

Synopsis for "On Liturgical Marriage"
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This paper first examines marriage from a trinitarian perspective, considering marriage as procreative in imitation of the Father who is creative; considering marriage redeemed by a Son who elevates nature to a supernatural level; and considering marriage as a path to holiness led by the Holy Spirit who sanctifies through an ascetical process. This brings us to the three goods of marriage which Augustine delineated and have influenced western thought since: *bonum prolis* (the good of offspring); *bonum fidei* (the good of steadfast fidelity); *bonum sacramenti* (the bond of indissoluble unity that is, in Christians, a sign of Christ's bridal union with his spouse). This permits discussion of marriage as mystery (sacrament) and covenant, by which two people are held in a relationship by divine grace that frees and enables them to fulfill their human potential. "Liturgical marriage is nothing other than natural marriage in its course of transfiguration, whereby ascetical cooperation with grace will lift a natural blessing into the eternal blessedness of the Trinity."

On Liturgical Marriage

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I suppose that for a conference of this gravity I should not begin my paper with a quip, much less base my paper on that quip, and yet it contains my thesis in such a succinct form that I am going to try it. Sometimes people say “the Sacrament of Marriage does not involve two persons, but three.” They mean that in addition to the husband and wife, one should remember God. But I like to quip in reply that by my Trinitarian arithmetic, that means there are five persons involved in each marriage.

My charge here is to say something liturgical and sacramental about marriage that is of use to pastoral ministry. Where would such a paper begin? I could rehearse the rubrics and text of the wedding rite; I could review arguments that marriage is a sacrament and that it was instituted by Christ; I could plod through the history by which, even without a final marriage liturgy, the Catholic Church came to practice canonical jurisdiction over marriages by the end of the first millennium in Europe; I could point out that the canons on marriage make up the largest section in the Code of Canon Law's book IV on the sanctifying office (forty-nine more than the Eucharist); I could recall the hesitation of some scholastic theologians to including marriage in the list of seven sacraments because it was a pre-Christian reality involving sex and the exchange of money (and besides, they had to figure out what was the matter and form of marriage).

A paper could, I say, begin with these sorts of details. But if I am to say something liturgical and sacramental about marriage that is helpful, then I feel obliged to drive myself beyond a history of the ritual, beyond rubrics, beyond canon law, even beyond the clarifications worked out by scholastic categories and recent historical scholarship, and begin instead with

liturgical life. And that means we must begin with the Trinity, for I hold that liturgical life is the sacramental participation of the body of Christ in the life of the Trinity. Liturgy is more than rubric, like music is more than score: the latter exists so that the former can be done. We don't want to examine the score here, we want to ask what two believers are doing in the sacrament of marriage. And that question is best answered by liturgical theology because liturgy is the manifestation of the new creation brought about by the Paschal Mystery and shared with a social, sacramental body, until the Lord of the Church returns as Lord of the World to hand all things over to the Father. Pius XII defines liturgy in *Mediator Dei* as "the worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its head and members" [¶ 20]. Christ is, himself, the mediator of the Father's grace to us, and the mediator of our thanksgiving to the Father, all in the Holy Spirit. Liturgy is best understood as a relationship. It is not a thing that Jesus left to his Church, but himself. Liturgy is participating in the relationship of love that flows between the persons of the Trinity. Every baptized liturgist is grafted into this Trinitarian life, but as married life is a particular vocation, married life is liturgical in a particular way. In the words of Pope Leo XIII from his Encyclical on Christian Marriage, *Arcanum*, we know that

Christ our Lord raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament; that to husband and wife, guarded and strengthened by the heavenly grace which His merits gained for them, He gave power to attain holiness in the married state; and that, in a wondrous way, making marriage an example of the mystical union between Himself and His Church, He not only perfected that love which is according to nature, but also made the naturally indivisible union of one man with one woman far more perfect through the bond of heavenly love.¹

I wish to therefore consider how these five persons – husband, wife, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – interact in the conjugal mystery, and how marriage is a liturgical vocation, and I hope the vision sketched here will be beneficial to the pastoral ministry that supports spouses in the difficulties they face today.

I know that we cannot divide up and isolate the work done by each person of the Trinity. Athanasius has hammered that into our skulls by his creed: “We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.” This means that in the acts of creation, redemption, and sanctification, all three persons of the Trinity are active. Nevertheless, tradition has appropriated certain missions to certain persons of the Trinity, and I am following that lead here. An appropriation is a special connection between the *activity* and the *character* of the divine person (even though this does not exclude the involvement of the other two persons). Matthias Scheeben describes this in an unparalleled chapter on the theological significance of the Trinity: “By their common activity and mode of action, the divine persons externally prolong and continue, or imitate and reproduce, their internal relations, and thereby call into being an order of things which is an objective unfolding and revelation of the inner heart of this mystery.”² We wish to see how the Church is imprinted with the Trinitarian hierarchy, how the Trinity's inner heart unfolds in the "new time" that is the Church, and how this plays out in the sacrament of marriage, which, like all her sacraments, serves our deification.

1. God the Father, Creator, and the Conjugal Mystery

In his reply to Moses' identity probe, God reveals his name as simply “I Am.” God is Absolute Being, uncreated source of all other being. Other things *are* – I mean, creatures exist – only inasmuch as being is on loan to them from God. If God withdraws his creativity, there is no life; creation is not just an event in the past but an ongoing divine activity. Why does God do it? What is his purpose? To this question Dante suggests a liturgical answer.

Not to gain any good for Himself, which cannot be,
but that His splendour, shining back, might say *Subsisto* –

in His eternity, beyond time, beyond every other bound,
as it pleased Him, the Eternal Love
revealed Himself in new loves.³

The God who is Being is also Love and Goodness, and when these three attributes compound, other creatures get willed into existence. God's loving goodness shares being so there are other creatures to love – and I mean both so that there are other creatures whom God can love, and also so that there are other creatures who can love, i.e., who are themselves capable of loving.

Creation is an overflow of the indwelling love that moves between the Father and Son and Holy Spirit (*perichoresis* in Greek, *circumincessio* in Latin). When this energy of love overflows, then there is space, time, and matter. Once there was nothing but God, and then God made something beside himself. (If we dare say so, creation is God beside himself with love.)

Dorothy Sayers interprets Dante's passage thus:

Why are these different things? [Meaning, why do these different things exist?] In order that the divine splendor, shining back in innumerable facets from the face of the finite creation, should be able to stand up before its Creator and say, “look! this is me. I really exist. I am something. I am myself. *Subsisto*.” It can add nothing to the source from which it derives – God gets nothing out of it; but it has pleased Him that every creature – angel, man, beast, beetle, or buttercup – should be able, in its small way, to enjoy itself, to enjoy being a self of some sort, dependent on God and yet distinct from Him.⁴

“I Am” is God's name. The I Am shares his being with other beings, and they cry out “Subsisto! I am, too.” We are because the I Am shares *is-ing* with us (is the word any funnier than *be-ing*?).

And not only has God shared life with human beings, he has also shared this very power to create. A man and a woman make love and make a baby and presto: another being who can say Subsisto! In the words of Pope Pius XI, the sacredness of marriage derives from many things, but not least among them is the fact that this is “the means of transmitting life, thus making the parents the ministers, as it were, of the Divine Omnipotence.”⁵

Not only does God share physical creativity with us, but spiritual creativity, too. Every feeding and bathing and cuddling and cooing with the baby is creativity-in-action because it brings forth personhood. Our selves are summoned forth. Subsisto! Described by Pope Benedict XVI, this means

Our *I* becomes acceptable to us only if it has first become acceptable to another *I*. We can love ourselves only if we have first been loved by someone else. The life a mother gives to her child is not just physical life; she gives total life when she takes the child's tears and turns them into smiles Man is that strange creature that needs not just physical birth but also appreciation if he is to subsist If an individual is to accept himself, someone must say to him: "It is good that you exist" – must say it, not with words, but with that act of the entire being that we call love.⁶

When the Church teaches that marriage is the appropriate environment for sex and procreation, she has imbedded in that teaching a view toward the development of a child's full personality, because this will misfire without the constancy and stability of a vowed covenant.

God has created many beings, but he created the *human* beings with an additional purpose, and for this purpose they are made after the image and likeness of God. The one in whose image we are made is a being-in-communion. Therefore, in the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, "This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."⁷ We are made in the image of God, who is a trinity-in-love. We are made to give ourselves away, as the Father gives himself to the Son, and the Son to the Father, all through the Holy Spirit. Marriage is a sacramentalization of this self-giving. John Paul II provides an eloquent exegesis of Genesis, saying it contains its own explanation for why man has been created male and female.

Even though man is surrounded by the innumerable creatures of the created world, he realizes that he is alone (cf. Gen 2:20). God intervenes in order to help him escape from this situation of solitude Woman complements man, just as man complements woman: men and women are complementary. Womanhood expresses the 'human' as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way It is only through the duality of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' that the 'human' finds full realization.⁸

Or, in the concise words of G. K. Chesterton, “Man is a quadruped.”⁹

And for what purpose is this complemented humanity created? What task is it that they are to accomplish that required them to be created in the image and likeness of God? John Paul II continues, “After creating man male and female, God says to both: 'Fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen 1:28). Not only does he give them the power to procreate as a means of perpetuating the human species throughout time, he also gives them the earth, charging them with the responsible use of its resources.”¹⁰ The man and woman exercise the shared task of exercising dominion over creation. Here’s an explanation from Gerhard von Rad’s commentary on Genesis about the meaning of the Hebrew word we translate as “image”:

Selem means predominantly an actual plastic work, a duplicate, sometimes an idol Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they don’t personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God’s image as God’s sovereign emblem. He is really only God’s representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God’s claim to dominion over the earth.¹¹

When Pharaoh Ramesses II wanted to indicate his dominion, he had his image hewn out of rock on seacoast, and the image meant that he was the ruler of this area. "Accordingly," Hans Walter Wolff says in his Old Testament anthropology, "man is set in the midst of creation as God's statue."¹² The world is the Lord’s, and all the glory therein, and it is as if God has strewn images of himself all over the landscape to indicate this. God indicates the range of his Lordship by putting up statuesque images of himself around the borders of his territory, and since the whole world is God's, look how far-flung people are across the globe. (And how odd for the statues to start acting as if they are sovereign.)

The home is the first domain for husband and wife to rule. The images of God rule here as vicars of the cosmic king. The word “Paradise” comes from an old Iranian dialect which

combined “pairi” (around) and “daeza” (wall) and meant a walled garden or orchard, like the author of Genesis 2 says God planted in the east. In each family, God again plants a garden, carves out a domicile, and places his images there to rule in his stead. Just as the Israelites had a portable temple in the wilderness that could roll up each morning and be taken with them, a husband and wife carry a portable paradise, and wherever the four walls of the domestic castle are raised up, it is again the orchard of Eden where they are king and queen.

2. The Son, Redeemer, and the Conjugal Mystery

If we are in Eden, the fall may not be far away. If we have a doctrine of creation in play, you might suspect that the doctrines of fall and redemption are not far behind. Indeed, this is the case. Lucifer will seek to destroy God’s creation, and there will be ramifications upon the primordial sacrament of marriage, too. But Satan discovers he is powerless to achieve his end of destruction. He is a fallen angel, after all, not an anti-god; he can neither create nor uncreate. So, instead, he molests. He warps and fractures and twists the Father’s creation. C. S. Lewis communicates the idea of the Fall by speaking about “bent worlds” and “bent persons.” The devil cannot change the essence of life as relational unity, but if he can bend the king and queen, then the world they govern will also be turned away from God. Alexander Schmemmann describes the strategy.

The devil could turn man, and in him, the world, away from God One thing he could not and cannot do: change the very essence of life as unity. He could not and cannot because only God is the creator and giver of life. Only from him is there life The substitution, the victory of the 'prince of this world,' however, lies in the fact that he has torn this unity away from God, its source, content and goal ... ¹³

Maximus the Confessor speaks of five tears, lacerations, divisions of being caused by sin. First, the created is torn away from the Uncreated (we no longer find our end in God); second,

what is perceived by the mind is divided from what is perceived by the senses (we look without seeing); third, heaven is separated from earth (the angelic and earthly creations go their separate ways); fourth, paradise is distanced from the inhabited lands (Eden, our original home, is far from our current place of toil); fifth, a tension appears between man and woman (sin is the origin of sexism and misogyny).

Now, the last place corroded by sin will be the first place healed by redemption. Once the turn is made, the last step of the descent will become the first step of the ascent (and *metanoia*, conversion, means to turn around). The last piece broken will be the first piece repaired when the whole is being restored. The re-union of man and woman is the first step in re-unifying the cosmos. This is because, Andrew Louth explains,

the human being is not just the last stage in this structure, it is, as [Maximus] says, 'the laboratory in which everything is concentrated' ... for human beings are found on both sides of each division: they belong in paradise but inhabit the uninhabited world; they are earthly and yet destined for heaven; they have both mind and senses; and though created, they are destined to share in the uncreated nature by deification. All the divisions of the cosmos are reflected in the human being, so the human being is a microcosm.¹⁴

As microcosm, the human person is able to mediate between the extremes of the cosmos; man and woman are a “natural bond,” says Maximus, and this redemptive adhesive should be applied first at the last place where things have come undone. This makes marriage a vocation in salvation history! Marriage is cosmological in its consequences, and eschatological in its ambition. Marriage is the frontier at which Satan's mischief can be most effectively battled. Achieving marital unity is the result of vowed participation in the economy of salvation. The husband and wife are symbol of the unity the human race should have been. Grace uses the living stones of husband and wife to refashion a Temple of God, so the home becomes a Church in miniature, an *ecclesia domestica*.¹⁵

Marriage is mysteriously saturated by God's will. What was once a natural creation, and additionally functioned as a curb for sin after the fall, can now be taken up into God's mystery as grace perfects nature. In Ephesians, Paul explains the mystery like this:

- Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... . In all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the *mystery* of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ” [1:8-9].
- When you read this you can understand my insight into the *mystery* of Christ, which was not made known to human beings in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. [3:5-6].

We may define the Mystery as the Father's will to make all humankind into heirs of Christ's grace. And the Mystery is Christ, the fulfillment of his Father's will. And the Mystery is the Church, where Christ (the word of God) and the Holy Spirit (the breath of God) are still accomplishing the Father's will. And the Mystery is sacrament because, in the words of Pope Leo, “What was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries” (Greek *mysterion* = Latin *sacramentum*).

The husband and wife live in the mystery of the new covenant brought into being by Christ's own death and resurrection. Their marriage is a liturgy. Their marriage is this mystery-in-motion in two personal lives. Their marital bond is a mystery (sacrament) of Christ's own bond with his bride, and in return Christ's own covenantal bond strengthens and communicates grace to their marriage. "This grace proper to the sacrament of Matrimony is intended to perfect the couple's love and to strengthen their indissoluble unity" [CCC 1641]. “Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ's redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church”¹⁶ John Paul II sees the sacramental and liturgical dimension of marriage like this:

sacraments inject sanctity into the plan of man's humanity. They penetrate the soul and

body, the femininity and masculinity of the personal subject, with the power of sanctity. All this is expressed in the language of the liturgy The liturgy, liturgical language, elevates the conjugal pact of man and woman, based on the language of the body reread in truth, to the dimensions of mystery. At the same time it enables that pact to be fulfilled...¹⁷

3. The Holy Spirit, Sanctifier, in the Conjugal Mystery

A sacrament is an efficacious sign – it is a sign that causes what it signifies. Now, there is a sense in which you can, and another a sense in which you cannot, make the signs of a sacrament more efficient. On the one hand, I could use living water and with more abundance in order to better signify Baptism as womb, tomb, and cleansing; but on the other hand, I could not make the drops of water any more liquid; they are as watery as they will get. I cannot strengthen the water. But matrimony's sacramental sign is kind of unique because the living matter of this sacrament can be strengthened. Based on thirty-four years of living as sacrament with my wife, I can attest that this sign gains strength. There is room for increased love between the partners, and a capacity for increased holiness in each partner. In marriage, the husband and wife are each an instrument through which the other grows in sanctity. That's why they are tied together for the journey. Every Christian runs toward the resurrection, but marriage is a three-legged race.

Pope Pius XII did not overlook this dimension in his encyclical.

This outward expression of love in the home demands not only mutual help but must go further; must have as its primary purpose that man and wife help each other day by day in forming and perfecting themselves in the interior life, so that *through their partnership in life they may advance ever more and more in virtue*, and above all that they may grow in true love toward God and their neighbor ... [emphasis added].¹⁸

Marriage is a path to holiness. The practice of marriage (and it is practicable) is a means for undergoing sanctification. I propose that this perfection of the spouses is a sort of "liturgical asceticism."¹⁹ The term *askein* meant "to work" and so *askesis* came to mean a discipline or a training process, and was especially applied to the sort of training that an athlete undergoes.

Those athletes in the desert, the monks, were called ascetics because they struggled to discipline their passions in order to contemplate God and attain union with him. (Evagrius identified eight passions: gluttony, lust, avarice, dejection, anger, despondency, vainglory, and pride.) But Christian asceticism is not born in the sand of the desert, even if it was brought to full perfection there; it is born in the waters of the font. Every Christian is called to this asceticism. The ascetic is someone who cooperates with grace to be capacitated for a holiness that is not our accomplishment. Asceticism is always the Holy Spirit's energy and our synergy.

If liturgy means sharing the life of Christ (being washed in his resurrection, eating his body), and if *askesis* means discipline (in the sense of spiritual formation), then liturgical asceticism is the discipline required to become an icon of Christ and make his image visible in our faces. Marriage can serve as a tool in the hands of the Holy Spirit to sculpt new faces. *Familiaris Consortio* describes asceticism in this positive tone when it defines chastity as a "spiritual energy capable of defending love from the perils of selfishness and aggressiveness, and able to advance it towards its full realization."²⁰ Liturgical asceticism is our imitation of Christ, and we begin by imitating Christ's death. Louis Bouyer has said, "Christ died for us, not in order to dispense us from dying, but rather to make us capable of dying efficaciously."²¹ And within the daily bounds of marriage there is plenty of room to exercise the Christian discipline of dying to self and rising in love to new life, as Romano Guardini observed.

Marriage comprehended in the light of faith and lived in grace *becomes* 'natural' in a much higher sense, as the fruit of grace, the harvest of faith. It is not beginning, but end of Christian effort, and must be formed by the same power as that behind virginity; renunciation made possible by faith. Christian marriage is constantly renewed by sacrifice. True, it fulfills and enriches the lives of both partners through fertility and a ripening of the personality beyond the limits possible for each individually; not only through the fullness and creativeness of the joint life, but also through the sacrifices necessary to weather the temptations of brute instinct, inconstancy, never-ending disappointments, moral crises, changes in fortune and the general demands of a common life.²²

The Catechism also finds the cross to be the fount of this conjugal asceticism. “It is by following Christ, renouncing themselves, and taking up their crosses that spouses will be able to ‘receive’ the original meaning of marriage and live it with the help of Christ. This grace of Christian marriage is a fruit of Christ's cross, the source of all Christian life” [CCC 1615].

That is why both Paul Evdokimov and Vladimir Solovoyof say that there are two ascetical vocations: marriage and monasticism. Monks have professed a vow: they are professional religious. The spouses, too, profess a vow: they are professional lovers. They have committed themselves to a life-long undertaking that will require discipline, self-control, and joyful enthusiasm. The spouses have each vowed themselves to be true to one other human being, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, and to love and honor that person all the days of their life. Each has taken one single person to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to be parted only by death, and nothing else. Marriage is a specific way of living out the baptismal call to universal holiness, as *Lumen Gentium* reminds.

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, 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.²³

To attain this end of holiness, marriage requires supernatural grace. The old Adam's redemption will require the power of the New Adam – the *eschata* Adam who recapitulates all things. The bent Eve's redemption will be accomplished when a righteous Eve flows from the side of Christ, who will be the mother of all upright believers. In the fallen order, marriage was a stopgap for a transitory life; in the supernatural order, marriage is a springboard for an eternal life.

In the fallen order, procreation gave consolation in the face of death, but having more babies will not keep death's scythe from eventually sweeping mankind from the earth. Man's extinction is always only one generation away. That is the real reason, says Vladimir Solovyof, why we have a sense of sexual shame. This shame refers neither to the physiological fact (which is simply a biological act), nor to sexual love (which is a pleasurable good within marriage). Rather, "the condemning voice of sexual shame refers solely to the way of the animal nature" that is essentially demeaning for human beings. "The law of animal reproduction of which we are ashamed is the law of replacement or the driving out of one generation by another The perfect marriage is the beginning of a new process which does not reproduce life in time but recreates it for eternity."²⁴ In other words, we are ashamed of the sex act because it sanctions death. "It is unworthy of man to be merely a means or an instrument of the natural process by which the blind life-force perpetuates itself at the expense of separate entities that are born and perish and *replace* one another in turn. Man as a moral being does not want to obey this natural law of *replacement* of generations, the law of *eternal* death."²⁵ Today's sexual rebellion lives in denial of this secret connection between sex and thanatos, by living with no horizon of the eternal in view. But Christianity looks this secret connection straight in the face, because it sees everything – even sex! – in the light of the resurrection. Christian procreation is not the making of replacement parts, it is where the ministers of Divine Omnipotence cooperate with God's new process of recreating life for eternity.

This also explains the secret alliance between marriage and virginity that so puzzles the modern world. The ancient Christian monks witnessed (*martyr*) to the fact that their future survival did not depend upon having children who would make sacrifice to the hearth god in their memory. Those celibates startled the ancient world the same way today's celibates startle

the modern, secular world. Discussing the theology of marriage seems a big enough topic already, but I suggest we won't truly grasp it unless we treat married and monk together, because there are things we can't understand about the one without the other. "Esteem of virginity for the sake of the kingdom and the Christian understanding of marriage are inseparable, and they reinforce each other" [CCC, 1620].²⁶

The Blessings of Conjugal Mystery

Christianity operates with an interesting arithmetic. In the Trinity, three persons are still a monotheism. In Christ, two natures are one person. In anthropology, the one human race (*anthropos*, man) is made up of many individuals (men and women, each a unique hypostasis). And in marriage, two persons become a "uni-duality," in John Paul II's phrase. The unity is not absorption, and yet the unity is more than an external alliance. A marriage is not one plus one to make two (that would be a business alliance). A marriage is not one plus one to make one (that would be a corporate merger). A marriage is not a half plus a half (like a centaur). The supernatural relationship of which I stammer to speak cannot be founded on the weakness of one or the neediness of the other, it must come from a superabundance of life. And this returns us to the *perichoresis* of the Trinity for our model. Out of an overflow of love in the cosmic creation came space, time and matter; out of an overflow of love in the domestic creation come children, fidelity, and a holy bond.

These, you will recognize, are the classic "three goods of marriage." They have been at work throughout this paper, and I hope you have noticed them in the background, but I have wanted to freshen them before bringing them front and center. They are the *bonum prolis* (the good of offspring); *bonum fidei* (the good of steadfast fidelity); *bonum sacramenti* (the bond of indissoluble unity that is, in Christians, a sign of Christ's bridal union with his spouse). These

goods are the results of love at generative work. They are blessings that marriage bestows upon the spouses, good things for the husband's and wife's benefit. They serve the good of the spouses – a *bonum conjugum* – which is an implicit truth being made more explicit in this century, to the point of some calling it a fourth good of marriage (it appears clearly when Canon 1055 says marriage is ordered toward "the good of the spouses and the procreation and offspring of children"), but it certainly derives from sentiments already present in *Casti Connubii* and *Gaudium et Spes*.²⁷ The latter document fosters the nobility of marriage by saying "For the good of the spouses and their off-springs as well as of society, the existence of the sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone" [¶ 48]. The former document is structured by Pius XI around these three goods of offspring, conjugal faith, and the sacrament, exposing those errors that are corrosive of them. And while he notes that "amongst the blessings of marriage, the child holds the first place" [¶ 11], he also clearly affirms the good of the spouses in statements such as, "This mutual molding of husband and wife, this determined effort to perfect each other, can in a very real sense, as the Roman Catechism teaches, be said to be the chief reason and purpose of matrimony" [¶ 24]. Pius XII apparently thought this fourth good was known to Trent.

Sometimes we perceive a conflict between the unitive good (*bonum conjugum*) and the procreative good (*bonum prolis*), even though we are asked not to. Paul VI says the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* "is founded upon the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning" [¶ 12]. Nevertheless, many continue to argue over whether unitive precedes procreative, or vice-versa, which is a little like arguing over whether the left foot precedes the right when we walk, or vice-versa. The modern world has its preference. And this preference for the unitive good of spouses makes certain traditional texts

uncomfortable to our ears. For example, I take how Augustine's treatise *On the Good of Marriage* sounds to us. It is a common prejudice to say he stresses the good of procreation over the good of spouses, whereas we now have a more balanced picture. But a careful reading, I think, finds that Augustine is actually leading his ancient audience to a more subtle conclusion. Nearly the first thing he says concerning the good of marriage is that it "seems not to me to be merely on account of begetting children, but also on account of the natural society itself in a difference of sex" [¶ 3]. He asks them to remember that although offspring is a significant good, it is not the reigning good. Again and again he asks those "who are united in marriage only for the purpose of begetting" [¶ 22] to recognize these additional goods. The bond is tied for the sake of begetting children, true, but it cannot be loosed for the sake of begetting more children, or when children will no longer be begotten. So what, he leads them to ask, is the higher meaning of the great strength of the marital bond? It is a question worth posing to ourselves.

The language of "higher" and "raised to the level of a new dignity" has been traditionally used in Christian conjugal theology, and this could also use some freshening. It's not really such a difficult thing to grasp, if the formal language is made familiar again. We do it all the time when we connect natural actions with human activities. For example, food is a biological good, but when we dine together at a banquet, or go out for a romantic dinner, or share a meal at the family table, it is for reasons more than just the nutritive consumption of calories. We raise a biological good to the level of a human good, which is also a social good. (In the Eucharist, food will be raised again.)

It is in this spirit that Thomas Aquinas identifies the levels of goods in marriage. The *natural institution* of marriage (which exists for the good of nature to perpetuate the race, and is governed by natural law) is also a *social institution* (which exists for the good of society to

perpetuate family and state, and is governed by civil law) and this can be raised to a *sacrament* (which exists for the good of the church to perpetuate Christianity, and is governed by divine law).²⁸ These levels ascend up, up, up – according to if marriage is seen from the standpoint of biological life, human life, or eternal life. Similarly, the goods of marriage associated with these levels ascend up, up, up: procreation, fidelity, and sacrament of God's unbreakable covenant. (I venture the hypothesis that just as Augustine raised his audience's sight beyond the first good alone, which they could easily see, so we must raise our sight beyond the second good alone, which we can easily see. The Romans understood marriage for the purpose of begetting children, but could they see the unitive good? We understand marriage for the mutual good of the husband and wife, but can we see the sacrament?)

When grace perfects nature, then human love becomes sacrament of eternal love. When grace perfects nature, then marriage's natural indissolubility becomes a sacrament of the indissolubility of Christ's covenant with his people. This has been an abiding teaching of the Church, standing upon Ephesians 5. After quoting Genesis about a man being joined to his wife and becoming one flesh, Paul says “This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.” The Catechism of Trent concluded, “Now his expression, this is a great sacrament, undoubtedly refers to Matrimony, and must be taken to mean that the union of man and wife, which has God for its Author, is a Sacrament, that is, a sacred sign of that most holy union that binds Christ our Lord to His Church.”²⁹ Four hundred years later, the Catechism of the Catholic Church draws the same conclusion in the paragraph that follows its quotation of Ephesians 5.

This is what the Apostle Paul makes clear when he says: "Husbands, love your wives ... The entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already Baptism, the entry into the People of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath, which precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist. Christian marriage in its turn becomes an efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the

Church. Since it signifies and communicates grace, marriage between baptized persons is a true sacrament of the New Covenant. [¶ 1616 and 1617].

All the sacraments are signs of a mystery that is nuptial, and the nuptial mystery is prototypically sacramental. John Paul II calls marriage a primordial sacrament because it is the figure of the "basic main structure of the new economy of salvation and of the sacramental order." Marriage, as a primordial sacrament is inserted into the new sacramental economy. "Reflecting deeply ... one would have to conclude that in a certain sense all the sacraments of the new covenant find their prototype in marriage as the primordial sacrament."³⁰

This marital covenant is as challenging to us as it was to Augustine's audience, because keeping covenant is costly. In the report from the Consultation with Canonists and Tribunal Officials that was sent out in preparation for this conference, the conflicted mind of today's couples was reported three times. Couples wish for permanence, but also believe they have a right to get out of a marriage; couples say they intend permanence but see it as an ideal that may not be attainable; couples see fidelity as an expectation but also regard infidelity as a legitimate reason to seek divorce. But this misses the very essence of a covenant, as the 1985 Commentary on the Code of Canon Law points out. "A covenant, or *b'rith*, was, in Jewish tradition, an agreement which formed a relationship which was equal in binding force to a blood relationship. Consequently, the relationship does not cease even if the consent to the covenant is withdrawn by one or both of the parties."³¹

To see *b'rith* as liberating, not confining, we will need an anthropology that acknowledges the mutual play of intellect, emotion, and will in our covenanting. We think covenants cannot be kept because we are promising to feel the same way next year as we feel today. But this is not the promise being asked for. Gustave Thibon defines a vow more accurately. A vow means that "any changes we undergo in the future will be inserted in the line

of this promise we have made to one another, just as the waters of a river flow in its bed. We shall certainly change, but the changes we shall undergo will not pass beyond the bounds fixed by our contract."³²

Chesterton had a few things to say about this, as well. If marriage commitment were based on mood, even the deep and holy mood of love, he says, it could not survive because human beings are too moody. We are never in the same humor for ten minutes together. In light of these flitting interests, "no man can say he will even be the same man by the next month or the next minute." But that makes impossible all those parts of life which only exist due to their construction over time, whether a personal or professional identity. "A man cannot choose a profession; because, long before he has qualified as an architect, he may have mystically changed into an aviator, or be convulsed in rapid succession by the emotions of a ticket-collector, a trombone-player and a professional harpooner of whales [T]he reply, not merely of religion but of reason and the rooted sanity of mankind is obvious enough. 'If you feel like that, why certainly you will not found families; or found anything else.'"³³ Marriage and the family are longer-lasting things than a temporal mood can understand, because they are eternal things: meaning they partake of the eternal and must be held in place by an act of will.

In everything worth having, even in every pleasure, there is a point of pain or tedium that must be survived, so that the pleasure may revive and endure In everything on this earth that is worth doing, there is a stage when no one would do it, except for necessity or honor. It is then that the Institution upholds a man and helps him on to the firmer ground ahead The essential element is not so much duration as security. Two people must be tied together in order to do themselves justice; for twenty minutes at a dance, or for twenty years in a marriage. In both cases the point is, that if a man is bored in the first five minutes he must go on and force himself to be happy. Coercion is a kind of encouragement If we all floated in the air like bubbles, free to drift anywhere at any instant, the practical result would be that no one would have the courage to begin a conversation. It would be so embarrassing to start a sentence in a friendly whisper, and then have to shout the last half of it because the other party was floating away into the free and formless ether.³⁴

Therefore, enjoying the mystery of marriage will require some discipline, but grace places it within our capability, as the Catechism points out.

This unequivocal insistence on the indissolubility of the marriage bond may have left some perplexed and could seem to be a demand impossible to realize. However, Jesus has not placed on spouses a burden impossible to bear, or too heavy – heavier than the Law of Moses. By coming to restore the original order of creation disturbed by sin, he himself gives the strength and grace to live marriage in the new dimension of the Reign of God [¶ 1615].

The Christian theology of marriage can only be understood within the conviction that the liturgy of the Church restores the original order of creation disturbed by sin, and opens us up to an even deeper participation in God. The reason the liturgical life of the Church can be termed sacramental is because it is the manifestation in time of the “new time.” Marriage lived within this new time called the age of the Church is liturgical marriage; it is a relationship lived as domestic Church; it is a sacrament of the Reign of God. Marriage realizes the natural unity of the human race, a unity lost and now in recovery. The new time, whose rays are already dawning from the eschaton, illuminates marriage, and we live into the Light. Scheeben told us that the Trinity called into being an order of things that unfolded the inner heart of the trinitarian mystery. When that good creation needed redemption, the Son put on our own humanity to do what the first Adam failed to do. This same Christ continues to act in and through the Church, making the Church sign and instrument of the Kingdom. So Olivier Clement defines the Church-in-motion by saying “In its deepest understanding the Church is nothing other than the world in the course of transfiguration... .”³⁵ Liturgical marriage is nothing other than natural marriage in its course of transfiguration, whereby ascetical cooperation with grace will lift a natural blessing into the eternal blessedness of the Trinity.

¹ *Arcanum* (Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on Christian Marriage, 1880), ¶ 9.

² Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1946) 136. It is from chapter four, “The Significance of the Mystery of the Trinity.”

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- ³ *Paradiso*: Canto XXIX; translation by Dorothy Sayers in reference below.
- ⁴ Dorothy Sayers, *The Poetry of Search and The Poetry of Statement* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1963) 32.
- ⁵ Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on Christian Marriage 1930), ¶ 80. This is the Fatherhood of God. God is not called “father” by analogy to us; we are creative by analogy to his fatherhood. Which leads Paul Evdokimov to say, “the maternity of the Virgin presents itself as the human figure of the paternity of God.” *The Sacrament of Love* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985) 34.
- ⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987) 74.
- ⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, ¶ 24.
- ⁸ *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, ¶ 7.
- ⁹ Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* in *G. K. Chesterton Collected Works* vol. IV (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987) 68.
- ¹⁰ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, ¶ 8.
- ¹¹ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) 57.
- ¹² Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974) 159.
- ¹³ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987) 152.
- ¹⁴ Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (New York: Routledge Books, 1996) 73.
- ¹⁵ “In order to understand better the foundations, the contents and the characteristics of this participation, we must examine the many profound bonds linking the Church and the Christian family and establishing the family as a “Church in miniature” (*Ecclesia domestica*), in such a way that in its own way the family is a living image and historical representation of the mystery of the Church.” *Familiaris Consortio*, ¶ 49.
- ¹⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, ¶ 48.
- ¹⁷ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997) 378.
- ¹⁸ Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, 23.
- ¹⁹ The term and its consequences are further explained in the first chapter of my book, *Theologia Prima* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2003) and in “A Century on Liturgical Asceticism,” *Diakonia*, Volume 31, Number 1, 1998, 31-60.
- ²⁰ *Familiaris Consortio* (The Apostolic Exhortation following The Synod of 1980), ¶ 33.
- ²¹ Louis Bouyer, *The Paschal Mystery: Meditations on the Last Three Days of Holy Week* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1950) xiv.
- ²² Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1954) 175.
- ²³ *Lumen Gentium*, ¶ 11.
- ²⁴ Vladimir Solovyov, *Justification of the Good* (London: Constable and Co., Ltd., 1918) 142. Bernard Lonergan expresses the same sentiment when he said, “Man is an animal for whom mere animality is indecent,” *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 187.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ John Paul II says, “Perfect conjugal love must be marked by that fidelity and that donation to the only Spouse ... on which religious profession and priestly celibacy are founded.” *Theology of the Body*, 277. And on this, see also Emil Mersch, S.J., *Love, Marriage and Chastity* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939).
- ²⁷ “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament” [canon 1055]. It is repeated in the Catechism, ¶ 2201.
- ²⁸ See *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book IV, ch 78.
- ²⁹ *The Catechism of Trent*, “Holy Matrimony.”
- ³⁰ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 339.
- ³¹ 1985 Commentary on the Code of Canon Law, p. 740, commenting on Code 1055..
- ³² Gustave Thibon, *Love at the Crossroads* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1964) 10.
- ³³ G. K. Chesterton, *The Well and the Shallows*, in *G. K. Chesterton Collected Works* vol. III (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990) “The Return to Religion,” p. 397.
- ³⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong With the World*, *G. K. Chesterton Collected Works* vol. IV (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987) “The Free Family,” p. 69.
- ³⁵ Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New York: New City Press, 1982) 95.