

*“Promoting and Sustaining Marriage as a Community of Life and Love”*  
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**MARRIAGE AS A COVENANT AND SACRAMENT**  
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**Introduction: The Situation**

In the recent social debate over gay marriage, there was a lot of talk about marriage. On one side were those who seemed to agree that marriage is a loving, committed relationship, thus to deny gay people the right to marry those they love and desire to be committed to would be unacceptable, akin to standing in the way of the many couples throughout history kept apart by social convention or limited notions of who was right for whom. On the other side, were those who stated what seemed an obvious truth—marriage is between a man and a woman. Sometimes this was followed by claims that marriage had always been this way, or that God had created marriage to be this way or that marriage by nature is heterosexual. While those open to gay marriage often spoke of marriage as evolving over time and in response to cultural trends, those opposed spoke with more certainty about the enduring value of marriage in its traditional form.

Many could not help feeling cynical about all this talk about the value of marriage. With a high divorce rate leveling off at 45-50%, high reported rates of infidelity and abuse, along with plenty of weak marriages, reverence for the institution of marriage, both on the part of those who did not want it to change and on the part of those who did, was hard for many to swallow.

I am not going to enter into the gay marriage debate in this paper. Instead, I want to



raise an overlooked problem. Amid all the discussion about marriage, there was little substantive talk about what it means for people to marry or what exactly it *is* that is “between a man and a woman.” With all the public debate over who should marry whom, there was very little discussion of marriage. But talking about marriage has never been more necessary. There is real need for public discourse about this most battered of institutions, still sought after by most, yet increasingly fragile and even broken.

Churches have traditionally used language of covenant and sacrament to talk about marriage. Both terms, are, I would argue, mostly devoid of content both for those inside the church and those outside it. Certainly, few are able to aptly define the terms, but even more significantly, the terms fail to inspire imagination, let alone commitment. The challenge for Christian theologians and pastors is to make these languages live, that is, to talk with theological depth and attention to the real lives of men and women who marry. Contemporary theologians, particularly those who are married, provide rich new resources for constructing a viable theology of marriage using the concepts of sacrament and covenant. This paper will attempt to bring forward the most valuable of these ideas, with the hope of contributing to a richer public dialogue.

It is important not to be naïve about the difficulties facing those who would speak in public about Catholic views on marriage. A central problem is how to speak from the tradition to a diverse, public audience. The Catholic laity need a deeply theological vision of marriage they can connect to their own lives, something they can believe in and work toward, something in-between difficult papal documents and the simple pamphlets often promoted at the pastoral level. Married couples who are not Catholic need to see something substantive in the Church’s vision and witness of marriage in order to take it



seriously. They may not be called to live this way, but they can have more understanding and respect for those who do. They might find overlap with their own convictions, or be inspired by the prophetic witness of their neighbors. The task, as I see it, is not to translate the theology into universal terms but to articulate it in powerful ways so that Christians will be energized in their faith and others will be moved to pay attention.

However, speaking so that people might hear will be difficult, for when the Church speaks about marriage today, it speaks to those who live in a fragmented world and are sustained by romantic visions of marriage. By fragmented, I mean that lives are no longer whole but rather are split into many different segments. For instance, Catholic life used to be centered around the parish. However, families today are involved in multiple communities connected to one or two jobs, a neighborhood (or more when parents are split apart), multiple children's schools, a parish, interest groups formed around sports or other activities, friendships, and extended family networks that increasingly span the nation or even the world. For Catholics, like most Americans, this leads to a sense of fragmentation or, in popular language, of being spread too thin or pulled in too many different directions. In the midst of this fragmentation, marriage is often portrayed as the relationship that solves all problems, diminishing the necessity and importance of the rest of fragmented world. Romance is supposed to sustain and fill us, no matter what the world throws at us. This is a seductive story, and a powerful one, but it does not tell the whole truth about marriage.

The Catholic tradition offers a way of seeing marriage that speaks to its reality and potential. Within the Catholic narrative, families are viewed not isolated havens, but as small, sacramental or grace-filled communities connected to and engaged in a larger



world. God is present in ordinary family life, the tradition says, inasmuch as love and pain, strength, and weakness are. Moreover, marriage is a covenantal relationship, one sustained by public promises and capable of communicating to a community the value of long-lasting love and fidelity. The Christian narrative offers an alternative vision more attuned to the human experience of strength and brokenness, and more able to help families move beyond fragmentation.

This is not a narrative to be dismissed as overly ideal. One of the most under-emphasized strengths of a Catholic sacramental theology of marriage is its ability to make sense of imperfection and sin. While it is true that grace can be found in the depths of marital love, grace is also to be found in the ordinary and painful aspects of marriage. Human beings are, as Flannery O'Connor famously said, "but rough beasts slouching toward Bethlehem,"<sup>11</sup> yet God remains present in our lives. We need to speak to that reality, and of the vocation to be faithful to the marriage covenant that makes it possible. This narrative is far richer than those of our culture, and it has the potential to attract and transform Catholics and non-Catholics alike, if it is well-told.

### **Sacrament and Covenant in the Catholic Tradition**

Despite the Christian tradition's historical ambivalence regarding marriage, one finds in it a stubborn insistence that even if celibacy is a higher path, marriage is nonetheless a worthy way to live. This ambivalence in Catholic theology continues even in the Baltimore Catechism, where marriage is defined as "the sacrament by which a

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<sup>11</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, ed. and with an introduction by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Noonday Press, 1979), 90. The original phrase is from W.B. Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming."



baptized man and a baptized woman bind themselves for life in a lawful marriage and receive the grace to discharge their duties.”<sup>2</sup> The sacrament is to be found in extra grace given to those who marry in the church. In some editions, the text is accompanied by a picture of Jesus chatting with the couple of the wedding at Cana story (John 2:1-11), a concrete (apocryphal) example of the sort of help Catholics couples can expect to receive. Discussion of their future life is limited to references to ongoing “mutual help” in maintaining their lifelong commitment and to parental duties.<sup>3</sup> A full understanding of the marriage relationship itself as sacramental remains undeveloped.

The more recent Catholic tradition carries forward the traditional emphases on children and fidelity, moves beyond suspicion of sexual passion, and explores the meaning of sacramental marriage. It sees the grace present not only in the juridical bond of marriage, but in the lives of married people. It asks, “What is it about real life of marriage that is revelatory of God? What is holy about the lifelong covenant of two people?” Its answer is in three parts: (1) Marital love reveals God, (2) Marital love is not insular but outward reaching, (3) Marital love is imperfect yet holy. In each part, both the sacramental and covenantal aspects of marriage are pushed forward. This view of marriage is a viable response to fragmentation that marks the contemporary situation.

### ***Love reveals God***

Pope John Paul II had much to teach about marriage, but perhaps his most significant contribution is his elevation of married life. For him, the sacrament of marriage is “the specific source and original means of sanctification for Christian married

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<sup>2</sup> The New Saint Joseph Baltimore Catechism, official revised edition (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1964), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



couples and families.” It “is in itself a liturgical action, glorifying God.” [It] gives couples “the grace and obligation of transforming their whole lives into a ‘spiritual sacrifice.’”<sup>4</sup> Self-giving love is for the Pope the point of human existence and the heart of marriage. He believes that in drawing close to one another and giving more of themselves, wife and husband become better human beings and better Christians. Though few people recognize the language of growing in holiness, most of those who believe know that they experience God’s love in their most intimate relationships. They can see that over time, they get better at sacrificing their own wants for those who are close to them. Their marriages are sacramental, not just because they are faithful, fruitful, and lifelong, but because they are loving relationships through which God can be deeply known.

John Paul II carries the tradition further not only by seeing sacramental grace in marriage itself but by extending sacrament to include family. His decision to speak of family as a communion is profound, for it captures sacramental presence using a word that evokes Eucharistic presence for Catholics, and community or even communing for everyone else. The bodily presence of family life is raised up. The Pope implies a similarity between the intimate encounter of Eucharist and the intermingling of lives that occurs in a family. Family values of acceptance, encounter, dialogue, availability, and solidarity are implicitly affirmed. The Pope puts forth the idea that because the dignity of each person is recognized in a profound way in the family, it is “the most effective means for humanizing and personalizing society.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, we come to understand the value of

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<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1981), #56.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, # 43.



persons here and bring this understanding forward into society. As well, those outside a family are brought to a deeper understanding of human dignity when they see and experience the love that holds a family together. It is a love that proclaims, “This is what God is like; God loves us like this.” This understanding of sacrament pertains not simply to juridical bonds or marriage liturgies, but primarily to human relationships.

Even though the language of sacrament is most prominent in the Pope’s theological treatment of marriage, covenant provides the foundation for the growth in love that so concerns him. The Pope implies that without a permanent covenant, it is difficult to achieve the internal or external goods of sacramental love or familial communion. He writes that married couples “are a permanent reminder to the church of what happened on the cross; they are for one another and their children witnesses to the salvation in which the sacrament makes them sharers.”<sup>6</sup> Note the emphasis on the love expressed on the cross: the love of sacrifice and pain, the love of the One who would not stop loving no matter what it cost him. It is a rare family that does not experience some of the cross in their marriage, and yet, the Pope claims, they are called to covenant loyalty, for their “deeply personal unity. . . demands indissolubility and faithfulness in definitive mutual giving.”<sup>7</sup>

Readers of John Paul II’s theology often remain skeptical of his ideals because, though laudible, they can seem unrealistic. Lay theologians writing on marriage have tried to bring marital theology down to earth by reflecting on their own experiences as married people.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., #13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



Bernard Cooke's well-known understanding of marriage as a sacrament of friendship is a prime example. Cooke worries that the older sacramental theology led Catholics to think that when people get married, they are to able make special withdrawals from the bank of grace.<sup>8</sup> This notion was not very convincing, as most are aware of Christian marriages that seem lacking in grace. Instead, Cooke claims, married couples should understand that they are grace to each other, to their children, to everyone around them.<sup>9</sup> This sounds radical but really is not. Love is the most profound human experience. We experience love in friendship, and marriage is the ultimate friendship, wherein God communicates God's self to us through the love of others. This is the sacrament, the grace of God's love poured out on us through those who love us. Though Cooke is not significantly less idealistic than the Pope, by naming marriage as friendship, he allows people to connect with a concept (sacramentality) that many still link to a bond or ceremony rather than to the relationships that are most central to their daily lives.

Lay theologians also work to make the languages of sacrament and covenant more responsive to contemporary views of marriage that are marked by mutuality. In *Familiaris Consortio* John Paul II, devotes most of his attention to talking about married couples as partners called to create a communion of love, serve life, work for the transformation of society, and become the church in their home, and very little time trying to distinguish between the different roles of men and women. Still, he does distinguish between the vocations of motherhood and fatherhood in a way that privileges

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard Cooke, "Christian Marriage: Basic Sacrament," in Kieran Scott and Michael Warren, eds., *Perspectives on Marriage: A Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 48.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



male work outside the home and female work inside it.<sup>10</sup> Later writing on women clarifies this distinction by affirming women's public roles, but does so by affirming their "feminine genius" (without defining men's particular gifts).<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, lay theologians speak from experience not primarily of complementarity but of partnership.<sup>12</sup> For them, reliance on socially determined parts gives way to true openness to the gifts, desires, and callings of each person. The commitment of the couple is to the growth of each individually and to the good of the family as a whole. This is the same love and sacrifice that John Paul II writes about, tempered by the insistence that marriage must be fully mutual as well as fully giving.<sup>13</sup>

Still, lay theologians also point out that intimate marital union of any sort is difficult to attain. Deepening communion is hard work and, in the rush of contemporary family life, easy to avoid. Many couples today, even those who rarely travel or work late,

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<sup>10</sup> *Familiaris Consortio* #22-25.

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1995) #10.

<sup>12</sup> This pattern can be seen in Cardinal Ratzinger's, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration between Men and Women in the Church and in the World," (available at [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040731\\_collaboration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html)), which emphasizes complementarity and responses to it by lay women, which focus on mutuality. See, Sidney Callahan, "Ratzinger, Feminist?: Not Quite," *Commonweal* 10 September 2004: 9-10 and Susan Ross, "Can God Be a Bride?: Some Problems with an Ancient Metaphor," *America* 1 November 2004: 12-14.

<sup>13</sup> Including justice as a fundamental component of sacramental marriage need not undercut love. As philosopher Pauline Kleingold points out, "if both spouses care about achieving a just marriage, claims of justice can even be *welcomed* ('I'm glad you mentioned it') instead of having to be interpreted as the opening of hostilities and the end of affection." See, "Just Love? Marriage and the Question of Justice," in *Mutuality Matters: Family, Faith, and Just Love*, 34. Some sociological studies have found that mutuality between spouses and shared parenting are beneficial to both spouses and children. See, Diane Ehrensaft, *Parenting Together: Men and Women Sharing the Care of Their Children* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990) and Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (New York: Avon, 1989).



know that sometimes in the rush of jobs, activities, dinner, and housework, in the dance of dividing and conquering, they can fall into bed exhausted from their efforts without having had a meaningful conversation, let alone having spent the day together. There is a revealing scene in the movie “The Story of Us,” about a couple whose marriage is failing. The wife says that they can go days without really seeing each other, and the director shows a rapid fire succession of scenes in which both spouses are attending to the needs of house, children, and dog without ever glancing into each other’s eyes.

There is so much to occupy a family’s days, intimacy is often not sought out or protected. It is far easier to walk through the crazy part of life filled with young children career building and fail to look into each other’s eyes. It may be harder still when growing children seek independence and aging parents require care. However, as Florence Bourg writes, a vision of marriage as a sacramental covenant can help married couples see each other in a new light, not apart from, but in the midst of, the craziness of modern family life. According to Bourg, “[a] family where Christian sacramental vision is operative may experience the same ‘falling short of ideals’ as any other family. But they dare to believe, if nothing else, that God remains with them.”<sup>14</sup> Despite very real difficulties, this vision of a grace found in loving, mutual union endures in many families, and allows them to live their marriage vows more fully.

***Sacramental love is not insular but outward reaching***

The Catholic tradition and American culture speak in some harmony about the goodness of marital love. If the culture speaks frequently of love’s beginning and only rarely of its life and depth, the contemporary tradition tries to remedy this by speaking of



the life of married couples. The tradition parts company with the culture even more significantly, in its insistence that a couple's relationship is fundamentally open—to children, extended family, neighborhood, community, nation, and world. More than thirty years ago, Karl Rahner wrote, "Marriage is not the act in which two individuals come together to form a 'we,' a relationship in which they set themselves apart from the 'all' and close themselves against this. Rather it is the act in which a 'we' is constituted which opens itself lovingly precisely to the ALL."<sup>15</sup>

More recently, John Paul II, who gave serious attention to relationships between spouses, also spoke movingly of the open nature of the family. The spousal communion of which he speaks is total, but not at all insular. Children are the first and most tangible sign of the self-giving of couple--"a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother."<sup>16</sup> The Pope's celebration of children as a sign of spousal giving is echoed by the early church father, St. John Chrysostom, who writes that with their children, husband and wife constitute a three-in-one flesh unity,<sup>17</sup> He compares this bodily union to the union of Christ and the church.<sup>18</sup> In both instances, together they are one family. This image of husbands and wives poured out in children stands in contrast to the cultural focus on the couple. It is not that the marital relationship is downplayed in Catholic teaching. Rather, in a sacramental understanding of the marriage, the claim is that marriage points beyond itself, or better, includes more than itself within itself.

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<sup>14</sup> Florence Caffrey Bourg, Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Churches (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 118.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Rahner, S.J., Theological Investigations, vol. 10 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), 207.

<sup>16</sup> John Paul II, #14.

<sup>17</sup> John Chrysostom, "Homily on Ephesians," in Marriage in the Early Church, ed. and trans. David G. Hunter (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 83.



Just as in the Sunday Eucharist, after receiving communion the people must be sent forth to serve, the communion of married love is not complete unless it inspires, in the Pope's language, service of life. John Paul II charges couples with a mission to accept new life as a gift, educate children in Christian values, live simply, and welcome those who need their love. The family's commitment to be a "fundamental school of social living,"<sup>19</sup> flows out of their love for each other. All of this constitutes service of life. It is all also part of the sacramental nature of marriage: God's grace is present through a woman and man's love for each other and in their love for children, and in their efforts to make their home a place where people strive to become better, not just better off.<sup>20</sup>

Although these high expectations for the family will not be easily assimilated, often, poor families provide models to which others can look for guidance. Americans who spend time in poor countries are almost always struck by the ways in which families who have so little manifest this service of life. First World families have much to learn from these experiences. When members of poor families give up their beds to accommodate guests, take less food so that guests will have their fill, or invite guests into the warmth of their families without holding anything back, they are serving life in a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, #37.

<sup>20</sup> This vision of the family as a community that can transform society is central to American Catholic thinking on family and society. For instance, in the 1930s the U.S. Bishops used their Family Life Bureau to direct social change, because they believed that family was the key to Catholic Action in the world, in the 1940s and '50s, the Integrity movement promoted family personalism, because they believed that "family renewal lay at the heart of social reconstruction" (Jeffrey Burns, American Catholics and the Family Crisis, 1930-1962 (New York: Garland, 1988), 133, 170.



particularly familial, sacramental way. If American Catholics are unable to imagine how the Pope's vision can be actualized, attentiveness to families like these may help.

In addition to forming a communion of love, welcoming children, and serving life in other ways, John Paul II calls families to work to transform the world around them. This means committing to the work of charity and justice. For him, "far from being closed in on itself, the family is by nature and vocation open to other families and to society," thus "it cannot stop short at procreation and education."<sup>21</sup> Anticipating the criticism that such work is not what marriage is about, John Paul II insists that "[b]y taking up the human reality of the love between husband and wife in all its implications, the sacrament gives to Christian couples and parents a power and a commitment to live their vocation as lay people and therefore to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God."<sup>22</sup> The sacramental nature of their relationship gives couples the strength to be open to the needs of others and to participate in their own way in the transformation of the world; indeed, it obliges them to be and do so. Their marital covenant is not simply about fidelity to each other; it is also about keeping faith with the needy in their midst.

This seems like a great deal to ask of contemporary families who are already busy and stretched. Yet, those families who do engage in service or advocate for justice often find their contact with the poor to be life-giving. Through their service, they are brought together and pushed them to think beyond ourselves. They often affirm that they receive

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., #42, 44.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., #47.



more from those they serve than they give. As David McCarthy writes, “In doing for the poor, we must receive the poor as grace. In receiving them, we will be changed.”<sup>23</sup>

The genius of Catholic teaching on the family is its refusal to limit families by telling them to simply focus on themselves. Christian families, from this perspective, are to grow in self-giving love within and outside the bonds of kinship. This constitutes a distinctive way of being family in which communion and solidarity are connected. As John Paul II puts it in *Ecclesia in America*, “The awareness of communion with Christ and with our brothers and sisters . . . leads to the service of our neighbors in all their needs, material and spiritual, since the face of Christ shines forth in every human being.”<sup>24</sup> Such a way of life is not only for Catholics seeking a fuller realization of sacramental marriage. It has the power to diminish the sense of fragmentation that plagues modern families, for in this vision, familial communion calls forth connection to others.

The social dimension of the sacramental vision of marriage is something married persons are supposed to embrace and actively live out as a vocation. Families then have the potential to become a transforming social force. This call is a manifestation of the modern Catholic understanding of lay vocation in the world. Married love is discipleship, an “active choice of mutual giving and receiving.”<sup>25</sup> It is defined by what it does. As Kelly says, “Sacramental love never simply stays at home. . . . an intrinsically

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<sup>23</sup> David Matzko McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home: A Theology of the Household*, New ed. (London: SCM Press, 2004), 135.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* (Washington, D.C: United States Catholic Conference, 1999), #52.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas M. Kelly, “Sacramentality and Social Mission: A New Way to Imagine Marriage,” in Todd A. Salzman, Thomas M. Kelly, and John J. O’Keefe, eds., *Marriage*



sacramental marriage will model and extend self-gift as a way of being, both inside and outside the family.”<sup>26</sup>

In cities throughout the country, many families strive to live out this oft-neglected social aspect of Christian family thought. Some give up the comfort and isolation of the suburbs for the joys and challenges of inner city neighborhoods. Others support homeless shelters in town, by cooking meals, organizing clothes, or tutoring students. Some support local political causes by attending rallies or protests together. Others give up lucrative jobs so that they can do socially significant work and have more time for family and community. Many try to live more simply than other families who make similar amounts of money, so that they have more to give away. It is hard not to be challenged and inspired by the witness of people from whom marriage, rather than being a retreat from the world, is a vital source of communion and solidarity.

However, it is important to acknowledge that telling the stories of their lives may be overdone. Sometimes Christian theologians ask too much. How do they respond to readers who would query, “Why do you always hold up the impossible ideals, the perfect families? Can families really do all of this?” Often, the answer is that no family can do it all, but all should keep trying. This seems an inadequate response. Even as it is important to hold onto to the Christian tradition’s insistence that married love must spill over beyond the boundaries of the family, it is also crucial to acknowledge the real limitations that families live with everyday. These limitations do not disrupt the

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in the Catholic Tradition: Scripture, Tradition, and Experience New York: Crossroad, 2004), 149

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 152.



sacramental, open family model, as limits might disrupt the cultural romantic model. The beauty of the Christian tradition is that it holds grace and human finitude together.

***Sacramental love is imperfect love***

John Paul II certainly has an ideal vision of marriage. In *Familiaris Consortio*, he claims that grace is present in the two spouses, in their family, in the giving of their lives to each other, in their sacrifices and joys, in their children who reflect their love. He briefly treats those families outside of the ideal of a healthy, two-parent family in a section called “Pastoral Care of the Family in Difficult Cases,” which tries to deal firmly but compassionately with mixed marriages, cohabitation, separation, divorce, remarriage, etc.<sup>27</sup> One might argue that he says too little about the potential for these families to experience grace in the midst of imperfection. However, the pope does name many people who find themselves in circumstances that make family life exceptionally hard: migrant workers, those in the armed forces, refugees, homeless persons, single parent families, those suffering from addiction, those experiencing discrimination, the elderly, and those isolated from religious communities. While he offers strategies for how churches should try to help these families, he also says something interesting about the advantages these disadvantaged families have, “These are circumstances in which . . . it is easier to help people understand and live the lofty aspects of the spirituality of marriage and the family, aspects which take their inspiration from the value of Christ’s cross and resurrection, the source of sanctification and profound happiness in daily life, in the light of the great eschatological realities of eternal life.”<sup>28</sup> There may be more openness to experiencing grace in families in which scarcity or loss make faith and

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<sup>27</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, #77-85.



interdependence necessary.<sup>29</sup> Even in the depths of human weakness and in the face of imperfect attempts to love, God remains present and active.<sup>30</sup>

This is true not just for families that are structurally broken, or facing serious problems, but for those that are broken in more ordinary ways, that is, for all families. Often, it is *in* a family's imperfection that grace is revealed. In their brokenness, their need for God and each other is made clear. Lay theologians writing on marriage have brought this reality forward.

For instance, Joanne Heaney-Hunter writes that families are called to become Christ for one another. Like Eucharist, she says, they are blessed and broken. She emphasizes the dying and rising that takes places at so many stages of marriage: when young adults enter marriage and must give up some of their freedom, when parents suffer as children continually seek independence and experience the pain of growing up, when parents welcome back children who have made serious mistakes, when spouses care for their own frail elderly parents.<sup>31</sup> Families become known to each other in breaking of bread over a lifetime. As they are broken through suffering, they open themselves to

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., #77.

<sup>29</sup> The U.S. Bishops make a similar point about families that have experienced divorce. They call all families holy, for, "wherever a family exists and love still moves through its members, grace is present. Nothing—not even divorce or death—can place limits upon God's gracious love." It is possible that divorce, provides additional opportunities to become open to the loving compassion of another. See Follow the Way of Love (Washington, D. C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1994), 11.

<sup>30</sup> Florence Caffrey Bourg points out that in contemporary Catholic theology, this traditional concept might be more precisely expressed, "God works in us with us," leaving room for human agency, however imperfect. See, "God Working in Us Without Us? A Fresh Look at Formation of Virtue," (New Orleans, Yamauchi Lecture Series, 2004), 12.

<sup>31</sup> Joanne Heaney Hunter, "Toward a Eucharistic Spirituality of Family: Lives Blessed, Broken, and Shared," in Marriage in the Catholic Tradition, 128-30.



greater familial communion. Thus, “God builds on the imperfection present in every family life, and makes it holy.”<sup>32</sup>

Richard Gaillardetz puts less emphasis on the actions of married men and women and reminds readers that, “their communion with each other is, at the same time, communion with God . . . the ground and source of our existence who sustains us and abides in us.”<sup>33</sup> Gaillardetz does not revert to an earlier view of marriage that fails to recognize the value of and need for the work of love, but he does recognize that husbands and wives do not make grace present on their own, and he knows that God is not only present when they love each other well. Rather, “God is [also] found in the ‘between’ of the relationship of husband and wife,” in the solitude and pain, the waiting through the wintry seasons of a marriage, the “sense of absence, longing, and the embrace of the limits of the relationship.”<sup>34</sup> Christians who have passed through these seasons know that God is present, even when they fail to live up to the potential of their marriage vows.

The key point here is not that the efforts of human beings make grace present, but in their “faithful endurance . . . they will discover their marriage as grace.”<sup>35</sup> This is hard to recognize because modern Americans think they have to do everything on their own, but in the best of contemporary Catholic theology, there is an insistence that, despite our flawed efforts, God remains steadfast, pouring out love. As David McCarthy puts it, “If marriage in the church is a grace, then marriage and family life will be sustained despite

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 132. On this theme, see also, Florence Caffrey Bourg, When Two or Three Are Gathered, 133.

<sup>33</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 43.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 44, 69.

<sup>35</sup> McCarthy, 204.



our ambiguous choices and our lack of interpersonal expertise.”<sup>36</sup> During the down times of marriage, spouses sometimes make a conscious choice to rely on the covenant they have made. If divorce is not an option, they know they are not going anywhere. However, working on the problems is not always possible. So they keep going, trusting that the marriage will pull them through, and very often, it does. According to McCarthy, marriage is “structured to accommodate dysfunction.”<sup>37</sup> It allows for grace and redemption, despite sin and suffering.

The sacramental view of marriage does not assume perfect love; the covenant vision does not assume unfailing fidelity to every aspect of the marriage vow. Rather, Catholics see God working in and through limited, faithful human efforts.

### **Conclusion: Telling a Better Story**

Marriage understood as sacrament and covenant is a challenge worth pursuing. While less immediately attractive than cultural portrayals of romantic beginnings, its narratives of lifelong union are ultimately richer and more satisfying. Men and women, this theology suggests, can find sacrament in the self-giving love of marriage, and in reaching out to others in need, but also in the messiness, failures, infidelities of their own lives. In family life, grace is present in steadfast love, but also in the ordinary, in imperfection, and pain. It is in families that human beings come to know most assuredly that they are not God. It is not just through human efforts to love, but through God and through others that families are sacramental. Because each person is insufficient in

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 274.



herself, there is a need to reach out--to a spouse, to children, to neighbors, and to the poor--and to trust that God will work through us, despite us, in the strangest of ways.

Perhaps Flannery O'Connor's famous story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," is an appropriate "family values" story with which to end this reflection. One might say that here O'Connor portrays grace as found in a southern family on a day trip to the country. When the car breaks down, a family meets up with some murderers, who proceed to take each of them into the woods to kill them. The grandmother is the last to die. Up until this point in the story, she is presented as petty, concerned with manners and status at the expense of substance. She continually seeks to separate good people from the rest. But before the murders kill the grandmother, she talks to the leader, who is called the Misfit, and somehow, despite her pettiness, she sees that he is a human being, linked to her and everyone else, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children! She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. He sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times in the chest."<sup>38</sup> Just before her death, grace breaks in. For Flannery O'Connor, that is a happy ending, because she saw the world as so mired in sin, she did not dare hope for more than this. She painted for her readers the most extreme situations so that they would understand the depth of human limitation, and the power God has to reach them anyhow.

Catholic theology has much to offer a world in which people respond to fragmentation by seeking a soul mate to complete them, saving them from the messiness of the world. The romantic story told so often in our culture is terribly limited. There is some truth in it--the best couples do find peace resting in each other's embrace. But



marriage is not simply *between* a man and a woman, it is also around and beyond them. In their ordinary daily lives, their brokenness, and their efforts to reach beyond themselves, they witness to the human quest to love God, and God's willingness to love us. Our brokenness is an indication of our need for God and others. Catholic tradition wisely calls us to see and embrace this reality of marriage, to reach out to God, to those we love, and to others in need, finding an answer to fragmentation (both personal and social) not in a solitary, perfect union of two but in a lifelong belonging, in the kind of marriage made for all who Flannery O'Connor so rightly called "rough beasts slouching toward Bethlehem."

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<sup>38</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," in The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 132.