

THE CRISIS OF MARRIAGE
AS A CRISIS OF MEANING:
ON THE STERILITY OF
THE MODERN WILL

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“There is nothing more human than marriage, and yet no general human reality is more full of grace: marriage is, as St. Paul said, the ‘mega mystery.’”



1. THE IMPOVERISHMENT OF INTELLECT AND WILL

In *Fides et ratio*, John Paul II observes that “[o]ne of the most significant aspects of our current situation . . . is the ‘crisis of meaning’” (*FR*, 81). At the origin of this crisis, he explains, is the impoverished notion of reason that has arisen with the modern world. Having identified a number of trends in modern and contemporary thought—relativism, skepticism, scientific positivism, eclecticism, pragmatism, historicism, and nihilism, among others—all of which share a lack of confidence in reason’s capacity to attain to ultimate truth, the pope goes on to lament the invasion of the human spirit “by a kind of ambiguous thinking which leads it to an ever deepening introversion, locked within the con-

fines of its own immanence without reference of any kind to the transcendent” (ibid.). In order to help restore an openness of reason to what lies beyond itself, he says, three things are required: first, philosophy must recover its original “sapiential dimension,” that is, its aspiration to the meaning of the whole beyond the fragmentation caused by modern technological habits of mind (ibid.); second, philosophy must recall its ability to attain to the being of things, and so reach genuine knowledge of “total and definitive truth” (FR, 82); and third, philosophy needs to be understood, once again, as having a “*genuinely metaphysical* range, capable, that is, of transcending empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate, and foundational in its search for truth” (FR, 83). This is an urgent task for the Church, not only because a reduced conception of reason is closed to the truth of the faith, but also because, in this impoverishment of reason, humanity itself is at stake:¹ if the pope is right to say that we “may define the human being . . . as the one who seeks the truth” (FR, 28), the despair regarding man’s capacity to attain to deep and real truth represents a collapse that reaches to man’s innermost essence.

But the contemporary “crisis of meaning” concerns not only an impoverishment of reason; it is not only as a seeker of truth that we may define man. Rather, the human being is also, and even more basically, the one who seeks love. To quote the famous passage from John Paul II’s first encyclical: “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is meaningless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”² Love is so basic to man precisely because it is ultimately for love that man was created: in order to explain why the commandment to love God and neighbor is the “first and greatest,” *Gaudium et spes* states 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). If there is, indeed, a “crisis of meaning” in the contemporary world—and evidence of this

1. Indeed, one fails to grasp the deep point of the encyclical if one does not see that these are inseparable: man’s openness to God and the flourishing of his humanity.

2. *Redemptor hominis*, 10; translation modified.

has increased dramatically even since the publication of *Fides et ratio*—one cannot but wonder whether, along with the impoverished conception of reason and no doubt profoundly connected with it, our age also suffers from an impoverishment of the will. Just as we despair of ever being able to know total and definitive truth, so too do we have difficulty believing that man can truly give himself in a total and definitive way, and receive the total and definitive self-gift of another. The idealism of lovers might attract us and even inspire us at some level, but the moment we step back and see their protestations in what we call “perspective,” they appear to us unserious. And we always step back. To think about the human condition realistically, it is believed, we have to acknowledge that man can neither *know* the whole, nor *will* the whole. Man is finite, and he lives most honestly, he does the least damage to himself and others, when he frankly admits to his limitations and respects them. Such a modesty is taken to be the very mark of a Christian! We can only know so much, and therefore we can only promise so much. For all its pretensions in certain areas, the modern will turns out to be remarkably impotent.

An unmistakable expression of the impoverishment of the will that afflicts our age is the unhealthy state of marriage. It is in response to this state that Pope Francis has called the bishops of the world to meet, this fall and the next, so that the problems that beset marriage in the modern world may be thoughtfully and prayerfully faced, pondered, and addressed in a concrete way. Among these problems, the issue that has received the most attention as preparations for the synods begin is the question of the admission to the Eucharist of divorced and remarried Catholics. There is of course a great deal at stake in this question; it involves a number of related questions that go to the heart of the meaning of marriage, the Eucharist, and the nature of the sacraments in their connection to faith—and therefore the life of the Church as a whole. One of the basic questions involved in this particular issue is, Why is the marriage bond traditionally held to be indissoluble, and what makes it indissoluble? Often, in part because of the context in which it is being raised, this question is addressed through a consideration of the sacramental character of marriage, and the conditions under which this sacramental character comes about.

These are crucially important considerations, of course, and it is right and proper that they should be a particular focus in the specific question of the divorce and remarriage of Catholics. But we wish to suggest that the “crisis of marriage” ought to be pondered also within the context of the crisis of meaning diagnosed in *Fides et ratio*; the focus on the sacramental character ought not to eclipse the rich reality of marriage as a natural institution. In pondering the contemporary crisis of marriage, it is crucial to keep in mind, not only the perspective of ecclesiology, but also that of anthropology, and indeed of nature in general and the created order.³ We ought to recall that when Jesus taught the scandal of the indissolubility of marriage, he presented it not as a novelty he was introducing, but as a quality it had from the beginning (cf. Mt 19:4–9, Mk 10:2–11). There is a potential danger that explaining the issue of the indissolubility of marriage exclusively as a question of the conditions for a sacramental marriage would lead us to identify indissolubility with sacramentality *simply* and thus to forget that marriage *as such*, even if it is not sacramental in the strict sense,⁴ is indissoluble.⁵ To put the matter simply, it is indissoluble because marriage is the paradigm of human love, love is essentially a reciprocal gift of self, and there is no such thing as a temporary gift.

3. These are not in any sense meant to be opposed to each other here, as if to treat the ecclesiological perspective is *not* to treat the anthropological/meta-physical perspective implicitly, but only to say that it is not sufficient simply to leave the treatment one merely of implication.

4. Beginning with Augustine (*De bono coniugali*), the indissoluble bond that belongs to marriage was called “*sacramentum*,” but, as Aquinas explains, this has a general, “natural” meaning distinct from what is called “sacrament” in the Catholic sense: see ST, Suppl. q. 49, a. 2 ad 7. We will at the end talk about the essential and proper ambiguity of this term.

5. To say that marriage is naturally indissoluble in principle does not exclude the possibility of circumstances under which a particular marriage can be dissolved. We will not enter here into the complex discussion of what circumstances would permit such a dissolution, but the general principle would seem to be that one would need, on the one hand, to appeal to an authority that stands ontologically higher than the natural marriage (this might be the political authority, but we will not attempt here to make a judgment), or, on the other hand, to show that the conditions for the constitution of a marriage were not properly met. In any event, the point remains that the reality of the marriage—as we will seek to show in the following—cannot be held to be subject simply to the will of the spouses, whether as individuals or even as a couple.

In light of the observations we made at the outset, we ought to see that making the question of indissolubility *simply* a question of sacramentality threatens to reinforce the impoverishment of the will, which we suggested contributes in a profound way to the general crisis of meaning that afflicts our age, insofar as it seems to concede the incapacity for a definitive self-gift as belonging essentially to man's nature. In this case, the sacramentality of marriage, and the character of indissolubility it brings, would appear as something "tacked on" to supplement a deficiency that is due, not to man's betrayal of his nature through sin, but to the finitude of his nature as such. There is an analogy between this way of thinking and the fideism that compensates for what it presumes to be man's innate inability to know ultimate truth, and thus to know God as the *principium et finis rerum omnium*,⁶ through the super-advent of a purely heteronomous divine revelation. Fideism has always turned out to undermine not only reason, but even more basically faith itself.⁷ Likewise, an insistence on sacramentality in the strict sense as what brings indissolubility to man's natural incapacity to pronounce permanent vows will tend to weaken the sense and significance of indissolubility—not to say sacramentality itself. Just as the Church has taken it upon herself to defend and cultivate the genuinely human activity of philosophy in its fullest possible breadth and depth, so too must she preserve not only the sacrament of marriage, but the natural institution that is inseparable from it, and indeed the human love it brings to completion.⁸ As strange as it may initially seem, there is a reason to think that these two tasks

6. See *Dei filius*, ch. 2.

7. On this, see Robert Spaemann, "The Traditionalist Error: On the Socialization of the Idea of God in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Robert Spaemann Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

8. This is why it would be a tragic mistake for Catholics to respond to contemporary challenges by separating sacramental matrimony and the civil marriages conferred by the state, leaving the latter to be defined however liberal society decides. Such a separation may be necessary at some point for prudential reasons, but in principle it is deeply problematic. The problem here is similar to the challenge of casting the recent HHS mandate as an issue of *religious freedom* above all, rather than as an issue concerning the common good of human flourishing: on this, see David Crawford, "Is Religious Liberty Possible in a Liberal Culture?" *Communio: International Catholic Review* 40 (Summer–Fall 2013): 422–37.

are deeply interrelated, insofar as they represent in a paradigmatic way the essence of man as “*capax totius*,” in the two orders of the truth and the good.

The following reflections are not intended as a direct response to the particular pastoral question of the admission to the Eucharist of divorced and remarried Catholics.⁹ Instead, prompted more generally by the stated purpose of the coming synods, namely, to reflect on the challenges facing the institution of marriage and the family in the current cultural situation, we will focus on the broader anthropological background issue alluded to above, namely, the problem of the impoverishment of our sense of the will, and we will do so specifically by raising the question of the relationship between freedom and the mutual gift of self implied in the exchange of vows, on the one hand, and the relationship between freedom and the bond of marriage, on the other. It will become evident that these two issues are inseparable. We will first present what would seem to be the typical understanding of that relationship in liberalism, and then we will contrast that with an alternative view of freedom drawn from classical sources but illuminated by some more recent Catholic thinkers.

2. BONDLESS FREEDOM

If it is legitimate to define the conventional notion of freedom as essentially the individual’s power to choose among options, without coercive interference from anything external to that power,¹⁰ then it is not difficult to see that there is a tension—if not an outright opposition—between freedom, on the one hand, and vows and the bond to which they give rise, on the other. This is much more obvious in the case of the bond, perhaps, than

9. It is important to emphasize that we are not suggesting that the *natural* indissolubility of marriage is necessarily being denied by those who seek grounds for admitting divorced and remarried Catholics to the Eucharist. Rather, our intention here is simply to propose that the general crisis of meaning ought to form an essential part of the background against which the various pastoral questions are raised.

10. This is essentially what Isaiah Berlin defined as the “negative freedom” of modern liberalism in his classic essay of 1958, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

in the act of taking vows, but as we reflect on the matter it will become evident that these two aspects cannot be separated from each other. Let us begin with the bond. Whatever else a bond is, it is clearly a restraint on the power to choose. To the extent that one is *bound* to another, one is not free to bind oneself to anyone else; one's options are not only diminished in this regard, but eliminated altogether. It is precisely the notion of liberty as power to choose that Chesterton had in mind when he characterized a man's decision to marry as representing the "liberty to sell his liberty."¹¹

Now, there is a paradox here—as there often is in Chesterton's thinking—that opens up a curious ambiguity in the relationship between the modern view of freedom and the notion of taking vows. On the one hand, there would seem to be no necessary tension between the two at all: as long as there is no outside pressure coercing the choice, taking a vow would seem to be a supreme expression of the power to choose, of the individual's capacity to determine himself as he wills in a particularly impressive way. Whereas choice typically concerns some immediate good, the significance of which lasts only one or perhaps several moments, a vow is a choice that concerns (in principle) a whole life. In this respect, it has an infinite significance, which raises it above the finite significance of most everyday choices. To say that the human will is capable of making such a choice is to grant man an extraordinary dignity.¹² The vow in this respect would seem to represent the glory of the power to choose. On the other hand, however, to make a vow, a commitment that spans the whole of one's life, is precisely to bind oneself irrevocably, and we have just observed that there is a strict opposition between freedom conceived of as unrestricted power to choose and a bond. In this respect, the vow would represent, not the glory, but the demise of freedom. Conceiving of freedom as the power to choose clearly entangles us in a dilemma. If we seek to pre-

11. From "In Defense of Rash Vows," in G. K. Chesterton, *The Defendant* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1902), 23. Chesterton, of course, does not identify freedom simply as the power to choose; this power is instead just one dimension of a more ample reality.

12. In his recent address to the consistory of cardinals, Walter Kasper observed that "it is the dignity of the human person to be able to make permanent decisions" (*The Gospel of the Family* [New York: Paulist Press, 2014], 17).

serve the power to choose by restricting it, that is, by eliminating the taking of a permanent vow as one of the will's options, we in fact render it impotent: it has the power to choose only things of relative, ephemeral significance; it is unable to determine itself in any definitive way, which is to say that it is ultimately incapable of self-determination.

Is there any way out of the dilemma, or is the conventional conception of freedom necessarily caught, so to speak, in a bind here? As it turns out, there is an ingenious path of escape. The devil, we might say, is infinitely resourceful in his arrangement of details. If the dilemma arises because the vows lead to a bond, then we can outmaneuver the terms of the dilemma precisely by dissolving this connection: we affirm, on the one hand, that a person can take a permanent vow, which allows us to respect the power to choose, and on the other hand we deny that this necessarily gives rise to any bond.¹³ While this might seem to be an outright contradiction—doesn't it imply that the vow is a permanent one and that it is not a permanent one at the same time?—we ought to recognize that the matter is in fact more complex. As we shall see, what appears to allow one to outmaneuver the terms of the dilemma is that one need not establish permanence in actuality, but one may simply affirm it as a possibility, or in any event just not explicitly exclude it.

In order to understand what the separation of vow from bond might mean, it is helpful to recognize that this particular path of escape was explicitly opened up by a man who is arguably one of the principal authors of the modern conception of freedom, namely, Martin Luther. In a famous tract, originally published in 1522, to justify the exodus of the new Protestant Christians from the monasteries, Luther argued just what we noted above, namely, that there is a strict opposition between freedom and vows understood as irrevocable bonds.¹⁴ A vow is

13. The argument we are making here is analogous to the argument we made about the radicalizing of misogyny, not by rejecting reason altogether, but by insisting on its importance only *most of the time*, under certain circumstances: see *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 1–21. A more thorough discussion would show how the impoverishment of reason and the impoverishment of the will necessarily imply each other.

14. "The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows," in *Luther's*

a human work, he says, a human invention;¹⁵ as such it implies external obligation, or, as he puts it, slavery to the law.¹⁶ But this is precisely what Christ came to free us from. Christian freedom is a liberation of conscience from works.¹⁷ Now, it is crucial to see, in relation to our present concern, that Luther does not reject vows simply. To do so, as we saw above, would be to restrict the freedom that he intends to accord in a complete way to the Christian. Instead, Luther changes the meaning of vows: we must understand vows, he says, *precisely as expressions of freedom*, which for him means that they can always be set aside.¹⁸ Indeed, a *godly* vow—if such a thing were possible—would have to include in its making the power to revoke it.¹⁹ Circumstances, after all, might make the rupture necessary. “If,” Luther explains, “love should demand that the vow be broken and you were to hold fast to your vow, you would be sinning.”²⁰ The hypothetical character of this explanation is of decisive importance, insofar as the formulation avoids affirming that the vow *will necessarily have to be broken*, but instead simply insists on remaining open to the *possibility* that love would require such a thing. It may turn out that love never in fact makes this demand, in which case the vow would be kept forever.

The reason that this qualifier is significant is that it allows one to continue to use the language of vows if one wishes: I may intend to commit myself permanently to something—in the case Luther is discussing, the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience—but in order to do so in a way that respects Christian freedom, I must remain open at every moment to the possibility of something new, something that was not anticipated when I made the vow. In other words, what Luther is insisting on here is that I am never permitted to subordinate God’s will, which reveals itself

Works, vol. 44: *The Christian in Society*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 309.

15. *Ibid.*, 312.

16. *Ibid.*, 304.

17. *Ibid.*, 298.

18. *Ibid.*, 297.

19. *Ibid.*, 308–09.

20. *Ibid.*, 304.

concretely in history, to my own act of freedom, which I happened to exercise at some discrete moment of time. God remains sovereign over all, and this necessarily includes any choices I wish to make. If I vow something, it shows that, for my own part, I am willing at this moment in time to commit *myself*—which is why I can claim with a certain logical consistency to be determining myself in a way that is, or at least intends to be, permanent. But I cannot of course commit *God*. My willingness can only go so far; specifically, it can extend only to *myself* and my own actions and property. In order to respect the limits of my finite will, I have to leave God free to change circumstances as he wishes, circumstances that are essentially beyond my control, as it were. But genuine Christian freedom means being able to adapt immediately to the concrete promptings of God's will as it unfolds itself in these circumstances. A vow, understood as establishing an unbreakable bond, therefore represents "the absolute opposite of freedom."²¹

If we wanted to give as sympathetic a reading as we can to what Luther is arguing here, in language that may be modern but seems to capture the spirit of what he has in mind, we might say that the notion of a permanent vow that nevertheless retains within itself the power to be revoked keeps one's love alive and fresh; it keeps one's heart ever open. As Luther puts it, a person should do what he promised, "not because the vows compelled him to do so, but from a free choice of spirit."²² If our vow created an irrevocable bond, not only would this represent a kind of presumption regarding the future possibilities of God's will, but it would present a constant temptation to rest, so to speak, on our laurels, to consider love something we have *already* accomplished, a task that has been satisfied and left behind. Love would no longer be something requiring vigilance and daily attention. A bond *is just* love taken for granted. Love without freedom is dead, and freedom includes the power to choose. Rather than saying *yes* once and for all, and then attending to other things, true love is saying *yes* every moment of every day.

There is something undeniably moving about this last formulation, but a brief reflection reveals that it doesn't move

21. *Ibid.*, 309.

22. *Ibid.*

us very far. It *can't*: a yes that must be given in every moment “counts” only for that moment; its significance passes when the moment does. Let us enter into this matter more deeply. Luther affirms that the will is able to keep commandments, but is not adequate to a vow.²³ If we read this affirmation in line with Luther's general argument as we have seen it, he means the word “vow” here in the traditional, robust sense, that is (as we will elaborate more fully below), in the sense of a handing over of one's very self. The distinction between commandment and vow (in the traditional sense) is the distinction between the external law and the internal spirit. The human will, as Luther interprets it, can effect the external works of the law, which means it can accomplish discrete outward acts that the law requires. What it cannot do, on the other hand, is commit the spirit. I can will an act, but I can't will my heart, I can't hand over my very self in an act of the will. It is with this insight that we come to see the implication of severing the vow from the bond. In Luther's interpretation of the vow, which gives it the “godly” power to be revoked at any moment, the taking of a vow ceases to be an act by which one hands over precisely *one's ontological substance*, and becomes instead nothing more than the making of a promise concerning discrete acts to be performed in the future. In other words, this act of the will is no longer a communication of one's internal being; instead, it now becomes literally superficial, an activity concerned only with the surfaces of one's being, with what is external. Nothing happens through the act of the will at the level of the *being* of the one who wills; he remains the same in reality as he was prior to taking the vow, but he has simply made a promise regarding what is external, what he *has* or *does* rather than what he *is*.

What this means, concretely, becomes more evident when we consider vows specifically within the context of marriage: the notion of the will implied in Luther's emptying of the vow of its ontological density means that the couple who exchange vows in marriage can only be said to designate each other as the beneficiaries of external acts. They can perhaps be said to belong to one another *legally*, which means that through the exchange of vows they incur a variety of debts and obligations that concern not only

23. *Ibid.*, 341.

their bodies but also the material extension of their bodies in their property. But they cannot be said to belong to one another “metaphysically”; they cannot be said to give themselves to one another specifically as persons. Instead, after exchanging vows they remain two individual agents whose behavior toward one another is now measured in some sense by the terms of a contract, which is enforceable by law. To put it simply, they exchange *rights* rather than their *selves*. The bond is therefore not an ontological reality, but an external law. Luther goes on to explain that his description of Christian freedom as inimical to the bond entailed by a vow concerns *only* the (spiritual, internal) relationship between the individual and God, and that vows, with the legal obligations they entail, are perfectly in order in the relationships between man and his neighbor.²⁴ But denying traditional vows in relation to God, as we have seen, transforms their meaning. If Luther allows vows in this reduced sense to play a valid role in human relationships, this can only mean that Luther thinks of these relationships as a matter of the sorts of discrete, extrinsic acts that can be regulated by law. To put the matter a bit cynically, vows are acceptable among human beings because these relationships are essentially superficial.²⁵

We see that this implication becomes evident in Luther’s description of marriage, which he presents as an example of the appropriate place of vows, since this is of course a relationship between two human beings. In line with our interpretation, Luther says on the one hand that marriage vows are *binding*: I have the freedom to pledge myself in a permanent way to another person, and this pledge entails an obligation that I have to honor. On the other hand, Luther also says at the same time that a marriage can be dissolved *by the mutual consent of the spouses*.²⁶ While the individual wills are able to determine themselves in a permanent way, there is nevertheless no *real bond* that would take this

24. *Ibid.*, 313.

25. Luther would certainly not have intended this implication directly; he would no doubt observe that our human relations ought to have their basis in the relation to God, which is not at all superficial. One may ask, however, whether human depth can be sustained if it comes solely “from above,” so to speak, as this position would seem to imply.

26. *Ibid.*, 314: “if marital claims should cease owing to the wife’s death or to her having given consent to separate, then perfect freedom to marry or not to marry exists between you and God, as existed in the first place before marriage.”

relationship beyond that consent and so allow the spouses to determine themselves, and be determined, in an actually definitive way. My pledge can always be undone, not *simply* by my will, which would indeed seem to imply a contradiction, but by the will of the other, to whom I am obligated.²⁷ This follows logically from what we said above: if the exchange of vows is not an ontological event (a notion that still needs to be explained below), but only a *legal* one, if, that is, it is in its essence a contract for the reciprocal granting of rights, then there *is* no marriage, ontologically speaking, beyond the two individual wills, wills that have the form of the power to choose, and so retain the ability to choose to end the marriage. As Hobbes explains, there are two ways that people can be freed from a contract: performance, in which the pledged obligation is satisfied; and “Forgivenessse, the restitution of liberty,” in which the party or parties to whom the obligation is owed grant release to their debtor.²⁸ Hobbes, like Luther, incidentally thinks of the bonds produced by contract—in which he includes marriage²⁹—as having a merely external,

27. Two qualifications to this claim seem to be necessary: first, we have to acknowledge that even the consent to another’s release of my will is an act of will, though one could reply here that the object of this will is not to break the bond originally willed but to do what the other wishes (which happens to be to break the bond); second, even if my will *does* somehow in this case will the opposite of what it had originally willed, one could say that it is not contradicting itself in the strict sense insofar as these wills occur at different times. One can speak of a will’s consistency with itself only if it has a supra-temporal identity, which is why there is a fundamental anthropological dimension entailed in the question of freedom and the vows. It bears reflecting on the connection between the foundations of logic and personal identity: Locke for example took personal identity to be the root of our understanding of identity in general (see his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book II, ch. 27). Kierkegaard likewise affirmed a connection: “The present age . . . has . . . abolished the *principle of contradiction*. . . . The principle of contradiction strengthens the individual’s faithfulness to himself and makes him as constant as the number three spoken of so beautifully by Socrates, when he says that it would rather endure anything than become four or even a large round number, and in the same way the individual would rather suffer and be true to himself than be all manner of things in contradiction to himself” (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* [New York: Harper & Row, 1962], 68–69).

28. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* I. 14 (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 198.

29. Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive*, VI. 16, especially the footnote in which Hobbes explains that the question of the sacramentality of marriage is meaningless for all public intents and purposes; its indissolubility, he says, derives altogether from the nature of the (purely positive) law that brings it about.

and so legal, reality, precisely on account of what we might call the natural poverty of the will: “Bonds . . . have their strength not from their own Nature (for nothing is more easily broken than a man’s word), but from Feare of some evill consequence upon the rupture.”³⁰ If a bond is a merely legal reality, which is simply an extrinsic imposition on the wills that have produced it, and so leaves the two as individual agents of freedom standing over against one another, it makes sense that Luther would reject any such thing between man and God: God and man’s freedom, in this case, would be set off over against each other, subject to one another by an extrinsic law. This is clearly contrary, not only to Christian freedom, but to the divine nature simply.

To summarize the essential point we wish to make at this stage: if we take freedom to be uncoerced power to choose, it can be reconciled with the taking of vows only if we separate vows from any real (as opposed to *merely* legal³¹) bond, which means that human beings are not able to give *themselves* as persons to each other through an act of the will. The will is thus deprived of an ontological density, and becomes, as a result, something “insubstantial.”

3. THE REALITY OF “ONE FLESH”

Let us now consider an alternative view to this conventional modern conception of freedom and its possible use. We may refer to this alternative as the classical Christian view, though we will be drawing on more recent thinkers to elucidate and deepen some aspects of it. Our discussion will begin with the notion of

30. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 192. Like Luther, too, Hobbes rejects the very notion of religious vows, though his reasoning would have to be interpreted as a secularization of Luther. They share, nevertheless, a conviction that vows are “*contra naturam*,” and a sharp division between heaven and earth. In discussing religious vows, Hobbes writes that “they that Vow any thing contrary to any law of Nature, Vow in vain; as being a thing unjust to pay such Vow. And if it be a thing commanded by the Law of Nature, it is not the Vow, but the Law that binds them. . . . And therefore, to promise that which is known to be Impossible, is no Covenant” (197).

31. This is not to concede a purely positivistic concept of law, but in fact the opposite: the point will be to present the natural reality as finding expression in the legal bond.

the marriage bond and work its way back to the notion of freedom and the will that it implies, in order to see how this notion accords with the classical concept of freedom.

The first point to make is that the classical Christian tradition quite emphatically affirms the marriage bond as having an *ontological* reality; the enactment of marriage is not a mere legal contract that is established between individual agents according to terms that they propose, or even according to terms taken for granted as part of a tradition. Instead, there is a genuine ontological transformation that occurs in the exchange of vows: “For this reason the man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to the woman, and *they shall become one flesh*” (Gn 2:24). Note that this text occurs in the context of the creation narrative, which means that it concerns the order “built into” nature, so to speak, prior to any explicit reference to Christ and the Church and the order of redemption.³² Indeed, the possibility of coming to form “one flesh” arises because of the special manner in which man and woman were created: unlike the other animals that were created without reference in the narrative to their gender, man was created in the twofold unity of man and woman. First, God created “the man,” who then became male in the “second” creation in which the woman was fashioned from the rib taken from his side.³³ This is a rich text, filled with many provocative implications. Rather than enter into any of the controversy over the text, we wish in the present context simply to note that, whatever else it does, the text indicates a profound ontological relatedness between man and woman: they are not *in their most original being* separate, individual agents who stand over and against each other and only subsequently make contact with each other through discrete, deliberate acts,³⁴ but even in their irreducible

32. Of course, the reference is already implicit here: nature has an inner ordering to the communion with God that is brought about in a free way as the work of redemption.

33. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 2006), 147, 159.

34. For a metaphysical account of “constitutive relations,” see David L. Schindler, “Norris Clarke on Person, Being, and St. Thomas,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 20 (1993): 580–92; and Adrian J. Walker, “Constitutive Relations’: Toward a Spiritual Reading of *Physis*,” in *Being Holy in the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 123–60.

distinctness (guaranteed by the distinct creative act in each case), they share, one might say, a common substance.³⁵

In commenting on this passage from Genesis, Cardinal Ratzinger emphasizes its ontological reality: the “one flesh” that the man and woman become in marriage means “a single new existence.”³⁶ “Flesh,” in this context, does not of course refer simply to physical matter in the modern sense of the term, as “inert stuff,” or even in the scholastic sense as the capacity to receive form.³⁷ Matter as such does not have unity; its unity derives from the being—the “existence”—of which it is the matter. To say that the man and woman become “one flesh” is precisely to indicate the “ontological transformation” to which we alluded above. Prior to the exchange of vows,³⁸ the man and woman are two beings, but through the exchange they are taken up into a higher unity, to which they are now relative: they join to form a “single new existence.” When Jesus refers to this passage from Genesis, he significantly adds that, in becoming one flesh, the man and woman “are no longer two” (οὐκέτι εἰσὶν δύο) (Mk 10:8; Mt 19:6).³⁹ Is it proper to use the word “substance” in this context? Hegel, the philosopher who has reflected on the nature of marriage perhaps most profoundly from a metaphysical perspective, does not hesitate to do so. Rejecting the atomistic individualism of modern political thought that would be incapable

35. From ST I, q. 92, a. 2: One of the reasons God created the woman not from a separate substance, but from Adam’s side, is so “that man might love the woman all the more, and cleave to her more closely, knowing her to be fashioned from himself.”

36. Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, 3rd edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 38.

37. “Flesh,” in Hebrew (*basar*), can mean, for example, the unity of blood relations or even of the whole human race: see the entry under “*basar*” in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994). I am grateful to Joseph Atkinson for this reference.

38. The phrase “exchange of vows” is meant here to indicate the whole configuration of conditions through which a marriage is confectioned.

39. If Jesus modifies the original teaching at all, it seems to be only to bring out what might have been implicit: i.e., one flesh is not just an indication of (something analogous to) blood relations, in the sense that we can speak of all the members of a family sharing one flesh. Instead, the unity is more emphatic: their single, unified existence now takes the place of their individual existence as the primary reference of their identity.

of conceiving marriage as anything but a *contract*, Hegel says that “the precise nature of marriage is to begin from the point of view of contract—i.e., that of individual personality as a self-sufficient unit—in order to supersede it [*ihn aufzuheben*].”⁴⁰ In other words, in exchanging marriage vows, the individual person begins the act as an individual person, but does not *end* that way: the act comes to completion in a whole, of which the individual is henceforward a kind of part. But here things become a bit murky in Hegel. He goes on to explain that we can no longer speak in this case of two persons, but only of a “*single person*”; this “single person” is, for Hegel, a substance in the strict sense, and the members of the marriage, and eventually of the family, are henceforward literally “accidents” of this substance.⁴¹ Ratzinger, by contrast, insists that, “in their indissoluble spiritual-bodily union, [the man and woman] nonetheless remain unconfused and unmingled.”⁴² They do not, in other words, lose their genuine difference and individual uniqueness as persons in being “one flesh.” Nevertheless, it is crucial to see that Ratzinger does not mean thereby to attenuate the ontological reality of their unity: it is just that this true unity is of a sort that transcends, *and so does not compete with*, the natural unity of the individual spouses. In fact, it can even be said to enhance and strengthen their unique personality, even while being a higher sort of unity in itself.⁴³ Marriage is, in other

40. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, §163, Remark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 203.

41. *Ibid.* While there are clearly problems with this conception, which threatens to undermine the individuality of persons, any critique ought to retain the crucial point, both of the ontological reality of marriage and family, and the notion of the family—rather than the individual—as the basis of society. For a larger discussion of the meaning of social substance (*Sittlichkeit*) in Hegel, see D.C. Schindler, *The Perfection of Freedom: Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel between the Ancients and the Moderns* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 320–56.

42. Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 39.

43. One could say that what distinguishes Ratzinger from Hegel here is that Ratzinger has an analogical conception of unity, which allows him to affirm a genuine unity of the marriage that does not swallow up the unity of the individual persons who compose it. It is arguably the absence of analogy in Hegel’s notion of unity that leads him not only to deny the substantiality of the individuals in order to make room for the substantiality of the marriage, but ultimately in turn also to deny the substantiality of marriage in order to

words, more than a moral unity between two beings, or a unity of order, but in a certain sense it is *one existence* made up of the two distinct persons.

Now, we who have grown up and lived in the context of liberalism are virtually incapable of conceiving what it could possibly mean to speak of a “higher unity,” a “single new existence,” that transcends the individuality of the spouses that constitute it. We wish to suggest that this incapacity is due to what Robert Spaemann has called the “bourgeois ontology” that holds sway in modernity:⁴⁴ things are only themselves and nothing more; their significance stops at their physical boundaries, or if it extends at all it is only to those things its boundaries directly impact. We thus think of our individual being as absolute, and so we think of the acts of will through which we interact with others as radiating outward, so to speak, from our self-enclosed inner sphere of subjectivity—as telegraphed out into the distance from a central control tower. We make “contact” at the extremities. From this perspective, we can think of the language of self-gift as nothing but metaphor. It is perhaps a metaphor that we find important and inspirational, but we nevertheless stumble in confusion at the suggestion that it could be meaningful in a more than metaphorical way. Along these lines, we are tempted to think of the “one flesh” language regarding marriage as itself purely metaphorical, or at best—in an explicitly religious context—as having some mystical meaning that transcends the natural world. What we can’t imagine is that it could have a real meaning that both transcends our individual being and is *at the same time genuinely natural*. It seems to me that we will be able to overcome this difficulty only if we are able to understand the will in its normal, everyday operation, and in every one of its acts without exception, as bearing an essential analogy to the gift of self that takes place paradigmatically in marriage. Let us thus

make room for the ultimate substantiality of the state. For a general account of Hegel’s view of freedom and its place in marriage, plus a raising of critical questions, see D.C. Schindler, “‘The Free Will Which Wills the Free Will’: On Marriage as a Paradigm of Freedom in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” *Owl of Minerva* 44, no. 1–2 (2012–2013): 93–117.

44. See Robert Spaemann, “Bourgeois Ethics and Non-Teleological Ontology,” in *The Robert Spaemann Reader*. “Bourgeois ontology” is simply a way of characterizing nominalism.

turn to see how the classical conception of the will, as presented by Thomas Aquinas, lends itself to just this interpretation.

4. THE WILL AS THE FACULTY OF SELF-GIFT

Thomas Aquinas defines the will as the “intellectual appetite.”⁴⁵ The notion of will as an appetite is already profoundly significant for our discussion: appetite is an attraction, a movement toward or seeking for (“petere *ad*”), which arises in relation to some good that presents itself. Thus defined, the will has a radically receptive dimension; it is set in motion by the good that attracts it, which Aquinas calls, following Aristotle, a “mover unmoved” in relation to the will. Because the motion of the will *begins* in a decisive way from outside of the will, the motion also *ends* outside of it: in contrast to the act of intellect, which terminates in the intellect itself, the act of will terminates in the good that exists in things outside of the agent.⁴⁶ The good, in a certain respect at least, extends further than the true.⁴⁷ This does not mean that the will is simply passive; rather, the will moves itself and the other powers of the soul toward the good in question.⁴⁸ But its self-moving occurs inside of its being moved by the good—and, ultimately, by God who is goodness itself.⁴⁹ Note that this interpretation *roots* the will in what lies beyond it, which gives the will an essentially other-related, and so self-transcending character. Already, we’ve gotten beyond the notion of a self-enclosed “control center” as the origin of activity.

Now, this self-transcending dimension of the will gets deepened when we see that what distinguishes it, as an appetite,

45. ST I, q. 80, a. 2 and q. 183, a. 4.

46. See Aquinas, *De veritate* q. 1, a. 2: “The motion of an appetitive power terminates in things,” and q. 22, a. 10.

47. *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 3. Aquinas says, moreover, that a thing “can be loved perfectly, even without being perfectly known,” since love is directed to the thing as it is in itself rather than simply as it is known by us (ST I–II, q. 27, a. 2 ad 2). This does not at all mean that there is an aspect of goodness that is irrational, or that there is some good that is not *also* true, but only that goodness is perfective with respect to existence rather than with respect to the internalizing of essence, which is what characterizes truth.

48. ST I–II, q. 9, a. 1 ad 3.

49. ST I–II, q. 9, a. 6.

from the sensitive appetites that we share with all other animals, is that it is specifically an *intellectual* appetite: it is not simply the perceived good that moves the human will, but the good that we have apprehended by the intellect. This has three related implications that bear directly on our present question. First, because the intellect is that whereby we grasp the *essence* of things, we see things as they are in themselves and not merely how they seem to us,⁵⁰ i.e., we grasp their being, that is, their *truth*, beyond their mere appearance; it means that the good that moves the will *qua* intellectual appetite is not necessarily and exclusively a good that is relative to an immediate, material need. Instead, we are *most fundamentally* moved by what is good in itself. Second, Aquinas defines the good that is the proper object of the intellectual appetite as the “universal good,”⁵¹ which is, as he explains,⁵² the good understood in its “common ratio”—goodness simply—as distinct from the objects of the concupiscible and irascible appetites, which are set on particular goods, that is, goodness that has been specified in a particular way. It is just this object—goodness itself—that explains the transcendence of the will in relation to those appetites shared in some way with animals. But it is also just this transcendent dimension that allows the human being to act for the *common good*, the good that belongs to the whole of which man is in some sense a part.⁵³ Indeed, according to Aquinas, we are in fact moved by goodness itself before we are moved by particular goods (“before,” here, in a metaphysical rather than in a chronological sense), which means we are moved by the common good prior to our being moved by any “private” good, merely relative to ourselves as individuals. As De Koninck put it, “The common good is both in itself and for us more lovable than the private good.”⁵⁴ Finally, if the will is *essentially* an intellectual

50. The rejection of this by John Locke, e.g., is connected with the impoverished, indeed, the *sterile* notion of the will.

51. ST I, q. 82, a. 4 ad 1.

52. ST I, q. 82, a. 5.

53. For a powerful presentation of this theme, see Charles De Koninck, “On the Primacy of the Common Good: Against the Personalists,” *The Aquinas Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1997): 1–131.

54. *Ibid.*, 23.

appetite, which means that at its heart it is self-moving in being moved by the *true*, the *universal* good, and if the unity of intellect and will represents the heart of the human being,⁵⁵ it follows that a man is most free, most fully a mover of himself—paradoxically—when he is ordered to a good that transcends himself. We have an intuition of this in the fact that the most impressive personality stands out in the man who does not simply drift according to impulses of the moment, but lives with deliberate purpose—and above all with *noble* purpose.⁵⁶

Now, keeping in mind this paradox, namely, that a man is most profoundly himself when he is moved by a good that transcends himself, let us look at some of Aquinas's observations regarding love, *amor*. Aquinas defines love in its simplest sense as the “aptitude or proportion of the appetite to the good.”⁵⁷ In other words, love indicates an ordering to the good, a being *for* it, which implies at the same time, as “complacency in good,”⁵⁸ a being *in* it, and even more basically a being *from* it, insofar as it is the good that orders this aptitude.⁵⁹ Love is after all a passion, a being-moved, more basically than a (deliberate) moving of itself.⁶⁰ He goes on to specify that love always has a twofold movement: every act of love is always both a love *of* something (*amor concupiscentiae*) and *for someone* (*amor amicitiae*), and indeed this second aspect is love in its absolute as opposed to its relative sense.⁶¹ In this respect, love always has what we would today call a *personal* foundation, an ordering, not just to a good in itself, but ultimately to a good for *some person*. This adds a twist to what we

55. We would have to present in another context a longer argument for the unity of intellect and will as representing in a certain respect the *whole* of man moving himself (but see ST I–II, q. 6, a. 1 and especially 2).

56. See the striking passage from a soldier's letter cited in appendix II of De Koninck, “On the Primacy of the Common Good” (108), which stands essentially without comment, because it requires none.

57. ST I–II, q. 25, a. 2.

58. *Ibid.*, cf. ST I–II, q. 26, a. 2.

59. “It belongs to love that the appetite is fitted to receive the good which is loved, inasmuch as the object loved is in the lover” (ST I–II, q. 28, a. 5).

60. See ST I, q. 26, a. 2 and 3, especially ad 4.

61. ST I, q. 26, a. 4.

saw above regarding the nature of the will. With respect specifically to love, we would say that the “universal good” to which the will is ordered is inadequately conceived as simply an *object* of the appetite (love *of* something: *ad bonum* quod *quis vult alteri*), but must be understood ultimately also as essentially including a reference to a subject (love *for* someone: *ad illud cui aliquis vult bonum*). We will return to this point below.

What is important for us now is to consider what Aquinas presents in ST I–II, q. 28 as the *effects* of love. Those directly relevant for our purposes are the following:⁶² *union*, which Aquinas says precedes love as its cause, *is* love, and comes about in a *real* way as an effect of love (article 1); “mutual indwelling,” by which Aquinas means that in love, the beloved is in a genuine sense *in* the lover, and the lover is *in* the beloved, which is what makes love “*intimate*” (article 2); and “ecstasy,” by which the lover is said to transcend himself, i.e., he “goes out from himself,” or “is placed outside of himself” (article 3), in his relation to the beloved. The point here is to see that love, as Aquinas presents it, is more than a reference from a subject to an object that remains at a distance, but is rather a genuinely ontological movement, a movement of the lover’s very self, so that there occurs a genuine unity of being. The lover exists in some real sense outside of himself and *in* the lover (and vice versa)—the lover is moved “to penetrate into [the beloved’s] very soul,” he seeks “to possess the beloved perfectly, by penetrating into his heart”—rather than surface contact, as it were, between two essentially separate beings: “*non est contentus superficiali apprehensione amati.*”⁶³ Now, while one may be inclined, perhaps, along the lines we mentioned above regarding the marriage bond, to give these affirmations a kind of mystical meaning at best, a sense that transcends ordinary experience, and therefore in fact transcends reality; while one, in other words, may be inclined to take these affirmations as poetic metaphor, Aquinas gives these effects of love an ontological sense—and indeed an unqualifiedly *universal* sense. At the end of his thematic discussion of love, Aquinas raises the question whether everything the lover does is done

62. In addition to the ones we mention here, there is zeal (article 4), and the four proximate effects (article 5): melting, enjoyment, languor, and fervor.

63. ST I–II, q. 28, a. 2.

out of love (ST I–II, q. 28, a. 6), and, in light of the extreme description he has just offered of the effects of love, he gives a startling response. Making reference to the great—perhaps the greatest—philosopher of love, Dionysius the Areopagite, Aquinas goes beyond even the universality of the terms in which he put the question: “Every agent acts for an end, as stated above. Now the end is the good desired and loved by each one. Wherefore it is evident that *every* agent, *whatever* it be, does *every* action from love of some kind.”⁶⁴ Not only is every act of a lover an act of love, but everything that acts at all is a lover.

Insofar as everything that happens is an action, and every action implies at some level an agent seeking some good, what this claim means is that everything that happens in the cosmos, every movement of every creature, including man but not limited to him, is an expression of love.⁶⁵ But, as we have just observed, love entails an ontological intimacy, an exchange of being, a relationality in which the lover and beloved transcend themselves *into* one another, and are joined together in some ontological sense. If every action of every agent is an expression of love, it means that all of the interaction of things we witness in the world is not a mere colliding at the surface—atoms in the void—but an intimate communication of being. Of course, love in the most proper sense is love of friendship, which is possible only between persons. But Aquinas insists, with the whole classical Christian tradition, that love exists analogously at every level of being: he distinguishes between natural love, which is ordination to the good and characterizes all things without exception, even inanimate and non-sentient creatures, since these too bear a relation to goodness;⁶⁶ sensitive or animal love, which characterizes those things capable of perceiving and so pursuing the good; and rational or intellectual love, which belongs to those beings able to will the good in its truth.⁶⁷ These different loves are analogous because they all represent

64. ST I–II, q. 28, a. 6. Emphasis added.

65. ST I–II, q. 8, a. 1. Evil too has intelligibility only in relation to love—so it can be said to be an expression of love *negatively*, by its absence.

66. ST I–II, q. 26, a. 1.

67. See *ibid.* Aquinas makes a distinction between rational and properly intellectual love, but it is not relevant to our discussion.

existence from, in, and for the good, but different levels of intimacy in the participation in that ordination, different capacities to internalize it.

The point of seeing the universality of love, its analogous expression at every level of being, is not merely to understand something about rocks and trees, but also to understand the human being in a particular way: my deliberate acts of love are a rational participation in a love that involves the whole of my being, and includes not only my sensible appetites, but my body simply. My whole being is in my love. Moreover, just as every action in the cosmos is an analogous expression of love, so too every single action that I perform, and so a fortiori every act of will, is an analogous expression of love. There is a kind of self-communication, an intimate self-transcendence, that occurs in every choice I make without exception. Insofar as action is in a basic respect definitive—history can never be undone—we can say that this communication of self shares in the form of a gift, which Aristotle has said is characterized specifically as something given without the expectation of return.⁶⁸ I make a gift of myself in some analogous sense in everything I do.

Here we begin to see some of the metaphysical depths of the language of self-gift, which is so prominent, for example, in the thought of John Paul II, and has become standard in Church teaching especially regarding marriage and family.⁶⁹ In an essay composed before his election to the papacy, “The Person: Subject and Community,” Karol Wojtyła wrote of the special capacity for self-determination that characterizes human beings as persons.⁷⁰ One of the governing principles of his reflection is

68. See Aristotle, *Topics*, IV.4: a gift is a “grant that need not be returned.” Aquinas cites this text in ST I, q. 38, a. 2.

69. In what follows, we are discussing the notion of self-gift specifically in the active form of giving oneself *to* another, a gift that has its paradigm, we will suggest, in the exchange of wedding vows. But it ought to be noted that, even more basic than this giving of oneself to another is the *receiving of oneself from another*. The paradigm of this gift of self is the child. A complete notion of self-gift in the created realm requires the two irreducibly different poles of filiality and sponsality.

70. This text, originally published in Polish in 1976, is found in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 219–61.

the scholastic axiom, *operari sequitur esse*, action follows being, which Wojtyła interprets in the very strong sense as implying an inseparable connection between morality and ontology, action and being, such that one cannot act without this action having ontological implications *also* for the one acting.⁷¹ On the basis of this principle, Wojtyła explains that human action, which originates in subjectivity, is not only transitive, an acting *on* some object, but always at the same time “non-transitive”: human action is always a kind of self-determination; we do not only *effect* something in our action, but we *become* something as well.⁷² The meaning of this affirmation stands out in particular relief in relation to what we just saw in Aquinas: I communicate something of my very being in what I do; I am inescapably involved in my action.⁷³ Action involves me intimately; I join with the good, I indwell it intimately, in my choosing it; in some analogous sense—because this act is an expression of love—I become part of it and it becomes part of me.

According to Wojtyła, the axiom *operari sequitur esse* implies what we might call a kind of reflexivity between “subject” and “object”: the kind of being the subject is inseparable from the nature of its object and the aspect under which the subject wills the object. Thus, for example, to treat a thing of beauty as nothing more than an object of sensible appetite is to deny anything in one’s subjectivity that would transcend sensible appetite. This act affects not just the object, but also the subject, which thereby makes itself a being of mere physical desire. Now, as we saw above, man has the unique capacity to pursue the good *simpliciter*, that is, to affirm a thing as good *in itself* and not merely

71. *Ibid.*, 223–25. To support the reciprocity in Wojtyła’s interpretation, we ought to complement the scholastic axiom with its converse, *esse sequitur operari*, as Balthasar does (replacing *operari* with *agere*). This, according to Balthasar, is the principle of drama: see *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2: *Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 11.

72. Wojtyła, “The Person,” 227.

73. Ferdinand Ulrich shows that this means that I in some sense catch up with my being in my acting, which is why he characterizes the human intellect and will as radically “poor,” but rich in this poverty that connects it to being beyond its essence: see his *Homo Abyssus: Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1998), 394–97.

as relative to his immediate needs. He is able to do something for no other reason than because it is good. But this action, too, is reflexive, which means that in transcending himself through pursuit of an intrinsic good, man simultaneously affirms himself as an intrinsic good.⁷⁴ Wojtyła explains that we are free only in the kind of transcendence that characterizes man, and transcendence is possible only in relation to a true good, which is affirmed as such. There is for this reason, Wojtyła says, an essential connection between freedom and conscience: one possesses oneself fully, and genuinely determines oneself, only in action responsive to a true good.⁷⁵ Here we see, once again, the point made above, namely, that man perfects himself, he moves himself wholly and as a whole, precisely by transcending himself in relation to a common good beyond his mere individuality. In this sense, autonomy and relatedness to what is other, properly understood, are not only able to be brought into harmony, but are reciprocally dependent, and, in a certain respect, aspects of one and the same reality.⁷⁶

Now, what Wojtyła adds to what we saw in Aquinas is an explicit reflection on the meaning of *person*.⁷⁷ I make manifest my own intrinsic goodness when I face the other as intrinsically good, an end in himself, but I become a *person* only in relation to another *person*: when I face the other, not merely as an intrinsic good, but as a *Thou*.⁷⁸ Wojtyła refers approvingly to the claim

74. Wojtyła, "The Person," 235.

75. *Ibid.*, 234. "Conscience," here, has a strongly objective sense.

76. Wojtyła uses the term "autoteleology" here (232–33), which is often used to specify the activity proper to an organism, but it ought to be noted that the self-seeking that characterizes man necessarily coincides, for Wojtyła, with the transcendence of the self toward the true good.

77. Not that this is absent, of course. Indeed, one of the tasks Wojtyła took upon himself was to set this aspect of Aquinas's thought into relief: see his "Thomistic Personalism," *Person and Community*, 165–75.

78. It is interesting to reflect on the fact that the notion of person is essentially relational: see the discussion of the origins of the notion in Kenneth Schmitz, "The Geography of the Human Person," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 13 (Spring 1986): 27–48. The notion arose (beyond its original legal context) through trinitarian theology; significantly, the word "Person" was not used of God, simply, until the nineteenth century in Schleiermacher.

that “the *I* is in a sense constituted by the *Thou*.”⁷⁹ How does this happen? Here the reflexivity we mentioned above acquires a sense that we ought to recognize as paradigmatic, at least in the form this reflexivity takes, in friendship and love.⁸⁰ The other in an I-Thou relationship is not only an object but also a subject. The good, we might say, in which I involve myself in my acts of will is in this case not just *something*, but *someone*. Initially, the “someone” may be present in my action only as its recipient, but in the more proper I-Thou relationship the other reciprocates my action. In this case, the relationship between the good and the will we described above becomes more complex. The good here is not simply an “unmoved mover” of my will, but is now a person who *actively* moves me. There is a deeper kind of self-transcendence possible in this case, one that is enabled by the other’s co-action, since I am not only involved in the good that attracts me but I am *received* by the person. My action toward the other thus in turn has itself the form of *receiving him* as a person in his own self-giving. Human action comes to a certain completion here as inter-action, as a reciprocal relation between persons, which necessarily entails a special kind of respect and responsibility.⁸¹ Wojtyła says:

The more profound, integral, intense the bond between the *I* and the *Thou* in these mutual relationships, and the more it takes on the character of trust, a giving of oneself, and (to the extent possible in the relation of one person to another) a special kind of belonging, the greater the need for the mutual acceptance and affirmation of the *I* by the *Thou* in its personal subjectivity, in the whole structure of self-possession and in full harmony with the personal transcendence that expresses itself in acts of conscience.⁸²

79. Wojtyła, “The Person,” 241. This claim, properly interpreted, does not mean that person is purely relational, without reference to substance, or that the person is a purely socially created reality.

80. We ought to recognize that all social interaction between human beings, not just love and friendship, has an “I-Thou” dimension: Wojtyła, “The Person,” 243.

81. *Ibid.*, 246.

82. *Ibid.*, 245–46.

We can deepen the sense of this affirmation from the perspective of what we drew from Aquinas. We saw that all activity, of whatever sort, is an act of love, but the fundamental form of love, which underlies all other expressions, is the love of friendship: not just a love *of* some good, but love *for* someone. If there is something analogous to a self-gift in all action, as we suggested above, this analogy has its founding principle in personal love, or we can make what amounts to the same point, conversely, by saying that personal love is the perfection of what all being expresses in an inchoate fashion. In any event, the self-gift *to a person* is the basis for every other gift a person makes. As Aquinas put it, love is the “first gift, through which all free gifts are given,”⁸³ because at the basis of any gift is the love for the person as the one to whom we give. The accusative dimension (*ad illud bonum quod vult*) rests inside of the dative dimension (*ad illud cui bonum vult*) in which the word “gift” is explicitly signaled (dative: *dare, datum*, etc.). In a discussion of the meaning of religious life, Aquinas says that those who have taken vows “may be compared to those who do some particular good work as the infinite is compared to the finite. Whoever gives *himself* to another to do all the other may command, gives himself infinitely more than does one who gives himself to do some particular work.”⁸⁴ By analogy, we might say that one who gives not just some particular thing, but *his love*, to another, thereby gives each of his gifts an infinite depth even in their particularity. In this sense, the act of giving oneself in love is the perfection of self-determination, which gives all other choices a certain depth of substance.

5. LOVE AS A RELATIONSHIP THAT TRANSCENDS ITSELF

But right here we run into a problem that requires further penetration. It is not difficult to understand what it would mean to give some *thing* as a gift out of love, but what could it mean to give *love* as a gift? What could it mean, in other words, to give one’s very *self*? We often think of love—not altogether impro-

83. ST I, q. 38, a. 2.

84. *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, q. 3, a. 7 ad 6. Emphasis added.

erly, to be sure—as a sort of act originating in the self and extending to the other whom we love. But to say that *love itself*, or indeed, one’s very self, is given complicates this way of thinking: the other is no longer (simply) the *object* of my love, but is now in some sense also its subject. One might wish to interpret this claim in a weak sense, and say that what the gift of self really means is the gift of an unconditional good will: I give you not just some good thing but my willingness to give you all good things. Aquinas (following Aristotle), however, distinguishes between love and benevolence or goodwill. Benevolence, i.e., wishing a person well, is an essential part of love but is not sufficient for it, insofar as benevolence does not necessarily include *unity*; one can wish another well as one individual in relation to another who remains in every other respect a separate individual. But love implies a *unity* of the two: “To love is indeed an act of the will tending to the good, but it adds a certain union with the beloved, which union is not denoted by goodwill.”⁸⁵ A *certain* union, he says. Of what sort? In this particular article, Aquinas speaks of the “unity of affection.” But we have to be careful not to interpret this from within the context of the contemporary impoverished notion of the will, a context that would incline us to understand this in a superficial sense of “feeling like” I and the other are connected—i.e., we enjoy the sensation of unity, we have the appearance of being one, though of course in reality we are two separate individuals. Instead, insofar as the unity of affection *is in fact* a unity, the sensible experience of unity has to be understood as a function of its reality. Affection, after all, implies a kind of attachment that precedes my deliberate acts and provides the prior context from within which those acts occur.⁸⁶ Aquinas says in another context that the unity or “bond of affection,” which is essentially love itself, “is likened to substantial union, inasmuch as the lover stands to the object of love, as to himself.”⁸⁷ Love is more than goodwill because of the union it

85. ST II–II, q. 27, a. 2 ad 2.

86. This is why we tend to use organic as opposed to technological metaphors to speak of affection: we say that affection has to *grow*, and we confess that one cannot *make* oneself feel affection for another.

87. ST I–II, q. 28, a. 1 ad 2. This is said specifically in relation to the love of friendship, but we have to recognize that all love, including *amor concupis-*

implies, and this comes about because the two are joined together in some genuinely ontological sense in a bond.

But have we yet gotten in fact beyond metaphor? Couldn't we emphasize, in the words just quoted, the "*likened to . . .*" and interpret the "as" in the phrase "as to himself" specifically in the sense of an "as *if*"? After all, no one can deny that two friends, however "close" they may be, remain just that, *two* friends, i.e., two individuals who "mean a lot" to each other, but mean a lot specifically to each as an individual. It is just this objection that prompts us to take a further step, which proves to be the decisive one. We note that Wojtyła, interestingly, does not highlight the aspect of unity in his description of the I-Thou relationship.⁸⁸ Quite to the contrary, primarily because of the centrality of the uniqueness and individuality of the person it entails, this relationship sets into relief the aspect of individual self-fulfillment and self-affirmation that is part of the meaning of the person.

In its basic form, the *I-Thou* relationship, far from leading me away from my subjectivity, in some sense more firmly grounds me in it. The structure of the relation is to some degree a confirmation of the structure of the subject and of the subject's priority with respect to the relation.⁸⁹

Although this observation is—rightly—meant to be fundamentally positive rather than critical, we ought to take full cognizance of what it makes evident, namely, that the *interpersonal* relationship, though it has an inner tendency to genuine unity, does not have unity as its defining essence. This is why it can tend to take the form of a coincidence of individual self-interests. In this case, the transcendence of the I in relation to the Thou loses precisely its substance, the relationship devolves into one primarily of recipro-

centiae, gives rise to a bond of some form because a kind of self-gift is present in every act of love.

88. The language begins to appear just before he transitions to a discussion of the "we" relationship: these are clearly not simply two separate categories, but have an intrinsic connection to each other. The "bond" he mentions in the long passage we quoted above, for example, occurs just before he turns to discuss the "we" relationship.

89. Wojtyła, "The Person," 243.

cal use or pleasure. If it is, as we have seen, precisely goodness as such that effects genuine transcendence, then we can say that what is missing in the case of the coincidence of self-interests is the good as the ordering principle of the relationship. Wojtyła draws a strong distinction between the “I-Thou” and the “we” relationship.⁹⁰ It is only this latter that is properly social, he explains, because it is here that the activities of the individual subjectivities are gathered up into a unity in relation to a *common good*.⁹¹

In order to understand why this aspect is indispensable specifically in relation to the notion of love or gift, it is helpful to consider the famous argument of Richard of St. Victor regarding the understanding of God as a Trinity of Persons.⁹² According to Richard, self-gift cannot be perfect simply between two persons alone. Of the reasons he gives to explain, we will highlight a single one here: in the “basic form” of the interpersonal relationship, the supreme good of person A is B, and the supreme good of B is A. Because these are radically different goods—as irreducibly different persons—then there is no perfect unity here. No matter how deeply and inextricably intertwined they are, these are two coinciding loves, and *not one*. For there to be *one* love requires a good that transcends each of the two in their individuality. (It would not be proper to say that I and another are perfectly united because we both love *me* above all things!)⁹³ A *unity* of persons—a “we”—requires a common good, which both (or all) pursue. Without this common good that transcends each of the two and so unites them, the lovers may be said to give *of* themselves, but not yet to give *themselves*, i.e., to make a complete *gift* of themselves, insofar as, in their interpersonal love, they remain two individuals who still belong

90. Indeed, he suggests that the two are seemingly “mutually irreducible” (ibid., 240), which does not mean that they cannot coincide, as we shall see.

91. Ibid., 247.

92. Richard of St. Victor, *Book Three of the Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 371–98.

93. This seems, incidently, to be behind Aristotle’s apparently small regard for the *eros* relationship, which, in contrast to *philia*, struck him as often lacking in the unity that defines friendship. *Eros* approximates friendship, however, with the appearance of the child, who becomes the common good that unifies the relationship (this is why couples without children, he says, break up more easily than those with children): see *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.12.1162a20ff.

most basically to themselves however much they relate themselves to the other.

Now, as is well known, the best form of friendship, for Aristotle, is the friendship of virtue, in which each joins with the other in pursuit of the common good of human excellence. It is in relation to this good, indeed, that each makes manifest his own intrinsic goodness. But what happens, here, to the interpersonal dimension? Is the love directed to the virtue, or to the other person with whom I pursue it? Am I giving myself to the common good, or to the Thou, and, if both—which would seem to be the correct response—what exactly is the relationship between these two movements of love? It is in response to this particular question that we see the profound significance of marriage for a proper understanding of human nature. In marriage, the interpersonal and the social, the I-Thou and the We, the love of the common good and the love of the person, the love of desire (for the good) and of friendship (for the person) perfectly coincide in principle. When I make my vows in marriage, I consent not only to the other person, but to *the unity* with the other, which is marriage itself.⁹⁴ The institutional aspect is crucial here: marriage itself is a *common good* that transcends the individual goods of the two spouses and indeed transcends even their sum; but at the same time, this good points directly to the interpersonal relationship.⁹⁵ In the interpersonal “I-Thou,” each transcends himself toward the other, but in the marital “we,” the very relationship transcends itself, and it is just this “higher order” transcendence, if we may call it thus,⁹⁶ that prevents the interpersonal relationship from degenerating into an *égoïsme à deux*.

94. ST Suppl., q. 45, a. 1 ad 3: “Just as marriage is one on the part of the object to which the union is directed, whereas it is more than one on the part of the persons united, so too the consent is one on the part of the thing consented to, namely, the aforesaid union, whereas it is more than one on the part of the persons consenting. Nor is the direct object of consent a husband but union with a husband on the part of the wife, even as it is union with a wife on the part of the husband.”

95. See Wojtyła, “The Person,” 247–48: in marriage, the spouses “do not cease being an *I* and a *thou*, and they also do not cease being in an interpersonal *I-Thou* relationship. In fact, their *I-Thou* relationship in its own way draws upon the *we* relationship and is enriched by it.”

96. To use scholastic language, we would say that the *esse* of the interpersonal relationship is elevated to a *bene esse* in the social “we.”

This is why Richard of St. Victor said that love in the complete sense has an essentially “triadic” form.⁹⁷

Given the structure of human freedom in its relation to the good and love, it is not an accident that we can finally speak here in a strict and complete sense of a gift of self. The gift of love at the center of the meaning of love is not just goodwill, but ultimately union; this union has its paradigm in the exchange of vows. There is here a perfect expression of the three effects of love we indicated above: unity, mutual indwelling, and ecstasy. In reflecting on marriage as a paradigm of self-gift, it is first of all crucial to note that, because of the reflexivity of freedom, the self-determination in the affirmation of a good, it is important to recall that one can give oneself in a complete way only through the simultaneous receiving of another self-gift, which is to say that one can *give* oneself only to a person, and indeed only to a person who gives himself in turn.⁹⁸ To put it in language that I will clarify in a moment, I can realize my freedom only in relation to the realized freedom of another. One can “give oneself” to an ideal, to a noble good, but here we are using the term “gift” analogously, and the analogy has sense only in relation to its principle. A “self-giving” to a person who does not reciprocate is more like the devotion to an ideal than it is to self-gift in the strict sense. Fidelity to one’s (private) promise to another, such as we find for example in the novel *Jayber Crow*,⁹⁹ is more like a being true to oneself than it is a *belonging to another*. But in marriage, one no longer belongs to oneself, first of all, but now possesses oneself henceforward *as a member*: one belongs to another, and because this belonging is reciprocated, one belongs *with* another to something larger. We can illuminate this point by contrasting it to an argument made by Kant. According to Kant, *eros* implies the loss of personal dignity because it is a form

97. It is beyond the scope of this essay, but the connection ought to be explored between the God who is love *as Trinity* and the affirmation of love as having the inner form of a vow: see Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 58–65.

98. This presents one of the difficulties of same-sex marriage: it cannot have a single act that is a naturally reciprocal giving and receiving, but just an acting on another, which is perhaps then reciprocated.

99. Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2001).

of heteronomy, a subjection to the other. Marriage, for him, is the only place for *eros* that respects human dignity because in this case one gives oneself away only to a person whom one at the same time has in one's possession. There is therefore no real loss. Michael Waldstein brilliantly compared this to remedying one's invariable tendency to lose in gambling by buying the casino. It is not an accident that Kant conceives of marriage as an exchange of property rights, a contract granting permission for the reciprocal use of one another's sexual attributes. The argument we are making here is the exact opposite one: marriage is a special manifestation of human dignity, not because it represents a strategy for overcoming the inevitable loss of self, but because it is a perfect form of self-gift.

Here, we return to the *ontological* significance of the "one flesh" union: the giving of oneself and receiving the self-gift of another is a real exchange of substance because it is the paradigmatic fulfillment of what is foreshadowed and imitated in the self-communication and so intimate self-involvement in all acts of the will. The enactment of marriage, in this respect, is the culmination of the will; it is thus the perfection of freedom. Because every act of will is a communication of substance, the perfect act of will, which is not just a gift of a part of the self—an expression of the self or an offering of something that belongs to the self—but a gift of the very self, can be understood as generative of a new substance, or at least something analogous to substance, a "single new existence." In the reciprocal self-transcendence, the two persons "end up," as it were, in an ontological condition different from the one from which they started; they transcend themselves into the other in a third, in the union that transcends them both. We can therefore speak here in a *natural* way of a kind of "transubstantiation." This kind of self-transcending relationship makes marriage different in kind from a merely "interpersonal" I-Thou, no matter how deep that relationship may be. In contrast to the sterility of will that we saw implicit in Luther's emptying of the vows of any ontological density, which renders marriage nothing more than a legal contract regarding external actions and property, we see here a kind of fruitfulness that bears an analogy to the procreation of the child in the bodily self-gift of the marital act. In this case, we have the generation of a genuine ontological reality, the "single new existence," of

the marriage bond. It is this ontological reality, and not a mere juridical fiat, positivistically conceived, that makes marriage indissoluble in principle. In other words, it is indissoluble not just because everyone agrees to say it is, which means it exists only in the wills of the people concerned, but because it *is* something in itself.¹⁰⁰ To weaken or deny this indissolubility, and the ontological reality it expresses, is to render the will impotent in principle and therefore in *all* of its acts, or in other words, to make it literally “insubstantial.”

6. THE RELATION BETWEEN LOVE AND BOND

We saw above that at the heart of the sterility of will lies the separation of vow and bond, which is demanded once we define freedom as the power to choose. Let us, in closing, reflect for a moment on the connection between the two, or more specifically between bond and self-gift, in light of the alternative conception of freedom we have outlined here. According to Aquinas, unity has a threefold connection to love.¹⁰¹ Unity is the *cause* of love in the sense of a common good that joins together a multiplicity: one loves oneself because of the substantial union one has with oneself and loves another because the two share a form, which “makes them to be, in a manner, one in that form.”¹⁰² Second, unity is the essence of love insofar as love is a “bond of affection,” which we briefly discussed above. And, finally, unity is the *effect*

100. For an example of the contrary claim, see Theodore Mackin: “the theologians are accurate in finding the heart of a marriage’s indestructibility in an effect that Christ’s volitional love works in the spouses’ volitional love. But it is not clear that in finding marital indissolubility at the juncture of the two wills, divine and human, they have not destroyed human freedom in the latter—and thus destroyed the power to love. . . . I recommend that the words ‘indissoluble’ and ‘indissolubility’ be abandoned. Predicated of sacramental marriages they have suggested for centuries that these marriages hold a quality, an indestructibility, that transcends the volition of the spouses” (“The International Theological Commission and Indissolubility,” in *Divorce and Remarriage: Religious and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. William R. Roberts [Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1990], 59. I am grateful to Nicholas Healy for this reference).

101. ST I–II, q. 28, a. 1 ad 2.

102. ST I–II, q. 27, a. 3.

of love insofar as lovers seek a “real union,” that is, they seek to be together in the manner appropriate in terms of real physical presence: “to live together, speak together, and be united together in other like things.”

Now, Aquinas is here describing love in general, which would embrace *philia* as much as *eros* or *agape*. But let us consider these three aspects of unity specifically in relation to the self-gift of marriage. That unity is the essence of marriage is clear enough from what we said above: marriage is a “one-flesh union,” which has a substantial reality to it beyond the simple “unity of affection” by virtue of the complete gift of self enacted through consent. As for the “real union” that Aquinas describes as the effect of love, one naturally thinks, in marriage, not only of the complex joining together of the lives of two human beings, but more specifically of the conjugal act, which is of course a paradigm of physical intimacy. But we ought to see that the child that is born of this intimacy is a further dimension of this “real union”: if the union of the spouses is only implicit (though no less genuine) in the child, the substantial *reality* of the marital union, perhaps only implicit in the conjugal act (though no less genuine), is manifest directly in this fruit of the spouses’ love. In addition to the conjugal act and the child, our foregoing reflection leads us to see the marriage bond itself as a “real union” that comes about as an effect of love, a spiritual real union that has its twofold incarnate image in the conjugal act, on the one hand, and the child, on the other.

Finally, unity as *cause* of love. Aquinas distinguishes between the substantial unity that causes self-love and the unity in a common form, the unity of “likeness,” that causes love of the other. How does this distinction fit marriage? It is clear that there is a “likeness” between man and woman: the first example Aquinas offers of a common form that causes love is that of the “species of humanity” that allows love between human beings.¹⁰³ Man and woman clearly share the form of humanity. The creation story of Genesis, however, suggests a more “incarnate” unity as the cause of married love: man and woman share not only the same universal species, but, more intimately, they share in some sense the same body: bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

103. Ibid.

Eve was fashioned from the very side of Adam, and it is precisely *this* “consubstantiality” that allows them the utterly unique intimacy of the one-flesh union that defines marriage.

But there is still more to be said: the bond of marriage is not just a love between two human beings, or even simply between a man and a woman, but between *this* man and *this* woman. We wish to suggest that there is also a profound sense in which the one-flesh union of marriage is not only the essence and the fruit of this love, but a *cause* of it; it is what makes the love possible in the first place. It is, in other words, not just the self-gift in the vows that brings about the bond, but the bond that in turn brings about the self-gift of the spouses: this is the great mystery of marriage. In explaining the meaning of the Christian form as a state of life, Balthasar points to marriage as perhaps the clearest illustration of what such a life-form means:

When they make their promises, the spouses are not relying on themselves—the shifting songs of their own freedom—but rather on the form that chooses them because they have chosen it, the form to which they have committed themselves in their act as persons. As persons, the spouses entrust themselves not only to the beloved “Thou” and to the biological laws of fertility and family; they entrust themselves foremost to a form with which they can wholly identify themselves even in the deepest aspects of their personality because this form extends through all the levels of life—from its biological roots up to the very heights of grace and of life in the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁴

The phrase we wish to draw attention to first here is that the form of marriage “chooses them because they have chosen it.” This phrase gives expression to the metaphysical principle that actuality always precedes possibility,¹⁰⁵ and that potency can be reduced to act only by something in a state of actuality.¹⁰⁶ Contrary to liberal ideology, one of the seeds of which we find

104. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 27. Note that the identification of the self with the form is a way of expressing the fact that consent is not just to the other, but to the unity with the other.

105. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IX. 8.

106. See, e.g., ST I, q. 2, a. 3; I-II, q. 9, a. 1.

in Luther's thought described above, the marriage bond is not simply produced by the two wills that constitute it, so that it is nothing more than a sum of its individual parts, nothing more than the wills that bring it about now in the fervor of their love but that will grow cold later. When this inevitably happens, the two will have to choose whether to continue to remain constant to a purely extrinsic obligation or to agree to separate.¹⁰⁷ Instead, the bond has, as we have seen, a reality in itself, which means that it comes into being, paradoxically, precisely as something that *precedes* the very wills that constitute it. This is what Balthasar's phrase expresses in a succinct way. The marriage is not only a function of the spouses' wills, but their wills are in turn, and even more fundamentally, a function, so to speak, of the marriage itself. However paradoxical this may seem when put in these metaphysical terms, concretely it is quite a normal experience: spouses speak of "growing *into* their love" and of finding the strength to persevere through difficult moments precisely on the basis of the permanence of the vows—i.e., their generating a reality that transcends the particular moments of history and so is not completely at the mercy of that history. Because I have "always already" given myself perfectly in the original act of consent, I am able to give myself here and now and in each moment to come. The vow does not kill love, as Luther's judgment seems to suggest, but is just what can most profoundly keep it alive.

This "from above" dimension of the marriage bond, which chooses us because we have chosen it, may initially seem bizarre, a sort of "*deus ex machina*," which is extraneously appended to what would otherwise seem to be a normal human activity. But we need to recognize, once again, that this is in fact simply the "perfect" expression of what occurs in every act of will: as we saw above, the will moves itself only in being moved by the good, which means its own causal activity *always* occurs inside of the "from above" causality of the good. This is why Aquinas can say that God is in fact in a certain sense the exclusive cause of

107. Two beautiful texts expressing the meaning of fidelity in terms of an intimate participation in a reality bigger than oneself *as opposed to* simple constancy in one's duty to an external obligation: Gabriel Marcel, "Creative Fidelity," in *Creative Fidelity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 147–74; and Wendell Berry, "The Body and the Earth," in *Recollected Essays 1965–1980* (New York: North Point Press, 1996), 269–326.

every human act of will¹⁰⁸—though of course God’s is a generous causality that, precisely *in* its exclusiveness, *includes* the spontaneous participation of our freedom. Though this divine causality is operative in every human act, we have to see that it operates in a special way in what we have been describing as the paradigmatic act of human freedom, namely, the exchange of vows. Here, it is not just some aspect of the will, or of the person through the will, that is being moved in its self-moving, but the whole existence of the person. It would seem proper—though this is somewhat speculative—to say that God is involved causally here in a direct and immediate way, and not simply through the mediation of goodness that occurs in ordinary acts of the will. Following the analogy we have been describing in this essay, we might say that God is an immediate cause of the marriage bond—through the instrumentality of the spouses’ freedom—in a manner similar, on the one hand, to God’s immediate creation of the soul of the child in the spouses’ generative embrace, and, on the other, to the real communication of grace in the sacraments. In any event, we can say that, because it is a *kind* of transubstantiation, the act of marriage, *as* marriage, is always an essentially religious event, and it is no surprise that it has nearly always in every culture been recognized as such. This interpretation would help explain why the marriage of two baptized individuals is always sacramental, and why the effecting of this sacramental reality requires only an assent to the natural form of marriage in the presence of the Church’s witness.¹⁰⁹ If John Paul II pointed to the extraordinary significance of this unique feature of marriage as offering as yet untapped resources for our understanding of the relation between nature and grace,¹¹⁰ it is because here we find the summit of human freedom opening up from within to grace, a paradigm of simultaneous elevation and fulfillment.

108. ST I–II, q. 9, a. 6.

109. See Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Rota (26 January 2013), 1, in which he cites John Paul II, Address to the Roman Rota (30 January 2003), 8, with approval. We might compare the natural movement of marriage that opens it up to the order of grace to what Ferdinand Ulrich has argued about the natural movement of metaphysics that opens it up from within to faith: see, for example, his *Homo Abyssus*, 110–17.

110. John Paul II, Address to the Roman Rota (30 January 2003), 5; cf., the profound observations on this score in John Paul II, Address to the Roman Rota (1 February 2001), 8.

There is nothing more human than marriage, and yet no general human reality is more full of grace: marriage is, as St. Paul said, the “mega mystery.”

This last point reveals to us at an even more profound level why there is a connection between the crisis of marriage, to which the upcoming synods seek to respond, and the broad crisis of meaning. What is at stake in the question of marriage is not simply the health of our couples, our families, and the societies that are formed from the cells of families, as utterly serious as these matters are. What is at stake is, indeed, the meaning of existence simply, its capacity to become translucent so that the divine light can enter in and make it radiant. We have lost trust in man’s capacity to know reality as a whole, and we have lost confidence in the will’s capacity to give its consent to the whole and as a whole. To respond to the crisis of marriage, we need in the first place to deepen and strengthen our sense of the reality of the marriage bond—whatever urgent pastoral matters also need to be addressed. This involves, in a more original way, overcoming the modern sterility of will by retrieving a more substantial sense of freedom. Instead of freedom as the power to choose, we need to understand freedom as the gift of self, the communication of one’s being. When we think of it in this way, marriage comes to present itself not as the free cancellation of freedom—the “liberty to sell one’s liberty,” as Chesterton put it—but the *free perfection* of freedom: the liberty to *be* free, the self-gift that enables one to make a gift of oneself, to give oneself away in love.¹¹¹ If this freedom is darkened, so too is human existence.

Meaning is connection to something larger, the experience of oneself as part of a whole. The Church is the instrument of redemption, and so concerned in a fundamental way with human flourishing. In this sense, the Church has a special task to safeguard meaning. For just this reason, she has to preserve the

111. This does not imply the rejection of freedom as the power to choose, but a reinterpretation of what this phrase means: *not* power as separate from actuality and so as simply “open” in an indeterminate way, but as intrinsically connected to actuality. It is the *real* power to choose in the way that a consummate pianist has the power to play piano—as opposed to myself: I have the power to play piano in a completely “open” and indeterminate sense; in this sense, I equally have the power to play violin or fly a plane, or any other of an infinite array of options: there is no coercive force in principle keeping me from giving any one of them a try. (Except perhaps flying a plane!)

human capacity for the whole, which we find, according to different orders, in philosophy and in marriage. It is precisely because Christians are concerned with the crisis of meaning that afflicts the contemporary world that they are called in a special sense to be both the “guardian[s] of metaphysics”¹¹² and the guardians of marriage: “The form of marriage, too, from which derives the beauty of human existence, is today more than ever entrusted to the care of Christians.”¹¹³ □

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112. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 656. Cf. the entire final section, 646–56.

113. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, 28.