

“WHAT GOD HAS CONJOINED, LET
NO MAN PUT ASUNDER”:
A MEDITATION ON
FRUITFULNESS, FIDELITY,
AND THE CONJUGAL EMBRACE*

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“Even as a reality belonging to the order of nature,
sexual union is a kind of liturgical act uniting . . .
self-possession and self-sacrifice, in a gesture
analogous to the Eucharist.”



When the Pharisees attempt to draw him into a tricky debate about the technicalities of divorce law (cf. Mt 19:3), Christ responds by recalling the Creator’s original intention for marriage. The marital bond uniting male and female in exclusive life-long communion, he reminds his interlocutors, is not a merely human institution, much less a malleable plaything of human caprice, but was created by God himself in the beginning as an enduring tes-

* *Non seulement à la mémoire, mais à l'intention de notre ami et de notre frère Stratford; et à l'intention de son épouse, notre amie et notre sœur Léonie.*

tament to his own absolute unicity. This is why “a man shall leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh, so that they are no longer two, but one flesh. What God has conjoined, then, let no man put asunder!” (Mt 19:6).¹

According to Mt 19, then, the indissolubility of marriage is not simply a topic for learned debate among lawyers and moralists. Before anything else, it is the revelation of the Creator’s original intention for male and female, the archetypal paradigm in whose light we begin to see the sexually differentiated body as it truly is: not as opaque, indifferent, inert, and amoral stuff, as a neutral tool for our arbitrary self-expression, but as the sacrament of an inexhaustibly generous divine intention. To perceive and affirm this intention is not to betray our sexuality, but to liberate it into its primordial truth, which shines forth most brightly in the radiance of what John Paul II called “God’s plan for marriage and family.”²

God’s original intention for sexuality is written into the very pattern of our male and female bodies. We could think of this intention as a word or *logos* that the Creator speaks into our nature, but it is more than that, too: it is also our first acknowledgment of, and answer to, this divine speech in turn. Though truly ours, this initial response is assured to us before we can will it consciously; indeed, it is given to us as the internal ground and direction sustaining and orienting all our volition from within. To obey this direction is not to become a de-personalized instrument of sub-human forces, but to receive the right form of self-possession, which is itself the condition and the fruit of the vice-regal dominion over nature included in God’s original gift to mankind: “And God blessed them and said ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and have dominion over it’” (Gn 1:28).

In order to feel the full force of this claim, we need to recall what it is like to perceive a living human body. If we reflect on this perception, we realize that it is the impression of a real-

1. To be sure, the conjugal bond requires the consent of the spouses, but, once their consent is given, it belongs to God. He gathers up the subjective “Yes” of man and wife into an objective form that encompasses the entirety of their shared lives.

2. “[C]onsilium Dei de matrimonio ac familia” (*Familiaris consortio*, 3). This and all other translations mine.

ity that we cannot construct but can only first receive: a unique, original, and undivided whole that presents itself all at once with an evidence prior to every attempt to deny or even to explain it. It is *this* concrete whole, entirely saturated with “living soul” (Gn 2:7), that is the manifest embodiment of God’s original intention for man and woman. The very fact of being visible in the world as male or female makes each of us a living revelation of God’s generous plan, a plan whose *logos* is woven into the sensuous texture of our sexually-differentiated bodies.³

Now, one of the most eloquent expressions of the divine intention for male and female is the act to which each of us owes his existence, an act that imposes itself as the unique paradigm of what we mean by “sex”: What other use of the sexual organs, in fact, could *conceivably* interweave the intimate bodily commingling of male and female, their face-to-face encounter, and their conjoint fruitfulness in the same seamless whole?⁴ This incomparable *Gestalt* is clearly a sign. But what does this sign point to, if not to the society of man and woman in matrimony?⁵

We have just seen that the paradigm of “sex” is the genital union of male and female. But this union makes no sense apart from its constitutive reference to fruitfulness, even as fruitfulness points in turn to fidelity.⁶ In this sense, the generative embrace of male and female simultaneously signifies both *fides* and *proles*, the

3. The essential meaning of the sign that we are is dependent on God, but for that very reason it is more interior to us than we are to ourselves. This is why every moment of our conscious lives is in principle open to a sudden recognition of the sense it conveys.

4. This is why even the most “transgressive” sexual behavior is in fact never really anything more than an attempt to achieve fragments of the generative act apart from the undivided whole in which they are originally given.

5. The generative embrace involves a bodily union between man and woman that physically excludes any third partner and that culminates in an event (the *transmissio seminis*) that both seals the carnal act and opens it into a future beyond the partners’ control. Do we not see here an eloquent image of the irrevocable, exclusive, and fruitful marital bond?

6. This conclusion becomes evident once we realize that no fruit of sexual union could *conceivably* be greater than a new human being created in the divine image and ordered to eternal life with him. In the face of this wonder, the child’s mother and father cannot reasonably pledge him anything less than their irrevocable fidelity. But how could they be irrevocably committed to *him* unless they were irrevocably, and exclusively, committed to *each other*?

twin goods that co-constitute the substance of marriage.⁷ This is of course a claim about “natural marriage,” but it is important to see that the indivisible unity of fecundity and fidelity helps give natural marriage its original ordination to, and aptitude for, the sacramental representation of Christ’s fruitful covenant with his Church. “This,” in fact, “is why a man shall leave father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery. But I speak concerning Christ and the Church” (Eph 5:32).

St. Augustine makes a similar claim about the inseparable connection between fruitfulness and fidelity in his treatise on the good of marriage, *De Bono Conjugali* (=DBC).⁸ How, he asks there, can sexual union constitute a properly “nuptial” act?⁹ How, in other words, can it express and ratify the bond of marital society? The essential condition is the readiness to procreate: Without openness to *proles*, sexual union cannot signify *fides*, and so fails to be a conjugal act or, as I prefer to call it, a “conjugal embrace.”¹⁰ The nuptial aptitude of sexuality, its ordination to signify the marital bond, thus stands or falls with what Paul VI would call the “indissoluble nexus between the unitive and the

7. This does not mean, of course, that matrimony is solely for the sake of procreation. It does mean, however, that the procreative finality of sex is intrinsic to its capacity to express the marital bond, which consists, after all, in an indissoluble communion between one man and one woman. It is opportune to point out here that each sex provides a way of being a person in communion with another person of the opposite sex—and that marriage is the first complete revelation of this pattern, a pattern simultaneously involving both the irreducible “vis-à-vis,” or relative opposition, of the sexes and their total mutual exchange in view of the common good(s) of marital society.

8. The following discussion is indebted to a speculative reading of Augustine’s treatise, which, I believe, anticipates certain capital intuitions of John Paul II’s theology of the body, while offering a way beyond the sterile dichotomy between “physicalism” and “personalism.” Rather than developing a detailed justification of my interpretation of Augustine’s account of matrimonial society, however, I take the liberty of applying it directly to the question at hand.

9. Cf. DBC, X, 11.

10. In my rather free translation: “When carnal union is accompanied by acknowledgment of the true cause of its intelligible pattern, i.e. generation, it is flawlessly faithful to itself. But only this flawless fidelity suffices for nuptiality” (“*Concubitus enim necessarius causa generandi inculpabilis et solus ipse nuptialis est*”) (DBC, X, 11).

procreative significations that are both inherent in the very being of the conjugal [embrace],”¹¹ i.e., in the bodily act in which the *amplexus* “materially” consists.

But why must sexual union be open to fruitfulness in order to represent conjugal fidelity? An initial answer has to do with the nature of that union itself, whose essential idea is as immutable in its own way as that of the triangle. Just as you cannot separate the idea of the triangle from its three sides, you cannot separate the idea of sexual union from procreation.¹² So much so, in fact, that wilful frustration of the procreative finality of the sexual embrace automatically contradicts its unitive character as well. Deliberately sterile sex cannot be a positive achievement of carnal union, but can only produce a parasitic replica thereof lacking any unitive power of its own. It can achieve only an adulterated simulacrum of union unable to give valid expression to the truth of the marital bond.

Even granting, however, that sexual union is naturally procreative, why should our *subjective* enjoyment of it require affirmation (or, at least, the non-refusal) of its procreative finality? Here, too, the answer lies in the ideal pattern of the *unio carnalis* as a communion uniting male and female in the shared act of generation.¹³ This pre-existing *ratio* is itself an objective joy, in which the mutual delight of the spouses is inseparable from their shared delight in welcoming the child, who “embodies all [their]

11. “[N]exu[s] indissolubili[s] . . . inter significationem unitatis et significationem procreationis, quae ambae in actu coniugali insunt” (*Humanae vitae* [=HV], 12).

12. The visible pattern of sexual union confirms this inseparability, since the very event that completes the union in itself, i.e., the *transmissio seminis*, simultaneously opens it from within towards fruitfulness. Obviously, not every instance of carnal union leads to conception in the course of nature. Nevertheless, sexual union as such would be unintelligible without the transmission of seed, which would itself be unintelligible without a *per se* reference to fruitfulness. Even contraception presupposes the procreative “signification” of the act, whose movement it cannot reverse, but only hinder from reaching its goal, like a player who intercepts a long pass at the touchdown line. More pertinently, it is as if the quarterback himself were to intercept his own pass as it left his hands, deliberately marring the integrity of what would have been a spectacular display of his talent.

13. It is important to emphasize that this communion simultaneously includes both the union of the two sexes as a single principle of generation and their abiding relative opposition, which are inseparable, reciprocally conditioning aspects of the same complex whole.

authentic enjoyment of carnal love.”¹⁴ The whole substance of the spouses’ subjective fruition of sexual union, then, consists in a surrender to this objective joy, which always both precedes and surpasses their personal appreciation of it. When man and wife ratify this surrender, opening themselves to procreation, they jointly direct their genital expression of love towards its appropriate fruit, and so become one both in body *and* in (right) intention.¹⁵ Conversely, any deliberate closure to procreation prevents the spouses from coinciding in the intention of the same (right) end, thus wounding not only the natural integrity of their sexual union, but also their capacity to participate as one in its pattern of socially self-communicating joy.¹⁶ In one stroke, then, willful closure to fruitfulness wounds both the objective form of carnal union and its subjective enjoyment—thus frustrating its ability to exhibit the unitive power of the conjugal bond in the sexual sphere.

The nexus between union and procreation, then, not only constitutes the nature of sex, but also shapes it into a form of communion involving both spouses as a whole. Thus, even

14. “[U]nus honestus fructus . . . concubitus” (DBC, I, 1). The child, or the readiness to receive one, is the decisive test that the *unio* is not being used as a pretext for some alien intention, but is being properly enjoyed for what it is in itself. Even more: The child himself *is* the entire authentic fruition of the union, seen as unfolding its full meaning beyond the moment of its temporal consummation.

15. Commenting on the creation of Eve from Adam’s side, Augustine writes that “they are joined together at the sides who walk together and look together to the goal towards which they walk. *Consequently*, the connexion of society is in children” (“*Lateribus enim sibi iunguntur, qui pariter ambulant et pariter quo ambulant intuentur. Consequens est connexio societatis in filiis*”) (DBC, I, 1, emphasis mine). It bears stressing that the spouses’ common self-gift to the child and their reciprocal self-gift to each other are not two separate things, but simultaneous and coextensive aspects of one and the same generative embrace.

16. This consideration also suggests why every act of carnal union must be open to new life (cf. HV, 11). Insofar as he is a rational agent, man is always responsible for safeguarding the undiminished meaning of sexual union, which is at stake in each of its instances. This responsibility is not contradicted by the indeterminacy of our sexual appetite, which is itself best understood as the sign of the following problem: How do I realize the integration of reason and passion that corresponds to my nature? For Augustine, as for Paul VI, the solution to this problem ideally requires precisely a readiness to acknowledge the unadulterated ratio of the carnal act in each one of its instances—a readiness contradicted by recourse to contraception.

if man and wife don't fully realize the implications of the carnal act—who ever could?—the act itself “intends” the same gesture as their marital vows: irrevocable, exclusive mutual self-gift placed in the hands of the Creator. When, in its culminating moment, the act opens beyond itself towards fruitfulness, this opening is an invitation to the spouses, a call to return their entire union to God, who will transform it—if he so chooses—into a living fruit that endures into eternity.¹⁷ Any deliberate attempt to render sex sterile implies a refusal of this divine invitation, a “No” that separates the spouses both from God and from each other.¹⁸ Contraception drives a wedge of divorce into the very heart of carnal union, a germ of infidelity both to God, to each other, and to our common vocation to liberate “creation from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).

In the foregoing pages, I have argued that only the fruitful carnal union of man and wife—the conjugal embrace—can do full justice to the original vocation of sex, which is to signify the indissoluble conjugal bond. The achievement of this signification depends on a self-offering that is inscribed in the natural pattern of the sexual act and that is given to the spouses for their ratification. Far from degrading their union to a mere pretext for generation, however, this oblation gesture consummates it as a share in the supreme joy: the intensest experience of life coincident with the most irrevocable act of giving it away. Even as a reality belonging to the order of nature, sexual union is a

17. Even couples incapable of child-bearing on account of age or of some physical impediment participate in this offering, so long as their use of the sexual organs is representative of that species of acts whose *typical* instances are both unitive and procreative at once. The same holds true *mutatis mutandis* of couples who, for sufficiently serious reasons, have recourse to non-contraceptive methods of birth regulation, which do not actively hinder the achievement of the procreative finality of the act, but take advantage of “fallow periods” when its expression is naturally dormant.

18. Although spouses will ideally acknowledge the divine invitation with gratitude, a simple non-refusal of it counts as a “Yes” in any given case. We can presume such non-refusal in the absence of deliberate tampering with the objective form of carnal union or its procreative dimension. This kind of “passive consent” may not be the ideal, but it is already a beginning of the ideal's full realization. So much so, in fact, that even the active intention to conceive a child is, or should be, more a matter of receptive patience, even of supplication, than of aggressive will or cold calculation.

kind of liturgical act uniting enjoyment and kenosis, self-possession and self-sacrifice, in a gesture analogous to the Eucharist.¹⁹ And through this eucharistic gesture we catch a glimpse of the (trinitarian) unity of being and gift in God himself. This is why, in defending the natural integrity of the conjugal embrace, the Church is also defending the “most high calling”²⁰ inscribed in our sexuality from the beginning: its ordination to bear witness to the unicity of the Father, who, in generating the Son, also gives him the spiration of the Third Person, so that “the common Gift might also proceed from [the Begotten] as well.”²¹ □

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19. Sexual union naturally prefigures the exercise of lay priesthood we call the “consummation” of sacramental marriage.

20. “[A]ltissima vocatio” (*Gaudium et spes*, 22).

21. “Sic ergo eum genuit, ut etiam de illo Donum commune procederet, et Spiritus Sanctus spiritus esset amborum” (Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV, 17. 29).