

THE NUPTIAL MYSTERY: A PERSPECTIVE FOR SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?¹

• Angelo Scola •

“The nuptial mystery offers a systematic perspective—but
one never taken for granted
or possessed—for the *intellectus fidei*.”

1. *Beyond a classical prohibition*

We have already noted the impossibility of approaching the Holy Spirit except from two directions at once: as the (subjective) quintessence 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 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 of 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 In this sense, it is precisely perfect creaturely love that is an authentic *imago Trinitatis*.²

¹Farewell Lecture, given at the Lateran University, 10 December 2002.

²Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik*, vol. 3: *Der Geist der Wahrheit* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1987), 145–146.

Balthasar's affirmation, which dares to go beyond the radical objections of the two greatest authorities of Catholic theology, Augustine and Thomas,³ can serve as an introduction both to the nature of the "nuptial mystery" and to the range of its systematic possibilities.⁴ Both of these factors immediately place the themes of marriage and the family—for centuries, and partly still today, relegated to theological isolation—at the heart of the knowledge of faith as such.⁵ Through the use of analogy, Balthasar simultaneously brings into play both the mystery of the Trinity and the "nuptial mystery," thus going beyond the "prohibition" against seeing the natural triad of father, mother, and child as an image of the Trinity. This decision amounts to a claim that the nuptial mystery has objective implications for working out the elaboration of the *intellectus fidei* of revelation (theology). In order to justify this systematic claim, we must first briefly explain the content of the "nuptial mystery."

2. Theology's openness to the themes of the nuptial mystery

The Second Vatican Council and the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* in particular,⁶ gave the discussion of the questions surrounding marriage a new anthropological depth, without thereby succumbing to the temptation of an excessive emphasis on the subjective in Christian reflection on marriage and the family.⁷ In this

³Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 12, 5, 5; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 93, a. 6.

⁴Given the nature of the present article, many of the footnotes refer to other publications of mine. In these, the reader will be able to find many pertinent bibliographical references.

⁵Cf. A. Scola, *Il mistero nuziale 2: Matrimonio-famiglia* (Rome: PUL-Mursia, 2000), 63–80.

⁶Cf. GS 47–52.

⁷Cf. Ph. Dehaye, "La communauté conjugale et familiale d'après Vatican II," in J. Giblet-J. Etienne, *Aux sources de la morale conjugale* (Gembloux-Paris, 1967), 157–173; V. Fagiolo, "Essenza e fini del matrimonio nel magistero del Concilio Vaticano II," *Ephemerides Iuris Canonici* 23 (1967): 137–186; F. Gil Hellín, "El lugar propio del amor conyugal en la estructura del matrimonio según la *Gaudium et spes*," *Anales Valentinus* 6 (1980): 1–35; A. Miralles, "Amor y matrimonio en la *Gaudium et spes*," *Lateranum* 48 (1982): 295–354; E. Kaczynski, "Le marriage et

way, the Council favored a certain recuperation of these themes from the margins of theology. Until then, they had essentially been the preserve of canon law (consent-contract), moral theology (the sixth and ninth commandments), spirituality (the value of the couple), and pastoral theology (which saw marriage and the family as worthy of greater attention on the part of the Christian community).

On the other hand, we must acknowledge that theological reflection on marriage is perhaps only now finding a way out of the longstanding impasse created by an unclear theology of the sacrament.⁸ Critics have highlighted the objective underdevelopment of a theology of the family, which was treated as an appendix to the theology of marriage.⁹

It is, without a doubt, the merit of John Paul II's teaching to have brought "nuptial language" (and not merely "spousal vocabu-

la famille. La communion des personnes," *Divinitas* 26 (1982): 317-331; D. Tettamanzi, *I due saranno una carne sola. Saggi teologici su matrimonio e famiglia* (Leumann-Turin: Elle Di Ci, 1986), 103-121; A. Mattheeuws, *Les "dons" du mariage. Recherche de théologie morale et sacramentelle* (Brussels, 1996), 136-150, 260-263, 352-354, 465-468.

⁸Cf. E. O'Neill, "I sacramenti," in R. Vander Gucht-H. Vorgrimler, *Bilancio della teologia del XX secolo*, vol. 3 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1972), 295; P. F. Palmer, "Necessità di una teologia del matrimonio," *Communio* (Italian) 16 (1974): 1000-1009; D. Tettamanzi, "Matrimonio," *La Scuola Cattolica* 114 (1986): 585; G. Marengo, "Creazione, alleanza, sacramentalità del matrimonio," *Anthropotes* 8 (1992): 27-39.

⁹One writer has gone so far as to say that: "In the Christian tradition, discourse about marriage has proceeded without awareness of the need to prolong it into a theory of the family; it has even positively precluded such a development" (G. Angelini, "La Chiesa e la Famiglia," *La Scuola Cattolica* 120 [1992]: 467-468).

lary”¹⁰ to general attention.¹¹ (It is noteworthy that the “catecheses on human love” of the beginning of his pontificate repeat the conclusions of his work on the subject as Karol Wojtyła).¹² While we do not claim to expound, or even to summarize, the Pope’s detailed teaching on this matter,¹³ it will be helpful to draw attention to two fundamental elements of nuptial language.

The first element, whose privileged locus is chapter three of *Mulieris Dignitatem*,¹⁴ consists in an original development of the notion of the *imago Dei*. John Paul II does not limit himself, in the footsteps of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which continues to leave its mark even on secularized Western thought, to identifying the content of the image of God with the human being’s rational and free nature. The pope highlights the communal *qualitas* of the image.¹⁵ Man and

¹⁰For clarity’s sake, it may be useful to distinguish between “spousal vocabulary,” “nuptial language,” and the “nuptial mystery.” By “spousal vocabulary” I refer to concrete spousal images (bride-bridegroom, the wedding feast, adultery, etc.), of which the Scriptures offer numerous examples. By the term “nuptial language,” I mean the hermeneutical elaboration of spousal categories. The most outstanding example of this occurs in Eph 5:21–33; here, the use of the comparison Christ–Church/husband–wife led the Council of Trent to affirm that, in this passage, the author of the letter “*innuit* [hints at]” the sacramentality of marriage (cf. DS 1799). Lastly, the expression “nuptial mystery” indicates a critical and organic elaboration of nuptial language for the sake of the *intellectus fidei*.

¹¹Among the authors who have dealt with these themes, we can cite Matthias-Joseph Scheeben, Vladimir Soloviev, Gaston Fessard, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

¹²The complete catecheses on human love have been collected in English in John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1997).

¹³I attempted to explore the originality of John Paul II’s teaching in the first part of the first volume of *Il mistero nuziale*, where the reader can find an abundant topical bibliography. Cf. A. Scola, *Il mistero nuziale 1. Uomo-donna* (Rome: PUL-Mursia, 1998), 11–61.

¹⁴MD 6–8. The Pope explores the theme of the image particularly in catecheses 8 and 9 of the first cycle: “The Original Unity of Man and Woman,” and “Through the Communion of Persons Man Becomes the Image of God.”

¹⁵A detailed example of this would require a complete citation of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 7, but we can limit ourselves for now to the text’s central affirmation: “The fact that man ‘created as man and woman’ is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a ‘unity of the two’ in their common

woman are the image of God not only as individuals, but also insofar as they are capable of interpersonal communion. This brilliant development builds in a novel way upon the important passage in *Gaudium et Spes*, 24,¹⁶ which hinges on what amounts to an anthropological broadening of the notion of *communio*. Following one company of a school of phenomenological thought (Scheler, Ingarden), and relying to a certain extent on personalist philosophy,¹⁷ the Pope frees the theological notion of *communio* from an inevitable provincialism resulting from its relegation to a few chapters of eucharistic theology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Indeed, he makes *communio* an integral anthropological category that can tackle the central question about man, in terms of the elementary datum of the Creator's decision that "the human being should always and only exist as a woman or as a man."¹⁸

humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God through the unity of the divinity, exist as persons through the inscrutable divine relations. Only in this way can we understand the truth that God in himself is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:16). The image and likeness of God in man, created as man and woman (in the analogy that can be presumed between Creator and creature), thus also expresses the 'unity of the two' in their common humanity. This 'unity of the two,' which is a sign of interpersonal communion, *shows that the creation of man* is also marked by a certain likeness to the divine communion (*'communio'*). This likeness is a quality of the personal being of both man and woman, and is also a call and a task." Cf. Scola, *Il mistero nuziale* 1, 36–40.

¹⁶“Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, ‘that all may be one . . . as we are one’ (Jn 17:21–22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (GS 24).

¹⁷Cf. A. Wierzbicki, “La persona e la morale. Presentazione,” in K. Wojtyła, “L'uomo nel campo della responsabilità” (Milan, 2002), 7–16; P. Jobert, “Jean-Paul II. Philosophe de la transition de l'anthropologie classique à l'anthropologie moderne,” in Aa.Vv., *Karol Wojtyła: Filosofo, Teologo, Poeta* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984), 47–52; A. Poltawski, “The Epistemological Basis of Karol Wojtyła's Philosophy,” in *ibid.*, 79–91; T. Styczen, “Responsabilità dell'uomo nei confronti di sè e dell'altro,” in *ibid.*, 107–127.

¹⁸MD 1.

In the space opened by the exploration of this unique “unity of the two,”¹⁹ the second innovative element of Wojtyła-John Paul II’s thought takes shape: the theology of the body—the body which exists only in sexual difference—as a sacrament of the whole person.²⁰ This decisive point is the backbone of the pivotal argument of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith’s *Donum Vitae*.²¹

3. Nuptial language and dramatic anthropology

This twofold development—the communal quality of the image of God and the sexually differentiated body as the sacrament of the whole person—incorporates the best developments of theological anthropology. Notwithstanding its relatively recent emergence as a material of study (even today one encounters difficulties in introducing it as a separate subject in many faculties),²² theological anthropology has produced a number of important results, while avoiding both the risk of an erroneous interpretation of the anthropological turn on the one hand,²³ and a capitulation to a system à la Hegel on the other.²⁴

The term “dramatic,” which Balthasar uses to describe an adequate anthropology, can be taken as standing for a whole maturation of the *intellectus fidei* regarding man. The process is the fruit of

¹⁹Cf. MD 7.

²⁰Particularly important in this regard is Catechesis 19 of the first cycle, “Man Enters the World as a Subject of Truth and Love.”

²¹“Spouses mutually express their personal love in the ‘language of the body,’ which clearly involves both ‘sponsal meanings’ and parental ones. The conjugal act by which the couple mutually expresses their self-gift at the same time expresses openness to the gift of life. It is an act that is inseparably corporal and spiritual. It is in their bodies and through their bodies that the spouses consummate their marriage and are able to become father and mother” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae* II, B 4b). Cf. Scola, *Il mistero nuziale* 1, 171–176.

²²Cf. A. Scola-G. Marengo-J. Prades, *La persona umana. Antropologia teologica* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2000), 26–37.

²³Cf. *ibid.*, 34–36; 48–49.

²⁴In this regard, cf. G. Colombo, “Sull’antropologia teologica,” *Teologia* 20 (1995): 223–260.

numerous contributions, which we cannot list exhaustively here.²⁵ One thing is certain, however; “drama” goes right to the heart of the ex-centric nature of man. Man is an enigma (“he exists but does not have the foundation of his existence in himself”) that finds its explanation key in Christ—the key, but not the pre-determination of his own drama (Christology does not absorb anthropology).²⁶

Now, the enigma-drama of man is rendered clamorously present in the experience of every individual precisely through sexual difference. Each child which comes into being through the encounter of father and mother experiences in himself, deeply, what it means to exist without having one’s foundation in oneself (man as enigma). The child experiences this particularly in having to deal with sexual difference along the whole span of his life (man as drama).²⁷

4. Spousal vocabulary, nuptial language, and the nuptial mystery

Nuptial language, which is already a theological elaboration of spousal categories,²⁸ demands a critical, organic work of the *intellectus*

²⁵Among the major post-conciliar contributions in the area of theological anthropology, see M. Flick-Z. Alszeghy, *Fondamenti di una antropologia teologica* (Florence: Libreria Ed. Fiorentina, 1970); K. Rahner, *La grazia come libertà* (Rome: Paoline, 1970); J. Alfaro, *Cristologia e antropologia* (Assisi: Cittadella, 1973); O. H. Pesch, *Liberi per grazia* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1988).

²⁶Cf. A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans), 84–100; id., *Questioni di antropologia teologica* (Rome: PUL-Mursia, 1997), 29–41.

²⁷In my writings I have generally tried to avoid the more abstract term “sexuality,” and to speak instead of “sexual difference,” precisely in order to show that it is impossible to speak of sexuality without speaking concretely of sexual difference. It would be more rigorous to say that the individual always exists in sexual difference. The neologism “sexuation” employed by depth psychology better expresses the dynamic character of sexual difference, which brings into play the constitutive nucleus of this individual’s personality (including the deep dynamisms of the unconscious), from the beginning to the end of his life. Contrary to a widespread superficial opinion, this open, processual character of “sexuation” fully expresses the fact that the individual, in every one of his actions, remains within an insuperable and non-deducible sexual difference. In this regard, cf. M. Binasco, “Sulla sessualità femminile,” in Scuola Europea di Psicoanalisi, *Madre Donna*, G.I.S.E.P. (Rome, 1993), 9–22.

²⁸On spousal vocabulary, see the lectures of B. Ognibeni, *Il matrimonio*

fidei. We have given the result of this work the name “nuptial mystery”—a formula that remains provisional.

Why “mystery” (taken, obviously, in the sense that Scheeben gives to the word)?²⁹ Because its objective link to the foundation gives it a share in the latter’s un-graspability, which can be fittingly described in the ultimately Augustinian formula, *incomprehensibiliter comprehendere incomprehensibile* [incomprehensibly to comprehend the incomprehensible].³⁰ In other words, the originality of sexual difference constantly brings the experience-thought of nuptiality into play in each individual. It is here that we find a preeminent witness to the dramatic character of human existence. Since we exist necessarily only within sexual difference, each one of us is driven onto the path of love, whose unitive and procreative tension—since man is a *synholon* of body and soul³¹— objectively tends toward the fruit of new life. In this way, nuptiality reveals to the individual the ontological impossibility of realizing oneself within sexual difference without simultaneously bringing into play the experience of love as capacity for procreation.

We should not be confused by the fact that the exercise of sexuality can take place outside of the horizon of an authentic act of love, or that, for some decades now, contraception has enabled the separation of sexuality from its objective openness to procreation, or that in the ever-nearer future, technology may make commonplace a type of procreation that prescind from sexuality. The insidious

nell'Antico Testamento and Il matrimonio nel nuovo Testamento, Pro manuscripto (Rome, 2002). More specifically on marriage, cf.: A Tosato, *Il matrimonio israelitico* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982). A careful study of the use of spousal categories in the key of a nuptial language can be found in J. Sanz, *La simologia esponsal como dave hermenéutica del carisma de santa Clara de Asis* (Rome: Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum, 2000). The author studies the linguistic and anthropological presuppositions of nuptial language (27–96) and then discusses its use in the biblical tradition (97–180) and in patristic and medieval theology (181–313).

²⁹Cf. M. J. Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity* (London: Herder, 1946), §2–3.

³⁰This paradoxical formula was coined by Jean-Luc Marion (cf. J. L. Marion, “A discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion,” in *God, Gift and Post-Modernism*, ed. J. D. Caputo and M. J. Scanlon [Birmingham-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999], 75). Marion draws the term from a passage of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* (XV, II, 2), which is echoed by both Anselm (*Monologion* 64) and Thomas (*Summa Theologiae* I q. 12, a. 7).

³¹Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 14.

“technological imperative” which the dominant mentality infers from this state of affairs—“since it can be done, it has to be done!”—has nothing scientific about it.³² It is the idolatrous expression of a utopian madness, to which, particularly in the popular understanding, the achievements of science and technology remain exposed. In order to unmask the idolatry (that is, the lie) present in this “imperative,” we can draw once again upon the fundamental truth of the *nuptial mystery*, as we find it expressed by Balthasar: “Perhaps the only natural analogy for our intimacy with divine truth is that of the union of the sexes; but to be a fruitful analogy it must be taken together with the fruit of this union, the child, ignoring the temporal hiatus between the two.”³³

The unity of the three constituents of the nuptial mystery is, so to speak, ontological. The difficulty in winning this unity a hearing among our contemporaries is no different from the difficulties we encounter in speaking of any other aspect of fundamental human experience. Just think of “knowledge” and of the stubborn resistance that greets the conviction that one can, under precise conditions, attain a true and certain knowledge of realities such as God, good, and evil.³⁴

5. *The nuptial mystery and the event of the foundation*

At this point in our discussion, how are we to understand the extension in time (*diastasis*) of the procreative fruit of the unitive act made possible by sexual difference? The answer can be found precisely in a consideration of man’s dramatic nature. In the original, non-derived character of sexual difference, love, and procreation—the expression of man’s “flesh” that both places him firmly in the world and opens him to the other/the beyond—the individual is faced with the inescapable question, “And I, what am I?”³⁵ Because it powerfully

³²Cf. A. Scola, “Differenza sessuale e procreazione,” in *Quale vita? La bioetica in questione* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), 143–168, 368–380.

³³Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 78.

³⁴These difficulties are pointed out in *Fides et Ratio*, 5. Cf. on this subject A. Scola, “The Integrity of Human Experience: Cultural Dimensions and Implications of the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*,” in L. P. Hemming-S. F. Parsons, *Restoring Faith in Reason* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 256–276.

³⁵G. Leopardi, “Canto notturno del pastore errante dell’Asia,” v. 89.

unveils the fundamental anthropological question, the nuptial mystery opens the human being to the event of the foundation. For now, rejecting every formal *epoché* that excludes everything revealed, and Christian revelation in particular, from the horizon of the phenomena, we can simply say that the threefold nuptial mystery finds its confirmation in the gratuitous self-gift of the trinitarian foundation. Difference, love, and fruitfulness can be discerned in God himself.³⁶ Even in the immanent Trinity, in which there is neither temporal *diastasis* nor sexed body, the unitive and generative dimension of love brought about by perfect personal difference within absolute identity of substance³⁷ is still present. The Person of the Holy Spirit is the fruit of the *nexus* of fruitful unity between the Father and the Son. Both generative-receptive embrace and its fruit are present primarily in the superior (spiritual) form of love.³⁸ Under precise conditions, this integral vision of the nuptial mystery, which involves other analogates connected to the central mysteries of Christianity, unveils the full meaning of the individual's experience. Nor need we underestimate the weight of time. The *diastasis* mentioned above, far from underwriting the separation of the three dimensions of the nuptial mystery (difference, love, and procreation), expresses the created and inevitably contingent modality in which the *imago Trinitatis* is enacted. In the footsteps of Blondel, Balthasar affirms that “[This *imago Trinitatis*] is permanent proof of the triadic structure of creaturely logic. It shows that, when creatures attempt to introduce abstract logical principles—the axiom of the excluded middle—into real life (in the form of contraception), they contradict the law of that life.”³⁹

6. “Amor a quo omnis amor...”

³⁶Cf. A Scola, *Il mistero nuziale* 1, 104–111, *Il mistero nuziale* 2, 105–168; David Schindler, “Catholic Theology, Gender, and the Future of Western Civilization,” in *Heart of the World, Center of the Church* (Grand Rapids-Edinburgh: W. B. Eerdmans-T&T Clark, 1996), 237–274.

³⁷Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 252–255.

³⁸Cf. M. Ouellet, “Lo Spirito Santo sigillo dell’alleanza coniugale,” in *Il Matrimonio in Cristo è Matrimonio nello Spirito*, ed. R. Bonetti (Rome, 1998), 73–96.

³⁹H. U. von Balthasar, *Theologik* vol. 2: *Wahrheit Gottes* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1985), 57.

As a perspective from which to do the work of the *intellectus fidei*, the nuptial mystery sheds light on the fundamental experience of human love in all its expressions, even in the degraded form that C. S. Lewis terms *Venus*.⁴⁰ In the face of the “abolition of man” threatening our society today, the capacity to hold together all of the manifestations of love in a single analogical unity is of decisive importance. Now more than ever, a witness to the nuptial mystery is needed for the Church’s task (which can no longer be put off for the future) of (pastorally) regenerating the subject. The nuptial witness, in fact, bears out the depth of Guillaume de Saint-Thierry’s exclamation, “*O Amor, a quo omnis amor cognominatur etiam carnalis ac degener* [Love, from which every love is named—even carnal and degenerate loves]!”⁴¹ To realize that this is a relevant aspect of the Christian mission, we need only reflect on how the dominant culture at any rate still uses the word “love” to describe a vast array of manifestations, including disfigured ones, of the I-thou relationship. The personal experience of the nuptial mystery, transcending the long dispute between physical and ecstatic love,⁴² allows the Christian to discover, even in its most aberrant forms, the need for love that cannot be removed from the human heart. And to establish how things really stand with love: to say “love,” one must always also imply sexual difference and fruitfulness.⁴³

It is beyond the scope of this study to show how the nuptial mystery, integrally understood, might open interesting possibilities for understanding man’s relationship to all living beings and to the cosmos, through the use and development of the highly differentiated scholastic notion of *amor naturalis*.⁴⁴

7. A synthetic description

It is helpful, at this point, to give a synthetic description of the nuptial mystery. The expression indicates the organic unity of sexual

⁴⁰Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Fontana Books, 1960), 7–14.

⁴¹Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, *Expositio super Cantica*, Preface, 25.

⁴²Cf. A. Scola, *Il mistero nuziale* 1, 74–81.

⁴³Cf. *ibid.*, 117–143.

⁴⁴Cf. *ibid.*, 69–74; *id.*, “Freedom, Grace, and Destiny,” *Communio* 25, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 439–461.

difference, love (objective relation to the other) and fruitfulness. Beginning from the man-woman relation (paternity, maternity, fraternity, sorority), it opens out onto all the manifestations of love. Because it indicates an essential property of love, the nuptial mystery is present in every form of love, whether human or divine: in the man-woman relation, friendship, charity, the sacrament, the Church, Jesus Christ, and the Trinity.⁴⁵

8. *A perspective
for systematic theology?*

Can we now eliminate the question mark in the title of this essay and recognize the legitimacy of the nuptial mystery as a key to the *intellectus fidei* of revelation? Can we claim that the nuptial mystery opens a perspective for systematic theology? Before definitively answering this question, we must critically examine two positions that appear to prevent a “Yes”: one by way of excess and the other by way of deficiency. Both have to do with the use of analogy which, as in every theological exercise, is intrinsic to the proposal of the nuptial mystery. We cannot enter into this decisive and delicate methodological point, which has already been subjected to much scrutiny, and yet is always begging for new and expanded study.⁴⁶ We must limit ourselves to the affirmation that the nuptial mystery presupposes a knowledge of the Trinity and so claims to take account of the twofold movement of analogy, understood in the fullest sense as *analogia libertatis*:⁴⁷ the movement from below upwards (ana-logic), and the movement from above downwards (kata-logic).⁴⁸

⁴⁵Cf. id., *Uomo-donna. Il “caso serio” dell’amore* (Genoa: Marietti 1820, 2002).

⁴⁶I limit myself to referring the reader to my summary account of this matter in *Il mistero nuziale* 2, 98–104.

⁴⁷Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 220–229.

⁴⁸Balthasar takes the expression from Gerken, cf.: A. Gerken, *Theologie des Wortes, das Verhältnis von Schöpfung und Inkarnation bei Bonaventura* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1963), 323. Cf. Balthasar, *Theologik*, vol. 2, *Wahrheit Gottes*, 146. With regard to the spousal analogy, Claudio Giuliodori is an obligatory reference: C. Giuliodori, *Intelligenza teologica del maschile e del femminile* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1991), especially 81–112.

9. *A maximalist interpretation*

As for the so-called “maximalist” interpretation of the nuptial mystery, I would say from the outset that it runs the risk of turning it into a Hegelian-type “system.”⁴⁹ While aiming at a modern, conceptualistic foundation for the nuptial mystery, it ultimately tends towards an anthropomorphic deformation of our understanding of God, and even introducing sexuality into God himself.⁵⁰ Recent theological explorations in this direction have rightly triggered great perplexity. Some have even gone so far as to try to “sex” the Trinity, in an effort to find an argument in favor of homosexuality.⁵¹ This maximalistic temptation abandons analogy for univocity. Its underlying logic, whether its proponents intend it to or not, ultimately makes the claim that spousal categories are the only categories capable of elaborating the *intellectus fidei* of the mysteries of Christianity, and that they are therefore the only categories fit to illuminate Christian dogma. To move in this direction is to engage in bad theology. As is the case with every other theological language, nuptial language must remain analogical, limiting itself to uncovering yet another point of view that can enrich the great tradition of Christian thought. If we take our cue from the spousal vocabulary from the Bible, we can opportunely integrate the language of being, substance, causality, the transcendentals, and gift with the nuptial mystery.

In any case, I must stress that this reflection remains open regarding the possibility of a rigorous, analytical use of the categories of “male” and “female”—and the related themes of bridegroom-bride, father-mother-child—to penetrate the higher analogates (the Trinity,

⁴⁹Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 220–224.

⁵⁰I. Biffi, “Per una teologia dell’ ‘uomo-donna’: metodologia e linguaggio,” *Teologia* 14 (1989): 172–178, here 176. As debatable as they may be, Balthasar’s claims about “supra-sexuality” in the Trinity and in Christ’s generation of the Church have nothing to do with the above-mentioned position.

⁵¹See for example the “theological integration” of homosexuality proposed by Gerard Loughlin in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. J. Milbank–C. Pickstock–G. Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 143–162. Also: G. Loughlin, “Sexing the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 79, no. 923 (1998): 18–25; R. Williams, “Afterword: Making Differences,” in *Balthasar and the End of Modernity*, ed. L. Gardner, D. Moss, B. Quash, and G. Ward (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 173–179.

Christ, and the Church). This is an undertaking in which authors who cannot be suspected of superficiality, such as Scheeben⁵² or Balthasar,⁵³ have proceeded with great care, always affirming the substance of Lateran IV's characterization of the analogy between God and man as involving a *maior dissimilitudo*.⁵⁴ This is one of the reasons why the nuptial mystery remains a work in progress. Though the building has begun, only the foundations have been laid.

10. *The evisceration of analogy*

Perhaps in an attempt to avoid the maximalist surrender to a "system," others—more or less consciously—run the opposite risk. They fight every attempt to give the nuptial mystery theological weight. This group includes a wide range of positions. There are those who refuse to go beyond pure biblical exegesis, and for whom spousal vocabulary could at most be likened to the language of the parables (and thus would not have even a symbolic value): nuptial images would be on a par with many other biblical images, for example those of the shepherd and his sheep. Others marshal theoretical arguments to deny the nuptial category any systematic weight. Representatives of this approach invoke the impossibility of drawing rigorous concepts out of nuptial language, especially with regard to the fundamental mysteries of Christianity, and argue that doing so would generate confusion and lead to dead ends.⁵⁵

11. *Nuptial testimony*

Is there a way past this Scylla and Charybdis? Does analogy warrant the claim that the nuptial mystery is a fully legitimate component of the knowledge of faith as such, without falling into systems that

⁵²Cf. Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, §56.

⁵³Cf. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3, 137–143.

⁵⁴"*Quia inter creatorem et creaturam non potest tanta similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda* [Because no likeness between creator and creature can be identified without a greater unlikeness having to be identified between them]," DS 806.

⁵⁵Cf. Biffi, "Per una teologia dell' 'uomo-donna': metodo e linguaggio," 173.

reek of gnosticism⁵⁶ and threaten to transgress the limits of analogy that theology lays down for us? Is it good theology to refuse to take the exegesis of spousal vocabulary as a sort of “prohibition” to go forward? Does the “labor of the concept,” which the theology of the nuptial mystery certainly cannot avoid, fall prey to the conceptualistic blackmail⁵⁷—which is no longer naive after modernity—that can’t keep the *intellectus fidei* from “laying hands” on the foundation?

In order to respond to these questions, we must turn humbly to the actualization of the nuptial mystery in the experience of the individual.

What “language” does this mystery speak? First of all, it requires the individual to make the *movement* demanded by sexual difference (*dif-ferre*: to carry the same elsewhere).⁵⁸ In order to realize itself within sexual difference, the “I” is constantly called to carry itself (*dif-ferre*) towards the “thou” of another sex with respect to itself. In fact, sexual difference is a direct echo of the ontological difference in which every human being constitutively exists (*Dasein*). In its non-inferable, ungraspable, indefinable nature, sexual difference is the original place of transcendent truth’s singular mode of communication to human freedom. The event of truth conveys its promise to the act of freedom in a (symbolically) evident way through the individual’s existence in sexual difference. In the concrete, the sexual difference is a privileged *symbol* through which the transcendent Absolute (the

⁵⁶“If something of this vertical mystery were to appear in the course of history, then it could only be a continually more deeply experienced union in a continually more deeply and finally experienced differentiation. If, therefore, Paul says that in Christ there is neither man nor woman, then that does not mean that the difference between God and the creature is effaced (in the sense of a pantheistic interpretation of ‘that God may be everything to everyone’ 1 Cor 15:28), nor that the earthly sexes become eternalized (as in the Gnostic doctrine)” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theological Anthropology* [New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967], 314).

⁵⁷In conceptualism, “the act by which consciousness intends the *res*, that is, the affirmation of the truth, is a representation produced by a merely conceptual operation, and action is the putting into practice of this representation, the execution of a previously recognized idea” (A. Scola, “Ecclesiologia in prospettiva ecumenica: qualche linea di metodo,” in *Studi Ecumenici* 20 [2002]). Much of modern theology has performed a *doctrinalistic* reduction of revelation, which is linked to an *intellectualistic* conception of faith and a *conceptualistic* vision of theology.

⁵⁸Cf. id., *Il mistero nuziale* 2, 85–88.

foundation) simultaneously gives itself to human freedom and calls this freedom to a decision. Thus, at this decisive level of fundamental human experience, we find a confirmation of the dynamism that constitutes the act of freedom. Every act of human freedom is necessary, yet cannot be reduced to itself alone: to fulfill itself, it must go out of itself. This necessarily involves the “I”, but equally necessarily, it points the “I” to the gift of the transcendent Absolute which allows the “I’s” very act of freedom to be posited.⁵⁹ For this reason, we have elsewhere characterized the act of freedom as essentially testimonial.⁶⁰ Though the truth is not the fruit of the decision of the act of freedom, it nevertheless passes through it in order to give itself. In this way, every act of freedom is, for man, the place where the transcendent foundation is communicated. The self-*attestation* of the foundation to the act of freedom calls man to expose himself in his turn, in a decision: he is urged to *bear witness*.

The intertwining of transcendence, freedom, and testimony which is realized concretely in the performance of the very act of human freedom, prompts us to say that the language of the nuptial mystery cannot but be that of *nuptial testimony*, or witness.

12. The dynamic of desire

Practically speaking, what is the content of this testimony? The unitive drive to procreative love put into motion by sexual difference has always been placed in strict correspondence with the desire for happiness in the heart of man, and rightly so.⁶¹ As the primary relations (motherhood, fatherhood, marriage, brother- and sisterhood) make clear, to love *forever* and to be *definitively* loved are how the individual desires/needs to “be in relationship with.”⁶² This desire to love forever

⁵⁹Cf. id., “Which Foundation? Introductory Notes,” *Communio* 28, no. 3 (2001): 560–561.

⁶⁰Cf. *ibid.*, 14–28. On this subject cf. P. Martinelli, *La testimonianza. Verità di Dio e libertà dell’uomo* (Milan: Paoline, 2002), with a substantial bibliography.

⁶¹Cf. G. Zuanazzi, *Temi e simboli dell’eros* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1991), 86–97; L. Melina, “Amore, desiderio e azione,” in *Cristo e il dinamismo dell’agire* (Rome: PUL-Mursia, 2001), 19–35.

⁶²Cf. S. Grygiel, *Extra Communio Personarum nulla Philosophia* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2002).

and to be definitively loved expresses itself in everything from the infant's at once loving and egotistical impulse to seek its mother's breasts to the purest self-immolation—which Jesus Christ, the supremely innocent one, makes of himself on the Cross. This desire is the first “word” of nuptial language.

But the “forever” of love-desire is not obvious. In contemporary society it has been so widely denied as to have practically disappeared; the reason for this lies hidden in the culture's incapacity to hear the full language of nuptial testimony. What does this “forever” have to say? It echoes the promise which the foundation unceasingly makes to the act of freedom, urging it each time to a decision. That which is continuously proposed to this act of freedom is the ineradicable root of fidelity. So the second word of the language of nuptial testimony is precisely *fidelity*. Since we are speaking of the nuptial mystery, in order to be rigorous we must speak of *indissolubility*.

By marking every individual in his flesh, indissolubility fully expresses the paradox of human freedom. In the man-woman relationship, fidelity-indissolubility is the reciprocal promise that my “I” hands itself over to you to become in some way yours. If we take into account the element of time, essential to the idea of fidelity, this reciprocal handing over reveals a paradox: I can decide *only for me, and not for you*, to promise that I will no longer have a *my* time apart from *yours*. Moreover, this time is not in the power of the two spouses; they cannot objectively know how long it will last. Fidelity-indissolubility requires the individual to give a definitive commitment to something, time, whose quality and quantity is not within the exclusive control of the “I.” This gap gives *difference* the full space due it. Difference reveals that the insuppressible desire to love and be loved forever must, in order to be fulfilled, pass through the strange necessity of sacrifice:⁶³ “he who wishes to save his life will lose it; but he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:25). The desire to love forever and to be definitively loved which the “I” is capable of is not—we repeat—within the exclusive control of the “I.” Sexual difference, which urges the individual toward the other, is there to bring this fact home again and again. The other is, precisely, *other* to me. This brings desire objectively face to face with the necessity of sacrifice. And, in fact, sexual reciprocity is not a symmetrical complementarity, because the insuppressible difference expressed even in the one flesh of the

⁶³Cf. L. Giussani, *L'attrattiva Gesù* (Milan: BUR, 1999), 29.

conjugal act holds the place of the third,⁶⁴ the child. Here we have yet another instance of the indivisibility of the three dimensions of the nuptial mystery: no account of sexual difference can speak of love between man and woman without an opening to procreation.⁶⁵ Parenthood is coessential to the man-woman pair, which therefore cannot close itself off in a pure sponsality. “Nuptial language,” then, includes the one, the other, the unity of the two, the fruit of their union, and an indissolubility that brings into play the inevitable necessity of sacrifice as an essential part of love-desire. By the same token, it is more complete than a “spousal vocabulary,” and can be considered the latter’s fruitful development.

The nuptial mystery is the privileged symbol of the gift of the transcendent foundation because of its universality and singularity. It is the path along which freedom is lovingly called to fulfill itself. In order to do this, freedom must expose itself and utter a “yes” that must constantly be renewed within time. This “yes” can be full of exciting adventure: other times it can appear as praiseworthy abnegation or be marked by the weariness due to burdensome habit. It can appear to be contradicted by fragility and perhaps even by betrayal. It can ask for, receive, and give forgiveness.⁶⁶ It will experience the regenerative power of a second try. It will marvel at the miracle of birth. It will bear the intense and affectionate gaze of an enduring bond. It will express the fearful and lacerating surrender of the beloved to death and the certain hope of being together again in the resurrection of the flesh. In every case, this “yes,” taking up all the time of existence, becomes the fulfilled form of love and of being loved forever. Why should we be surprised if this “yes,” like the innumerable acts of freedom we make every day, stands before us as a task or, better, as a duty we must decide for? This is a duty that I want to have, the exalting duty of testimony.

13. Irreversible fate or beneficent plan?

⁶⁴Cf. Scola, *Il mistero nuziale* 1, 100–110; 122–127.

⁶⁵Cf. id., *Il mistero nuziale* 2, 171–188.

⁶⁶Cf. J. Laffitte, *Il perdono trasfigurato* (Bologna: EDB, 2001).

What can make this duty perennially light and truly life-giving; what can make faithfulness the defining mark of a love that finally *is* love, because it keeps the promise of the “forever” written in its fundamental core? The fact that I receive it as a proposal from the absolute and transcendent foundation. This foundation gives itself to me in the very act of my freedom, allowing me to participate in the goodness of *its* design, which contemplates *my* good. It is this positive proposal which calls for indissolubility by opening the space of difference in which the relationship between truth and freedom is played out for the individual. By itself, human freedom would be impotent and incapable of indissolubility (the space of difference)—and thus could not fulfill itself and be “free indeed” (cf. Jn 8:36)—if it did not take over as a *duty* the *power* the transcendent absolute gives it to decide for indissolubility in every act, in circumstance after circumstance, throughout the whole of one’s existence.

The secret that motivates every act of freedom and gives it back to itself fulfilled is this: *life is the response owed to vocation*. This is what enables the individual to pursue his own well-being. Also and especially through the nuptial mystery freedom is invited to follow the path on which there is no longer any opposition between power and duty.⁶⁷ Nuptial testimony is an intense expression of *life as vocation*. It thus turns out to be the place where reality—and not primarily reasoning or discourse about it—is received for what it is and needs no system which might justify it.

The alternative to this thrilling experience of freedom is condemnation to a tyrannical fate (*anàanke*); to a fatalism that can only be passively endured and that makes inevitable the attempt to lay hands on the foundation in order to construct a system to justify everything that happens. To fulfill a design or plan, on the other hand, means to be open and to embrace everything that happens, in fidelity to what is given us. What is given us is given lovingly by the ungraspable transcendent foundation. It therefore really corresponds to us, even if it should demand the sacrifice of fidelity at the limit of the impossible (as it does, for example, when one spouse abandons another). Shakespeare penetratingly writes, “Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds, / Or bends with the remover to

⁶⁷Cf. N. Reali, “L’erede e i suoi beni. Note teologiche sulla libertà in Galati 4:1–7,” in *Soggetto e libertà nella condizione postmoderna*, ed. F. Botturi (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2003) (forthcoming).

remove.”⁶⁸ Perhaps with even greater acuity, Balthasar observes in a brilliant aphorism, “Where there is infidelity, love was never present. Where there is fidelity, love does not yet necessarily exist. The heart can say: ‘Even if I cannot love you, I want at least to be faithful to you.’ But the bond of fidelity either leads to love or contains deep within itself, unknown to feeling, the knot of love, which is tied outside of time.”⁶⁹

In the Eucharist, the foundation (the Trinity), which is perennially lavished on us in the offering of the Lamb who was slain, gives itself to freedom and calls it to a physical involvement. The Eucharist thus sheds light on the sacramental logic implied in nuptial testimony, which is normally called upon to actuate itself in the sacrament of marriage.⁷⁰

Precisely in the radical difference between the dead and risen Jesus Christ and the species of the bread and wine—a difference that replicates the “hiatus” between the Father and the crucified Son, which, in its turn, takes place within the space of perfect difference between the Persons of the Trinity—pure and sacrificial love calls the believer’s free act of faith to a deeply fruitful exchange. The event of Jesus Christ addresses itself unmistakably to the act of my freedom in the Eucharist. The three dimensions of the nuptial mystery at work in the eucharistic event shed further katalogical light on the nuptial mystery: they show that nuptial testimony is totally sacramental. Thus, for example, the Eucharist helps the spouses to understand that their relationship and its circumstances correspond to them precisely because these things are given to them, and not vice versa. This specifically katalogical aspect is balanced by a no less significant analogical dimension, which takes up every circumstance and every relationship into nuptial testimony. The spouses’ free act of faith thus helps them to understand ever more deeply how the living and personal Word gives himself over in the Eucharist, the marvelous

⁶⁸William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 116,” 2–4.

⁶⁹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1995), 83.

⁷⁰Cf. P. Martinelli, *Vocazione e stati di vita del cristiano* (Rome: Laurentianum, 2001), as well as the integration proposed with respect to marriage in G. Richi Alberti, “Lógica sacramental y estados de vida. A propósito de una obra reciente,” *Anthropotes* 17 (2001): 369–378.

encounter and exchange between the freedom of God and the freedom of man.

Literary imagination can bring home the radical alternative which the nuptial mystery places before each and every human being, whatever his state of life: to undergo fate or to fulfill a plan. In Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Tony Buddenbrook, the paladin of faithfulness to the family's name and honor, faced with the ruin of his house consummated in the death of his young heir, says, "Yes—they say so.—Oh, there are times . . . when that is no consolation, God forgive me! When one begins to doubt—doubt justice and goodness—and everything. Life crushes so much in us, it destroys so many of our beliefs—! A reunion—if that were so—."

At this point, the old family governess leaps to her feet, slams her fist on the table, and cries, "It *is* so!"⁷¹ This conclusion leaves a bitter aftertaste, because we sense that it is a purely voluntaristic affirmation of a principle on the part of someone saying the opposite of what he feels: "We know that it's not true that we will see each other again, but to console ourselves, we have to say it's true." It is as if man has to face up to the implacable fate of his annihilation with the sheer force of his naked will.

The atmosphere is entirely different in Paul Claudel's *The Tidings Brought to Mary*. Upon returning from the Holy Land, the father, Anne Vercors, finds the body of his daughter and learns of the death of his wife:

Is the object of life only to live? Will the feet of God's children be fastened to this wretched earth? It is not to live, but to die, and not to hew the cross, but to mount upon it, and to give all that we have, laughing! There is joy, there is freedom, there is grace, there is eternal youth! . . . What is the worth of the world compared to life? And what is the worth of life if not to be given? And why torment ourselves when it is so simple to obey?⁷²

Where a plan is embraced, not even death is a defeat. It, too, becomes a call to freedom.

⁷¹Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 604.

⁷²Paul Claudel, *The Tidings Brought to Mary*, trans. Louise Morgan Sill (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916), 157–58.

14. Nuptial testimony and theology

Nuptial testimony in the actualization of the individual's faith thus stands forth as one of the main sources of the regeneration of the subject to which John Paul II continuously invites us in his invocation of the "new evangelization." The contemporary world is confused; with incredible speed, it has moved in the last thirty years from severing the unity of the three dimensions of the nuptial mystery to claiming to abolish sexual difference itself, to erase it in favor of a culture of androgynism and pervasive eroticism.⁷³ Is the fragile and wounded freedom of Christians ready to propose, once again, this nuptial testimony to the world in an exciting and compelling way?

Christ immolated himself on the Cross and generated the Church to enable them to do so. In his faithful "yes" to the Father in extreme abandonment (hiatus, difference), he reached the apex of love. He, the chaste Bridegroom, generated his holy Bride. From this perspective, the three parts of the nuptial triad katalogically express the full significance of the family as domestic Church.⁷⁴ Analogously, the domestic Church allows us better to penetrate the nature of the *new family relationship* proper to ecclesial communion, which we witness in Jesus' command to Mary and John at the foot of the Cross (cf. Jn 19:26–27).⁷⁵

But in order to speak of Christ the Bridegroom who generates and unites himself to the Church his Bride (cf. Eph 5:21–33) without unfruitfully aping the couple's erotic dynamism,⁷⁶ we must turn our attention to the singular event of Jesus Christ.⁷⁷ In him, according to the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon, two natures exist in one Person. The four adverbs of the Chalcedonian definition, *inconfuse, immutabiliter, indivise, inseparabiliter*, shed light katalogically on the "one flesh" of man and woman. The latter, too, at least according to

⁷³Cf. A. Scola, *Chi è il cristiano? Duemila anni, un ideale senza fine* (Siena: Edizioni Cantagalli, 2000), 36–39.

⁷⁴Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11; *Familiaris Consortio*, 21, 38, 48, 49, 51–55, 59, 61, 65, and 86; *Ecclesia in Africa*, 63. On this subject cf.: Scola, *Il mistero nuziale 2*, 129–131; D. Tettamanzi, *La famiglia via della Chiesa* (Milan: Massimo, 1991), 70–91.

⁷⁵Cf. Scola, *Il mistero nuziale 1*, 114–116.

⁷⁶Cf. G. Bataille, *L'Erotisme* (Paris: Ed. de Minuit, 1957).

⁷⁷Cf. Giuliadori, *Intelligenza*, 163–174.

Scheeben,⁷⁸ sheds light analogically on the hypostatic union of the two natures in the single Person of the Man-God,⁷⁹ not to mention the importance of the categories of father and son, which we have all directly experienced, in the groping attempt to penetrate the mystery of Fatherhood and Sonship in both the economic and the immanent Trinity.⁸⁰ And how could we fail to mention the motherhood of Mary and the awakening “thou” that she, like every mother, utters to her

⁷⁸Cf. Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, §56. However, other authors criticize what they take to be the improper application of the nuptial metaphor to the hypostatic union. Cf. G. Mazzanti, *Teologia sponsale e sacramento delle nozze* (Bologna: EDB, 2001), 44–45.

⁷⁹Another example of the analogical use of nuptial language in speaking of the incarnation of the Word is offered by the first Patriarch of Venice, St. Lorenzo Giustiniani: “*Sub hoc quidam sponsi ac sponsae vocabolo sanctus Spiritus, divinam ad hominem genus voluit commendare charitatem, et Verbi ad animam spiritus unitatem. Si enim relinquens homo patrem et matrem, et uxori adhaerens fit unum cum ea, et sic efficiuntur duo in carne una, quanto magis humana divinae adhaerendo naturae in unitate personali, unum fient? Sed et si quis adhaerens meretrici unum efficitur corpus, nonne amplius, si Ecclesia adhaeret Christo, unum corpus sunt? Sacramenta magna haec sunt, profunda mysteria, spirituales nuptiae, et spiritualiter perscrutandae. Sponsus namque Verbum est, sponsa humana natura; sponsa sancta Ecclesia; sponsa fidelis anima: non qualisunque, sed talis, quae meritis et dilectione sponsae vocabulo digna sit. Ut autem Verbum, Deique sapientia suas cum filiis hominum delicias esse notificaret, humanam, homo factus, assumpsit naturam, sibi que opulavit Ecclesiam: atque in fide et charitate desponsavit, et quotidie desponsat devotam sibi animam semper caste, semper misericorditer [The Holy Spirit, indeed, used the terms bridegroom and bride in order to commend God’s charity to the human race. He used the term Word in order to commend the unity of spirit to the soul. For if, leaving mother and father, and cleaving to his wife, a man becomes one with her, so that the two become one flesh, how much more will not the human and divine natures become one when the human nature cleaves to the divine nature in unity of person? But if even someone who cleaves to a prostitute becomes one with her, won’t it be even more true that, if the Church cleaves to Christ, they are one body? These are great sacraments, deep mysteries, spiritual nuptials, and they need to be investigated spiritually. For the Word is the bridegroom, and the bride is human nature. The bride is the holy Church. The bride is the faithful soul; not just any soul, but one whose merits and love make her worthy of the title bride. But that the Word and Wisdom of God might make known that his delights are among the sons of men, he became man; he took on human nature and joined to himself his Church, and in faith and charity he espoused to himself, and continues to do so every day, always chastely, always mercifully, the soul devoted to him]” (Lorenzo Giustiniani, *De spirituali et casto Verbi animaeque connubio*, caput IX: *De unione in Christo celebrata divinae et humanae naturae in unitate personali*).*

⁸⁰Cf. Scola, *Il mistero nuziale* 2, 105–122.

infant, proper to every relationship between a mother and child, as we attempt to stammer something about the self-consciousness of Jesus Christ?⁸¹

The nuptial mystery thus helps us to understand the Eucharist, Christ and the Church, the Man-God, and the Trinity, and conversely, these holy mysteries shed light on the nuptial mystery in its three dimensions. All of this is safe from the temptation to elaborate a Hegelian-type system precisely because, in the twofold movement of the analogy (from above and from below), every utterance of nuptial language must pass through a new act of testimony on the part of this particular individual, because the individual cannot capture the act of his freedom *a priori*. Hence nuptial language urges us to keep our thought in motion, because it constantly demands that thought become experience. The fact of dealing with mystery places the person before a task for which he must decide, always and ever-afresh. No systematic perspective can grasp the foundation, which unceasingly gives itself by urging freedom to testimony. On the other hand, if nuptial testimony is possible—as it in fact is—for many men and women in many families, it is so because of the grace of God. The “source of all fatherhood” (Eph 3:15), step by step, reveals his design to humble and obedient freedom. So we see that the nuptial mystery offers a systematic perspective—but one never taken-for-granted or possessed—for the *intellectus fidei*.

15. Farewell

At this moment when, after twenty years of teaching, I bid an official farewell to the chair of theological anthropology I have occupied at the John Paul II Institute at the Pontifical Lateran University, the presentation of the nuptial mystery I have just laid out reminds me of my efforts as a boy to climb Mt. Grigna near my home. That was before real mountain-climbing shoes existed, but I would find a few nails here and there, left by previous climbers, which made the way up safer. There were not very many of these nails, because it was an inflexible law that the climber’s skill was measured by his capacity to remove the nails he had used, not least so as to allow the next person to demonstrate his ability. Moreover, since the nails might have been

⁸¹Cf. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3, 175–176.

there for a long time, each one had to be tested for stability before the climber hooked his grip onto it. This is how it will be for those of you, students and teachers, who want to continue the ascent, at once exciting and dangerous, up the sheer face of the nuptial mystery. But this is the excitement of theology and the *raison d'être* of a University like our Alma Mater.

In any case, as a possible perspective for systematic theology, the nuptial mystery expresses the singular wedding between the pontifical Magisterium and the ecclesiastical sciences that is the distinctive note of the *Saola Romana*, with its long and often glorious tradition. Through the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family, our Alma Mater, the Lateran University, shows us that this *Saola* continues to play an indispensable, fruitful role in debate about the *humanum* which contemporary thought has no choice but to participate in.

Deepening our understanding of the nuptial mystery, as well as of every other aspect of the Christian mystery, through research, teaching, and study of the ecclesiastical sciences, is also an eminently pastoral way of supporting the testimonial nature of faith. Such faith means to stand firmly in the One who opened the way for us and did not consider his equality with God as something to be grasped at (cf. Phil 2:5), but passed through the eye of the needle at Golgotha so that the mercy of the heavenly Father could shine forth in his glorious humanity. How do we set out to follow him in the work of a university?

The Spirit of the Crucified and Risen One gives us, in baptism and the Eucharist, the grace of belonging to his holy Church, which guides, sustains, and corrects our freedom in the task (which no one can perform in our place) of deciding for the truth, always anew in every act.

In Paul Claudel's *The Satin Slipper*, Camillo addresses Prouheze with the words, "If I am void of everything it is the better to wait for you." To her perfect but all too doctrinal response of "God alone fills such a void," Camillo opposes the logic of testimony: "And this God—who knows if you alone are not the one to bring me Him?"⁸²

⁸²Paul Claudel, *The Satin Slipper*, trans. Fr. John O'Connor (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1945), 12–13.

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How do we communicate love except by giving ourselves to love?—*Translated by Michelle Borrás.*

ANGELO SCOLA is Patriarch of Venice.