

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY  
BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGY  
AND THE EUCHARIST:  
COMMENTS IN VIEW OF THE  
EXTRAORDINARY ASSEMBLY OF  
THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS  
ON THE FAMILY

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“The *nuptial* dimension proper to every form of love is the point of departure for addressing pastoral challenges regarding marriage and the family.”



1. LOOKING AHEAD TO THE EXTRAORDINARY  
ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

In view of the upcoming Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, in these remarks I would like to reflect on two aspects of the reality of marriage and the family: the first is an-

thropological in nature and the second sacramental.<sup>1</sup> They are closely interconnected.

*a) An anthropological view*

From an anthropological perspective, the reactions to the questions in the “Preparatory Document” show the existence of a significant disconnect, though this varies according to continent. On the one hand, the fundamental lessons taught by experience and by Christian doctrine continue to be considered and proposed as the expression of love’s ideal. On the other hand, they are perceived by many as ultimately unsuitable to the emotional experience of the men and women of our time.<sup>2</sup> This state of affairs prompts us to study in greater depth the intrinsically pastoral character of Christian doctrine, according to the teaching of Vatican Council II, lest the gospel of the family become irrelevant especially in those societies that have largely fallen away from the practice of the Christian faith.

In this regard, *Instrumentum laboris* clearly points to the need for a detailed anthropological reflection. In reporting the responses to the questionnaire, the document shows that the origin of many misunderstandings of the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family lie in the latter’s reduction to a series of moral guidelines that do not spring from a uniform vision of the human person.<sup>3</sup>

An adequate response to the challenges facing marriage and the family today can be found neither in a mere restatement of doctrine nor in a compulsory adaptation to the problematic situation that gives rise to them. Rather, this is to be found in a holistic

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1. The Holy Father has examined in depth, on important occasions, the themes 1) of the original character of the difference between the sexes, a positive reality willed by the Creator himself, by virtue of which 2) the individual person is introduced to love, 3) to the discovery of the good of the other, 4) to the faithful, fruitful gift of self, and 5) to happiness. Thus it is understandable that the Pope should choose to engage the whole Church in a cogent reflection on the family and, for the first time, to dedicate two Synod assemblies to it. Cf. Francis, *Lumen fidei*, 52; *Evangelii gaudium*, 66; Address to Engaged Couples Preparing for Marriage (14 February 2014); General Audience (2 April 2014).

2. Cf. *Instrumentum laboris*, “The Pastoral Challenges for the Family in the Context of Evangelization” (hereafter *IL*), 13 and 62.

3. Cf. *IL*, 15–16, 22, 112, 126–27.

proposal of life that starts from the experience shared by every person, which is essentially made up of affections, work, and rest.<sup>4</sup>

*b) Sacramental horizon*

Reinterpreting the whole set of issues addressed by the Synod in light of an adequate anthropology enables us to understand better the profound meaning of marriage as a sacrament. It sheds light on the intrinsic relation between the so to speak natural aspects of marriage and the sacramental reality, thus overcoming an *extrinsicism* that is still widespread. The sacrament of matrimony, instituted by Christ, captures the very depths of the experience of the twofold difference—between the sexes and between the generations—on which the family is founded. The gospel of the family is an intrinsic part of the Gospel as such. It is fertile soil in which flourishes a “sense” (i.e. both the meaning and the direction) of the total gift of oneself to another, a gift that is open to life and continues “forever,” which characterizes marriage in its indissolubility. Christian marriage reveals through grace everything that a man and a woman desire in their authentic experience of mutual love.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, reflecting anthropologically on the reality of marriage as a sacrament and on the family allows us to situate these within the overall sacramental dimension of the Church’s life.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the profound connection between marriage and the family and the sacrament of the Eucharist proves to be decisive in understanding the truth of marriage itself.<sup>7</sup> This connection sheds light on marriage and on the Paschal Mystery it-

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4. From this perspective we must acknowledge the major contribution made by St. John Paul II to an adequate anthropology, in particular, with respect to the theme being considered here, by his famous catecheses on human love, which are explicitly mentioned in *Instrumentum laboris* as a decisive contribution that deserves to be developed further: (cf. *IL*, 5 and 18).

5. Cf. Marc Ouellet, *Mistero e sacramento dell’amore: Teologia del matrimonio e della famiglia per la nuova evangelizzazione* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2007).

6. Cf. Angelo Scola, *Chi è la Chiesa? Una chiave antropologica e sacramentale per l’ecclesiologia*, BTC 130 (Brescia: Queriniana, 2005).

7. Cf. Angelo Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, trans. Michelle K. Borras (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 258–71.

self as the mystery of the spousal union between Christ and the Church.<sup>8</sup> This is demonstrated both in the Pauline writings of the New Testament (cf. Eph 5 and 2 Cor 11:2) and in the Johanne writings (cf. Jn 2:1–11; 3:29; Rv 19:7–9; 21:2–22:5).<sup>9</sup>

It will thus be useful to dwell in section 2 on several anthropological considerations about the man-woman relation with reference to the sacrament of matrimony, and in section 3 on the connection between this sacrament and the Eucharist.

## 2. AN ADEQUATE ANTHROPOLOGY AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

### a) *Situated within the difference between the sexes*

Within the context of an adequate anthropology, it is crucial to give careful consideration to the shared, holistic, and fundamental experience<sup>10</sup> that every human being is called to live out due to the very fact that he or she exists in a sexually differentiated body. This is first and foremost a matter of understanding the full import of the *singularity* of sexual difference.<sup>11</sup> One of the root causes of the marriage crisis is precisely a misunderstanding of this fundamental dimension of human experience: every human being is situated as an individual within the difference between the sexes. We must recognize that this can never be overcome. To overlook the insuperability of sexual difference is to confuse the concept of *difference* with that of *diversity*. Contemporary culture often replaces the binomial *identity-difference* with the bino-

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8. Cf. Angelo Scola, *Il mistero nuziale: una prospettiva di teologia sistematica?* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2000).

9. Cf. Bruno Ognibeni, *Il matrimonio alla luce del Nuovo Testamento* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2007). For a survey of marriage in the Old Testament, see Carlos Granados, *El camino del hombre por la mujer: El matrimonio en el Antiguo Testamento* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2014).

10. Cf. Angelo Scola, *L'esperienza elementare: La vena profonda di Giovanni Paolo II* (Genoa-Milan: Marietti, 2003) and "Which Foundation? Introductory Notes," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 28 (Fall 2001): 549–67.

11. Cf. Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, 213–38; Livio Melina, "Il corpo nuziale e la sua vocazione all'amore," in Giuseppe Angelini, et al., *Maschio e femmina li creò* (Milan: Glossa, 2008), 89–116.

mial *equality-diversity*. The just promotion of equality among all persons, especially between men and women, has often led some to consider difference as discriminatory.

The confusion stems from the fact that upon closer inspection, *difference* and *diversity* are not synonyms. They designate two profoundly dissimilar human experiences, at least from an anthropological perspective. At this point it may help us to examine the etymology of the two terms. The word “diversity” has its roots in the Latin *di-vertere*. Normally, this refers to the movement of the subject in a different direction with respect to another subject. Therefore two or more autonomous subjects are *diverse* if they can enter into relation or go in opposite directions while remaining in their autonomous subjectivity. Diversity therefore brings the *interpersonal* relation into play.

In contrast, what we experience in difference refers to an *intrapersonal* reality. It is something regarding the individual person in his constitutive identity. “Difference” comes from the Latin verb *dif-ferre* which, at its most elementary level, means *to bring somewhere else, to displace*. The appearance of an individual of the opposite sex “brings me somewhere else,” “displaces me” (difference). Every individual finds himself inscribed within this difference and is always confronted with this other way of being a person, which is inaccessible to him. The sexual dimension is something internal to the individual person; it indicates his or her essential openness to the opposite sex. Recognition of this difference is a decisive factor in arriving at an adequate self-awareness. We can thus understand why the difference between the sexes (the insuperable character of which is primordial and not derivative) cannot as such be the precursor of any discrimination.<sup>12</sup>

#### b) *The process of “sexualization”*

At this point we need a crucial clarification. Sexual difference must be understood dynamically. As a balanced depth psychol-

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12. Cf. Giovanni Salmeri, *Determinazioni dell'affetto*, *Dialegesthai* 15 (Rome: Aracne, 2013), 113–37; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2: *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 365–66. Classic references to the theme are: Aristotle, *Metaphysics* X, 3; Hegel, *Science of Logic*, II, 1.

ogy affirms, the biography of every individual involves a process of *sexualization*.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the biological component of sex confronts every individual with sexual difference from birth—just think of the two famous Freudian complexes. This sets in motion a labor of his free will with regard to his “own sexual reality,” which will ceaselessly provoke him throughout his life.

Indeed, the ever-necessary determination of human freedom cannot help but encounter the sexual dimension as well. It is precisely in this “labor” that the individual can open himself to the other by virtue of this sexual difference, decide in favor of the other, and thus embark on the way of love, which cannot fail to involve a choice. In the marriage between a man and a woman this happens *objectively*. In it, I *choose to be chosen by another who is sexually different from me, intending the duty* of living exclusively with her forever in a communion of life and fruitful love.

Male and female are not a merely biological datum, nor a simple cultural construct.

### c) “Gender” theory

Gender theory, which is quite widespread nowadays, tends, in contrast, substantially to replace sexual difference with the various orientations of gender.<sup>14</sup> Originating in a practical need to liberate male and female from the narrow parameters of their socially determined roles, such theory has become closely affiliated with several types of feminism. As several interventions of the Church have recalled,<sup>15</sup> some prevalent currents of feminism to-

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13. The term is unusual yet crucial. Cf. Mario Binasco, *La differenza umana: L'interesse teologico della psicoanalisi* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2013), 26–31.

14. Cf. Marguerite A. Peeters, *Le gender, une norme mondiale? Pour un discernement* (Paris: Mame, 2013); Theodore R. Bach, “Gender Is a Natural Kind with a Historical Essence,” *Ethics* 122 (2012): 231–72; Laura Palazzani, *Sex/gender: gli equivoci dell’uguaglianza* (Turin: G. Giappichelli, 2011); Paolo Gomarasca, “L’idea di natura nei ‘Gender studies,’” in Francesco Botturi and Roberto Mordacci, *Natura in etica* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2009), 175–90; Giuseppe Angelini, “Passaggio al postmoderno: il Gender in questione,” in Angelini et al., *Maschio e femmina li creò*, 263–96.

15. Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* (31 May 2004), 2. English translation at Vatican website: <http://www.vatican.va>

ward the middle of the last century sought to emancipate women from a subordination to men that has often degenerated into discrimination. They championed equality/antagonism between the sexes, and then went so far as to maintain that the abolition of the difference itself was a prerequisite for equality.<sup>16</sup> In this way, sexual difference tends to be reduced to mere cultural conditioning, which the subject can determine in various ways and even many times over the course of his or her life.

A similar development is certainly fostered today by the extraordinary link between science and technology, which gives man an unprecedented sense of his power (and also of his obligation) radically to manipulate every reality, including his own self.<sup>17</sup> Heterosexuality, homosexuality, and transsexuality—and other increasingly numerous varieties of gender—are said to be possibilities completely at the disposal of the subject's self-determination.

*d) Self-evidence of eros in the self-evidence of the body*

Basic human experience, however, attests to *the self-evidence of eros* as an original openness to the other and to the fruitfulness of relation, inscribed in the *self-evidence of the sexually differentiated body*. The “flesh,” as a “sentient” body, reveals that our “being there,” our existing, insofar as it is situated within sexual difference, always happens within relations (with God, with others, and with ourselves) marked by this *difference*.<sup>18</sup> Here it becomes

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[vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040731\\_collaboration\\_en.html](http://vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html).

16. See the summary of this trajectory presented in Aristide Fumagalli, “Genere e generazione: Rivendicazioni e implicazioni dell’odierna cultura sessuale,” *La Rivista del Clero italiano* 95 (2014): 133–47, esp. 135–40. There is no shortage of valuable feminist literature devoted to a more in-depth study of the theme of difference: Anne Stevens, *Women, Power, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Adriana Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone: Figure femminili nella filosofia antica* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2009); Marina Teragni, *La scomparsa delle donne* (Milan: Mondadori, 2007); Luce Irigaray, *In tutto il mondo siamo sempre in due* (Milan: Baldini Castoldi Dalai, 2006); Luisa Muraro, *Il Dio delle donne* (Milan: Mondadori, 2003).

17. Cf. Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, 215.

18. Cf. Angelo Scola, “Il mistero nuziale: Originarietà e fecondità,” *Anthropotes* 23 (2007): 57–70.

evident that difference, relation, and fruitfulness (nuptial mystery) are inseparably intertwined.

The *nuptial* dimension proper to every form of love is the point of departure for addressing the pastoral challenges regarding marriage and the family.

Based on what has been said, we can make an observation fraught with pastoral significance. The original character of sexual difference indelibly marks every person in his or her singularity. Recognizing this insuperable anthropological structure does not permit us to resort to generalizations. The sets of problems inherent in sexual difference, like those connected with marriage and the family, need to be addressed as unique situations, starting with the individual. Moreover, the problem of “sexualization” is a process which by its very nature is dramatic (from the Greek verb *drao*, “to be in action”); as we already noted, this process engages every individual, in whatever sexual condition he perceives himself, throughout his life.

### 3. THE RELATION BETWEEN THE EUCHARIST AND MARRIAGE

#### a) *The Eucharist: A nuptial sacrament*

On this anthropological basis, we must now consider the relation between the nuptial mystery and Christian marriage as a sacrament. I do not intend to discuss here the vexed question, which originated in the modern era, of the theology of the *elevation* of the natural element to the status of a sacrament through the work of Jesus Christ. From several quarters, and also by dint of the impetus of Vatican Council II, there are indications that we need to rethink this model.<sup>19</sup> Instead I would like to show how the nuptial mystery, as a dimension of every form of love, finds in the mystery of the trinitarian life and in its communication

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19. Cf. José Granados, *Una sola carne en un solo espíritu: Teología del matrimonio* (Madrid: Palabra, 2014), 33–57; Nicola Reali, “*Tamquam spoliatus a nudo*: il rapporto tra matrimonio naturale e sacramento: Il punto di vista di un pastore,” *Ephemerides Iuris Canonici* 53 (2013): 391–425; Nicola Petrovich, “La ‘natura pura’ dell’uomo non esiste,” *Marcianum* 6 (2010): 41–64.



through the redemptive Incarnation of the Son, the archetype and revelation of what a man and a woman experience in their relationship as promise and desire.<sup>20</sup>

The issue, then, is not so much considering sacramental marriage as the elevation of a reality already complete in itself, but rather grasping in the sacrament *the form* that renders nuptial love comprehensible and practicable as it was willed by the Creator “in the beginning.” Understood in this way, the relation between a man and a woman is illuminated by the “great mystery” indicated in the Letter to the Ephesians (cf. Eph 5), in which the relation between Christ and the Church is in fact described in nuptial terms. The sacrament of matrimony is thus revealed to be the elementary actualization of the Church (the family as the domestic church). As such, the sacrament can never be “inadequate” for coping with difficult situations and the wounds experienced by spouses. This is not because the ideal has to be applied abstractly to life, which is always more or less conditioned by adversities and frailty, but because the sacrament offers the love of Christ the Bridegroom for the Church his Bride. This love is a resource, criterion, and guarantee that the promise engraved on the heart of every human being, with his insuppressible need to be loved and assured of love forever, is practicable.<sup>21</sup> To downsize the specific *goods* of the sacrament (indissolubility, fidelity, and openness to fertility)<sup>22</sup> in the name of a reductive notion of pastoral care so as to resolve people’s painful personal problems does not help them. Especially in the trials and wounds of their conjugal union, Christ’s sacramental action never leaves spouses lacking the *gifts*<sup>23</sup> they need to be able to live out their love to

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20. Cf. Marc Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, trans. Philip Milligan and Linda M. Cicone (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).

21. Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 41–53.

22. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter cited as CCC), nos.1643–54.

23. Cf. Alain Mattheeuws, *Amarsi per donarsi: Il sacramento del matrimonio* (Venice: Marcianum Press, 2008) and *Les “dons” du mariage: Recherche de théologie morale et sacramentelle* (Brussels: Culture et Vérité, 1996). This author proposes the hypothesis that the *goods* of marriage are its *ends* precisely because they are in the first place *gifts*.

the point of full communion for the good of the Church and the world.<sup>24</sup>

*b) The Eucharist, marriage, and life as vocation*

From this perspective, we begin to see how essential the inter-relatedness of all the sacraments is for Christian life—in particular the relation between marriage and the Eucharist (*sacramentum caritatis*) as the sacrament of the nuptial love between Christ and the Church.

The Holy Eucharist, the source and summit of the Church's life and mission, is the efficacious sign of the gift of the body of Christ the Bridegroom, even unto the utmost self-sacrifice, to the Church, his fruitful Bride. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, the spouses thus encounter the trinitarian foundation of the nuptial mystery, as an intertwining of difference, self-gift, and fruitfulness.

In the eucharistic action, Christ has entrusted to the Church the memorial of his total self-gift so that the believer, in his own freedom, can opt for him. Thus, in quasi-sacramental terms, every circumstance of life, even the most adverse, becomes a moment when Christ himself offers himself to our freedom so that we might opt for him. Marital and familial life thus takes its place within the total horizon of life as a vocation, and a vocation to holiness. We find a clear statement of this in the text of Benedict XVI's post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 27:

The Eucharist inexhaustibly strengthens the indissoluble unity and love of every Christian marriage. By the power of the sacrament, the marriage bond is intrinsically linked to the eucharistic unity of Christ the Bridegroom and his Bride, the Church (cf. Eph 5:31–32). The mutual consent that husband and wife exchange in Christ, which establishes them as a community of life and love, also has a eucharistic dimension. Indeed, in the theology of St. Paul, conjugal love is a sacramental sign of Christ's love for his

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24. Cf. Gabriel Richi Alberti, "Como Cristo amó a su Iglesia (Ef 5, 25)," in Jean de Dios Larrú, ed., *La grandeza del amor humano* (Madrid: BAC, 2013), 125–47.

Church, a love culminating in the Cross, the expression of his “marriage” with humanity and at the same time the origin and heart of the Eucharist.

*c) Eucharistic celebration and matrimonial consent*

Another reason why many people find the radical nature of Jesus’ summons to bring the state of marriage back to the “beginning” (cf. Mt 19:4; Gn 1:27; 2:24) difficult to accept today as a positive good for the human person, the family, the Church and society, is that the relation between eucharistic celebration and consent on the occasion of a marriage still remains too extrinsic. I do not mean that the value of the Eucharist is obliterated, but it runs the risk of being demoted to the role of an occasion to express a generic blessing of the spouses by God. The eucharistic sacrifice is, rather, the definitive *condition* within which matrimonial consent is given. It allows the spouses to decide to accept the call of Christ the Bridegroom as the origin of their own decision. Pastoral practice on the occasion of a wedding that fails to demonstrate clearly the fundamental connection between the eucharistic celebration and matrimonial consent leads to a view of fidelity and fruitfulness as additional properties that are basically nonessential; they do not determine the marital bond.

*d) The Eucharist, Reconciliation, and divorced and remarried persons*

*i) The reasoning of the Magisterium*

What has just been said must be kept in mind when we address sensitive topics involving particular suffering, such as the topic of the divorced and remarried. Those who, after a failure of their marital common life, have established a new bond are denied access to the sacrament of Reconciliation and to the Eucharist.

Often the Church is accused of lacking sensitivity and understanding with regard to the phenomenon of the divorced and remarried without careful reflection on the reasons for her position,<sup>25</sup> which she acknowledges to be based on divine revela-

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25. Cf. *IL*, 93–95.

tion.<sup>26</sup> Yet what is involved here is not an arbitrary action of the Church's Magisterium, but rather an awareness of the inseparable bond uniting the Eucharist and marriage. In light of this intrinsic relation, it must be said that what impedes access to sacramental Reconciliation and the Eucharist is not a single sin, which can always be forgiven when the person repents and asks God for pardon. What makes access to these sacraments impossible is, rather, the *state* (condition of life) in which those who have established a new bond find themselves— a state which in itself contradicts what is signified by the bond between the Eucharist and marriage.<sup>27</sup> This condition is one that needs to be changed in order to be able to correspond to what is effected in these two sacraments. Non-admission to eucharistic Communion invites these persons, without denying their pain and their wound, to set out on a path toward a full communion that will come about at the times and in the ways determined in light of God's will.

Beyond various interpretations of the praxis in the early Church, which still do not seem to give evidence of actions substantially different from those of the present day,<sup>28</sup> the fact that she increasingly developed an awareness of the fundamental bond between the Eucharist and marriage signals the outcome of a journey made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in much the same way as all the sacraments of the Church and their discipline took shape over time.

This helps us to understand why both *Familiaris consortio*, 84 and *Sacramentum caritatis* confirmed “the Church's practice, based on sacred Scripture (cf. Mk 10:2–12), of not admitting the divorced and remarried to the sacraments, since their state and their condition of life objectively contradict the loving union of

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26. Cf. Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis* (hereafter *SC*), 29.

27. As *SC*, 28 declares, “The indissoluble, exclusive, and faithful bond uniting Christ and the Church, which finds sacramental expression in the Eucharist, corresponds to the basic anthropological fact that man is meant to be definitively united to one woman and vice versa (cf. Gn 2:24; Mt 19:5).”

28. Cf. Gilles Pelland, “La pratica della Chiesa antica relativa ai fedeli divorziati risposati,” in Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Pastoral Care of the Divorced and Remarried* (Vatican City: LEV, 1998), 99–131; Walter Brandmüller, “Den Vätern ging es um die Witwen,” *Die Tagespost* (27 February 2014): 7 (see the summary by the same author, “Divorziati risposati, così nella Chiesa primitiva,” *Avvenire* (5 April 2014).

Christ and the Church signified and made present in the Eucharist” (*SC*, 29).

In this perspective we should mention two elements that must be studied in greater depth. Certainly the Eucharist, on certain conditions, contains an aspect of forgiveness; nevertheless it is not a *sacrament of healing*.<sup>29</sup> The grace of the eucharistic mystery effects the unity of the Church as the Bride and Body of Christ, and this requires in the recipient of sacramental Communion the objective possibility of allowing himself to be *perfectly incorporated* into Christ.

At the same time we need to explain much more clearly why the non-admission of those who have established a new bond to the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist should not be considered a “punishment” for their condition, but rather a sign pointing the way to a possible path, with the help of God’s grace and continued membership [*immanenza*] in the ecclesial community. For this reason and for the good of all the faithful, every ecclesial community is called to implement all the appropriate programs for the effective participation of these persons in the life of the Church, while respecting their concrete situation.

*ii) Forms of participation in the sacramental economy*

The life of these faithful does not cease to be a life called to holiness.<sup>30</sup>

Extremely valuable in this regard are several gestures that traditional spirituality has recommended as a support for those in situations that do not permit them to approach the sacraments.

I am thinking, first of all, about the value of *spiritual communion*, i.e., the practice of communing with the eucharistic Christ in prayer, of offering to him one’s desire for his Body and Blood, together with one’s sorrow over the impediments to the fulfillment of that desire. It is wrong to think that this practice is extraneous to the Church’s sacramental economy. In reality, so-

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29. The *Catechism* classifies as “sacraments of healing” the sacraments of Reconciliation (*CCC*, nos. 1422–98) and the Anointing of the Sick (*CCC*, nos. 1499–1532).

30. Cf. Alain Mattheeuws, “L’amour de Dieu ne meurt jamais: La sainteté des divorcés remariés dans l’Église,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 136 (2014): 423–44.

called “spiritual communion” would make no sense apart from that sacramental economy. It is a form of participation in the Eucharist that is offered to all the faithful; and it is suited to the journey of someone who finds himself in a certain state or particular condition. If understood in this way, such a practice reinforces the sense of the sacramental life.

An analogous practice for the sacrament of Reconciliation could be proposed more systematically. When it is not possible to receive sacramental absolution, it will be useful to promote those practices that are considered—also by sacred Scripture—particularly suited to expressing penitence and the request for forgiveness, and to fostering the virtue of repentance (cf. 1 Pt 4:7–9). I am thinking especially of works of charity, reading the Word of God, and pilgrimages. When appropriate, this could be accompanied by regular meetings with a priest to discuss one’s faith journey. These gestures can express the desire to change and to ask God for forgiveness while waiting for one’s personal situation to develop in such a way as to allow one to approach the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, drawing on my experience as a pastor, I would like to recall that it is not impossible to propose to these faithful, on certain conditions and with suitable follow-up, “the commitment to live in complete continence,” as St. John Paul II declared, “that is, to abstain from those acts proper to spouses.”<sup>32</sup> I can say, after many years of episcopal ministry, that this is a path—involving sacrifice together with joy—that God’s grace does in fact make feasible. I have had the opportunity to readmit to sacramental communion divorced and remarried Catholics who had arrived at such a decision after mature reflection.

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31. Some of these guidelines were already recommended in *Sacramentum caritatis*, which, among other things, forcefully declares that the divorced and remarried, despite their situation, continue to belong to the Church. They cultivate “the Christian life” through their “regular participation at Mass, albeit without receiving communion, listening to the word of God, eucharistic adoration, prayer, participation in the life of the community, honest dialogue with a priest or spiritual director, dedication to the life of charity, works of penance, and commitment to the education of their children” (29).

32. John Paul II, Homily at the Conclusion of the Sixth Synod of Bishops (25 October 1980), 7, translated from the Italian text in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 72 (1980): 1082.

Pastoral experience also teaches us that these forms of participation in the sacramental economy are not palliative. Rather, from the perspective of conversion that is proper to Christian life, they are a constant source of peace.

*e) Cases of matrimonial nullity*

In conclusion, we must consider the situation of those who believe in conscience that their marriage was invalid. What we have said thus far about sexual difference and the intrinsic relation between marriage and the Eucharist calls for careful reflection on the problems connected with declarations of marital nullity. When the need presents itself and the spouses request an annulment, it becomes essential to verify rigorously whether the marriage was valid and therefore is indissoluble.

This is not the occasion to repeat the fair recommendations that emerged in the responses to the questionnaire presented in *Instrumentum laboris* concerning the necessarily pastoral approach to this whole set of problems.<sup>33</sup> We know very well how difficult it is for the persons involved to turn to their own past, which is marked by profound suffering. At this level too we see the importance of conceiving of doctrine and canon law as a unity.

*i) Faith and the sacrament of matrimony*

Among the questions requiring further examination we should mention *the relation between faith and the sacrament of matrimony*, which Benedict XVI addressed several times, including at the end of his pontificate.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the relevance of faith to the validity of the sacrament is one of the topics that the current cultural situation, especially in the West, compels us to weigh very carefully. Today, at least in certain contexts, it cannot be taken for granted that spouses who celebrate a wedding intend “to do what the Church intends to do.” A lack of faith could lead nowadays to the exclusion of the very goods of marriage. Although it

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33. Cf. *IL*, 103–04.

34. Cf. Benedict XVI, Address for the Inauguration of the Judicial Year of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota (26 January 2013).

is impossible to pass final judgment on a person's faith, we cannot deny the necessity of a *minimum of faith*, without which the sacrament of matrimony is invalid.

*ii) A suggestion*

In the second place, as *Instrumentum laboris* also makes clear, it is to be hoped that some way might be found to expedite cases of nullity—fully respecting all the necessary procedures—and to make the intimately pastoral nature of these processes more evident.<sup>35</sup>

Along these lines, the upcoming Extraordinary Assembly could suggest that the pope give a broader endorsement [*valorizzare di più*] to the ministry of the bishop. Specifically, it could suggest that he examine the feasibility of the proposal, which is no doubt complex, to create a non-judicial canonical procedure which would have as its final arbiter not a judge (or a panel of judges), but rather the bishop or his delegate. I mean a procedure regulated by the law of the Church, with formal methods of gathering and evaluating evidence.<sup>36</sup> For example (hypothetically), one could explore recourse to the following options: the presence in every diocese or in a group of small dioceses of a counseling service for Catholics who have doubts about the validity of their marriage. From there one could start a canonical process for evaluating the validity of the bond, conducted by a suitable appointee (with the help of qualified personnel like notaries as required by canon law); this process would be rigorous in gathering evidence, which would be forwarded to the bishop, together with the opinion of the appointee himself, of the defender of the bond, and of a person who is assisting the petitioner. The bishop (who may also entrust this responsibility to another person with delegated faculties) would be called on to decide whether or not the marriage is null (he may consult several experts before giving his own opinion). It would always be possible for either of the spouses to appeal that decision to the Holy See.

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35. Cf. *IL*, 98–102.

36. Examples of administrative procedures currently provided for by canon law are the procedures for the dissolution of a non-consummated marriage (canons 1697–1706), or for reasons of faith (canons 1143–50; proper norms), or also the penal administrative procedures (canon 1720).



This proposal is not meant as a gimmick to resolve the delicate situation of divorced and remarried persons, but rather intends to make clearer the connection between doctrine, pastoral care, and canon law.

#### 4. WITNESSING TO THE GOSPEL OF THE FAMILY

In these pages I wished to present anthropological and sacramental reflections on marriage and the family in view of the upcoming Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, draw some conclusion from them, and offer a suggestion with regard to the procedure for verifying the validity of the bond.

However, in the promotion of marriage and the family, I do not overlook the need to rely constantly on the solid experience of familial holiness found throughout the people of God in various geographic and cultural contexts. The strongest point for the renewal of pastoral care for the family can only be witness.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, it is possible to address situations of suffering and difficulty in a positive way thanks to the many, many spouses who have lived their married life in love and fidelity. When visiting parishes and communities I am always moved to meet so many now elderly couples who, after forty, fifty, or even sixty years, speak with tender joy about their marriage and witness to how, with the help of the Lord and with the practical support of the Christian community, so many trials and sufferings can be confronted and overcome. I must also recall with profound gratitude the testimony of those who have suffered abandonment by their spouse and have chosen to remain faithful to the marriage bond. They are not uncommon, and they are a powerful sign of what Christ's grace can accomplish when human freedom is open to it.

Pastorally speaking, moreover, I consider it quite realistic and effective to be convinced that even today marriage proves to be the precious

[objective form] that both transcends and contains all an individual's cravings to "break out" of its bonds and to assert itself. Marriage is that indissoluble reality which confronts with an iron hand all existence's tendencies to

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37. Cf. *IL*, 59–60.

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 [ultimately Jesus Christ] that chooses them because they have chosen it. . . . [T]his form extends through all the levels of life—from its biological roots up to the heights of grace and of life in the Holy Spirit.<sup>38</sup>

The bishops gathered for the Third Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, guided by the Holy Spirit and strengthened by these testimonies of familial sanctity, will be able to point out to the Holy Father the best way to show the beauty of the gospel of the family to the whole world.—*Translated by Michael J. Miller.* □

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38. 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, 1983), 27, translation modified.