

PASTORAL CARE OF MARRIAGE:
AFFIRMING THE UNITY OF
MERCY AND TRUTH

FABRIZIO MERONI

“Failing to strengthen love’s demand for
faithfulness unto death . . . will take the Church to
the point of becoming worldly, insignificant, and
pastorally incapable of communicating God’s love.”



He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms,
he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.
—Is 40:11

1. LOVE IS STILL POSSIBLE

The mission of the Church is pastoral because of her divine motherhood: the Bride of Christ, pregnant with the Holy Spirit, conceives, gives birth, and nurtures the children she receives gratuitously from God. These children, the entirety of humanity, are sons and daughters of God in her flesh. The more she is united with the eucharistic Body and Blood of her Lord Jesus Christ, the more she can be mother, teacher, good shepherd, and merci-

ful judge. Nothing she has and shares belongs to her; everything comes as a sacrificed gift from above, from her Lord, her Head, and her Spouse. In the blessed Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, the Church is mother since she faithfully receives divine life, cherishes it in her heart, and freely gives it away for the sake of her children's life (Lk 2:51).¹ Pastoral ministry consists of letting her risen Lord make her so intensively one with him that she becomes a transparent and sacramental instrument for Christ's pastoral mission. The Good Shepherd makes his Church pastoral in and through the spousal unity between himself and his Bride, announced in the Scriptures and made real in the Eucharist, which makes present and active the Cross and Resurrection in the world. Inasmuch as the Church is one with her Lord, she can witness to her children how good and merciful he is and how welcoming she is made to become as house and temple for all men and women seeking life and truth in love. In her pastoral care, "the Church is a mother."²

The Church pastorally cares for her children's life by nurturing them with the Word of God, by teaching the path of Christ's salvation, and by leading them to his eucharistic life. Like any real and loving mother, the pedagogical wisdom of God (the Holy Spirit) enlightens her through the hard discernment of worldly paths. She comes to know in faith and charity, in truth and mercy, how and when her children still need to be fed with milk or, as grown adults, are capable of receiving solid food and of facing the challenge of witnessing to Jesus Christ up to the point of their death (1 Cor 3:1–3; Heb 5:11–14). The solid food of Jesus' Cross is offered to, heals, and saves those who desire to belong to Christ, who is the true Bread come down from Heaven. While we are children of God our Father, we must grow to full stature in Christ and thus become mature in faith. We are called to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of truth and for the salvation of all, thus participating in the universal mission of the Church having come to that full stature. The Church's pastoral work never hides the Cross. It never ignores the hardship of sacrifice for the sake of love (Jn 6:59–71). Life, according to the Gospel,

1. Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (hereafter *EG*), 285.

2. *Ibid.*, 139.

can be given and shared only through free sacrifice. Thus, sacrifice is intrinsic to the truth of love; it is its interior authenticity and purified fruitfulness. “Perfect love is love crucified. But love crucified, as Francis of Assisi said, is also perfect joy.”³

The Church is both mother to all peoples and Bride of Christ: her motherhood is not an abstraction, but—like all motherhood—a function of her indissoluble and ever-deepening unity with her Bridegroom. We know and participate in this unity in a particular and elevated way through the sacrament of the Eucharist. Thus, we see that a special relationship exists between the sacraments of the Eucharist and marriage.

The sacrament of the Eucharist brings the Church and all within her fold into an organic unity with the Lord, the fruit of which we see in the faith of the believers and in the believers themselves—the children of the world, of our mother, the Church. We see this unity and fruitfulness imaged in a particular way in marriage: where two, male and female, come together in such a way as to produce the fruit of a child. It is these two unities—the mysterious and gratuitous unity of creature and Creator in the Eucharist, and the equally mysterious and gratuitous unity of the man and woman in the child—that direct the Bride in all her actions in this world.

Thus, when we speak of the pastoral action of the Church, we must first and foremost know that it only comes from—is the fruit of—the deep unity the Bride has with her Bridegroom. And in recognizing that her actions are only possible within her union to the Good Shepherd himself, the Church uses this union as the principle for all her works.

Human life can be shared and nurtured only through a personal gift in which man and woman can become one and give themselves totally for the sake of the other’s life. By doing so, each of them too can find his or her own life. Pastoral care is concerned with human life from conception to natural death, following the organic movement of a fruitful and free personal surrender in the communion of sexually differentiated human beings. Thus, marriage is at the very core of any pastoral effort, since spousal love possesses a unique character that consists in the

3. Marc Ouellet, “Theological Perspectives on Marriage,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 31 (Fall 2004): 431.

gift of the person.⁴ In her pastoral ministry, the Church tries to avoid any self-centered bureaucratic and administrative concern. She engages herself outwardly so people can share God's life in a very personal way.

The pastoral dimension of the mission of the Church is defined by her sacramental capacity to offer Christ's life and salvation. In fact, by conceiving and giving birth to God's children, the mission of the Church is pastoral. Therefore, marriage, the loving, unique, irrevocable, and fruitful communion of a man, the groom, and a woman, the bride, stands at the heart of the Church's mission. Marriage's pastoral care cannot become one concern in the midst of others. Indeed, the Church exists to communicate God's life to the world. Marriage and family, wife and husband in and through their children, are at the heart of her existence and mission.⁵

As just mentioned, it is both a gift and a mystery that the concrete personal mediation of a man and woman, who in the sacrament become husband and wife, father and mother, is always needed for any child of God to come into the world. Marriage is thus not simply an object of the pastoral care of the Church. Insofar as life in the family of God is the reason for the Church's creation and existence in the Cross as Christ's Spouse, marriage as such becomes the real subject, foundation, and active structure of any serious and true pastoral work of the ecclesial community. Pastoral activity should be molded and structured upon marriage and family since the gift of full life needs to be shared in a very personal way. The Church is called to witness to and work for the glory of God, the living man. Giving birth to a child, the Church receives him from God through the human and sacramental mediation of his mother and father (Gn 4:1); she returns this child in Christ to God by Word and sacraments. Marriage and family thereby represent the heart of the Christian Mystery and the reason for the existence of the Church. The world and its life are at the core of our faith, hope, and love: that all might have life, divine life, and have it in abundance (Jn 10:10). The future of humanity and of the Church thus passes

4. Cf. *ibid.*, 430.

5. Cf. Angelo Scola, "The Nuptial Mystery at the Heart of the Church," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 25 (Winter 1998): 630–62.

through the family founded on man and woman's indissoluble and fruitful marriage.⁶

There is in man, paradoxically, an infinite desire for love, always coupled with the concrete experience of weakness and failure to attain that same desire. Marriage has always represented one's handing oneself over to that desire in a way that references that very infinity; the sacrament of marriage confirms for us that this desire for an infinity is not only answerable, but constitutive of humanity: the exclusiveness of the beloved, the human capacity of fully entrusting one's self totally (body and soul) to the other, and the transcending fruitfulness of total entrustment give us hope that love is still possible and worth living. We know, through Christ's love and unity with his Church, and thereby in every sacramental marriage, that love is not simply an ideal. Fears and failures can never condemn man and woman to a frustrating desire for a promised but unreachable happiness. The positive and hopeful newness of the Church's Gospel is that in Christ's love for us, the miracle of a family founded upon the matrimonial bond is a present reality that is genuinely possible and embraceable:

From the moment of their sacramental wedding, Christian spouses have been incorporated into the mission of the Holy Spirit, who not only perfects their natural love but introduces the spouses into the eschatological love that unites Christ and the Church. . . . Conjugal love is therefore taken up and integrated by the charity of Christ, which incorporates it within and puts it at the service of his own nuptial gift for the Church. Such a perspective brings to light the personal character of grace, the dramatic play of the divine persons who come to meet the spouses, who bless them with their Presence, and engage them to serve and glorify God by remaining in the temple of their divine Communion.⁷

The contemporary magisterial concern regarding the role of the baptized spouses' personal faith, for the efficacious validity of the sacrament of marriage,⁸ points out how deficient and weak

6. John Paul II, *Familiaris consortium* (hereafter *FC*), 56, 75, 86.

7. Marc Ouellet, "Theological Perspectives on Marriage," 428.

8. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Pastoral Approach to Marriage Should

the pastoral and doctrinal formation for marriage of engaged couples has been in past decades. As a Church, we often fail to give those who seek sacramental marriage a clear understanding and awareness of their vocation to take part in the divine-human spousal love of Christ and the Church. More than superficial pre-Cana courses, engaged couples should be exposed to an experiential and doctrinal encounter with the living Christ, Son of the Father, whose Church welcomes them as prodigal sons and daughters returning home. They return to Church and ask for the sacrament of marriage in virtue of their human love, their desire to build a family, to raise children, and to be faithful. These desires which motivate their return are interesting and providential.

In Christ's unfailing, faithful love for the Church, all natural love is good and trustworthy insofar as it invites man and woman to give themselves to one another in accordance with the unifying fruitfulness of the sexual difference in their spousal bodies. In faith through the sacrament of marriage, human self-surrender in love can participate in, be embraced and supported by, God's creative faithfulness. Thanks to the sacrament, the spouses, inserted in the love of Christ and the Church, exchange their love in the Lord, receiving and giving to one another from him. They are no longer left alone in their tragic incapacity to speak in words and to realize through their bodies the totality of the nuptial gift proper to human and divine love. Human spouses are given a faithfulness which is not their own. Yet, in faith and sacrament, this faithfulness can become efficaciously theirs. In the sacrament of marriage, they enter a form infinitely greater than their human capacity to love. By the very act of their free obedience to Christ and his Bride, the Church, this form is gratuitously given as gift.⁹

Be Founded on Truth" (originally published in 1998 and republished in *L'Osservatore Romano* on 30 November 2011 with new footnotes). Cf. John Paul II, Address to the Prelate Auditors, Officials and Advocates of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota (Vatican City, 1 February 2001). Cf. Benedict XVI, Address for the Inauguration of the Judicial Year of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota (Vatican City, 26 January 2013).

9. Cf. International Theological Commission, "Christological Theses on the Sacrament of Marriage" (Vatican City, 1977), 7. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 27, translation modified: "What could be stronger than a marriage, or what

This is not romanticism: Christ's spousal form of love is always available and efficacious, both for faithful married couples and for those who, for various reasons, fail or are betrayed in their marriage. In the divine-human form of his spousal love, Christ elevates natural and free consent by making possible and real the indissolubility and totality that the spouses had always originally desired in their conjugal gift, but had been unattainable for their weak and wounded humanity. This elevation exists from the moment of consent in a sacramental marriage, and the crucial point is that it never leaves the marriage, no matter what its present state. Thus every marriage is a real symbol of the divine betrothal and unity of Christ and his Church.

In marriages that fail, Christ offers to the spouses' wounded and broken hearts his Cross and Resurrection as the real hope for their sinful and suffering infidelity to marriage's sacramental form of marriage. It is true that divorced spouses, abandoned spouses, and divorced and remarried couples are called in very different ways to share Christ's suffering and perhaps, most especially, his sacrifice. Depending on their situation—that is, if they are unfaithful to their marriage vows, and thereby to the marriage of Christ and his Church—they cannot receive the Eucharist. This, however, does not mean that they are excluded from the Church or Christ's grace. The more these spouses submit to what is true in the grace they were given at the time of their sacramental consent, the more they will experience God's mercy and forgiveness

shapes any particular life-form more profoundly than does marriage? And marriage is only true to itself if it is a kind of bracket that both transcends and contains all of an individual's cravings to 'break out' of its bonds and to assert himself. Marriage is that indissoluble reality which confronts with an iron hand all existence's tendencies to disintegrate, and it compels the faltering person to grow, beyond himself, into real love by modeling his life on the form enjoined. When they make their promises, the spouses are not relying on themselves—the shifting [sands] 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. . . . The form of marriage, too, from which derives the beauty of human existence, is today more than ever entrusted to the care of Christians."

through the real hardship of their broken, and even irreversible, marital condition.

But what can this concretely mean? To begin with, either the solitude of the spouse's faithfulness to his sacramental marriage, or even his imperfect ecclesial participation in not receiving the Eucharist due to a new union, will represent the concrete impact of the rupture of a conjugal relationship in which the human body, the human heart, and the Spirit of God are efficaciously involved. By keeping the wound of disobedience open, this spouse still makes Christ's spousal love for all humanity visible, with no misguidance regarding the Lord's precise will on the indissolubility of marriage.¹⁰ As Ratzinger writes:

There exists a clear consensus among the Fathers (of the Church) regarding the indissolubility of marriage. . . . The Church in the time of the Fathers clearly excluded divorce and remarriage, precisely out of faithful obedience to the New Testament. In the Church at the time of the Fathers, divorced and remarried members of the faithful were never officially admitted to Holy Communion after a time of penance. It is also true, however, that the Church did not always rigorously revoke concessions in certain territories, even when they were identified as not in agreement with her doctrine and discipline. It also seems true that individual Fathers, Leo the Great being among them, sought pastoral solutions for rare borderline cases.¹¹

2. PASTORAL CARE: THE GOSPEL OF LIFE AND MARRIAGE IN CHRIST

Truth is remaining in the Father, and mercy, we know, is being restored and fulfilled by paschal life. These two characteristics and activities of God meet, embrace, and kiss each other in the sacrificed and risen Lord. There is no possible separation of the two; in their unity in the risen Body, they give form to life as such.

Life comes from truth by walking in Jesus' path (Jn 14:6). No one can come to the Father except through him (Jn 14:7; Jn 10:15; Mt 11:25–27; Lk 10:21–22), and it is this truth

10. FC, 84; Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis* (hereafter SC), 29.

11. Ratzinger, "The Pastoral Approach to Marriage Should Be Founded on Truth."

about life that makes life possible, bearable, and fruitful. Namely, mother and father, conjugally united once and forever, make all human beings real children of God through their parental and sacramental mediation. Through his Son, our heavenly Father generates in the Spirit, by the conjugal love of man and woman, children in the image of God (Gn 1:27–28). Man and woman, in marriage, give life by receiving children from and offering them back to God the Father. The path for life is their conjugal unity, which, in Christ, is the sacrament of his unbreakable unity with the Church.

Life, through the sacrifice of reciprocal self-giving and receiving, establishes an irrevocable and irreversible unity, which is the source of life for the children and for the unity of the spouses. The very nature of sexual difference that makes possible the unity of the spouses in the sacrament gives life by making the spouses one. The more united and stable the spouses are in their union, the more freely and obediently independent their children will grow to be. The life the Good Shepherd has laid down is given freely as gift and is never taken away. He has the power to restore his life in the Resurrection through the sacrifice of the Cross without abolishing his Cross (Jn 10:17–18). The offering of his Body and Blood is as irrevocable and unchangeable as the free gift of the child for the spouses. Life comes from that total self-giving without any restriction or condition.¹² Through this total surrender, the life of the child witnesses to the intrinsic inseparability of union, conception, and birth. Life comes to us by the stable unity of mother and father, whose irrevocability does not simply depend on their free decision. Life, in the human form of a child, is evidence of parents who are united by marriage and form a family.

The saving truth about marriage focuses exclusively on the real difference between man and woman, which makes possible their unique and indissoluble unity and love. This indissoluble unity has its fruitfulness in children, who are the irreversible sign of the spousal communion and unity between Christ and

12. Obviously, life is created even when man and woman surrender one to another without any irrevocable spousal unity, but this proves the rule rather than denies it: our bodies (and the law of nature) are more generous than we understand.

his Church. In Christ, there is no other way for the baptized to be married. Marriage is a true sacrament in light of and fructified by baptism, which is the true and indissoluble marriage between God and his people.¹³ In breaking away from the conjugal sacrament, the subsequent unions of divorced persons can never be equated in nature and sacrament to the marriage willed by Christ for his Church and disciples (Mk 10:1–12; Mt 19:1–12; Eph 5:21–32; Rv 19:7–9, 21:1–14). We must admit it is exceedingly difficult to understand how it is possible, on the one hand, to safeguard, positively proclaim, and witness to the indissoluble unity of sacramental marriage, and, on the other hand, to allow pastoral behavior which permits exactly the opposite. The only way to grasp the interior logic of pastoral care versus doctrine is to go back to the Mosaic pastoral permission of divorce due to the sinful hardness of the human heart against the original will of God (Mt 19:7–8; Dt 24:1): dissolving what God has validly united (Mt 19:6) can hardly be described as an act of pastoral mercy, but only as unfaithfulness in need of conversion and repentance.

It is amazing how many contemporary theological and pastoral reflections about this topic simply avoid any serious reference to the sinfulness and the moral gravity of freely breaking up a valid marriage. In the contemporary debate, there is insufficient concern for the truth of the sacrament freely celebrated. There is not enough serious interest in the good and future of the children injured by the divorce and new unions of their biological parents. It seems that pastoral care for divorced and remarried people focuses only on the two persons in their second or third marriage. Even at its natural and creaturely origins, marriage is not just a simple construction of subjective will, human emotions, and private free consent. Conjugal unity and children are bodily, fruitful witnesses—like the primordial sacrament—to a social nature and to a transcendent openness to God's spousal love. This spousal love is always already deeper, higher, fuller, and stronger than human freedom and lovers' feelings. Christ in his love for the Church shows how man and woman are concretely capable of fruitful conjugal love. Their human love, their sexual difference, and their natural, free, matrimonial consent are taken and fulfilled beyond their natural capacities by Christ in the Church without

13. *SC*, 27.

destroying the original dimensions of their creaturely love, free will, and human emotions. The simplistic reduction of the sacrament of marriage to individual subjective love, whose disappearance declares the death of the sacrament as such, opens the door to the pastoral recognition of any other type of subjective love, independent of its intrinsic fruitfulness and sexual difference.¹⁴

The heroic decision of abandoned spouses to uphold their faithfulness to their sacramental marriage without remarrying shows the true objectivity and the sacrificial nature of Christ's love for his Church. Pastoral tolerance in the name of mercy, so often invoked and referred to today, pays little attention to the innocent abandoned spouse who decided to remain faithful to his or her sacramental marriage. The Church aligned with this untruthful mercy could appear more pastorally concerned with the spouse seeking remarriage than with the abandoned and still-faithful spouse. We refer here to Gerhard Müller:

Love is more than a feeling of instinct. Of its nature it is self-giving. . . . For Christians, the marriage of baptized persons incorporated into the Body of Christ has a sacramental character and therefore represents a supernatural reality. A serious pastoral problem arises from the fact that many people today judge Christian marriage exclusively by worldly and pragmatic criteria. Those who think according to the "spirit of the world" (1 Cor 2:12) cannot understand the sacramentality of marriage. The Church cannot respond to the growing incomprehension of the sanctity of marriage by pragmatically accommodating the supposedly inevitable, but only by trusting in "the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God" (1 Cor 2:12). Sacramental marriage is a testimony to the power of grace, which changes man and prepares the whole Church for the holy city, the new Jerusalem, the Church, which is prepared "as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rv 21:2). The Gospel of the sanctity of marriage is to be proclaimed with prophetic candor. By adapting to the spirit of the age, a weary prophet seeks his own salvation but not the salvation of the world in Jesus Christ.¹⁵

14. Cf. Giovanni Cereti, *Divorziati risposati. Un nuovo inizio è possibile?* (As-sisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2009), 111.

15. Gerhard Müller, "Testimony to the Power of Grace: On the Indissolu-

In order to be a saving truth which gives life, the Christian truth about the sacramentality of marriage must embrace all sinful breakdowns, unfaithfulness, and remarriage at the foot of the Cross. As the first step toward a real conversion, divorce followed by a new union needs to be acknowledged as intrinsically sinful and as a call for repentance. Breaking a valid marriage, indeed, involves a sinful charge against the Christ-Church spousal unity. Yet sexual difference, indissolubly unifying love, and the free conjugal consent of the Christian sacrament can face and truly embrace the suffering of all who are affected by the voluntary breakdown of a valid sacramental marriage. With the same crucified and risen love for his Bride, the Church, the Lord reaches, as the Good Shepherd in the form of the slain Lamb, to the very core of the sacrament of marriage. His outstretched arms encounter all the brokenhearted, without contradicting or confusing those spouses struggling for sacramental marital unity and faithfulness. The lost sheep has always belonged to the same flock of the ninety-nine—the Catholic Church. Even if one goes astray by divorcing from his sacramental spouse, Christ never separates himself from him in and through baptism. By being united with Christ, the spouse can never leave the Church or Christ's divine and sacramental fruitfulness.

By discerning the different levels of moral responsibility in the rupture of a valid sacramental marriage, the Eucharist, and in it, sacramental reconciliation, can never be understood or sought after as a sacramental right. Faithful to marriage, or divorced and remarried, one either receives in faith or one excludes one's self from the Eucharist, which is an unmerited gift—never a reward or right.¹⁶ If a true reconciliation should happen, the sins must be acknowledged in light of God's mercy and truthful love. The Church should discern, internally and externally, the invalidity of the first marriage, the innocence or guilt of the spouses, and the way in which they should seriously commit to a Christian and sacramental life through penance and conversion. The claims for mercy in a very arbitrary and ambiguous process of sacramental readmission of divorced and remarried people, based

bility of Marriage and the Debate Concerning the Civilly Remarried and the Sacrament," *L'Osservatore Romano* (23 October 2013).

16. EG, 47.

on inferred pastoral deductions of ancient councils' canons or on patristic exceptional practices,¹⁷ are misleading and harmful to the spiritual good of the faithful—especially the children of divorced couples. Following this faulty logic, the pastoral ministry of the Church will end up approving their parents' divorce and trying to solve their guilty separation with a new blessed union. This course of action greatly increases the suffering and distress of these children deprived of their natural family. The faith of the children, too, could be strongly injured by a Church who appears to be very yielding to the sinful rupture of their parents and almost indifferent toward them. Ultimately, the vulnerable—namely, the children of the sacramental marriage—will be hurt and forgotten by a pastoral concern which was intended to be merciful and tolerant, yet in reality was unjust and harmful.

It might be suggested that new civil unions could offer better relationships between men and women as well as a more loving and caring environment for the children of previous marriages. However, nothing can erase or take away the wounds of separation and division. This suffering is imposed upon children by divorced parents, and they not only will grow within the wound itself but carry the same wound in themselves throughout their lives. Of course, step-parents can offer parental care and affection to children of previous marriages alongside their own biological sons and daughters. Thanks to their gratuitous self-giving love, step-parents paradoxically keep open and cure the wound of the irreversible unfaithfulness of the children's natural parents. Step-families and adoptive couples never need to hide the truth of the child's identity in order to love more: you will know the truth and it will make you free (Jn 8:32). But in the end, there is no substitution for a natural mother and father, and

[t]hrough the communion of persons which occurs in marriage, a man and a woman begin a family. Bound up with the family is the genealogy of every individual: *the genealogy of the person*. Human fatherhood and motherhood are rooted in biology, yet at the same time transcend it. . . . When a new person is born of the conjugal union of the two, he brings with him into the world a particular image

17. Cf. Cereti, *Divorziati risposati*, 51–80.

and likeness of God himself: *the genealogy of the person is inscribed in the very biology of generation.*¹⁸

Transcending ourselves in body and spirit, thanks to conjugal union and procreation, shows how only human beings can have a history through children as free, intelligent, and loving subjects like their parents.¹⁹ No one who stands before God and is aware of his nature can hide the truth about his biological belonging to God the Father through the human mediation of his parents. Yet, in the Cross of Christ, any self-sacrificing love can give life to everyone, even to the children of a previous marriage. Again, it is always possible that divorced and remarried people can represent and live the truth and mercy that is Christ's life and gift to us: they can deepen their self-gift by keeping the wound of their broken previous marriage open to self-sacrificing love for one another and for each other's children. And it must be stressed, again, that there cannot be any pretension of being readmitted to the Eucharist as if their sacramental marriage was not still valid. Their obedience will show their desire for repentance and will be a sign of humble service to the truth.

3. TRUTH AND MERCY IN MARRIAGE AND LOVE

The sacrament of marriage can efficaciously communicate God's spousal love and offer divine grace only in and through the conjugal gift of the spouses. Indeed, the saving and healing power of the sacrament can be effective and surely active under the condition that the matter of the sacrament, the bodily consent of husband and wife, is objectively transparent to the invisible, but still present, power of God's grace. The nuptial relationship between Christ, the Bridegroom, and the Church, his created Bride, needs and visibly requires the concrete and historical revelation of the spousal bodies of man and woman united in sacramental marriage in order to mercifully save us.²⁰

18. John Paul II, *Letter to Families* (hereafter *LF*), 9.

19. Cf. Mary F. Rousseau, "The Roots of Liberation," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 8 (Fall 1981): 254.

20. *FC*, 80.

David S. Crawford elucidates:

[T]he fullness of human giving is mediated through the body; human love is never fully manifested in a bodiless consent. Human love in its fullness is always a giving away of everything that one is, as *corpore et anima unus*. Sexual consummation therefore carries the mutual belonging begun in consent to its fulfillment. It carries forward what is already implicit in verbal consent and brings it to its culmination and fulfillment in the flesh. It is on this basis that the tradition understands the role of sexual consummation as signifying Christ's union with the Church or the unity of the divine and human natures in the Incarnation. In short, sacramental marriage's bond is indissoluble because the union of divine and human nature in the Incarnation and through Mary's motherhood is indissoluble.²¹

The visibility of the spousal exchange of their male and female flesh is essential to the efficaciousness and validity of the sacrament. God's life-giving grace appeals to the reciprocal self-gift in their bodies in order to be fruitful (in children) and to save and perfect the spouses in their spousal unity. The free obedience and the graced faithfulness of the two spouses in their covenantal consent and consummation allow God's Spirit to transfigure their bodies into a living, visible, and active sacramental sign of divine love for the sake of human life. According to the logic of the Incarnation,²² created nature, Christian salvation, and revelation are totally indissoluble and inseparable. Creation is for the sake of the covenant with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Marriage, from the very beginning of its creation, is open to and apt for the sacramental communication and manifestation of God's spousal love. That is true to the point that God's love is efficaciously merciful and reconciles man and woman thanks to their natural aptness and to the free conjugal obedience they have as spouses, in their heart and throughout their whole body. God saves us by revealing himself, and divine revelation happens while redeeming us. Love and truth always appear and become

21. David S. Crawford, "Of Spouses, the Real World, and the 'Where' of Christian Marriage," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33 (Spring 2006): 116.

22. Cf. Scola, "The Nuptial Mystery at the Heart of the Church," 648–53.

incarnate together, and need each other in order to be sacramentally efficacious and real. On the contrary, any arbitrary bodily and sacramental contradiction between marriage and the Eucharist risks undermining the natural created order of the human body, male and female, spousal in its virginal and conjugal states. Even more, this discrepancy might discredit the body's naturally-oriented aptness to be the visibly efficacious sign and realization of God's love and of Christ's redeeming sacrifice for the life of his Bride, the Church. In other words, the spousal relationship between man and woman in a sacramental marriage, as baptized bodies and souls, is shaped by a theological-christocentric order from the start, as all nature is made in and for the Christ-Church relationship from the very beginning of its creation all the way to its eschatological fulfillment (Eph 1:3–14; Col 1:15–20; Jn 1:1–5). As Balthasar explains:

[T]he relationship between man and woman in marriage is an image of the relationship between Christ and the Church and must pattern itself after the norm of that relationship. The decisive norm for the man-woman relationship is thus a *theological norm*, not a norm patterned on the social customs of a particular time.²³

Sacramental grace creates an objective transparency between the conjugal consent of the spouses, body and spirit, and its interior foundational content, the Christ-Church spousal love, which they have been called to express visibly and efficaciously since the beginning of creation. Thus, the Christ-Church loving relationship, as life-giving communion between God and man, reveals the reason (*logos*) that the entirety of creation seeks the Paschal Mystery for the sake of its eschatological fulfillment.²⁴

Therefore, if Christ's Cross and Resurrection, in their spousal and eucharistic fruitfulness in the Church, can be contradicted by the sacramental opposition of divorced and subsequently remarried baptized persons, whose previous sacramental

23. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "A Word on *Humanae vitae*," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 20 (Summer 1993): 443.

24. Cf. Carlo Caffarra, "Marriage as a Reality in the Order of Creation and Marriage as a Sacrament" in Richard Malone, *Contemporary Perspectives on Christian Marriage: Propositions and Papers from the International Theological Commission* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1984), 117–80.

marriage is still valid, God's concrete faithfulness to us and the efficaciousness of his saving grace in our historical life can be seriously doubted and disbelieved.²⁵ We would be especially confused and misled regarding Christ's paschal spousal love for his Church and the world, namely in divine love's capacity to save and transfigure creation according to the revealed logic of the Incarnation. The sacramental conflict over the Eucharist and the assault to the sacramental validity of the bodily conjugal love of divorced and subsequently remarried spouses would create a mistrustful belonging to the Church. Her mission to witness to her real gifted capacity of mediating God's life and love to the world would be seriously jeopardized. The Church has written about this many times before; I point to one instance here:

In receiving the divorced and remarried to the Eucharist, the Church would let such parties believe that they can, on the level of signs, communicate with him whose conjugal mystery they disavow on the level of reality. To do so would be, moreover, on the part of the Church to declare herself in accord with the baptized at the moment when they enter or remain in a clearly objective contradiction with the life, the thought, and the being itself of the Lord as Spouse of the Church.²⁶

The breaking up of a sacramentally valid marriage pierces and wounds Christ and his spouse, the Church. This split inherently disorders the very aptness of the sexually differentiated human body to express and to make real and visible God's fruitful love, both in the eucharistic body and in conjugal bodily unity.

The power of divine mercy to restore us into sacramental communion with God through his Bride the Church would no longer have its effect, because truth in its efficaciousness would not be shaping the form of the matter of the sacraments—neither the Eucharist nor marriage. Indissoluble faithfulness would no longer be possible given the incapacity of a person to be faithful in conjugal fruitfulness. This contradiction would create an interior conflict since our body, time, space, matter, and movement

25. *FC*, 84.

26. International Theological Commission, "Christological Theses on the Sacrament of Marriage," 12.

bear an openness for nuptiality, for love.²⁷ The whole visible and material world is taken up by our human flesh thanks to the Incarnation. Indeed, bodies, both eucharistic and conjugal, matter for the validity, efficaciousness, and historical reality of God's saving grace to transform the world.

The understanding of the Church's doctrine of the vocation and role of our body and its spousal meaning²⁸ in obedience to the logic of God's revelation in Jesus Christ is essential for any anthropology which claims to be adequate to the human experience and to God's will to save all humanity (1 Tim 2:3–7). The reason our bodies are intrinsically spousal, open and apt through bodily communion, is to receive God and express his spousal love for humanity through his Son, in the Christ–Church relationship. Any unfaithfulness to the sacramental logic of the spousal form of the Incarnation in the Paschal Mystery seriously hinders the intrinsic capacity of our body to carry and communicate God's life-giving grace.

By taking shortcuts out of presumably merciful pastoral intentions, the credibility and historical concreteness of the sacraments in their liturgical words and matter are imperiled. “To diminish in no way the saving teaching of Christ constitutes an eminent form of charity for souls,”²⁹ writes John Paul II. Because it is morally impossible to restore the transparent correspondence between conjugal persons (body and spirit) and the truth of their sacramental marriage, in the sacrificial dimension of Christ's eucharistic body, this rift between the two generates an irreversible wound. This wound requires adequate and true pastoral care rather than just an extrinsic public conviction of the sacramental righteousness of the new relationship between a divorced man and woman. A false pastoral solution can injure doctrine and the sacramental trust and faith that God loves and saves us through the sacraments. Pastoral concessions which compromise the unity of love and truth will create doctrinal uncertainty and

27. Cf. David L. Schindler, “Is Truth Ugly? Moralism and the Convertibility of Being and Love,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 27 (Winter 2000): 704.

28. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 177–90.

29. *FC*, 33.

doubts, reducing marital indissoluble love between husband and wife to an unreachable ideal, thereby forcing God's revelation and its active presence out of history. Thus, sacramental efficaciousness will be limited to a very subjective private dimension without any social, cultural, or community impact. If those in pastoral ministry intend to go after the one lost sheep by casting aside the difficulty of truth, rather than embracing this difficulty for the sake of truth itself, they scandalize the ninety-nine still in need of sacramental salvation. Furthermore, they necessarily endanger the certainty of all the faithful who are left doubting the Church's sacramental power and its efficacious work in and through all of our concrete historical circumstances and situations. Any pastoral decision affecting sacraments always involves doctrine since, thanks to the truth revealed and rightly understood, the Church is enabled to serve God in his sacraments for the sake of the world's salvation, for the sake of our life.

Unfortunately, in many theological reflections regarding developments toward a merciful pastoral approach for divorced and remarried people, there appears to be a lack of sacramental understanding of the human sexual difference. The proponents of these pastoral initiatives neither make nor reflect enough on substantial references to the spousal meaning of the body or to marriage as a primordial sacrament. Those who propose such ideas fail to engage a theological anthropology that is sacramentally coherent with the original beginning of man and woman, their spousal dual unity, and their fruitfulness. The consequence is that the fact of being male and female becomes almost indifferent to God's plan of creation and the economy of salvation.

When it comes to the breaking of the sacramental marital bond between a baptized man and woman due to a new conjugal relationship, the Christ-Church relationship, already signified in Adam and Eve, remains outside of any significant consideration. Rather, pastoral care for divorced and remarried couples threatens to become a psychological compassion, superficial sympathy, or subjective merciful comprehension that seeks to bring the spouses back into the full sacramental life of the community while ignoring the truth of their sacramental and anthropological situation. Those who propose these pastoral initiatives show insufficient interest in doctrine and in the nuptial mystery of the Christ-Church relationship. They claim, in a nominalistic man-

ner, that there is no need to change the teaching of the Church, only to adapt it to the new cultural challenges by pastoral actions. Their arguments tend to rely on the tensions between pastoral mercy and care for divorced and remarried people, on the one hand, and the rigorousness of Canon Law and the official Magisterium in interpreting the Lord's absolute precept of marriage's indissolubility, on the other. The praxis of the Eastern Churches is often referred to along with a few historical patristic exceptions that were made for specific particular cases. They forget that these exceptions occurred when the Church doctrine about marriage was not yet so fully and organically developed, understood, and taught as it is today—especially since the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*.³⁰ Creation, in its christocentric foundation, and all salvation history fulfilled in the New Covenant, with its ontological significance for nature, world, history, and anthropology, is left unconsidered. This turns out to be even more incomprehensible when we recall that Jesus' teaching about marriage always refers to the beginning of creation,³¹ regarded as foundational and revelatory of God's plan for the salvation of the world (Mt 19:3–9; 10:2–12; Eph 5:21–32).

Even more, the lack of theological reference to the catechesis of Pope John Paul II on human love and his theology of the body is striking. This remarkable silence attests to an amnesia regarding the teaching on family of a pope who arguably had the most theologically prolific pontificate on marriage and family in Church history. It is difficult not to believe that avoiding and forgetting the whole spousal and sacramental value of man and woman is a pastoral shortcut to reach an already-ideologically predetermined solution, and one which will be sought at any cost. According to some pastoral proposals for the future, divorced and remarried people ought to undertake a longer period of penance in order to be readmitted to Holy Communion. The reality today is that they are often already living a sacramental life

30. Carlo Caffarra, "From Bologna with Love: Hold on a Moment!" *Il Foglio* (14 March 2014), republished in English on 24 March 2014 as "Cardinal Caffarra Expresses Serious Concerns About Family Synod Debates," <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/cardinal-caffarra-expresses-serious-concerns-about-family-synod-debates>.

31. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 131–223.

without bothering with any Church requirements for penance, because quite often they are already receiving the Eucharist without waiting for any official permission or magisterial approval.

Let us be clear: these are offenses to Christ's unity with the Church. Not only do they create a further division between the Bride and her Bridegroom, but they place that very division in the relationship between the divorced spouse and the Church. As such, there is in the end nothing that is genuinely pastoral, truthful, or merciful about such solutions.

4. HOPE FOR THE SALVATION OF ALL

The family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis. . . . Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will. But the indispensable contribution of marriage to society transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple.³²

The Church is facing profound cultural challenges in this post-Christian, Western world. These challenges are not accidental to—indeed they stem directly from—the breakdown of and direct attack against marriage we see in so many quarters. The practice and civil institutionalization of new forms of diachronic polygamy and polyandry³³ overtake the social and juridical structure for marital love between man and woman, and thus our societies are moving toward a cultural and psychological conviction that human love and its intrinsic spousal unity and fruitfulness are nothing short of impossible and perhaps completely meaningless.

Factual disordered relationships between man and woman, factual breakups of spontaneous cohabitations, free and occasional unions, endlessly changing of partners, and same-sex unions seem to make human conjugal love unlivable and unbearable in its demand for faithfulness and fruitfulness. The nihilistic

32. *EG*, 66.

33. Cf. Synod of Bishops, "Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization," Preparatory Document to the Third Extraordinary General Assembly (Vatican City, 2013).

understanding of empty freedom as the sole content of human subjectivity undermines the possibility for love to be human, viable, enjoyable, and worth sacrificing for. The polygamous partnership represents a great illusion of a lighter form of relational self-centered satisfaction. The infinite human desire for love is answered in the complete, total, and enduring gift of self contained in the vows of marriage; innumerable varieties of partners not only leave this desire unanswered, but mask what love truly is. The consensual contract³⁴ becomes the only possible way to establish, even for human love any kind of social and legal stability for economic, health, and fertility goals. Thus love is reduced to an emotional feeling: bodies do not correspond to and cannot express the reality of love any longer. Interchangeable and unstable partnerships in sexual and emotional unions require only the minimum formality of a social contract to have legal standing. As a result, such partnerships are quickly dissoluble. Ironically, this legalistic and extrinsic approach becomes the public form that assures the continual formation of these new self-centered and individualistic relations. In the past four decades, releasing subjective personal love from legal and institutional conjugal consent has become a central issue in moral and pastoral theology. The sexual revolution of the '60s was intensely in favor of any free expression of sexual love without any legal regulation with the consequence that fights for legal recognition of any kind of civil union today have become crucial for the advancement of our postmodern society.

Furthermore, within this difficult cultural context, the pastoral engagement of the Church with divorced and remarried people represents a more focused pastoral challenge than what some ecclesiastical agents and the media claim. Rather than trying to loosen the sacramental relationship between God's spousal love and our conjugal love through unnecessary pastoral changes for divorced and remarried people, the Church needs to endure in her witness to the demanding newness of Christ's Gospel of the family. Failing to strengthen love's demand for faithfulness unto death with the excuse of concessions or exceptions will

34. Cf. Michael Novak, "Man and Woman He Made Them," *Communio* 8 (Fall 1981): 233.

take the Church to the point of becoming worldly, insignificant, and pastorally incapable of communicating God's love. Engaging the challenges of neo-pagan polygamy and polyandry of our dying Western cultures, Catholic pastors and the faithful need to deepen their witness and give better reasons as to why and how, in Jesus Christ's spousal love for the Church, men and women can still love one another faithfully, fruitfully, and forever—today more so than ever.³⁵ Witnessing to the demanding yet joyful Gospel of the spousal love of God, we should make all efforts to convince and lead new generations not to be afraid of love, Christian marriage, and its fruitfulness. Joy and happiness are truly human and possible only in the Cross and Resurrection of Christ's love. There, mercy is always available for all. It will not be by proselytizing, by imposing new obligations that the Church in her maternal pastoral concern can grow, evangelize, and restore the joy of faith, but by the attraction of sacrificial love and the generous gift of life.³⁶

Serious pastoral care for the marriage of divorced and remarried people, rather, should be more concerned with the spouses' living witness through sacrificial love in and to the world. In the present situation, the concrete way for personal sanctification in the wounded discipleship with Christ in the Church for divorced and remarried people is to be found, not through a demand for sacramental recognition, but through faithful love until death and self-sacrificial love for the procreation and education of children. They should not press for an untruthful and supposedly pastoral solution; rather, their faith, strengthened through prayer and liturgical participation in a committed Christian spiritual life, should be efficaciously lived through their professional knowledge and work. Fields like politics, the economy, marketing, education, medicine, and media are open to all of us, especially to these laypeople, as a great opportunity to be transparent and living witnesses of God's transforming love for all. Due to their wounded marital life in Christ, they might not be able to have an ordinary sacramental participation in the Eucharist, but as true members of the Church, they can be and are called to

35. *FC*, 68.

36. *EG*, 16.

sacrifice themselves in love and work for their new families and to give their professional contribution for the sanctification of the world by work, professional competence, and Christian service to the poor. Only a Church solidly founded in the eschatological fulfillment of her mission through the paschal victory of Christ in our lives can carry all in her womb toward eternal salvation. A Church supported by such a strong paschal faith in the saving power of the Cross can really dare to hope that all can and will be saved, although their pilgrimage on earth will be differently related to the sacramental historical fullness of ecclesiastical life, namely the Eucharist. A pastoral incapacity and a weakened conviction that divorced and remarried people can be purified and saved even without receiving the Eucharist could be a negative sign of a lack of faith and hope in the eschatological salvific power of love. At the end of our life, all—the ninety-nine and the one lost sheep—will be judged upon love.³⁷ □

FABRIZIO MERONI, PIME, is assistant professor of theological anthropology at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America.

37. *LF*, 22.