heart of man is "capable" of infinity and, on the other hand, that infinity communicates itself to man. In this sense, love is an encounter between eternity and time.

Through nuptiality, we perceive that someone calls to us and sets our freedom into motion. In this way, the Mystery dons the face of a real presence, though it continues to remain veiled. It is the face of a "thou" that strives in some way to enter into dialogue with us. As Balhasar says, the deepest nature of man is *dramatic*.¹⁶ The "I" experiences at every moment a constitutive tension between its openness to the infinite totality of Being (a capacity for the Infinite) and the insurmountable limit that constitutes it. Concretely, the nature of the "I" is revealed in the gift that the Mystery, understood as the "tenacious vigor"¹⁷ that holds together all things, makes of himself to finite freedom, communicating existence to it and holding it in being. If every moment of human existence is marked by this positive dramatic tension, it finds heightened expression precisely in the constitutive dimensions of basic human experience. Thus, when we speak about sexual difference, love, and procreation, we perceive that something of the substance of the "I" is at stake, something of its integrity here and now, as a being that is at once capable of

¹²Cf. John Paul II, "On the Occasion of the Opening of the Academic Year 1996-1997," 15.

¹³Cf. M. J. Schieeben, *I misteri del cristianesimo* (Brescia, 1960), 8-15.

¹⁴Cf. C. Bruaire, *L'affirmation de Dieu: Essai sur la logique de l'existence* (Paris, 1964).

¹⁵J. Guitton, *Il mio testamento filosofico* (Milan, 1997), 154-55.

¹⁶Cf. H. U. von Balhasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2, 335: "If we want to ask about man's 'essence,' we can do so only in the midst of his dramatic performance of existence. There is no anthropology but the dramatic." and A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balhasar: A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 84-100.

¹⁷Cf. the beautiful liturgical hymn *Rerum Deus tenax vigor*.

self-possession and relations with another—ultimately, we catch a glimpse of the very Infinite that gives it existence.

The main consequence of this state of affairs, that is, of man's very nature, becomes apparent in the fact that when we speak about the essential dimensions of our person, we are unable to consider them as so many static elements closed in on themselves, able to be minutely analyzed through the biological, psychological, and social sciences. Instead, we realize that these dimensions represent open and dynamic factors; they are pathways, invitations that open the "I" to the ways upon which it can expand its fundamental experience and bring to light all its natural and supernatural riches. I can explain myself better by taking some examples from Western culture. Sexual difference, love, and fruitfulness have always been the way religious man has read the nuptial relationship in general, on the basis of which he grasped the relation between heaven and earth, which is fundamental in any view of the cosmos as divine.¹⁸ As awareness developed, and God was eventually understood as a Supreme being, nuptial categories became the expression of the relationship between God and man.¹⁹ Very surprisingly, Jewish revelation represented the covenant itself (which includes creation) between Yahweh and the chosen people by putting forward the most loving and passionate instances of nuptiality: lover and beloved, husband and wife, father and mother.²⁰ It is enough to recall the touching words of the prophet Hosea: "I will betroth you to myself forever, betroth you with integrity and justice, with tenderness and love; I will betroth you to myself with faithfulness, and you will come to know the Lord. . . I will love Unloved; I will say to No-People-of-Mine, 'you are my people' and he will answer, 'you are my God'" (Hos 2:21–22, 25).

The category of "nuptiality," considered in the perspective of mystery, properly understood, acquires therefore various levels of meaning which nevertheless converge in a single point.

¹⁸ A concise vision of these themes in Mediterranean civilizations is found in *Le civiltà del mediterraneo e il sacro* (Milan, 1992).

¹⁹ Cf. J. Ries, *Il rapporto uomo-Dio nelle grandi religioni precristiane* (Milan, 1992), 67–92.

²⁰ Cf. the entries "Amore," 35–64; "Cantico dei Cantici," 237–45; "Corpoietà," 308–21; "Donna," 416–29; "Matrimonio," 920–30; "Uomo," 1590–609; "Verginità," in *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia Biblica*, 3rd ed., ed. P. Rossano, G. Ravasi, and A. Girlanda (Cinisello Balsamo, 1989), 1639–54.

We should endeavor to explore this a little further by posing the second question: In what sense does the nuptial mystery, which we have just sketched out, lie at the heart of the Church? There are at least two explanations. The first, which we have already referred to indirectly, is linked to the Christian conception of existence as a mystery of grace and freedom. The dramatic nature of the "I," of which the nuptial experience (sexual difference, love, and procreation) is an essential part, is obviously the *raison d'être* of the Church herself who proclaims Jesus Christ head of creation and Redeemer of man and of history. Therefore all of the human phenomena directly connected to the nuptial experience—emotions, love, marriage, the family, maternity, paternity, fraternity, friendship, preference, even celibacy and consecrated virginity—have always constituted a privileged factor through which the Church, Mother and Teacher, cares for men and women, intermediate communities, and entire peoples.

There is however a second reason, perhaps not as immediately obvious as the first, which shows how nuptiality lies at the heart of the Church. This reason is linked to the nuptial language employed by Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, the Holy Doctors and more generally by the whole tradition of Christian thought—even if it occurs with different qualitative and quantitative emphasis—to describe the most elevated mysteries of our faith. From the sacrament of the Eucharist, where there is question of the *body*, and of the Body given and the Blood poured out by Jesus Christ who redeems us and makes us fully brothers and sisters, to the sacrament of Baptism which, *incorporating* us (again we see the theme of the *corpus*) into Christ within the Church, makes us *sons and daughters in the Son* (the fundamental familial relationship appears here as connected to nuptiality!), and finally, the very relationship between Christ and his Church. In the Letter to the Ephesians this relationship is presented as that of a Bridegroom (the Crucified body is pierced, and blood and water pour forth) with his Bride, without spot or wrinkle.²¹ In this relationship, the mystery of the marriage between Christ and humanity also finds expression.²²

²¹ Cf. Schlier's commentary on Ephesians 5:27 in H. Schlier, *Lettera agli Efesini*, 2d ed. (Brescia, 1972).

²² Cf. C. Guiliadori, *Intelligenza teologica del maschile e femminile* (Rome, 1991), 163ff.

Moreover, through the mysterious union of the two natures in the person of Christ Jesus, nuptiality reveals to us how the Father and Author of all fatherhood²³ condescends to every person, lovingly offering his powerful mercy in his own Son, crucified and risen, whom the Spirit makes explicitly present today in the Church his spouse. He is the sacramental victim given to our wounded freedom so as to redeem and bring it to completion.

Yet even this is not the ultimate meaning of nuptiality, if, as Balthasar shows us in profound and fascinating pages, spousal categories are the least inadequate for stammering a few words about the ineffable life of the Infinite Supreme Being who, by grace, in Christ Jesus, revealed to us his face.²⁴ The perfect relationship of love between the Father and the Son sends forth the Holy Spirit, who is at once the bond and the fruit of that love.

Precisely this last powerful assertion of the theologian from Basel enables us to gather into a unity the plurality of aspects that describe the nuptial mystery. It begins from the natural experience of the relationship between mother, father, and child and ends in the relationship of perfect identity in difference which characterizes the mystery of the triune God.

We can thus understand a little better why we defined nuptiality as a mystery, in the full sense of the term, as Scheeben affirms in speaking about the Christian mysteries. In this sense, "mystery" does not designate the Unknown, but rather the One who communicates himself in a real way, remaining veiled in order to involve human freedom in a dynamic of fruitful love. At the same time, it perhaps becomes clearer how central the nuptial mystery is for the life of the Church.

III. *The Nuptial Mystery*

In the present context, it is not possible to develop a full account of the *analogical* levels—if I may use the technical term—characteristic of the nuptial mystery. I will therefore limit myself to reflecting on some anthropological implications which might be of help on the personal and ecclesial paths that each one of us is called to tread. Concretely, I intend to highlight the three

elements implicated by the nuptial mystery; but I will consider these on the basis of the daily experience of those who strive to live their lives in Christ, or, if they have not yet received the grace of an explicit encounter with Christ, those who, at the very least, are permeated with a religious outlook on life.

For convenience's sake, I will give you the titles first. First of all, I would like to dwell on the general meaning of nuptiality, understood as the interconnection of sexual difference, love, and procreation. Secondly, I will endeavor to show how the human experience of nuptiality lies at the heart of the Church according to God's original plan. Thirdly and finally, I will look at the task the nuptial mystery implies for the married faithful.

As a side note, it bears remarking that it matters little for our purposes whether we speak of male/female, sexual difference, or—to use the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary—"gender." These expressions are not altogether synonymous. In fact, there are nuances of difference implied in these variations in vocabulary. As has been recently pointed out, it is not the same thing to talk about gender rather than sexual difference or maleness/femaleness.²⁵ A difference in expression can be a way of insinuating an ideological reduction of the reality of things. Thus, for example, the category of gender, especially when it is transposed into the context of a Latin mentality, may lend itself more easily than that of maleness/femaleness to nullifying the weight of physiological evidence that establishes differences between masculinity and femininity.²⁶ Nonetheless, on a general level such as ours, these differences do not significantly affect the meaning of things, and we may thus use the terms interchangeably.

A. *The General Meaning of Nuptiality as the Interconnection of Sexual Difference, Love, and Procreation*

We have already said that, by the expression "nuptial mystery," we mean first of all the concrete experience of the man-woman relationship that lies at the very origin of the phenomenon of nuptiality in all its various types, and thus forms its constitutive nucleus. Using the language of analogy, we might say that this relationship represents the *analogatum principis*. We see

²³Cf. Eph 4:6.

²⁴Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2, 411ff.; id., *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5, 85ff.; P. Evdokimov, *Le donne e la salvezza del mondo* (Milan, 1980), 21ff.

²⁵Cf. P. Donati, ed., *Uomo e Donna in Famiglia* (Cinisello Balsamo, 1997).

²⁶Cf. G. Rossi, "Genere e sesso: Chi ha paura dell'identità femminile?" *Nuntium* (1998).

in this affirmation one of the most fundamental exigencies of the history of thought in general and of the tradition of Christian thought in particular, namely, its realism.²⁷ Human thought is made to grasp reality. It therefore communicates with reality. It is on this basis that human thought becomes capable of knowledge and at the same time of language, that is to say, of communication with others.

Today, however, thought's elementary capacity to relate to reality is very often ignored. I am convinced that, in the concrete situation that besets Christianity today, conversion (*metanoia*) is necessary also in this respect. This is the invitation extended by the motto first used by Husserl, a motto that turns up in every aspect of the Anglo-Saxon culture. I am referring to the urgency of turning (*cum-vertere*) to things just as they are, to reality in itself. What we need today is a con-version "to the real." Only thus will it be possible to grasp the mystery of which reality itself is always the sign. A *real sign*—it is exactly this! In more technical terms, we could say that reality presents itself as an event (*e-venio*)²⁸ that calls on our freedom to adhere to it. Allow me to have recourse to Chesterton in order to express this structural listening to the real which, as it happens to us (this is what "event" means!), sets in motion the creativity of the "I." In the novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* we find the following paradoxical dialogue:

"And then something did happen. Buck, it's the solemn truth, that nothing has ever happened to you in your life. Nothing has ever happened to me in my life."

²⁷St. Thomas reminds us that while divine knowledge is the measure of reality, reality is the measure of human knowledge: "Veritas autem quae est in intellectu humano . . . non comparatur ad res sicut mensura extrinseca et communis ad mensurata, sed vel sicut mensurata ad mensuram, ut est de veritate intellectus humani, et sic oportet eam variari secundum varietatem rerum" ["But the truth that is in the human intellect . . . is not related to things as an exterior and universal measure to what is measured, but as what is measured is related to the measure, as it is in the case of the truth of the human intellect, and so this truth has to vary according to the variety of things" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* 1.4.1)].

²⁸In this regard, one can speak of "symbolic ontology": cf. G. Colombo, *La ragione teologica* (Milan, 1995); A. Berruetti, "La 'ragione teologica' di Giuseppe Colombo: Il significato storico-teoretico di una proposta teologica," *Teologia* (1996): 1, 18–36; id., *Il concetto di esperienza*, in *L'evidenza e la fede* (Milan, 1988), 112–81.

"Nothing ever happened!" said Buck, staring. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing has ever happened," repeated Barker, with a morbid obstinacy. "You don't know what a thing happening means? You sit in your office expecting customers, and customers come; you walk in the street expecting friends, and friends meet you; you want a drink and get it; you feel inclined for a bet and make it. You expect either to win or lose, and you do either one or the other. But things happen!" and he shuddered ungracefully.

"Go on," said Buck, shortly. "Get on."

"As we walked wearily round the corners, something happened. When something happens, it happens first, and you see it afterwards. . . . It happens of itself, and you have nothing to do with it."²⁹

This is the primacy of reality as an event that calls on our freedom!

Entering now more directly into the mystery of the man-woman relationship, let us once again set forth the question that—in a simple and unparalleled manner—John Paul II posed in the striking catechesis on spousal love (theology of the body) at the beginning of his pontificate. I am referring to the following assertion: "The definitive creation of mankind consists in the creation of unity of two beings. Their unity above all denotes the identity of human nature; the duality, on the other hand, manifests what, on the basis of this identity, constitutes the masculinity and femininity of created man."³⁰ John Paul II took this theme up again even more explicitly in the third part—which still has not been studied in depth—of *Mulieris dignitatem*: "It is a question of understanding the reasons and the consequences of the decision of the Creator that the human being would always exist only as female or male."³¹

²⁹G. K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, 127–28.

³⁰John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 45.

³¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 1. See in this regard *Dignità e vocazione della donna. Testi e commenti* (Vatican City, 1989), with the participation of M. Sales, A. Scola, L. and S. Grygiel, I. de la Potterie, V. Grossi, E. Scabini, C. Lubich, G. Blaquière, J. Burggraf, A. Vanhoye, G. Chantraine, G. Honoré-Lainé, M. Hendriks, and D. Tettamanzi.

Going back to things in themselves—listening to the real—when speaking about nuptiality means answering the demand to welcome the data that offers itself directly to the consciousness of each one of us. Every man and woman in fact comes into the world as a sexual being (man or woman), in the context of a parental relationship, and in most cases, at least until recently,³² born out of a conjugal act that involves the love of a man and a woman (two persons of a different sex), regardless of the couple's intention. Because I am born from a father and mother, I thus stand within a constitutive relationship which our tradition identifies with the term "marriage," as the basis of the reality of the family. What does all of this mean?³³

³²Cf. P. Morande, "La imagen del padre en la cultura de la postmodernidad," *Anthropotes* (1996): 241-59.

³³A great difficulty undermines the educational capacity of parents towards their children, but also that of the ecclesial body—parish, diocesan church or the Universal Church—towards engaged couples preparing for marriage. It is a question of their incapacity to give good enough reasons for the moral injunction, the "ought." With respect to responsible procreation, contraception, and premarital relations, this incapacity often comes from not beginning with things as they are, which in our case means starting with the real experience of the man-woman relationship: we come into the world as a man or woman within a familial context. We are the children of a modernity which, having separated the individual dimension from the social dimension of ethics, has ended by bracketing the foundation of reality as it presents itself, setting in its place and otherwise compensating for it by laying emphasis on the "ought," and having lost the capacity to give (ontological) reasons for acting. By contrast, in the inevitable wearing together of the "is" and the "ought," only the perception of how "things are"—the perception of being—can guarantee the truth and the creative freshness of the "ought." Moralism (whether in the form of laxity or rigorism) is a serious threat, particularly in the domain of nuptiality. I always say to my students who are priests that we are like the father who, not expecting his son's request to be able to stay out late at night, tells him: "No, no you can't." And, confronted with a son who responds, "why can't I?" he does not know how to give any reason but what amounts to no reason at all, merely an arbitrary recourse to the principal of authority: "Because I say so" or "because that's the way it is." But to be able to offer genuine reasons, we need above all to know things as they are. In order to be able to offer to the student convincing criteria for the "ought," it is necessary to link this with the very being of things. It is not by chance that education was defined as "an introduction to total reality." (Cf. J. A. Jungmann, *Christus als Mittelpunkt religiöser Erziehung* [Freiburg 1939], 20.) Only thus will the "ought" appear as profoundly fitting (let us recall the medieval sense of the term *convenientia*: cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3.1.1:

I will respond briefly using a somewhat technical expression, but one that until now has seemed the most effective to bring to a point all of the data concerning nuptiality. Nuptiality, in its interconnection of sexual difference, love and fruitfulness, manifests a reciprocity between me and another. This reciprocity bears a very peculiar characteristic which I call "asymmetry." *Asymmetrical reciprocity* (this is the technical term!) is thus the meaning of nuptiality.³⁴

Let us begin with the category of reciprocity: its immediate meaning is quite clear. There exists another modality other than my own for embodying the total identity (*corpore et animam*) of the human person, namely, that of the woman. My existence as a sexual being means, in some sense, that I am placed from the beginning in relation to another. The other is presented to me as being identical in her own being as a person but, at the same time, because of sexual difference, she reveals to me a radical difference that distinguishes her from me at all levels. Thus if my way of embodying the identity of person is masculine, the feminine mode that stands before me is a *different way* of being a person. The reciprocity that springs from sexual difference thus shows that the "I" emerges into existence from within a kind of constitutive polarity.³⁵ In order to be able to say "I" in the fullest sense, I need to take the other into account; I have the possibility of (that is, the resource for) taking the other into account. Therefore, the expressions "male-female," "sexuality" or "gender" identify in concise terms wherein the difference lies. A

³⁴Responded dicendum quod unicuique rei conveniens est illud quod competit sibi secundum rationem propriae naturae" ["I answer that that suits each thing which belongs to it according to the intelligible structure of its own nature."] and capable of interpreting the objective desire of the freedom of the person being educated with the undeniable need for "satisfaction" which accompanies it. It will thus be possible to obey even with great sacrifice: "Why torment yourself, when it is so easy to obey?" (P. Claudel, *L'annuncio a Maria*, 2d ed. [Milan, 1993], 152).

³⁵P. Vanzan speaks of asymmetrical reciprocity ("Uomo e donna oltre la modernità," *Famiglia oggi* 10 [1997]: 25-31), and quotes Rosetta Stella ("Il Papa e la crisi della modernità: Una reciprocità asimmetrica" *Prospettiva Persona*, December 1996). I reached the same formulation myself around 1987 in the context of my teaching at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family.

³⁶On constitutive polarities, see H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2, 346-94; A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 84-100; R. Guardini, *L'opposizione polare* (Brescia, 1998).

difference that comes to light within a unity³⁶ never destroys the unity of human nature, which belongs to each of the two.

This is why the pope, like Balthasar, speaks of a *dual unity*. It is worth saying that man, as he exists here and now (*Dasein*), is not a purely spiritual subject. We do not find spiritual subjects walking in the street; when we look at our son or daughter, we always see a male or female human being. We are dealing with a relationship that is intrinsically connected with the fundamental experience of the self-awareness of our "I," to such an extent that it is coessential with it. There is no reason to waste words here: it suffices to recall our mother's smile when we were children and how decisive this smiling and friendly "thou" was for us to be able to say "I" with greater force and energy.³⁷ It happens, for example, when we enter into a friend's house, that a child who does not know us might hide in his mother's skirts. Then, when a conversation begins between his parents and the "stranger," the child enters the circle of communication; he detaches himself from the mother and moves towards the friend. In a certain sense the child realizes that the other is quite different, and this at first puts him on his guard. But then this diversity is eventually revealed to him as something good, as a resource that makes the "I" grow. The example shows us in passing that the "other" is obviously a category broader than that of the "other sex." Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the original and basic experience of otherness is founded on sexual otherness. It is not necessary to get involved in depth psychology to see this.³⁸

³⁶It is useful to note that the dramatic anthropology alluded to here might perfect, without destroying, the classical anthropological conception of the *individual*, only bringing out the influence of the man-woman and individual-community polarities, as coessential with the body-soul polarity, which, as in classical anthropology, maintains its own priority. Cf. A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 89.

³⁷Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *L'accesso alla realtà di Dio*, in *Mysterium salutatis*, vol. 2, 5th ed., ed. J. Feiner and M. Löhrer (Brescia, 1980), 19-57; id., "A résumé of my thought," in *Communio* 15 (Winter 1988): 468-73.

³⁸With regard to psychoanalysis and the Christian *Weltschmerz*, it is remarkable how often those who accuse Christian education of inflicting severe psychological damage are not so quick to recognize how similar the two approaches are in their assertion of the irreducibility of sexual difference. It seems to me that a similarly unobjective attitude can be seen in some of Beattie's reflections in T. Beattie, "A Man and Three Women—Hans, Adrienne, Mary and Luce," *New Blackfriars* 79 (February 1998): 97-105.

Why in fact do we qualify this reciprocity as *asymmetrical*? I will explain by making reference to a significant passage from Plato's *Symposium*, in which Aristophanes imagines that sexual difference—the existence of people as male and female—is due to the jealousy of a god who cut into two halves a being who initially formed a unity. Sexual difference would therefore indicate the path that the two halves would have to follow in the almost always failed attempt to recover the much desired original unity.³⁹ This androgynous vision of things, widespread today, is profoundly erroneous.⁴⁰ The error lies in the fact that reciprocity is "thought" as simple complementarity. On the contrary, sexual reciprocity is not simple complementarity, but possesses, rather, an important asymmetry, and this for at least two reasons. The first reason is quite obvious: every male and female lives simultaneously and as if in his or her very foundations, a plurality of relationships with the other sex. My "I" is simultaneously a point of reciprocity for different persons of the other sex, each of whom has a different *status*. I am immediately related to my mother, sister, a female friend etc., and when I relate to someone of the other sex, I am not at all polarized in a search for a fictitious other half of myself.

It is important to see, however, that this is nothing but the macroscopic expression of the true, radical meaning of *asymmetry* (*asimmetria*). Asymmetry consists in the fact that sexual difference, in a significant and immediate way, testifies that the other always remains "other" for me. One can even say that "the aspiration to overcome the duality of the sexes is more than just a tragic illusion: it is the death of love itself and of those who love."⁴¹ We find a confirmation of this point in depth psychology (which is certainly not likely to "connive" with the Christian vision of things). Psychoanalysis, for example, clearly affirms that sexual difference, in a certain sense, cannot be overcome. It cannot be deduced, that is, it cannot be translated into concepts, because it is precisely the decisive practical point in which the "I" experiences that the "other" always stands before him as "other."

³⁹Cf. Plato, *The Symposium*, 189d.

⁴⁰This androgynous mentality which is dominant nowadays is not the least reason for the spread of homosexuality and transsexuality and explains at the same time why these might be presented as legitimate sexual alternatives. Our judgment here is ontological not ethical (cf. *Antropologia cristiana e omosessualità* [Vatican City]).

⁴¹G. Zuanazzi, *Temi e simboli dell'eros* (Rome, 1991), 76.

At the very moment in which the "other" presents himself as the condition and the occasion for the fulfillment of the "I," this same "other" leaves the "I" at a distance, by saying repeatedly "I am another for you."⁴² This occurs even in that special place of unity between man and woman, in marriage, which is called the conjugal act. In this instance, to use the great expression of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the "one flesh" comes into being; and even in the "one flesh" the "other" remains "other" for me (asymmetrical reciprocity). Why is this?

The reason lies in the fact that the *difference between the two* (the man and the woman) *makes space for a third*, and this once again speaks of otherness. The reciprocity does not cancel the difference because it is asymmetrical, since it exists not for the sake of androgynous union of two halves, but for the procreation of the child. This is the fruit that is essentially connected to the love of the two persons. To avoid misunderstanding, this assertion requires a few words about love. Asymmetrical reciprocity, which we have been discussing, is rooted in man's instinctive nature, draws this instinctive desire from the unconscious, accompanies it in the preconscious, and manifests it as the ontological value that leads St. Thomas to define desire as *amor naturalis*.⁴³ Therefore asymmetrical sexual reciprocity forms the anthropological foundation that makes the experience of love possible.

An author whom I know is dear to you all, C.S. Lewis, comes to our aid. In his beautiful Anglo-Saxon style full of subtle irony, he presents the theme of love. I am referring to his wise and delightful essay, *The Four Loves*.⁴⁴ Lewis rightly rebels against the idea of using different words to describe the complex forms of the phenomenon of love. According to many thinkers, even some Christian ones, we should not use the word "love" for describing physical love, and at the same time for speaking about spiritual or ecstatic love, which implies a going out of oneself. By contrast, Lewis maintains that all expressions of love fall under the same category, "love." Even the most degraded form of commercialized love, which he calls *Venus*, no

matter how debased and disfigured it may be, does not cease to possess the traits of love and should be called "love." The fact that love is realized in degrees that are enormously different does not prevent these different degrees from retaining the name "love." For this reason Lewis contests the opposition of so-called "Need-love" and "Gift-love": "It would be a bold and silly creature that came before its Creator with the boast 'I'm no beggar. I love you disinterestedly.' Those who come nearest to a Gift-love for God will in the next moment, even at the very same moment, be beating their breasts with the publican and laying their indigence before the only real Giver. And God will have it so."⁴⁵

The passage from Lewis is related to what I said earlier about the necessity, which we can ill-afford to give up today more than ever, of starting with things as they are. Now, human love has to take into account the constitutive dimensions of human nature, which is made up both of soul and body. Love should not be thought of as something angelic, any more than it should be reduced to mere animal instinct. There must always be a unity, even at its highest level, between the instinctual, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. Nature is not opposed to freedom, but, as St. Thomas teaches us when he talks about natural inclinations as one of the orienting foundations of natural law and ethics,⁴⁶ it offers freedom guidelines that the latter is called on to choose, and thereby personalizes them. This is why we cannot talk about love without involving sexual difference and what this objectively signifies, namely, the objective orientation of the conjugal act towards procreation! In this respect, sexual reciprocity means "love" and at the same time, by reason of its asymmetry, it means an openness to the fruits of love, to fecundity, and procreation. This is not the occasion to work out in detail the intrinsic link that connects sexual difference, love, and procreation; it suffices to emphasize that the asymmetry that characterizes sexual reciprocity is necessary because of the fact that the two persons who come together in "one flesh," regardless of the degree of awareness with which the act occurs (although this is of course also important), are taken up into a dynamic that opens them to the procreation of a child who is the very fruit of love according to

⁴²The publications of the Jesuit Beirnaert are noteworthy on this point (L. Beirnaert, *Aux frontières de l'acte analytique* [Paris, 1987]; id., *Expérience chrétienne et psychologie* [Paris, 1966]).

⁴³Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1-2.26.

⁴⁴C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1960); id., *Mere Christianity* (London, 1996), 84-100.

⁴⁵Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 14.

⁴⁶Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1-2.91.2; A. Scola, *Questioni di Antropologia Teologica* (Rome, 1997), 131-38.

the vision that has quite rightly permeated the whole Western world: *amor est diffusivum sui*.⁴⁷

B. The Nuptial Mystery: "One Flesh," or the Logic of the Incarnation (Sacrament)

It is possible at this point to understand how the structure of human sexuality is part of a design in which we are called to participate. Welcoming this call belongs to the religious sense that characterizes humanity. The person who perceives the dimension of mystery connected to nuptiality recognizes in its constitutive factors signs through which Mystery itself calls on the person. Whoever, on the other hand, claims to deny this religious sense will be led to read the phenomenon of nuptiality (sexuality, love, fecundity) as something closed in on itself. This person will constantly be tempted to reduce nuptiality to the realm of the inner-worldly and will not be able to see how our nuptiality could contain in itself that remarkable openness of nature, with all of its biological and psychological laws but also its reason, toward the transcendent. The experience of sexuality gives rise to an interaction between nature and culture which not only contributes to fulfilling the history of each "I," but at the same time the history of humanity as a whole, allowing also for an authentically ecological relationship, that is, a fully healthy relationship, with the universe.

Religious man finds it natural to let this threefold asymmetrical reciprocity call on him and provoke him to ask why things are as they are: we only need think of the amazement that a new-born child stirs up in the hearts of its parents. This is an amazement full of humility because of the disproportion of such a gift, as it were. It is a humility that raises the heart toward the Author of life and causes us to fall on our knees in adoration and at the same time fills us with awe for being so unworthy of the gift received.

For the religious person who is a Christian, that is to say for the one who has encountered in the person of Christ a

powerful and adequate response to religious yearning, the provocation that arises from the asymmetrical reciprocity of sexuality marks only the beginning of an exhilarating road that leads, by grace, to the heart of the Mystery himself.

In this regard, revelation, as manifest in Scripture and as abiding in "the place of practice and experience" that Blondel called Tradition—the place that joins us in unbroken continuity to the group of friends who lived with Jesus by the Lake of Gennesaret, who participated in the important and dramatic final events in Jerusalem and who were able to touch the wounds of the Risen One⁴⁸ with their own hands—proposes the nuptial mystery as the key for understanding (by analogy, of course) the salient aspects, the dogma, of our faith.

It is useful here to list in order the three most fundamental aspects. First of all, there is the relationship between Christ and the Church that is presented, particularly in chapter five of the Letter to the Ephesians, as a relationship between a Bridegroom and a Bride.⁴⁹ Then there is the existence of the two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ as the foundation⁵⁰ that makes possible the "one flesh" of the two spouses that stems from the sacrament of marriage. Finally, there is the nuptial dimension within the Trinity⁵¹ where the difference between the Divine Persons lives in perfect unity as the cause and reason for the possibility of unity in difference which is proper to the man-woman relationship.

As I have already said, it is not my intention in this forum to go into too much detail concerning nuptiality in all its aspects.

⁴⁸The following passage from Mauriac's *Life of Jesus* gives eloquent testimony to the continuity between the first group of apostles and the life of the Church: "Those who were 'his own' could go through life with their eyes closed, having no longer anything to fear of men. Nothing more to fear, nothing more to expect. They had given everything in order to attain all, so closely identified with their love that those who received them received Love also. These words of Jesus spoken in the hearing of the Twelve carried the germ of the bravery of thousands of martyrs, the joy of those who would suffer for Christ. Thenceforth, and no matter what horrible thing might happen to them, the friends of Jesus had but to lift up their eyes to see the open heaven" (F. Mauriac, *Life of Jesus* [New York, 1939], 62).

⁴⁹Cf. A. Vanhoye, "Il grande mistero": La lettera di Ef 5, 21-33 nel nuovo documento pontificio," in *Dignità e vocazione*, 146-53; H. U. von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2, *Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 143ff.

⁵⁰Cf. C. Giuliadori, *Intelligenza teologica*, 194-97.

⁵¹Cf. *ibid.*, 117-33.

⁴⁷Cf. A. Scola, *Identidad y diferencia* (Madrid, 1989), 39f. The original axiom in St. Thomas speaks of *bonum diffusivum sui* for example in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1-2.1.4. Cf. J.-P. Jossua, "L'axiome *bonum diffusivum sui* chez saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* (1966): 127-53.

I will simply limit myself to looking at two anthropological considerations which carry an important practical significance.

In the first place, the meaning of our paper's title should now be clearer. In fact, to reiterate, when we talk about the nuptial mystery at the heart of the Church, we are not only referring to the experience of asymmetrical reciprocity which is given to us in the love between a man and a woman, but we are moved by faith itself to inquire into the relationship between Christ and the Church, the event of Christ, and the mystery of the Trinity. The mystery of nuptiality shows itself to be harmoniously unified and complex at the same time!

The question now arises: how is it possible to hold all these meanings in a unity and justify them, without becoming vulnerable to the objection that we have thereby left the field of the verifiable experience of human sexuality to end up prey to arbitrary constructions, perhaps the fruit of the fervent imagination of some particularly well-versed theologian, but alien to everyday practical human existence? Here again we meet with David's battle with Goliath which we mentioned at the outset. To address this objection, we have to penetrate deeply into the logic of Christianity and grasp its profound nature. *This is the logic of the Incarnation or of the sacrament.*⁵² I believe that one of the most serious temptations that besets Christians today is that of spiritualism. What I mean is the often unintentional but nevertheless serious way that some people have of looking at Christ's ascension as a disincarnation. It is fairly common, even among Christians, to find the practical belief that, ultimately, the event of Christ does not succeed in being present materially in the here and now of history. Jesus Christ is not considered effectively present to every person of every age. He is treated like a fact of the past! If this is so, then Jesus Christ ceases to be an event! Even if he could be considered as the paradigmatic model for human behavior, he will invariably be reduced to a hypothesis. Thus his truth and his substance will be lost. In my opinion, we have here one of the most insidious objections to Christianity.⁵³ Arising with the Enlightenment, this unresolved challenge continues to surface, as forcefully as ever, both in the experience of the

individual and of the Christian community, especially in the inter-religious and multi-cultural context which today characterizes the mission of the Church. Christ is treated like a fact of the past, a noble metaphor that inspires our conduct. By contrast, the logic of the Incarnation is the logic of the *real sign* which, according to the *form of the sacrament*, makes the event of Christ present to the freedom of modern man, calling him to follow. This logic leads us to read every circumstance, every relationship, as a sign of Christ's happening for me here and now. It is only in this perspective that the fundamental experience of being human is flooded with light at every level, including that of the asymmetrical reciprocity found in the man-woman relationship.

Here the "I" is called not only to make space so that the other may say "I," but the two spouses are moreover led, in a certain sense, to transcend themselves as unity-of-two (a dual unity) so as to welcome a third person, the child. This reveals that, in the reality of the very love that unites the two, there is an inherent moment of ascent towards a mysterious "Quid." Thus the question concerning what lies behind this ascending dynamism becomes even more acute. Balhasar helps us to find an answer. He asks himself: "When the trinitarian God . . . creates the couple, what does he create? What is the original couple in the mind of God?"⁵⁴ According to the theologian from Basel, God first had in mind the perfect archetype of the couple, namely, Christ the Bridegroom and the Church his Bride. The experience of the man-woman relation thus encounters its fullest meaning, which is its final (eschatological) and for this reason its primordial meaning, only in reference to this original relation. The truth of nuptiality is thus contained in the modality by which Christ generates his Bride in the total self-gift of the cross, and continues his relationship with her according to the logic of the sacrament.

From this perspective, it becomes clearer what it means to speak of the family as the domestic Church. In the first place, the expression does not mean that the family is a particular cell in a large diocesan community in the formal-judicial sense. If it did, then we would be left with the difficult task of determining the particular prerogatives of this familial domestic Church (are the spouses the "ministers" of the domestic Church? What is involved in such a ministry? Should the Eucharist be celebrated in

⁵²Cf. A. Scola, *Questioni di antropologia*, 43-53.

⁵³"How is it possible for a contingent historical truth to become proof of the truth of necessary reason?" (G. E. Lessing, "Sopra la prova dello Spirito e della forza," in M. F. Sciacca and M. Schiavone, *Grande antologia filosofica*, vol. 15 [Milan], 1557-59).

⁵⁴Cf. I. de la Potterie, "Antropomorfismo e simbolismo del linguaggio pubblico sulla elezione uomo-donna," *Dignità e vocazione*, 110-16.

the family?). The Council, referring to the Fathers of the Church,⁵⁵ sought instead to call the members of the family to take joy in the creative depth of the relationship between a man and woman founded on the sacrament of marriage. What is at issue here is the possibility of living every day more deeply and thus participating in the sacramental sign of marriage, which is the total and joyous gift of oneself to the other, whose goodness and beauty redounds back to and thus fulfills the "I." The sacrament of marriage, or rather marriage in as much as it is a sacrament,⁵⁶ puts at the disposal of the spouses' freedom the great resource of the perfect love by which Christ, who gave his life for his Church, makes her his Bride and preserves her from wrinkle or stain. As paradoxical as it may seem, on a pastoral level, the category of the domestic church emerges more, in its full effective reality, when we look at the Church as a family,⁵⁷ than at the family as a Church. Here we see the great power of the vision of the Letter to the Ephesians, where the relationship between Christ and the Church is described in the light of the man-woman relationship and vice versa. Far from chasing after fantastic theories and abandoning the realm of experience, this choice permits an unparalleled concreteness which demonstrates the persuasive force of the experience and the logic of the Incarnation. Balhassar affirms that the fullness of the mystery of man and woman "is only attained in the mystery of Christ and his Church (Eph 5:27, 33)."⁵⁸

Having opened the horizon of conjugal and family life to Christ's boundless love for his Bride, we cannot help but pursue the question further. The asymmetrical logic of the reciprocity that characterizes nuptiality does not allow us to rest content; it urges other questions.

On what basis can we legitimately speak of Christ as the Bridegroom of his Bride the Church, without falling into a fruitless parody of the eros relationship, analogous to that which

⁵⁵Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11; *Familiaris consortio*, 21.

⁵⁶Cf. A. Scola, *Questioni di antropologia*, 51-52.

⁵⁷"According to the Council, the Church is the Bride of Christ and our mother, the holy city and the first fruits of the coming Kingdom. It will be necessary to take into account these suggestive images, according to the suggestions of the Synod, in order to develop an ecclesiology centered on the concept of the Church as the family of God" (John Paul II, *Eccllesia in Africa*, 63).

⁵⁸Cf. H. U. von Balhassar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 289.

many writers see in the material world, if not even more dangerous since it is applied to the most noble reality of our faith, a reality we pray to and adore?⁵⁹ We are given the possibility of speaking in these terms because of the profound nature of the singular event of Jesus Christ. In him, two natures exist in one person, according to the modality wonderfully described by the Council of Chalcedon (*inconfuse, immutabiliter, indivise, inseparabiliter*).⁶⁰ With the revelation of Jesus Christ, the original experience of dual unity appears in history. The unity of the person of Christ (true God and true man) is communicated sacramentally through his powerful authority over humankind and the cosmos (miracles); moreover, there is Christ's greater Lordship over himself which enables his supreme, spontaneous ("sponte" according to St. Anselm) abandonment to the Father on the cross. "The Son of Man has the power to lay down his life and to take it up again." Such is the self-rule of the Crucified Risen Lord! This powerful unity of the "I" of Jesus Christ (the perfect *Ich-Mitte*) is not sundered by the duality of natures. On the contrary, it is rather strengthened by the virtue of their interconnectedness. Christ, in fact, is *one*, because he is the bearer of a single human nature—the unique and unrepeatable humanity of the Son of God.⁶¹ He (true God and true man) binds himself to a precise moment in time and to precise and particular circumstances, and becomes involved in the lives of certain men and women in particular. But in the humanity of the Son of God and through the power of the Resurrection, Jesus Christ embraces all moments of time and all circumstances in space, thus making himself contemporary to every man and woman in every place and in every period in time. Concretely speaking, how can this be so? Through the sacramental dynamism (the full experience of *logos*) by which the Risen Lord who dwells bodily with the Trinity, and through all moments in time and space with his body, the Church, which has her foundation in his mystical body (the Eucharist).⁶² In this way, the dual unity of the two natures in the one person of Christ appears as the source from which spring the dual unity between Christ the Bridegroom and his Bride the Church. The believer

⁵⁹Cf. G. Loughlin, "Sexing the Trinity," 18-19.

⁶⁰Cf. *DS* 302.

⁶¹On the singularity of Jesus Christ, see G. Moioi, *Cristologia: Proposta sistematica* (Milan, 1978), 223-55; A. Scola, *Questioni di antropologia*, 11-27, 107-30.

⁶²Cf. H. de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum* (Milan, 1982), 33-59.

who has formed his thoughts in meditation on the nuptial mystery of the two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ will not be surprised that the four adverbs from the Council of Chalcedon serve to illuminate the meaning of the original biblical commandment to man and woman to become one flesh. Thus a strict link is established between the man-woman relation, the Christ-Church relation, and the man-God relation. Here, our fragile freedom receives the unexpected possibility of finding a firm foundation in the experience of a tenacious and faithful love.

We said before that this represents the culmination of the experience of dual unity within the horizon of the human; but, once again, the fruitful asymmetry by which the Church Bride is born from the two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ requires a basis. Our ascent continues toward its final goal. Where does the unity of Jesus Christ come from and what is the reason for it? First of all, let us address its purpose. It comes from the mysterious decision of God the Father to send his only Son, and through him the Holy Spirit, to make men and women exist as autonomous creatures and nonetheless "capable" of participating at that supreme level of love which consists in being his adopted sons and daughters. We are called to be *sons in the Son* so that we can call on God as "Abba," an expression both tender and dramatic.⁶³ It is a name more familiar than "father" because of the tones of gentleness running through it.⁶⁴ The familiarity of God the Father with us is fulfilled in his unconditional fidelity to the original plan (which is another decisive factor for the man-woman relationship and for the family). Not even sin breaks this pact; instead, it becomes an occasion for the Father to reveal, in the Crucified Risen Lord who pours out his Spirit on us, his true face: mercy. This is the bond (another nuptial word!) of perfect love. We can now see more precisely where the ultimate root of nuptiality lies, the root that illuminates every level of the reality, because it reveals the full sense of the asymmetrical reciprocity that is the fruit of dual unity. It is the event of Jesus Christ that allows us to catch a glimpse, however inadequate, of the fact that the Trinity presents an experience of love in its most complete form, according to the perfection that consists in a difference between the three persons which does not destroy, but rather exalts, the unity of the one God. For this reason, the triune God is the ultimate explanation of all possible difference, and therefore

also of dual unity. God's trinity is the ultimate guarantee that difference does not do away with the contingent being. On the contrary, difference exists for the sake of its truth and fulfillment. In this sense, difference within perfect unity, which characterizes the triune God, tells us who God truly is: He is purest love. The love of the Father for the Son is so perfect that the Holy Spirit is at once the bond (*nexus*) and the fruit of this love.⁶⁵

We can now grasp the importance of Balthasar's striking analogy between the life of the Trinity and the conjugal act of man and woman in relation to the begetting of a child. Balthasar is not afraid to assert, even going against Augustine and Thomas,⁶⁶ that man, woman and child are the most adequate natural analogy of the Trinity. In this sense, even in the Trinity there exists a nuptial relationship made up of a reciprocity. We are dealing here with a reciprocity which maintains, in a certain sense, the element of asymmetry because it rests on the exchange (each Person simultaneously relates to the other two) between the three in the one nature of God, but this perfect difference lies within perfect unity. The one and the three are the ultimate driving force of every nuptiality. In fact, in God, the third person is no longer hidden as he is in the various relationships between man/woman (child), Christ-Bridegroom/the Church-Bride (Jesus Christ), the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ (Father), because the Father, Son, and Spirit are identically manifest as the one God. At the same time, the dynamism of nuptiality is revealed in all its fullness: the reciprocal love between the Father and the Son is the perfect bond which begets a perfect fruit, the Holy Spirit, who is himself God. To bring the different aspects described in this section together, it is worth quoting in full a passage from Balthasar which shows the link between the Trinity and the family:

We have already noted the impossibility of approaching the Holy Spirit except from two directions at once: as the (subjective) quiddessence of the mutual love of Father and Son, hence, as the bond (*nexus*) between them; and as the (objective) fruit that stems from and attests to this love. This impossibility

⁶³Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Theologik*, vol. 3, 144-50.

⁶⁶"This spousal illustration of the mystery of the Trinity seems no less valid than that of St. Augustine (Father: *Mens*; Son: *Notitia*; Spirit: *Amor*, whose traces are fixed in the spirit of man as intellect, memory, and will) or that of Hugh of St. Victor, taken up again by St. Thomas who defines the Father as Power, the Son as Wisdom, and the Spirit as Love" (C. Giuhodori, *Intelligenza teologica*, 121).

⁶³Cf. Gal 4:6.

⁶⁴Cf. J. Jeremias, *Abba* (Brescia, 1968).

translates into a convergence of the poles. Imagine for a moment that the act of love between a man and woman did not include nine months pregnancy, that is, the aspect of time. In the parents' generative-receptive embrace, the child would already be immediately present; it would be at one and the same time their mutual love in action and something more, namely, its transcendent result. Nor would it be a valid objection to say that the diastasis we have described just now has to do simply with man's gendered nature, and that in some higher form of love there would be no reproduction (a view that turns up not only in today's common distinction between the ends of marriage, but also in the notion of eros that we find from Plato to Soloviev: cf. G3). We must say, in fact, that this form of exuberance and thus fruitfulness (which can be spiritual) is part of every love, and that includes precisely the higher kind of love. In this sense, it is precisely perfect creaturely love that is an authentic *imago Trinitatis*. . . . What follows from this, as Adrienne von Speyr explains (*Welt des Gebetes*: Einsiedeln, 1951), is mutual admiration, indeed, adoration, infinite mutual thanksgiving (the Father thanks the Son for allowing himself eternally), mutual petition (the Father asks the Son to fulfill all of his, the Father's, wishes, the Son asks the Father for permission to carry out the Father's utmost wishes). This mutual indwelling would seem to be eternally "unexpectedly" (one is tempted to say) and precisely *as* superabundance something that is once more One: the proof that the loving interpenetration has been a success, just as the human child is at once the proof of the reciprocal love of the parents and the fruit of their love. "The third," says Tertullian, "is the fruit from the root of the fruit tree" (*Adv. Prax.* 8 [PL 2, 163]).⁶⁷

The ascent has reached its goal, and, well beyond the weak stammering of our poor concepts, the mystery of the Christian God at work in the lives of Christian spouses and the Christian family finds a way to become manifest in an attested manner. Supporting this assertion, we find not only the trinitarian prophesies in the Old Testament, where the Trinity's visit to a man or woman almost always leaves as a sign a son (for example, Sarah or Manoah) but also and especially the incomparable event of the Annunciation with the gift of the Word, who became a child for us and for our salvation.

C. The Nuptial Mystery and the Christian States of Life

If up until this point we have kept to the essential arguments, we can now ask ourselves how *nuptiality*, developed in the total vision of God's plan, enters concretely into Christian life. The Church traditionally deals with this question by means

of the theme of Christian states of life.⁶⁸ Returning to the beautiful works of Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr for a reflection on the genesis, meaning, and variety of the states of life,⁶⁹ I feel compelled, on this occasion, to highlight two often neglected aspects of *nuptiality* as a dynamic of the life of the faithful in the two states of marriage and virginity.

1. Nuptiality and the Indissolubility of Marriage

Indissolubility is ultimately what makes Christian marriage a sacrament, that is, an objective and subjective expression (*ex opere operato et ex opere operantis*) of *nuptiality*.⁷⁰ In fact, only by its being indissoluble does marriage participate in the nuptial sacrifice that the Word Incarnate makes of himself on the Cross to his Immaculate Bride, thereby revealing the essence of the spousal love that circulates in the Trinity. This offering is the absolute expression of the Father's fidelity to his plan of covenant with humankind precisely because it is irreversible. Here we have the root of the indissoluble nature of the Christian marriage (and ideally of "natural" marriage as an expression of the man-woman relationship⁷¹). This is possible for man and woman as a result of the grace of the sacrament (the objective dimension—*ex opere operato*) which calls on freedom (the subjective dimension—*ex opere operantis*) to adhere to it. The most elevated human sign of this subjective obedience in the objective grace of the sacrament is the *fiat* of Mary (the image of the Church), who by her Immaculate Conception was able freely to receive the gift of the Word in the Incarnation. The unconditional and immaculate "yes" of the Virgin Mary becomes the permanent guarantee of the reciprocity of the Bride in relation to Christ the Bridegroom.⁷² Incidentally,

⁶⁸Cf. C. Antoine, "États de vie," in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1913), 905–11; there is another bibliography in G. Lesage and G. Rocca, "Stato di perfezione," in G. Pelliccia and G. Rocca, eds., *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, vol. 9 (Rome, 1997), 204–15.

⁶⁹Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).

⁷⁰Cf. A. Scola, "Spiritualità coniugale nel contesto culturale contemporaneo," in *Cristo Sposo della Chiesa sposa*, ed. R. Bonetti (Rome, 1997), 49–52.

⁷¹Cf. id., *Questioni di Antropologia*, 51–52.

⁷²Cf. id., *Spiritualità coniugale*, 49.

⁶⁷H. U. von Balthasar, *Theologik*, vol. 3, 145–47.

it should be noted that indissolubility, with all of the dramatic trials of life it entails, corresponds to the constitutive desire of love as it is given in basic human experience.⁷³ A genuine declaration of love cannot keep from saying "forever." The sacrament of marriage, which by grace enables an act of indissoluble proportions, offers a sure and objective path for this deep-rooted exigence of the human heart.

2. *Nuptiality and Virginity*

The second observation that I would like to make regarding nuptiality and the states of life lies in the somewhat provocative affirmation that virginity is the culmination of nuptiality—even for spouses.⁷⁴ In the end, virginity is the ultimate meaning of indissolubility. In fact, it is impossible to love the other as "other" if one does not love the other in his or her own destiny.⁷⁵ There is no real love between a man and woman, between a husband and wife, if there is no detachment (which is traditionally called "chastity"), through which the other is welcomed as a sign of Mystery, a sign of the Trinity. In this *possession in detachment*, the husband and wife can live indissolubility, whose ultimate guarantee is forgiveness. A similar type of relationship has rightly been called Christian virginity. We are dealing here with a virtue that is eminently Christ-like, because it finds its most perfect expression in the way in which the God-man took possession of people and things. Christian virginity, which springs from Baptism and develops as a virtue through sacramental grace, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and ascetic effort, can find special help in the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph. Mary is a virgin precisely because she is a mother and a mother because she is a virgin. And the putative fatherhood of Joseph, far from being a disincarnate love, demonstrates that the ultimate depth of every human nuptiality is possession in detachment (virginal). This is the reason for the prophetic value of virginity in the life of the Church, whose special value was reconfirmed by the Council of Trent.

This assertion, far from disincarnating marriage, shows its constitutive complementarity with the choice of virginity. The

two states of life mutually recall the fullness of nuptiality.⁷⁶ The fact that love is always spousal, illustrates the paradigmatic nature of marriage.⁷⁷ The other state of life, virginity, expressing the full modality of possession—possession in detachment—prevents love and the affective life from closing itself up in the inner-worldly, and opens it beyond the implacable link between sexuality, begetting, and death.⁷⁸ We can now grasp the pedagogical force of the following assertion: "The more the charism of virginal life is present and affirmed in Christian life, the more marriage will be called to its true nature and will be helped to conform to its ideal."⁷⁹

IV. "Welcoming" as a Method of Communicating Nuptial Fruitfulness

We may now ask ourselves: How does this exploration of the nuptial mystery reveal its fruitfulness? Why are married couples and consecrated people called to understand it more profoundly? In what sense are they transformed (*metanoia*) as a result of it and impelled with spontaneous joy to transmit this beauty to men and women of today, who are so wounded they remain fundamentally skeptical toward nuptiality? In a word, how can the beauty of the nuptial mystery be communicated?

I express these ideas by having recourse to an apparently particular category, but one which, in reality, is capable of pointing out the privileged path for communicating the nuptial mystery. I am referring to the category of "giving welcome."

In "giving welcome" (solidarity and hospitality), an authentic experience of the culture of life, the Christian, but particularly the family, is invited to take as a starting point the memorable scene which took place on Calvary at the foot of the cross of Christ. This episode is described for us in John's gospel. Jesus, dying on the cross, turned to his mother and

⁷⁶Cf. A. Sicari, "Diversità e complementarietà degli stati di vita nella Chiesa," *Communio* 135 (1994): 8–24. See also *Christifideles laici*, 55.

⁷⁷Cf. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 277ff.

⁷⁸Cf. DS 1810. This concerns the fruitfulness which springs from consecrated virginity. See also, A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 115–16.

⁷⁹G. Biffi, *Matrimonio e famiglia. Nota pastorale* (Bologna, 1990), 12.

⁷³Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 58–60.

⁷⁴Cf. A. Scola, *Spiritualità coniugale*, 52–54.

⁷⁵Cf. L. Giussani, *Il tempo e il tempo* (Milan, 1995), 11–35.

said, pointing to John (Jn 19:26-27), "Woman, behold your son." Then he said to John, "Behold your mother." The evangelist then comments, saying, "the disciple welcomed her into his own home." The relationship of flesh and blood is made true here and the dimension of affection reaches amazing heights. A new relationship is born at the foot of the cross and it is the relationship that constitutes the Church itself. It is the communion of the Church.

The fruitfulness of this new relationship (*communio ecclesiale*) is based completely on a radical welcome that is intense and a little daunting. Think about how John must have looked at Mary at Jesus's invitation and how Mary must have treated John all during her earthly life after such an invitation! What power of affection; what truth in that affection! What a deep and radical level of purification of the possessiveness of the flesh and blood in an affection not based on domination, seduction or the will to power, but rather based on a pure and free welcome, on an openness to the other in his or her need as it presents itself.⁸⁰

"And the disciple welcomed her into his own home." I would like in particular to emphasize the fact that John's home, the Church, the Father's house, the many rooms in the Father's house, all form a unity. The word "*welcome*" thus reveals its enormous significance. One can understand why we will be judged according to our capacity to offer welcome (cf. Mt 25). John makes physical space for this new and stronger relationship, and for this new motherhood. It is significant that, in the scene we are describing, each of the three protagonists (Jesus, Mary, and John) receives a mission that involves welcoming.

At this point I would like to underscore the fact that giving welcome is always linked in some way to *bodiliness*, to a *materiality* which is the measure of the call of each of the three. *Jesus* strips himself of being God (Phil 2) and takes a human *body*. He welcomes the plan of the Father who sends him: "You have prepared a body for me, here I am; send me" (cf. Heb 10:5-7). By her "Yes," *Mary* makes space for Jesus in

her body. And finally *John* offers his home—an extension of his body—as the material sign of his welcoming Mary. That gesture of welcome into his home takes him beyond the fact of not having been physically born of Mary and allows him to participate in the very same position as Jesus, in having been born, flesh and blood, of Mary.

John—let us not forget that the tradition of the Church has always considered him a virgin—is the model for our way of welcoming. We can welcome someone in person in as much as we welcome him into our homes—we can welcome physically, by means of a mission, in as much as we welcome in our dwelling place. The figure of John is our measure, because the measure of Jesus and Mary are under the mystery of an absolutely extraordinary grace. In the case of Jesus, there is the divine sonship and identity with God. In the case of Mary, who was destined to give birth to the Son of God, there is the Immaculate Conception. But John is exactly the point in which this extraordinary, concrete, and indeed bodily experience of giving welcome passes into the history of ordinary men and women. In John's gesture—and perhaps it is significant that the gospel says nothing about what Mary did for John, but only about what John did for Mary (he welcomed her into his home)—the act of welcoming a person into our home acquires an exemplary and fundamental significance for our faith.

How alien this impressive gesture, which once carried so much meaning and was so natural up through the Middle Ages, has become to the modern mentality! It still remains fundamental in some of the poorer countries of our time. I will always remember a touching episode that I witnessed in Brazil a year ago, in an out-of-the-way area in the Amazon. I recall the scene: a missionary priest said a funeral for a lady who had had about ten children by different men. Coming out of the Church, he gathered the ten children around him and began to ask a group of women who were there, "Who will take this one? Who will take that one?" Within a few minutes the ten had found new homes. This is truly a gesture born out of poverty, and one that stands within the welcome of John and Mary, lived in the Lord. How our mentality and civilization tends to treat as exceptional something that should be totally familiar to us as Christians!

Welcoming into one's own home (family) has an absolutely extraordinary power to build community and aid the common good (culture of life). Moreover, it manifests in a remarkable way the intrinsic link between nuptiality and

⁸⁰Out of the depths of his suffering, Jesus embraced in one look the two beings he had most loved in this world, and he confided them to one another. 'Woman behold thy son—Behold thy mother'—and ours, for eternity. Mary and John were never again to leave one another" (F. Mauriac, *Life of Jesus*, 234).

fruitfulness: it is not by chance that the Christian becomes Christian by being "welcomed," and adopted. For this reason he or she is rightly called, even on a supernatural level, a son or daughter. Indeed, we are God's children. —*Translated by Philip Milligan, William Schmitt, and David Louis Schindler, Jr.* □

The Religious Sense

Cardinal J. Francis Stafford

Man's true happiness rests on his willingness
to ask the fundamental questions that
haunt reason and to struggle
mightily for the answers.

In the fourteenth chapter of *The Religious Sense* (=RS) Msgr. Luigi Giussani recalls the change of Jacob's name to Israel at Penuel.¹ His reflections on the Patriarch's story point up the incommensurability of man's infinite desires with his finite capabilities. Its usefulness in understanding Giussani's *apologia* for the religious experience will become apparent.

Giussani highlights the need for engaging every bit of man's strength in the search for God. Here is his account. Returning home from exile:

that is to say, from the dispersion or from a foreign reality, [Jacob] reaches the river at twilight, and darkness is rapidly descending. Already the herds, servants, and women have passed by. By the time it is his turn to wade the ford, it is completely dark, but Jacob wants to continue on. But before he sets foot in the water, he senses an obstacle in front of him. A person confronts him

¹ Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, newly revised translation by John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).

Cardinal J. Francis Stafford is the President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

*This address was presented at the third annual Hans Urs von Balthasar lecture at the Centre for Faith & Culture in Oxford, England (21 March 1998).