

“Promoting and Sustaining Marriage as a Community of Life and Love”
A Colloquium of Social Scientists and Theologians
October 24-25, 2005

MARRIAGE AS A UNITIVE AND PROCREATIVE PARTNERSHIP

John S. Grabowski, Ph.D.
The Catholic University of America

Marriage as an institution has fallen upon hard times of late. News articles and scholarly studies alike call our attention to the high rate of failure among marriages, the widespread practice of cohabitation, and the growing number of persons who (for a variety of reasons) choose to never marry.¹ These developments have led to the rise of an industry designed to cater

¹ In 1997 the percentage of U.S. marriages which would end in divorce was 50%. The percentage of remarriages which would end in divorce was 60%. The likelihood of a new marriage ending in divorce in that same year was 43%. See “U.S. Divorce Statistics” at <http://www.divorcemag.com/statistics/statsUS.shtml>, accessed 9/1/05. While in 1965 some 11% of U.S. couples cohabited by the end of the last decade that number had climbed to over 50%. Of these only 53 % will eventually marry. The number of couples who chose marriage declined 25% from 1975 to 1995. For these figures and supporting studies see the N.C.C.B. document “Preparing Cohabiting Couples for Marriage; An Informational Report on New Realities and Pastoral Practices” (1999) available at <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/cohabiting.shtml>, accessed 9/01/05. See also Sharon Jayson, “Cohabitation is Replacing Dating,” *USA Today*, available at http://www.usatoday.com/life/lifestyle/2005-07-17-cohabitation_x.htm, accessed 09/01/05. For an alternative view see Michael G. Lawler, *Marriage and the Catholic Church*:

to the needs of this new “generation ex” and the expansion of media and products aimed at playing on the uncertainties of a growing number of 20 and 30 somethings about the married state.² The dispirited conclusion which some draw from these developments is that marriage is somehow defunct or reaching the end of its tenure in western civilization.

Yet there are reasons to believe that rumors of marriage’s untimely demise are, in fact, greatly exaggerated. The Judeo-Christian tradition has rich biblical and theological resources which can serve to ground marriage both a conceptualization and praxis of marriage even in the face of such unprecedented challenges. Specifically, this paper will contend that understanding marriage as unitive, as procreative, and as a partnership can serve to ground a compelling vision and a vibrant spirituality of marriage in our present context.³

The paper will proceed by considering each of these concepts in turn. It will first

Disputed Questions (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 162-83. Lawler argues that cohabitation is not new in western or Catholic practice and that it should be recognized as a part of the “process” of marrying following upon a rite of betrothal.

² For a cogent critique of the “divorce industry” and its effects see Diane Medved, *The Case Against Divorce* (New York: D.I. Fine, 1989).

³ This paper assumes that there is an intimate link between vision and praxis so that in order to develop practices to pursue and interiorize the good one must first have a vision of that good. This is a central assumption of accounts of virtue as old as Plato. The paper also assumes that any such account of the good in a Christian context and any spirituality derived from it must be immersed in the thought and categories of scripture.

examine marriage as a covenant of love which draws persons together in unity and communion. It will then treat the life-giving character of marriage and the blessing of children. The final section will consider marriage as a partnership and the crucial role of mutuality in the relationship of husband and wife. In each case an effort will be made to locate the biblical basis and some contemporary theological elucidation of these affirmations as well as their implications for the praxis of marriage.

Marriage as Unitive

The term “unitive” as a description of the ends to which marriage is ordered is a relatively recent entry to rich vocabulary of the Church’s tradition, appearing for the first time in Paul VI’s watershed encyclical *Humane Vitae* in 1968. This prompted some of those critical of its reaffirmation of the prohibition of artificial contraception to complain about the novel status of the document’s terminology in the tradition.⁴ However, it is fairly clear that this new language is really just a shorthand for what the previous tradition called the “secondary ends” of marriage-- refracted through the personalist lens of 20th century Catholic thought and the

⁴ See, for example, Joseph Selling, “Magisterial Teaching on Marriage 1880-1986: Historical Constancy or Radical Development?” in R  al Tremblay and Dennis J. Billy, eds., *Historia: Memoria futuri M  langes Louis Vereecke* (Roma: Accademia Alfonsiana, 1991), 351-402.

teaching of Second Vatican Council.⁵ Close examination of this concept reveals that it also has biblical foundation as well.

The foundation of a couple's interpersonal union in biblical thought is the covenant that binds them together. Their mutual promise of unconditional fidelity made before God binds them into a new entity—"one flesh."⁶ Their allegiance to their family of origin is now superseded by their unconditional promise to one another—a promise whose surety is their very lives.⁷ This

⁵ The 1917 Code of Canon Law mentioned "secondary ends" such as marriage as a *remedium concupiscentiae* and the mutual assistance of man and woman. Interestingly, Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et spes* (no. 50) consciously avoided this heirarchical language: -- "hence, while not making the other purposes of matrimony of less account, the true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of family life which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Savior, who through them will enlarge and enrich his own family day by day." The citation is from Walter Abbott, S.J. (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (Piscataway, NJ: New Century, 1966), p. 254.

⁶ Cf. Genesis 2:24. The Hebrew word *basar* can either be rendered "flesh" or "body."

⁷ In biblical literature a contract is a legal agreement predicated on a promise of property should the contract be broken or voided. A covenant is a pledge of fidelity made before God in which one promises one's very life. See the classic studies of Gene M. Tucker, "Covenant Forms and Contract Forms," *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): 487-503 and Paul F. Palmer, S.J.,

oath is then sealed in the couple's bodily gift of self to one another in sexual union. In this act of sexual union they truly are "one flesh" and they engage in a bodily enactment and recollection of their covenant promise to one another.⁸ Thus the unitive end of marriage is disclosed to us as the meaning and expression of a couple's covenant with each other.

It is for this reason that the Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church *Gaudium et spes*, in recovering the biblical category of covenant, juxtaposed it with the personalist concept of self-donation:

The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws. It is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence, by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other, a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting

"Christian Marriage: Covenant or Contract?", *Theological Studies* 33 (1972): 617-65, esp. 617-19, 639-40.

⁸ On this reading of "one flesh" as bespeaking sexual union see Maurice Gilbert, S.J., "'Une seule chair' (Gn, 24)," *Nouvelle Revue Théologie* 100 (1978): 66-89. On sexual intercourse as a covenant ratifying gesture in biblical thought see Gordon Paul Hugenberg, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Developed from the Perspective of Malachi*, Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum*, 52 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 185-279; and John S. Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 32-38.

one.⁹

A couple swearing faith to one another in the covenant of marriage is engaged in an act of self-donation, giving themselves and accepting the gift of the other as a person.¹⁰ This act of bestowal and acceptance forms the foundation for the couple's ongoing communion of love. Subsequent acts of self-donation are a recollection of and participation in this original unconditional pledge. This is most evident in the case of the bodily gift of self in sexual intercourse, but it also true of all the acts of generosity and affection which form the fabric of a

⁹ *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48 as cited in *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 250. The 1983 Code of Canon Law also reflects this development. The 1983 Code describes marriage as a covenant between spouses which establishes a "partnership of the whole life" (*totius vitae consortium*, can. 1055) in which they "mutually hand over and accept each other" (*sese mutuo tradunt et accipiunt*, can. 1057). See *Codex Iuris Canonici* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983). On this development see P. Branchereau, "Le sacrement de mariage dans le code de droit canonique," in *Nouvelle revue théologique* 107 (1985): 376-93; and Comac Burke, "Marriage: A Personalist or Institutional Understanding?", *Communio* 19 (1992): 278-304.

¹⁰ This "self-donation" in marriage was highlighted in the reflection of 20th century personalist authors such as Dietrich von Hildebrand and Herbert Doms. Among the former's works, see especially *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love*, no trans. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1942) and *In Defense of Purity* (Baltimore: Helicon Press 1962). Among the latter's works see *The Meaning of Marriage* trans. George Sayer (London: Sheed and Ward 1939).

couple's relationship woven over a lifetime together.

It is worth recalling, however, the interpersonal communion which the covenant of marriage effects is not a purely human reality. It is ultimately a divine work. This is why the Church has understood marriage as not merely a covenant but also a sacrament—an efficacious sign of grace which serves as a living icon of the bond of love which unites Christ to the Church.¹¹ In their day to day acts of kindness, service, mutual love, service, and forgiveness a couple manifest and share in the love demonstrated on the cross which itself is an outpouring and revelation of the eternal communion of love within the Trinity.

Love, however, is a paradoxical reality in that it can only be received insofar as it is given away. *Gaudium et spes* teaches that human beings are fulfilled in the development of their capacity for self-gift: “man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”¹² To put this in philosophical terms, persons discover themselves as selves—as an “I” precisely in giving themselves to a “Thou” in the dialogue of friendship and love.¹³ Yet this interpersonal dialogue of love is only fully

¹¹ Like Saint Bonaventure, Pope John Paul II held marriage to be a sacrament “from the beginning” and not merely after the coming of Christ. See his weekly general audiences of September 29, 1982 and October 6, 1982 in *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, trans. L'Osservatore Romano, English Ed. (Boston: Pauline, 1997), 330-36.

¹² *Gaudium et spes*, no. 24. The citation is from *The Documents of Vatican II*, 223.

¹³ See the analysis provided by Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New

expressed when it stands in relation to a third term who can be addressed by the couple as a “we.” The unitive nature of a couple’s love has an intrinsic connection to fruitfulness insofar as the couple’s communion is ordered to the community of children.¹⁴ This community of I–Thou–We reflects the eternal communion of love within the Godhead where the Holy Spirit is breathed forth as the fruit of the eternal dialogue of love between the Father and Son. For this reason both the family and the Trinity may be called a *communio personarum* (a “communion of persons”).¹⁵

This understanding of the unitive nature of marriage has some important implications which can be touched upon briefly here. Recalling its foundation in the covenant of marriage and its demand for unconditional and life-long commitment confronts us with a fidelity foreign to our own conception of interpersonal relationships. It was on this basis of this teaching that Jesus condemned the practice of divorce and its basis in the Torah (cf. Dt. 24:1-4) as a

York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 53-85.

¹⁴ See John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 18; and *Letter to Families (Gratissimam sane)*, no.7. This will be developed more fully in the next section. It should be noted, however, that the love of childless couples can also be fruitful both in their own interpersonal communion and in flowing out and enriching the broader community around them. On this point see Michael G. Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament: A Theology of Christian Marriage* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 102-104.

¹⁵ See Pope John II, weekly general audience of November 14, 1979 in the *Theology of the Body*, 45-48; Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris dignitatem*, no. 7, and *Gratissimam sane*, no. 8.

concession to the hard-heartedness induced by sin and proclaimed that it violated God's original creative intention for the covenant of marriage (cf. Mk. 10:2-11 and par.).¹⁶ This insistence on the indissolubility of marriage offers a critique of and challenge to our current culture of divorce which has devastated countless children and spouses who have been abandoned by individuals searching for "personal fulfillment" outside the bonds of these commitments.¹⁷ The fulfillment offered in marital union is found precisely in responding to its invitation to lifelong fidelity and generosity rather than in a flight from these bonds.¹⁸ "The sincere gift of self" is lived out in

¹⁶ Cf. Richard B. Hayes, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 372.

¹⁷ It should be noted that divorce is a tragedy which can have causes other than mere selfishness on the part of one or both spouses. It is therefore wise to recall Pope John II's insistence on the need for "careful discernment of cases" distinguishing "between those who have sincerely tried to save their first marriage and have been unjustly abandoned, and those who through their own grave fault have destroyed a canonically valid marriage." See *Familiaris consortio*, no. 84. The citation is from *The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, Vatican Polyglot Press Translation (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1981), 125-26.

¹⁸ Walter Kasper correctly argues that the bond of marriage itself once created by a couple's commitment becomes in a certain sense "unavailable" to them. This understanding of the permanence of the bond of marriage frees couples from the fickleness of moods or of the moment and thus enables them to win a joint victory over time. Human freedom is fully

myriad struggles and joys of a couple's daily life.¹⁹

Furthermore, grounding the unitive nature of marriage in the marriage covenant serves as a check to any kind of romantization of the language of "self-donation" or "communion" in understanding the unitive nature of marriage. Some commentators have complained the personalist turn of 20th century Catholic theology and teaching falls prey to just such romanticism.²⁰ In fact, it unwittingly reinforces the privatization of marriage and the reduction of romance to a commodity aggressively marketed by contemporary American consumer culture.²¹ Spouses are thereby expected to fulfill all of their partner's emotional and relational needs and

expressed and realized precisely in fidelity. See *Theology of Christian Marriage*, trans. David Smith (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 21-24, 49.

¹⁹ It is worthy recalling *Humanae vitae*'s description (cf. no. 9) of the characteristics of conjugal love: human—involving the senses and the spirit; an act of freedom which grows through the joys and sorrows of daily life; total—a form of personal friendship in which spouses share everything they have; and faithful and exclusive until death.

²⁰ In regard to official Church teaching, particularly in sexual matters, see Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics, 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 202-207.

²¹ See the thoughtful analysis provided by David Matzko McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home: A Theology of the Household* (London: SCM Press, 2001). While I do not agree with all of Matzko McCarthy's conclusions on this point, the analysis is often brilliant.

failing to do so should not be surprised when they are set aside for a newer model who can deliver greater novelty and excitement. It must be recalled, however, that biblical conception of marriage as a covenant was anything but privatized—it was always located in a larger social matrix, whether that of Ancient Israel (in the Old Testament) or the broader Christian community (in the New Testament). This location within God’s covenant people was the necessary support and context for the couple’s covenantal commitment and communion of love with each other. Among followers of Jesus, marriage was never a private enclave in a hostile world but the smallest and most basic form of Christian community—“the domestic Church.”²² Since spouses cannot provide for all of each other’s emotional and relational needs, it is vital that the couple have other friendships to sustain them and the support of the larger Christian community. This reality of immersion into the Christian community is one of the key elements missing from many programs of marriage preparation and support.

Equally important for marriage preparation in light of its covenantal and sacramental nature is attention to the faith of the spouses. That which unites spouses in the sacrament is precisely the faith, hope, and love that also unite them to God in a life of discipleship. What happens when an individual or a couple has little or no faith?²³ It is worth recalling, of course, that in classical sacramental theology faith is not necessary for sacraments to validly conferred

²² Cf. *Lumen gentium*, no. 11; *Familiaris consortio*, no. 21.

²³ For helpful overviews of the problem with differing conclusions see Lawler, *Marriage and the Catholic Church*, 43-61; and Peter J. Elliott, *What God Has Joined: The Sacramentality of Marriage* (New York: Alba House, 1990), 192-99.

(i.e., an unbeliever can baptize) but it is necessary for them to be fruitfully received. The standard western view is that the couple is both the ministers and the recipients of the sacrament—they confer the sacrament on one another in view of their baptismal priesthood.²⁴ Hence one possible theological solution to this dilemma is hold that the couple can be valid ministers of the sacrament apart from conscious faith yet they cannot fruitfully receive the grace conferred by it until the obstacle posed by this lack of faith is removed.²⁵ Pastorally, this problem points to the need for effective evangelization within the context of marriage preparation so that a couple can draw upon the grace of the sacrament from the beginning of their union.

Finally, to understand the interpersonal union and communion of marriage as ordered to children, family, and community also resists some of the most destructive assumptions of our culture. Mutual love is not merely ordered to the interpersonal happiness of the lovers but toward the building up of society and community. The “inseparable connection” between the unitive and procreative meanings of sexuality invoked by *Humanae vitae* is not the result of

²⁴ In Ladislav Örsy’s formulation: “The role of the priest who witnesses the exchange of vows is ambivalent in the Western church: his presence is legally required, but theologically he is expendable.” See “Married Persons: God’s Chosen People,” in *Christian Marriage Today*, Klaus Demmer and Aldegondie Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn eds. (Washington, D.C. The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 38-54. The citation is from p. 45.

²⁵ Classical sacramental theology called this removal of an obstacle through repentance or conversion the “revivification” of a sacrament.

ecclesial voluntarism as some of its critics supposed.²⁶ It is based on very profound anthropological and biblical insights into the nature of love.

Marriage as Procreative

For most of its history the Jewish and Christian insistence on the link between marriage and procreation was an uncontroversial one. After all, the link between sex and child-bearing was obvious and in pre-industrial societies children were a tangible economic and political blessing, adding to the economic power and overall security of their families by their mere presence. This led biblical authors to view children as a blessing from God (cf. Gen. 24:60; Ps. 127:3-5; Ps. 128:3-4) and sterility as a curse (cf. 29:31; 30:1-2; 1 Sam. 1:5-6). With concerns about increasing global population and limited resources, and with the growing expense of raising and educating children in an industrial and now informational society such as our own it is not wholly unsurprising that our own culture's attitudes toward children are much more conflicted.²⁷ Compounding this new socio-economic context is the fact that increased scientific knowledge and the application of technology has made it much easier for many to break the connection between sex and procreation (in a variety of ways) that our predecessors took for granted.

²⁶ Cf. *Humanae vitae*, no. 12.

²⁷ On this last point see the thoughtful reflections of David McCarthy, "Procreation, the Development of Peoples, and the Final Destiny of Humanity," *Communio* 26 (1999): 698-721.

The first creation story of Genesis (1:1-2:4a) describes humanity's creation in "the image of God."²⁸ This image is comprised on the one hand of the exercise of dominion over the rest of creation (cf. Gen. 1:26, 28). However, this dominion is not the same as the untrammelled license of domination but rather must be understood as the exercise of royal representation and stewardship.²⁹ Human beings represent the power and authority of a Creator who sustains rather than dominates His creation. They are placed in it to "cultivate and to care for it" it (cf. Gen. 2:15c).³⁰ On the other hand, humanity's creation in the *imago dei* involves a second, equally fundamental, signification—that of relationality.³¹ It is "male and female" together that comprise

²⁸ All biblical citations are from the NAB.

²⁹ For a complete study of this text see Francis Martin, "Male and Female He Created Them: A Summary of the Teaching of Genesis Chapter One," *Communio* 20 (1993): 240-65; and Walter Vogels, "The Human Person in the Image of God (Gn 1, 26)," *Science et Esprit* 46 (1994): 189-202.

³⁰ The phrase recalls the primary occupation of early humanity—farming. See PHEME Perkins, "Women in the Bible and Its World," *Interpretation* 42 (1988): 33-44. Yet it also accords well with the notion of stewardship of creation rather than domination of it found in the first creation account. See Manfred Weippert, "Tier und Mensch in einer menschenarmen Welt. Zum sog. *Dominium terrae* in Genesis 1," in *Ebenbild Gottes—Herrscher über die Welt*, Biblisch- Theologische Studien 33 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998), 35-55.

³¹ Cf. Claus Westerman, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, S.J.

the divine image (cf. Gen. 1:27c) and this fundamental relation is in turn dependent upon the relation between the Creator and humankind fully realized in the worship of the Sabbath (cf. Gen 2:1-4a). Creation finds its completion in the worship of the One from whose hand it came. Men and women, as the priest- stewards of this creation not only represent God to their fellow creatures but have the awesome privilege of declaring the gratitude and praise of all of creation to its Maker.

But these two dimensions of our creation in the image of God—dominion and relation—are not unrelated. The text of the first creation account draws them together by noting that one way in which men and women exercise the dominion with which they are entrusted over the visible world is to “be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28b). It is precisely (though not exclusively) in the joining of their shared fertility that this exercise of priestly dominion is realized. The term used here for the “blessing” which accompanies procreation (*barak*) is significant in the Hebrew of the Old Testament as it almost always signifies God’s action of giving life to His creation.³²

This is one important reason why the scriptures can parallel sex and worship since both are activities which ratify a covenant.³³ Awareness of this parallel can be found in the nuptial

(Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 142-61.

³² This is one reason why biblical traditions view children as a tangible sign of God’s blessing and sterility as a curse as noted above.

³³ Cf. Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue*, 37-38; and Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 216-79.

imagery for the covenant between Yahweh and Israel in the Old Testament.³⁴ It is also the backdrop for the “great mystery” found in the Christian couple’s participation in the union between Christ and the Church (cf. Eph. 5:21-33). Thus while the scriptures resist the deification of sex or its projection onto the divine found in Ancient Near Eastern and some Greco-Roman religions, this does not stop them from seeing the sexual relationship of spouses as something that involves God and his holiness.

As noted above, the marriage covenant involves the total gift of oneself to one’s spouse and this unconditional gift is sealed in the bodily union of sexual self-donation. Intercourse is therefore a form of communication between the couple. It is, to use John Paul II’s phrase, “a language of the body” in which the couple somatically proclaims both unconditional fidelity and unreserved self-gift.³⁵ Part of this gift is precisely the gift of one’s fertility. This is both because fertility is an integral part of the person as male or female and because the sharing of this gift is an expression and realization of the couple’s creation in the image of God. When a couple’s gift of fertility results in the creation of a new human life the couple become co-creators with God—it

³⁴ This is particularly evident in the prophetic books of Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The negative import of this imagery is that in worshiping idols Israel has adulterated her faith in Yahweh. The positive implication is that the bodily gift of self in sexual union can be understood as analogous to the offering of the whole person in prayer and liturgical worship.

³⁵ See his weekly general audiences of January 5, 12, 19, and 26, 1983 in *The Theology of the Body*, 354-65.

is a “renewal of the mystery of creation.”³⁶ To deliberately withhold this dimension of oneself is to undercut the language of total self-gift and therefore deny the dignity of one’s spouse created in the image of God.³⁷ It also is an affront to the Creator who is the author of both love and life.³⁸

This understanding of the procreative nature of marriage also has some important implications. First, it serves as a point of resistance to current cultural attitudes which see children primarily as a threat and an impoverishment to the life of couple and the global community rather than first and foremost as a blessing. It likewise challenges the dominant view of much western society and medicine that human fertility is a disease to be suppressed through

³⁶ See John Paul II’s weekly general audience of March 12, 1980 in *The Theology of the Body*, 80-83. However, it must be noted that couples whose fertility is impaired can still express the fruitfulness of their love in a wide array of vital expressions—from adoption to a vast array of expressions of care for others in and outside of the Christian community.

³⁷ See Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 32; *Gratissimam sane*, no. 12. See also his weekly general audiences of July 11, August 8, and August 22, 1984 in *The Theology of the Body*, 386-88, 395-99.

³⁸ On this point see the incisive analysis of Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willets (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; rpt. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 245-49.

medication or surgery.³⁹ That is, it resolutely opposes what some have described as the “contraceptive mentality” or what John Paul II labeled “the culture of death.”⁴⁰

The recognition that marriage is ordered to the procreation and care of children and that the shared fertility of a couple is a gift challenges the couple to see their relationship in a broader and more truthful perspective. This insight helps them see that they are not merely trying to live “happily ever after” as an isolated couple. It serves as a reminder that sex is not just about pleasure and interpersonal fulfillment but also about concrete relations of blood, family, and kinship whether in or outside of the Christian community.⁴¹ Rather it encourages them to build a small Christian community in their household in the way they relate to each other, their children, and their society. This requires attention to the varieties of practices that make up and structure their common life—whether in regard to prayer, mutual communication, social relationships,

³⁹ Rather schizophrenically the same society is often willing to pursue fertility (and especially the cult of genetic likeness) through reproductive technologies which divorce it from the bodily expression of a couple’s interpersonal union in sex.

⁴⁰ For some of the characteristics of a “culture of death” and its opposite see Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Evangelium vitae*, nos. 7-21, 78-101.

⁴¹ This is an important theme in Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, *passim*. Along with these meanings of marriage she also emphasizes pleasure and intimacy as bodily meanings of sex (cf. p. 111).

interaction or isolation in their parish and neighborhood, or patterns of work and consumption.⁴²

It also challenges couples to search for and implement practices that habituate them to respect for the gift of their sexuality and the integral place of fertility within it such as the use of Natural Family Planning to space or achieve pregnancy.⁴³

But if the procreative end of marriage reminds couples of their broader social responsibilities, it also reminds the Church of its responsibility to care for couples and families.⁴⁴ Families are the basic cell not only of society but of the Church as a whole.⁴⁵ Therefore the Church has a responsibility to integrate couples and families into the fabric of its life.

⁴² On this last point in particular see Matzko McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home*.

⁴³ For an analysis of the use of NFP on the moral life of the couple, see Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue*, 142-54. For a reflection on the method's impact on the spirituality of marriage see *idem.*, "Natural Family Planning and Marital Spirituality," in *Integrating Science through Natural Family Planning*, Richard J. Fehring and Theresa Notare, eds. (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2004), 29-45.

⁴⁴ It is noteworthy that Pope John Paul II holds that a married couple is already in a real sense "a family"—prior to the arrival of children. Cf. *Letter to Families*, no. 7.

⁴⁵ For an excellent study of the meaning of "family" in the recent teaching of the Church see Donald Miller, "A Critical Evaluation and Application to Various Situations in the United States of the Official Roman Catholic Position on Family Life from Vatican II through *Christifideles laici*," Ph.D. diss, The Catholic University of America, 1995.

Unfortunately, frequently this attempt is only made in the context of sacramental preparation—in the preparation of a couple for marriage or their children for the sacraments of initiation. Once this catechesis is complete, the effort to support and catechize families on the part of parishes or dioceses often appears to cease. If families are about giving and receiving life this cannot be the case. Families must be challenged to both receive and give life to the broader Christian and human community. The Church’s sexual ethic has to be intrinsically social in its aim. One key part of this social orientation lies in inculcating mutuality in couples and families.

Marriage as a Partnership

While the language of “partnership” does have distinctively modern overtones, its import is not foreign to concepts found in the biblical tradition. The preceding analysis has already highlighted the fact that the first account of creation in Genesis underscores the creation of male and female in the image of God (cf. 1:26-28)—an idea very different from other creation myths of the ancient world which often located humanity at the bottom of the cosmic ladder and assumed women to be the property of men.⁴⁶ For Genesis, men and women both represent God

⁴⁶ For example, one can contrast this text with Mesopotamian creation myths such as the *Enuma Elish* in which humankind is created for the blood of a vanquished god to do the menial tasks in the universe to which the gods do not want to attend. Women in these societies were legally and socially subjugated to men. Cf. Benedict M. Guevin, *Christian Anthropology and Sexual Ethics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 3-6.

to creation and have the capacity to relate directly to Him. Both are acknowledged as the priest-stewards of the created world, having a dignity that comes directly from God rather than from their social function or legal standing.⁴⁷

The second creation story (Gen. 2:4b-3:24) also provides important insights into the equal dignity of the sexes. Following canonically upon the first story of creation, the second account sounds a jarring and discordant note to the careful reader—“It is *not good* for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18b).⁴⁸ The solution to this problem is the creation of an *ezer*—a term literally rendered as “suitable helper” but perhaps more accurately rendered into English as “suitable partner.”⁴⁹ This is because in current English usage “helper” has connotations of secondary status and subordination whereas “partner” does not. Biblical research has shown that the term

⁴⁷ It should be recalled that in the 6th century B.C. in ancient Israel when this text was written women did not have the same legal rights and status as men.

⁴⁸ Emphasis added. While the text is canonically second, most scholars think that it predates the first creation story by some four centuries (dating from about the 10th century B.C.). Thus the author of the first account who presumably did the final redaction of this material surely noticed the conflict that this statement created with the repeated affirmations in his own text that everything God made was good (cf. 1:4, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), but left it because he recognized the importance of that which it introduced.

⁴⁹ Versions of the former more literal translation may be found in the NRSV and the NIV. The latter comes from the NAB.

ezer carries no such connotations in the original Hebrew. In fact, the term often is applied to Yahweh as the “helper” of Israel.⁵⁰ Equally striking is the wordplay in the man’s covenant declaration to the woman in 2:23. He declares her to be *ishah* (‘woman’) because she has been taken out of *ish* (‘man’), using for the first time the gender specific terms rather than the generic ‘*adam* (‘mankind’). They are therefore described as being made from the same substance and thus sharing a common nature.⁵¹ Finally, it is crucial to notice the reversal of Israelite law and practice hinted at in 2:24: “a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife” when in the legislation of the OT it was she who left her family to become part of the “house” of her husband.⁵² The net effect of this language is to provide a strong challenge to the assumption that the subordination of women to men in the law of ancient Israel reflected God’s original intention for the covenant of marriage.⁵³

In the New Testament, Jesus’ repudiation of the Old Testament legislation which allowed

⁵⁰ See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 54. Cf. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 90.

⁵¹ Equally striking is the reversal of Israelite law and practice hinted at in 2:24: “a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife.”

⁵² Cf. Cahill, *Between the Sexes*, 55.

⁵³ Especially when this text will explicitly go on to describe this subordination as the result of human sin in 3:16. Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Mulieris dignitatem*, no. 10.

men to divorce their wives (cf. Dt. 24:1-4) poses another challenge to the socially presumed control of women by men (cf. 1 Cor. 7:10-11; Mk. 10:1-12; Mt. 5:32, 19:1-12; Lk. 16:18). Commenting on these texts Walter Kasper has correctly observed in regard to the position of a woman:

She is no longer—as the Pharisees question presupposed—at the mercy of a man’s decision. She has security in the decision of God and in his covenant. Jesus’ words about the indissolubility of marriage therefore form the basis of a new understanding of marriage as a partnership, in which neither partner is at the mercy of the other, but both are at God’s mercy in faith.⁵⁴

When neither spouse has the sole power to end or a continue the marriage relationship it must be regarded as a partnership in some sense.

Reinforcing this insistence on mutuality in marriage is the New Testament’s unambiguous repudiation of a double standard of sexual morality for men and women. This can

⁵⁴ *Theology of Christian Marriage*, 48. This is not to say that the biblical or subsequent theological tradition regarding these sayings is uncomplicated as Kasper acknowledges (cf. *Theology of Christian Marriage*, pp.50-62). Unfortunately, some authors lay so much emphasis on the so-called exceptive clauses of 1 Corinthians and Matthew that it appears that “the exception becomes the rule” and the basic thrust of Jesus’ prophetic words are lost. Examples are provided by Cahill, *Between the Sexes*, 76-77; and Mark J. Molldrem, “A Hermeneutic of Pastoral Care and the Law/Gospel Paradigm Applied to the Divorce Texts of Scripture,” *Interpretation* 45 (1991): 43-54.

be seen in Jesus' prophetic deepening of the sixth commandment from a matter of exterior behavior to one of the heart in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Mt. 5:27-28).⁵⁵ It can also be seen in the Pauline insistence on the equality of husbands and wives in regard to what the later tradition would call the "debt of marriage." In his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul insists that husbands and wives have authority over one another's bodies (cf. 1 Cor. 7: 4) and should therefore make decisions about sexual relations or abstinence together—"by mutual consent" (1 Cor. 7: 5b). Given the assumptions of the Hellenistic culture of the first century A.D. about male sexual prerogatives, this teaching regarding marital reciprocity is nothing short of revolutionary.

Yet in the face of this biblical trajectory of mutuality stretching from the creation stories of Genesis to the New Testament stand some significant obstacles. For not only does much of the legislation of ancient Israel subordinate women to men, but so do key New Testament texts often referred to as the household codes.⁵⁶ Even though these texts enjoin husbands to love their wives and care for their children, they nonetheless unambiguously insist on the subordination of women to men in marriage. As such, they are often read as part of a literary genre common

⁵⁵ This continues a trajectory already present within the Old Testament to apply the demands of covenant fidelity within marriage equally to women and men. See Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue*, 38-43. Note especially the very similar formulation in Job 31:1, 9-12.

⁵⁶ Such texts include Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet. 2:17-3:9; 1 Tim. 2:8-15; 6:1-10, and Titus 2:10.

among Hellenistic authors both Greco-Roman and Jewish⁵⁷ and as part of a Christian accommodation to the patriarchal Hellenistic family structure.⁵⁸

However, recent historical and biblical scholarship and theological reflection suggests that there is reason to read these texts differently. There is solid historical and exegetical evidence to suggest that these NT texts are not an example of an existing literary form or *topos*.⁵⁹ This in turn suggests that they may not merely reflect a failure of nerve on the part of an originally egalitarian Christianity to the oppressive structures of the male-dominated Hellenistic family.⁶⁰ In fact, these texts are better read as an attempt to transform this family structure from

⁵⁷ See, for example, Plato, *Laws* 3, 689E-690D; *Republic* 4, 433A-D; Aristotle, *Politics* 1, 1252a-1253b; 1260a-b; *Nichomachean Ethics* 7 1160b-1161a; Plutarch, *Conjugal Precepts* 11, 16, 32; Seneca 2, 18, 1-2; Philo, *The Decalogue* 165-167, *Special Laws* 2, 225-227; 3, 169-171; *Apology for the Jews* 7, 3, 5; Josephus, *Against Apion* 2, 199 206, 216.

⁵⁸ See, for example, the influential study of Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 245, 268-69.

⁵⁹ See the cogent summary of Francis Martin, “Marriage in the New Testament Period,” in *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*, Glenn W. Olsen, ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 50-100; see esp. 78-80.

⁶⁰ See Martin, “Marriage in the New Testament Period,” 79. Cf. Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, Society for New Testament Studies 59 (Cambridge: Cambridge

within by making the sacrificial servant-leadership of Christ the model for male “headship” in the family.⁶¹

In this vein it is important to note the reading of texts such as Ephesians 5:21-33 offered by Pope John II. Considering both the literary and grammatical context of “mutual submission out of reverence for Christ” (5:21) as well as broader canonical and theological considerations, the pope taught that the directive of the text “is to be understood and carried out in a new way: as a *mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ*.”⁶² The pope was well aware of the novelty of this teaching as compared to previous official formulations but stated that mutual character of the marital authority was part of the “*ethos of the Redemption*” which, flowing from the newness of

University, 1988), 43-47.

⁶¹ This is the conclusion of Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 220, 243, n. 157. Cf. Stephen Miletic, “*One Flesh*”: Eph. 5.22-24, 5.31: *Marriage and the New Creation*, *Analecta Biblica* 115 (Rome Biblical Institute Press, 1988), 116. For a summary of some of the exegetical arguments undergirding this conclusion see John S. Grabowski, “Mutual Submission and Trinitarian Self-Giving,” *Angelicum* 74 (1997): 489-512, esp. 491-94.

⁶² Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris dignitatem*, no. 24. The citation is from the version of the text in *The Theology of the Body*, 478. Emphasis in original. The other considerations on which John Paul II bases this teaching include: the equal dignity and personhood of women in the Genesis creation accounts, invoked by Ephesians (cf. 5:32) and the insistence of the sacrificial love of husbands for their wives which accords well with the style of Jesus in the Gospels in relating to women as persons.

the gospel message, takes time to “gradually establish itself in hearts, consciences, behavior, and customs.”⁶³ That is to say, he himself saw this as a development of the Catholic doctrine of marriage and proposed it as such.⁶⁴

This remarkable development in the Church’s teaching makes it clear that marriage must be understood as a partnership in the fullest sense. Men and women in marriage are not only equal in dignity and in fundamental human rights, they are equal in their exercise of authority. Yet this equality does not necessarily mean that men and women are identical. In this vein Pope John Paul II spoke of the irreducible originality of women and men--not just in their embodiment but in the whole of their personal existence.⁶⁵ It is worth noting that contemporary theologians such as Lisa Sowle Cahill helpfully point to the distinction between sex specific qualities and men’s and women’s roles, enabling us to perceive the stability of the former and the flexibility of the latter.⁶⁶ This is crucial for the success of marriages where women choose to (or because of economic necessity are forced to) work outside the home because in these cases there

⁶³ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁴ For an extended argument for this interpretation and a consideration of its implications see Grabowski, “Mutual Submission and Trinitarian Self-Giving,” *passim*.

⁶⁵ See *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 16. See also his weekly general audiences of November 14, 1979; and November 21, 1979 in *The Theology of the Body*, 45-51.

⁶⁶ See *Between the Sexes*, p. 96. However, Cahill does not fully develop the significance of this distinction in this text.

must be a redistribution of traditional household roles so that women are not trapped in “the murderous dual role” of assuming primary responsibility for their families while also pursuing a career.⁶⁷

This understanding of mutual authority/submission within the marital partnership has a host of theological and practical implications only some of which can be considered here. To hold that men and women exercise equal authority in the marriage relationship requires very careful attention to the communication skills and patterns of decision-making on the part of couples. In order for couples to live this kind of mutuality they must honestly share their views and learn to make decisions together on a host of issues ranging from finances, to scheduling their time, to investing in their spiritual lives, to raising their children. It may well be that because of temperament or personal gifts one spouse may choose to cede an area of responsibility such as managing the household schedule or finances to his or her mate. However, there are also matters of such importance that they cannot be delegated in this way such as raising children who need both a mother and a father.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, this understanding challenges couples to learn to make decisions together on an array of issues affecting their

⁶⁷ Cf. Walter Kasper, “The Position of Women as a Problem of Theological Anthropology,” trans. John Saward, in *The Church and Women: A Compendium*, Helmut Moll, ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 51-64, esp. 61.

⁶⁸ This is also because motherhood and fatherhood are not mere “roles” of men and women, but fundamental vocations of men and women. Cf. Grabowski, “Mutual Submission and Trinitarian Self-Giving,” 509.

common life. When disagreements arise, they require deeper communication and mutual discernment on the part of the couple. Occasionally, when couples are deadlocked on an issue confronting them, one spouse may have to defer to the other. If there is genuinely mutual love and good communication between them, it can be presumed that it will not always be the same spouse who gives way.⁶⁹

Obviously, challenging couples to embrace and grow toward this mutual exercise of authority is not an easy task—especially when individuals come from familial or cultural backgrounds with very different assumptions. Effective preparation for marriage in this regard must begin as early as possible in a person’s life. Ideally, this preparation should occur both in and outside of a person’s family of origin. This requires, among other things, instruction in effective communication skills, an understanding of the psychological differences between men and women as these impact communication, habituation to respect for the dignity of others as persons, an understanding of the importance of conflict resolution and how to achieve it, the cultivation of a life of prayer, and training in methods of discernment. Preparation for the partnership of marriage thus involves effective catechesis of the whole person and is a task of all

⁶⁹ In this I disagree with William E. May who argues that in times of crisis in particular families need a single decision-maker or principle of authority and that men are better suited for this position. See *Marriage: The Rock on which the Family is Built* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 63-64. Such a position cannot be reconciled with the teaching of *Mulieris dignitatem* or a trinitarian understanding of authority which will be outlined briefly below.

of the members of the Christian community.⁷⁰

Yet mutual submission does not erase the fundamental personal differences between men and women. Rather, it must presuppose them. The case of a couple using some version of Natural Family Planning can be instructive in this regard. Successful use of the method requires the couple to communicate about the size of their family and about their sexual relationship. It also rules out any univocal decisions in this regard—couples must make decisions together or the method is impracticable. But these decisions presuppose all of the differences between them as men and women—physiological, psychological, and sexual. If the initiative for considering sex frequently comes from the male because of his psycho-sexual make-up, it is then submitted to his wife and her fertility, state of mind, and their consensus as to whether they are trying to achieve or avoid the conception of a child at a given point of their relationship. Use of NFP thus demonstrates what the praxis of mutual submission looks like in the day to day life of a couple. The method also habituates a couple to this praxis in the whole of their relationship.⁷¹

⁷⁰ This is especially important if one's family of origin proves to be an obstacle to learning this kind of mutuality in the marriage relationship.

⁷¹ This may be one of the reasons why studies have found such an enormous discrepancy in the divorce rate between couples who use NFP and those who do not. See the studies cited by Janet Smith, *Humanae vitae: A Generation Later* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 127; and Jeff Brand, *Marital Duration and Natural Family Planning* (Cincinnati, OH: Couple to Couple League, 1995). Cf. Andrew Pollard and Mercedes Arzú-Wilson, "Correlates of Marital Satisfaction in a Group of NFP Women," in *Integrating Faith and*

The ground for this understanding of mutuality in marriage like the ultimate ground for marriage itself is the eternal communion of the Trinity. The revelation of the Trinity in the economy of salvation provides us with the real meaning of “mutual submission.” Numerous NT traditions indicate that the Father’s purpose in creation was to establish a people to glorify his consubstantial Son (cf. Jn. 17:24; Eph. 1:9-10), a glorification most fully effected in the cross and resurrection of Jesus (cf. Lk. 24:26; Jn. 13:31b-32, 17:5; Acts 3:13; 1 Pet. 1:21). The Son, in turn, most particularly in the Johannine corpus seeks not his own glory but that of the Father who sent him (cf. Jn. 8:50; 12:28). John also describes the joint work of the Father and Son as one of mutual glorification (Jn. 13:31b-23; 17:1, 22). In the NT the Holy Spirit is sent to make present the person and work of the Son and thus give him glory (cf. Jn 16:13-14; 2 Cor. 3:18). This ceaseless work of mutual glorification by the Persons of the Trinity in the economy of salvation demonstrates the full meaning and import of mutual submission. Couples united in Christ are called to grow together toward the unity of will which exists in the Godhead *ad intra* and is displayed *ad extra* in the economy of salvation. The mutual love of the couple, transformed by grace, joins two free and distinct human subjectivities into a unity of operation such that they no longer make decisions on the basis of self-interest, but for the sake of each other. Marriage as a partnership is thus part of the core of its unitive nature.

If the idea that the authority of marriage is to be exercised as “mutual submission” is indeed a development of doctrine, the ecclesiological implications of this teaching have yet to be considered. Accepting recent magisterial teaching concerning the non-ordination of women as definitive merely tells us what mutual submission in the Church is *not*. It does not tell us

Science, 139-65.

positively how this new perception of the equal dignity of women and men is to be positively expressed in the Church's life and ministry. An adequate articulation of the ecclesial gifts and ministries in of women relation to those of men remains to be undertaken.

Conclusion

Marriage is indeed facing new and unprecedented challenges in our society as is witnessed by increased rates of cohabitation, divorce, and avoidance of the marital commitment altogether on the part of many. Yet the biblical underpinnings of this covenant and sacrament and the Church's theological tradition have the resources for an effective theological and pastoral response to this situation. Part of the problem is that marriage has been coopted by a larger consumer culture which emphasizes personal pleasure (sexual and otherwise) and individual autonomy and fulfillment, as the only hallmarks of relational success. Personal relationships are thus marked by their disposable nature and frequently by the struggle for control within them.

The Church's biblical and theological tradition offers a bracing and full-blooded alternative. For here marriage is understood as a covenant—an unconditional promise of fidelity in which one promises and gives one's very self to another before God. Yet this is commitment is not merely based on human volition but on God's gracious reconciliation of the world to himself in Jesus Christ and it is therefore a sign of and participation in the union between Christ and the Church. The oath of marriage is expressed in sexual union in which a couple enacts and subsequently recalls their covenant promise. An integral part of the bodily gift of self on the part of the couple is the gift of their shared fertility so that marriage is ordered to fruitfulness in

children, in the Church, and in the broader society. Marital self-donation, however, involves the whole person and the whole of a couple's history. Hence shared decision-making and mutual deference become vehicles of the couple's continuing growth and union in love.

This understanding of marriage as a unitive and procreative partnership provides a vision which can effectively critique and challenge shallow contemporary views of marriage, commitment, sex, and children. Still more it can point to an array of concrete practices which can enable members of the Christian community to begin to interiorize this alternative which is at one more bracing and beautiful. Marriage is not an institution waiting to expire or in need of some deadening accommodation to current cultural norms and practices; the sacrament remains an efficacious sign of God's gracious covenant with us fully realized in Jesus Christ.