

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MARRIAGE

• Marc Cardinal Ouellet •

“The love of Christian spouses already participates in the ‘nuptial mystery’ that fulfills the promise of conjugal love in the eschatological love that Christ bears the Church.”



We are sufficiently aware of the massive influence of communication technologies on the civil authorities and the spectacular advances of lobby groups to keep from boldly offering the teaching of Christian revelation on marriage. The confusion that reigns in people’s minds is such, and the lobby groups so effective, that they succeed in imposing their ideologies and in provoking the legislative slippage that we have been witnessing. The millions of believers that we serve have a right to hear a clear statement to help them distinguish what is true from what is false and to dissipate the popular mental confusion and moral disarray.

What is at stake in the present discussion is not only the regulation of a universally recognized social institution, it is the redefinition of marriage, in independence from its divine origin and its proper nature as a social institution created by God for the propagation of the human race. The *homo technicus* that Goethe already proclaimed two centuries ago seems to have taken the place of the *homo sapiens* of Christianized Greco-Roman civilization. He is in the process of reinventing himself and recreating himself without God, dismissing the fundamental givens of human reproduction. This

homunculus which has emerged from Faust's laboratory no longer wishes to live on the basis of a gift that has been made to him and that he receives; instead, he wishes to reproduce himself in an autonomous and narcissistic fashion. He has lost his original reference to the Creator and he strives to draw from his own techniques the magic formula for his immortality. This adventure of the sorcerer's apprentice can lead nowhere else but to absurdity and self-destruction.

As Christians, we know that Jesus Christ is the measure of man and that there is no genuine humanity outside of him, outside of the grace that he has come to bring to human beings, institutions, and societies. It is thus by taking Christ as our starting point that we are able to deepen the rational and sacramental foundations of marriage in a way that allows us better to judge the actual evolution of our secularized society and to propose a coherent alternative. The present anthropological crisis urgently demands a return to the foundations of Christian anthropology, without which our society risks losing the memory of its constitutive values and compromising its future.

As theological perspectives, I will develop three points that directly or indirectly concern the aforementioned problem. First, a call back to the creation of man in the image of God, as male and female, the conjugal relation expressing by its very nature the vital bond of dependence and service that defines the status and the vocation of the couple with respect to the Creator. Second, the vocation of man and woman in God's plan is rooted even more profoundly in the grace of Christ who not only restores the conjugal relation by healing love's wounds but elevates this relation to the eminent dignity of the sacrament of Christ's union with the Church. Third, this "community of life and love" that we call the marriage institution, this domestic church, is a largely ignored and untapped sacramental resource that ought to nourish conjugal and familial spirituality and to offer a response to the moral and anthropological collapse that we witness at present with astonishment.

*I. 'Man and woman he created them, in the image of God
he created them.'*

The Catechism offers a beautiful synthesis of this doctrine in number 1604:

For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love. Since God created him man and woman, their

mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man. It is good, very good, in the Creator's eyes. And this love which God blesses is intended to be fruitful and to be realized in the common work of watching over creation: 'And God blessed them, and God said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it."'

Does this account of man's creation imply an analogy between the Trinity and the family? Some would say that it does, though the majority of exegetes claim it is anachronistic to read the creation stories in the light of the New Testament. Methodological scruples notwithstanding, it is possible to identify at the strictly exegetical level a certain number of elements that authorize an interpretation of the notion of image/likeness as including the couple and its fecundity, that is, the family. Let us try to sketch out a few of them.¹

As an initial observation, we note first of all that the theme of man "created in the image and likeness of God" is relatively rare in the Old Testament. With the exception of the later repetitions in Sir 17:1-3 and Wis 2:23, it is practically the sole prerogative of the priestly story of origins: Gn 1:26-28; 5:1-3; 9-6b. At the level of interpretation, one could say that exegesis is presently moving toward the overcoming of two extremes: on the one hand, the purely spiritual interpretation, which is the common opinion of Christian exegesis after Philo, namely, that the notion of the image of God concerns solely man's spiritual dimension, which allows him to dominate animals and things; on the other hand, the purely material interpretation of the image, namely, the fact that the Hebrew term *Selem* (sculpture, statue) refers to the bodily form characteristic of man, i.e., his upright posture. Between these two views, we find today a majority of exegetes who maintain that the notion of image/likeness in Gn 1:26-27 refers to the fact "that Adam is the royal representative of God himself, embodying and exercising his authority on earth and over all that lives in it."² Another group maintains, with Claude

¹A more complete presentation of recent exegesis can be found in the careful and balanced study by Gunnlaugur A. Junson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a Century of Old Testament Research*, Coniectanea Biblica, Old Testament Series 26 (Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1988).

²Francis Martin, "Male and Female He Created Them: A Summary of the Teaching of Genesis Chapter One," *Communio* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 247.

Westermann, “that the image of God must be found in the capacity for relation with God which man receives from him.”³ Read within its context, the narrative of man’s creation would express God’s will to give himself a partner capable of dialogue with him. The most interesting aspect for our purposes is to note that the exegesis of Gn 1:27–28, according to the priestly tradition, establishes certain points in the direction of an integration of the man-woman relationship within the notion of image/likeness.

In effect, if, instead of separating the two creation stories, we illuminated the first by means of the second, Gn 2:18–24, and of Gn 5:3, it appears that the male-female reciprocity, in the image and likeness of God, allows man to represent God on earth and to imitate him by participating in his creative power. The insistence of the priestly tradition on the bodily difference between the sexes thus intends to express the fundamentally relational character of the human being, in the horizontal sense of the relation between man and woman, as well as in the vertical sense of man’s relation to God. That is why the priestly tradition’s exegesis ends up drawing a close link between the theme of image and the theme of family. “Adam represents God, i.e., he makes his power and authority present and he interacts with him in the relation of man and woman.”⁴ Régine Hirschberger comes to the conclusion that Gn 1:26 suggests “a relation of likeness between God who creates and man—male and female—who, blessed by him, procreates.” Thus, “the expression ‘God made them in his likeness’ means that God made man to be fruitful like he is.”⁵ Moreover, if we emphasize, with Walter Brueggemann, that God created *them* male and female in order to reflect himself in them as his image and likeness, we can infer: “God is reflected solely in human community. According to this bold affirmation, God is not

³Ibid., 258. See Claude Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 147–161, esp. 157–158.

⁴Martin, “Male and Female He Created Them,” 259.

⁵L. Gendron, *La mission des laïcs* (Collection Communauté et Ministère, Grand Séminaire de Montréal, Bellamin-Cerf), 142–143. The first citation is taken from an article by Hirschberger, “Image et ressemblance dans la tradition sacerdotale,” *RSR* 59 (1985): 192. This article is a brief presentation of her work *D.E.A.: Image et ressemblance dans la tradition sacerdotale* (Strasbourg, 1983), which is the source of the second citation: 52.

reflected as an individual but as a community.”⁶ Add to this the deliberative plural “Let us make,” which introduces the statement about image, and we can legitimately conclude that this exegesis of the *imago Dei* according to the priestly tradition, duly complemented by New Testament revelation, constitutes a solid scriptural basis for founding the familial analogy of the Trinity.

To be sure, Genesis does not make explicit the image/likeness relationship between the God of Love who is in fact the Trinity and the mutual love of man and woman, which reproduces in a certain sense the very Life of God. The analogy is thus not immediately trinitarian and familial, but the foundations are nevertheless provided for subsequent development. The exegesis of the notion of image/likeness simply establishes a dialogical relationship between a fruitful couple and a divine “we” that is left undetermined, a relationship that manifests God’s creative power in the procreative union. “In other words,” as Hirschberger puts it, “our [priestly] tradition does not establish a homology between the being of God and the being of man, but between the creative action of a God who brings forth life and the procreative action of a man who is able to reproduce himself on the face of the earth.”⁷ This dynamic interpretation of the image as actualizing its likeness by means of the procreative union coincides well, moreover, with the idea of Covenant (*Berit*), which forms the broader context of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*.

Indeed, God creates man in his image with a view to interacting with him, with a view to a Covenant, of which the history of Israel is the privileged expression. The message of Genesis is that this covenantal structure is already inscribed within the complementarity of man and woman, the fecund reciprocity of which resembles and corresponds to the Creator’s gift. When Eve gives birth to her first son, she exclaims: “I have procreated a man with the help of the Lord” (Gn 4:1), underscoring God’s creative involvement in the gift of life. Taken in all of its breadth, this history of the Covenant, already inscribed within the creation of Adam and Eve, culminates in Christ, the new Adam, whom the first Adam foreshadowed. It is Christ, indeed, who is the “image of God” *par excellence* (2 Cor 5:4), “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). It is therefore in him that the familial

⁶Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: An Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 34.

⁷Hirschberger, “Image et ressemblance dans la tradition sacerdotale,” 192.

analogy of the Trinity reaches its apogee and is at the same time surpassed toward a more profound analogy founded not only on God's creative action but on the gift of Grace.

The point we ought to retain here is the strict interconnection between conjugal love and the gift of life that constitutes man and woman in their reality as the dynamic image of the God of Love. God is involved in the dialogical relationship between man and woman, he expresses himself therein and makes a gift of Life within this relationship in a way that always transcends human calculations and expectations. That is why the conjugal relation is a sacred reality, a ring of the transmission of the mystery of Life, a place of encounter between the divine Trinity and the basic cell of human society which communicates through the vicissitude and the dignity of the flesh. This sacred relationship opens upward (Covenant) and forward (fruitfulness), and has no equivalent in the homosexual unions that are radically opposed to the Creator's will and utterly unable to be blessed with fruitfulness. Hence, the implicit but effective atheism that is proclaimed and promoted by these imprudent laws.

II. Christian Spouses' Call to Sacramental Love

1. At the origin: the gift

The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* clearly affirmed the spouses' vocation to holiness within marriage: "Christian spouses, in virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony, whereby they signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and His Church (Cf. Eph 5:32), help each other to attain to holiness in their married life and in the rearing and education of their children. By reason of their state and rank in life they have their own special gift among the people of God."⁸

⁸*Lumen gentium*, 11. A note is added, referring to 1 Cor 7:7, in order to emphasize that the charism belonging to the spouses lies in conjugal chastity, which is to be distinguished from continence: "*Unusquisque proprium donum (idion charisma) habet ex Deo: alias quidem sic, alius vero sic.*" Cf. St. Augustine, *De dono persever* 14.37: PL 45, 1015ff: "*Non tantum contentia Dei donum est, sed coniugatorum etiam castitas.*"

The gift that belongs to the Christian spouses resides in the “community of life and love” that is built upon the covenant between the partners, that is, upon their personal and irrevocable consent (GS 48). Through this solemn act of faith, the spouses give and receive themselves reciprocally and enter together into a new relationship with the Creating and Redeeming God, who is the Author and the ultimate guarantor of their covenant. The spouses’ vocation to love is thus rooted in this sacramental gift, which assumes their natural love and transforms it into a sacramental love. “Authentic conjugal love is caught up into divine love,” Vatican II teaches, by the grace of the sacramental consecration that fructifies their life of faith, hope, and love so that they may reciprocally sanctify one another and that together they may contribute to the glorification of God.⁹

The spouses’ vocation to sacramental love thus does not simply arise from a restoration of the grace lost through original sin; nor from the remedy for the concupiscence of the flesh that the nuptial blessing brings. Their vocation is moreover not exhausted by their generous procreative cooperation in the service of life. It incorporates the spouses into the mission of Christ and the Church because their “community of life and love” participates in the nuptial mystery that unites Christ and the Church. This participation began the day they exchanged their love, “in the Lord,” receiving one another from him, and consecrating themselves to him for the service of his glory. From the day of their matrimonial consecration, the Christian spouses were placed and place themselves at the service of Christ, Bridegroom of the Church, the original Sacrament of trinitarian Love.

God’s plan for sacramental marriage and family therefore embraces the entire arc of the movement that passes from the initial creation to the definitive fulfillment accomplished by Christ. Genesis teaches that, in the beginning, man, created as male and female in the image of God, will leave his father and mother in order to attach himself to his wife, and the two will henceforward be a single flesh (Gn 1:27; 2:24). Such a plan was disrupted by the sin of the first couple, but it was not eliminated. With the account of the first sin and its consequences, the author of Genesis 3 hints at the victory of the woman’s offspring over the serpent (Gn 3:15). This offspring is Jesus, who allows us to abolish divorce because he has himself brought the remedy for the “hardness of heart,” and the grace of an absolute

⁹*Gaudium et spes*, 48.

fidelity to the new covenant that he establishes in his own person. On the basis of this sacramental gift, marriage and conjugal love are elevated to the dignity of a properly supernatural vocation that both fulfills and transcends the functions and duties of the order of creation.

2. *The gift of the sacrament and the spouses' ecclesial mission*

The Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* shows the broadening and deepening of the spouses' supernatural mission by underscoring the gift of the Holy Spirit as the rule of the spouses' communion: "the Holy Spirit who is poured out in the sacramental celebration offers Christian couples the gift of a new communion of love that is the living and real image of that unique unity which makes of the Church the indivisible Mystical Body of the Lord Jesus." This new communion is not just a veneer superimposed on a more or less fragile human relationship; it embraces the very impulse of the spouses toward one another by affirming and augmenting all of their dynamisms: "The gift of the Spirit is a commandment of life for Christian spouses and at the same time a stimulating impulse so that every day they may progress towards an ever richer union with each other on all levels—of the body, of the character, of the heart, of the intelligence and will, of the soul— revealing in this way to the Church and to the world the new communion of love, given by the grace of Christ."¹⁰

It is worthwhile to dwell on the particular form of this gift of the Holy Spirit which enriches the conjugal communion in a singular way. Theological reflection distinguishes two distinct but closely connected dimensions in this gift that the spouses share: first, an objective dimension, which consists essentially in the affixing of the divine seal on the conjugal bond.¹¹ Constituted through the exchange of vows, the conjugal bond fused by the Holy Spirit places a divine seal upon the spouses' act of total and irrevocable self-gift. It constitutes the first dimension of the sacrament, which allows the couple to represent and reproduce the nuptial union between Christ and the Church even in their union of the flesh. Though it is constituted by a subjective act on the part of the spouses, the conjugal bond, once it is

¹⁰*Familiaris consortio*, 19.

¹¹Cf. Louis Ligier, *Il Matrimonio: Questioni teologiche e pastorali* (Rome, 1988), 114ff.

concluded and consummated in the flesh, is no longer dependent on the spouses' subjective fluctuations; it is sealed by God, for the gift of the Holy Spirit has made them in an objective way participants in the indissoluble relationship between Christ and the Church. Hence the absolute indissolubility of the sacramental marriage *ratum et consumatum*, which even the Roman Pontiff himself is unable to dissolve.¹²

If the conjugal bond is the first effect of the sacrament (*res et sacramentum*), the gift of the new communion in the Holy Spirit also contains a subjective dimension that touches the interior of the spouses' daily community of life and love. The Council of Trent already affirmed that the grace of the sacrament perfected the natural love, confirmed its indissolubility, and sanctified the spouses.¹³ The description of this grace was explained afterwards in terms of the healing, elevation, and perfecting of the spouses' love in view of the fulfillment of their specific mission. This larger and more diffuse effect of grace thus embraces the entire life of the spouses and enables them to form a true community of persons, that is, to "preserve, reveal, and communicate love, a living reflection and real participation in God's love for humanity and Christ's love for his Bride the Church."¹⁴

3. *The horizon of serving God in the communio personarum*

As we have emphasized elsewhere, the great author of this sanctification of conjugal love is the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ The Spirit grants to the spouses something of his own mode of being a communion of Persons. Having taken hold of their love through the seal of the conjugal bond, he becomes the interior Master of their love, he teaches them to drink the joy of communion more deeply and more purely; he invites them to love one another with his own love, which effaces itself in order to allow the other, discretely and sincerely, the

¹²Code of Canon Law, 1141.

¹³"*Gratiam vero, quae naturalem illum amorem perficeret, et indissolubilem unitatem confirmaret, coniugesque sanctificaret, ipse Christus, venerabilium sacramentorum institutor atque promotor, sua nobis—passione promeruit*" (DS 1799).

¹⁴*Familiaris consortio*, 17.

¹⁵Marc Ouellet, "Lo Spirito Santo, sigillo dell'alleanza coniugale," in *Il matrimonio in Cristo è matrimonio nello Spirito*, ed. R. Bonetti (Rome: Città Nuova, 1998), 73–96.

primacy of the gift or the reception. In difficult moments, he patiently obtains the conversion of their hearts through the suffering of humiliation and the reconciliation after mistakes are made; in every circumstance, he teaches them to pray on the basis of life, for the growth and the holiness of the persons called to sacramental love.

This description of the sacramental grace of marriage allows us to see that the spouses' mission far surpasses the natural order of the procreation and education of children. A certain classical presentation of this grace tended to describe it exclusively as a function of nature, underscoring the perfecting of nature and of its ends as the entirety of sacramental marriage. But Vatican II has made clearer the personal dimension of the sacrament and of conjugal love. It explained the sacramental grace in terms of the encounter with Christ and consecration in the Holy Spirit: "The Savior of men, the Bridegroom of the Church, comes to encounter Christian spouses through the sacrament of marriage. He continues to remain with them. . . ." ¹⁶

This more christocentric and personalist vision of grace entails a shift in perspective that allows a deepening of the spouses' relationship with God. 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 reaches that fullness to which it is interiorly ordained, conjugal charity, which is the proper and specific way in which the spouses participate in and are called to live the very charity of Christ who gave Himself on the Cross." ¹⁷ 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.

III. Conversion to the Sacramental Fecundity of Marriage

¹⁶*Gaudium et spes*, 48.2; cf. G. Baldanza, *La grazia del Sacramento del matrimonio* (Rome: Edizioni Liturgiche, 1993), 161–303.

¹⁷*Familianis consortio*, 13.

God calls men to enter into communion with him. Now, the men whom he calls are sinners, “sold to the power of sin” (Rom 7:14), who have voluntarily accepted the yoke of sinful passions. The conversion to God’s call thus demands from them, at the very outset, a conversion, and then a penitent attitude for the duration of their lives. The Bible distinguishes the interior aspect of penitence from the external acts that it commands. The Greek Bible, for example, “employs at once that verb *epistrephein*, which connotes the changing of practical conduct, and the verb *metanoein*, which indicates an internal turning.”¹⁸ *Metanoia* means repentance, penitence. Jesus’ call to conversion (Mk 6:12) gathers up both of these aspects, but includes with them “a positive act of faith in Christ: the Jews will turn themselves around (*epistrephein*) toward the Savior (Acts 3:19; 9:35).”¹⁹ The act of conversion, sealed by baptism, is accomplished once and for all, and cannot be renewed; but those who are baptized are susceptible to falling back into sin and thus they need the sacrament and the virtue of penance as an extension of baptismal conversion.

For the spouses, conversion entails the twofold—practical and spiritual—demand to make ethical choices in harmony with the will of Christ and in communion with his Spirit. It demands the unity, fidelity, and fecundity of the couple according to the ends specific to marriage; but it must distinguish itself today, along the lines of the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, by the primacy of the sacrament, i.e., by the spiritual outreach of the couple and the family: “Therefore, not only do they receive the love of Christ by becoming a ‘saved’ community, but they are likewise called to ‘transmit’ the same love of Christ to their brothers by thus becoming a community ‘that saves.’”²⁰ This perspective takes up once again the direction followed by Vatican II with respect to the Christian family, which, by virtue of its participation in the covenant of love that unites Christ and the Church, “will make manifest to all men the Lord’s presence in the world and the Church’s true nature.”²¹ The conversion of the Christian

¹⁸Jacques Guillet and Pierre Grelot, “Pénitence, Conversion,” in *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique* (Paris: Cerf, 1961), 788.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 796.

²⁰*Familiaris consortio*, 49.

²¹*Gaudium et spes*, 48.

spouses ought therefore to go beyond the horizon of morality and even of spirituality, in order to embrace the sacramental dimension in its apostolic and missionary dimensions.

This conversion of the couple to Christ's love, which it receives and transmits, presupposes a concrete and perseverant openness to the action of the Holy Spirit, without which there is no holiness, communion, or Christian mission worthy of the name. "Those whom God's Spirit inspires are the children of God" (Rom 8:14). The couple's and the family's sacramental and missionary fecundity is a theological work of the Holy Spirit. It is not the fruit of a voluntarism, a moralism, or a pastoral activism. Hence St. Paul's insistence on docility to the Holy Spirit (Rom 8), in order to live "in Christ" and thus in order to obtain the first good of marriage, namely, holiness. A great Russian saint, Seraphim of Sarov, considered the goal of Christian life, in either state of life, to lie in the acquisition of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. "And hope does not deceive because God's love was poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us" (Rom 5:5). The Holy Spirit is the artist *par excellence* of the conformation of the Christian spouses to the charity of Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church. It is he who gives them a share in his own fecundity in order that the family might become more and more the sacred sanctuary and the radiant icon of the Holy Trinity.

The experience of this communion in the Spirit brings with it a spiritual joy which is the sign of the Christian couple's union with God and the source of their spiritual fecundity. There exists, in fact, a fruit of charity, a joy, a *gaudium*, that belongs specifically to spouses, from the fact that spousal love possesses a unique character: "it consists in the gift of the person."²² This reciprocal gift of persons gives rise to joy not only because it is in the image of God but also because it contains, humbly but truly, the "Gift" of God, the Holy Spirit. Now, the Holy Spirit, as Balthasar writes, "is in himself the 'exuberance' and the 'excess of Love.'"²³ That is why he calls forth in the couple this

²²K. Wojtyła, *Amour et responsabilité* (Paris: Ed. du Dialogue/Ed. Stock, 1978), 89–90; Eng. translation, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

²³"If, from the origin in the Father, God is already the miracle of love, in possessing his existence in self-gift, this miracle comes to completion in the Holy Spirit who precisely as the excess of Love in his being always-greater is the ungraspable and insurmountable summit of absolute love: *Deus semper major* not only for us, but in himself" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologie: L'Esprit de vérité*

kindness and this delight that expands them from within and without which “one does not act, one does not make the attempt, one does not resolve to live well.”²⁴ The joy of the gift thus gives rise to the generosity of the gift and an ever more radical engagement in the ever greater trinitarian Love. “For the gift points back to the giver. The spouse is a royal gift who shines forth the presence of the Giver of life.”²⁵

If the joy of the gift is the source of the sacramental fruitfulness, its contrary renders the conjugal covenant sterile. St. Thomas Aquinas defined the sin of acedia²⁶ as a sadness and a distaste for action (*taedium operandi*), which runs contrary to the enthusiasm of charity. This capital, but subtle, vice, which was well known in the monastic tradition,²⁷ corresponds to what we commonly call in the conjugal life the “midday demon.” It can be recognized by certain symptoms such as a withdrawal into self, boredom, instability, the search for novelty, flight from home, a lack of openness to the child, etc. Acedia is a theological vice, a sin against the joy of charity that the Holy Spirit pours out. It traps the couple in mediocrity and paralyzes their action, obstructing the gift of self that brings about communion; it takes from charity the joy of union with God, which is its most savory fruit and the source of its outward radiance. This vice has to be conquered by prayer, penitence, and by a conjugal ascesis that the Orthodox liturgy symbolically enacts. According to St. John Chrysostom, the crowns that the bridal couple wear recall martyrs’ crowns and they invite the couple to conjugal ascesis. Perfect love is love crucified. But love crucified, as Francis of Assisi said, is also perfect joy.

The spouses’ struggle for spiritual fecundity in Christ thus needs to pass the test of time, of patience, and of realism in fidelity.

[Brussels: Culture et vérité, 1996], 151).

²⁴St. Augustine, *De spiritu et littera*, 3.5; PL 44, 203.

²⁵Alain Mattheeuws, *Les ‘dons’ du mariage. Recherche de théologie morale et sacramentelle* (Brussels: Culture et vérité, 1996), 456.

²⁶ST I-II, q. 26, a. 3; II-II, q. 35, a. 1; for a detailed analysis of the experience of acedia in the spiritual tradition, see P. Gervais, *Péché-Pécheur*, 826–846.

²⁷Cf. Evagrius Ponticus, *Practical Treatise or The Monk*, 12 (SC 171, 521–527); John Cassian and Gregory the Great draw out Evagrius’ fine analyses, to which St. Thomas contributes a remarkable theological development. I take these observations from Fr. Jean-Charles Nault, O.S.B., who wrote his thesis at the John Paul II Institute on acedia in St. Thomas.

“To love someone means to give him time,” writes Jean-Claude Sagne, to give it without limits, for the infinite value of the person transcends the limits of time. “To make someone a promise without measure is to give him life.”²⁸ This boundless gift does not proceed from feeling by itself, no matter how profound or noble the feelings may be; it stems from the commitment of the will and it is built upon unconditional fidelity. In short, love has to become a “covenant” founded on faith in the Resurrection. “The notion of covenant,” writes Xavier Lacroix, “implies *the idea of death* in four ways: 1) a person commits himself until death; 2) in order to make the covenant, one must die to one’s old life; 3) to break the covenant would imply dying to an important part of oneself; 4) it consists in fighting together against death and the forces of death. To the ultimatum of death, the covenant opposes another ultimatum, that of an irrevocable commitment.”²⁹ This enduring radicality of love is a reflection of the divine love that conquers death in Jesus Christ. It presupposes and demands faith over the course of its development, the faith that places trust in God, in relation to everything and in spite of everything. For, “Love is strong as death” (Song 8:6), as the *Song of Songs* tells us. Gregory of Nyssa has a magnificent remark to address every flagging of effort: “The divine power is able to create hope where there is no more hope, and to forge a path in the impossible.”³⁰

The conjugal covenant, in concert with consecrated virginity, bears witness to the absoluteness of love made manifest in human history in Jesus Christ. Its witness acquires an eschatological dimension through the paschal structure of the sacrament. The love of Christian spouses, even though it belongs initially to the first creation, already participates in the “nuptial mystery”³¹ that fulfills the promise of conjugal love in the eschatological love that Christ bears the Church. Hence the spouses’ submission to the primacy of the love of Christ and to the ethical demands of a love that is faithful, enduring, and

²⁸Jean-Claude Sagne, *L’homme et la femme dans le champ de la parole* (DDB, 1995), 48.

²⁹Xavier Lacroix, *Les mirages de l’amour* (Cerf, 1998), 216.

³⁰Paul Evdokimov, “La vocation sacrée du laïc,” in *Le mystère de l’Esprit Saint* (Mame, 1968), 362.

³¹Angelo Scola, *Il mistero nuziale*, vol. 1: *Uomo-donna* (PUL-Mursia, 1998).

fecund.³² Christ's eschatological love for the Church already indwells the spouses' union and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, urges it from within toward the eternal wedding banquet of the Lamb. Thanks to the christocentrism of Vatican II, we henceforward see more clearly that "genuine conjugal love is taken up into divine love,"³³ and that it becomes more and more the visible sacrament of this invisible love that made itself physically present in the Eucharist. That is why Christian spouses, under pain of sterility, are never able to separate themselves from this inexhaustible source of sacramental fecundity that nourishes their life of faith, hope, and love; "it is thus that they together contribute to the glorification of God."³⁴

These theological perspectives on marriage have recalled the couple's and the family's vocation to holiness in love and the gift of life. In the light of Scripture, it is clear that God created man and woman in his image and likeness in order that they might be one and fruitful, as he is. In Christ, the matrimonial covenant becomes the sacrament of a greater nuptial mystery that brings a grace of healing, of holiness, and of growth to a wounded humanity. Our world needs this evangelical light of sacramental marriage and family—the light of the domestic church—more than ever before, in order to find the path toward a culture of life and a civilization of love.—*Translated by D. C. Schindler.*

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³²"In the conjugal relation, once the spouses surrender themselves to one another in their total and reciprocal self-gift, they hand themselves over at the same time to Christ, who, in the same act, also gives himself to them. Yet, once again, they know that Christ's love must come before everything else and that sometimes abstaining from sexual relations, when it is morally required and even when it is more freely chosen (1 Cor 7:5), will be able to become the sign of their unconditional love for the Lord" (M. Seguin, *La contraception et l'Église: Bilan et prospective* [Paris: Mediaspaul/Pauline, 1994], 216).

³³*Caudium et spes*, 48.

³⁴*Ibid.*