

Marriage in God's Plan

Discovering the Power of Marital Love

ISSUE: What is the role of marriage in the plan of God?

DISCUSSION: Christ restored marriage to its original integrity and elevated it to the dignity of a sacrament. Marriage reflects the communion of love that the Godhead shares in Himself and is a means through which God restores man to the communion for which he was created.

In order to grasp the full meaning and power of marriage, we must understand why man was created. Reading the first paragraph of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we learn: "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in Himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life." In his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II further explains:

God created man in His own image and likeness: calling him to existence *through love*, He called him at the same time *for love*. God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being (no. 11, original emphasis, footnotes omitted).

God Created Man for Love

Man's deepest meaning as "person" is to love God. This also entails loving one's neighbor, who is created in the image and likeness of God. Christ called loving God and neighbor the greatest of all the commandments (cf. Mk. 12:29-31), and Saint Paul taught that the fulfilling of the law is to love (cf. Rom. 13:8-10).

God Himself "lives a mystery of personal loving communion." God made man in His image and likeness to share in that loving communion, not out of His own need, but purely as an act of goodness. Marital love is a striking image of the kind of love that God lives in Himself and that which we were created to share with Him. This was so from the beginning.

The concept of marriage is central to all of Scripture. It begins with the creation of man (Gen. 1-3) and ends with a vision of the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev. 21-22; cf. Catechism, no. 1602). God's covenant with His people Israel is revealed in marital imagery. We find this throughout the Old Testament, particularly in the books of the Prophets, the Song of Solomon, and the story of Ruth and Boaz.

In the New Testament, marriage expresses the intimate relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:22; Rev. 21:2, 9). In His parables, Jesus often employs the image of marriage (e.g., Mt. 22:1-14; 25:1-13). Further, Holy Mother Church has always attached great significance to the fact that Jesus' first miracle was at the wedding in Cana.

Because it expresses the love of God for His people, marriage serves God's ultimate purpose and plan for humanity. It served that purpose prior to the severing of that unity by sin. As a sacrament, in Christ, it serves to restore that unity.

At the Service of Communion

The Catechism describes marriage as a sacrament at the service of communion (nos. 1534-35). This means that it is directed toward the salvation of others. Other sacraments contribute in various ways to the salvation of the recipient. Those at the service of communion, when one receives them, are given to contribute to the salvation of another.

Sacramental marriage consecrates spouses to a special dignity. They are called to fulfill certain duties (*ibid.*, no. 1535). What are these duties? How is it that marriage actually ministers God's grace to individuals on their path to eternal life? The meaning of marriage from the beginning was one of love and communion, reflecting the very image of God. For this reason, after the scourge of sin, Christ restored marriage to the dignity of a sacrament to aid in the restoration of that communion of love for which man was first created (cf. Catechism, no. 1615). Therefore, the single most important duty or task of married love is to be at the service of communion. This clearly means that spouses bear a certain responsibility for each other's salvation, and together for that of their children. From this fundamental obligation all other duties and responsibilities of marriage flow.

To understand how to restore communion with God, we must first understand communion itself. There are several aspects to consider.

Communion: The Personal Touch

Communion is possible only between persons. A person is not a mere instance of a species, let alone an interchangeable commodity. Rather, each person is unique and unrepeatable; he is himself and not another. A person is never merely a part of a larger whole, but an individual "I."¹ Love is the only adequate response to persons. This is what Pope John Paul II calls the "personalistic norm."² A person can never be used as a means to an end, but must be viewed as an end in himself. In marriage, a spouse is loved for his or her own sake. Marital love, then, is a value-response³ to the intrinsic beauty and worth of the beloved. Love becomes the cause of a radically new and different kind of communion.

Communion: Sexuality

One should not mistakenly think that the only difference between spousal love and other relationships is sex. The difference is that the nature of marriage requires total self-donation and self-giving of one person to another that is completely indissoluble. Sexual union is intrinsically a part of this and, for this reason, is proper only to marriage.

Sexuality, then, is much more than a biological function or a mere urge or physical instinct within marital love. Spousal love is between persons and human persons have bodies. Sexual union is not reducible to the satisfaction of a bodily instinct, but is innate to the mutual self-giving of the spouses. In sexual union, spouses are not merely giving their bodies to each other as if the self could be momentarily suspended, but they are giving their very selves to one another with their bodies. This is why, outside of the indissoluble covenant of marriage, sex is always a lie and is always the use of another person for self-satisfaction. In such acts, the couple does not act like persons in the image and likeness of God, but like mere animals.

Communion: Procreation

The call to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28) is part of spousal love. The procreation and education of children is the primary end of marriage, and it cannot be understood as such outside the context of the meaning of marriage, which is love. Did God command procreation merely to populate the earth, using man and woman as a means to that end? No. To be fruitful and multiply follows the unique union of man and woman in the image of God in love.

The true beauty of procreation lies in the fact that it flows from marital love. If one views procreation without this knowledge, he is in danger of missing the deeply personalistic dimension of procreating. As sexual union is much more than a mere biological function, so is procreation. It is so intensely beautiful and powerful that from this loving act a new, unique person comes into being with all the characteristics of a person mentioned above. The spouses are then called to train their children in the school of love, so that each may discover his or her vocation as a child of God. Here we can clearly see marriage as a sacrament at the service of communion, as spouses fulfill their mission to raise godly children and truly function as a "domestic Church" (cf. Catechism, nos. 1656, 2221-26).

It is sad when a person ignores the value of the other and uses the other for sexual satisfaction alone—even within marriage. When this happens, the value of the child is not reduced, because such value is intrinsic to the child.⁴ However, the spouses deprive one another of the full power of their sexual union and may not appreciate the child's incalculable worth. The connection between sex and procreation is far more profound than the mere biology of human reproduction.

This is why every contraceptive act is an offense against spousal love. Contraception not only frustrates procreation, but it strikes at the very heart of procreation, which is spousal love. It is irredeemably depersonalizing. Natural Family Planning, in contrast, when used as intended by the Church, fosters respect for the person in marriage. On the one hand, we are not to frustrate the possibility of conception in the marital act. On the other hand, our bodies are not mere machines to produce offspring indiscriminately. If this were so, the sexual union of a couple who could not conceive would possess less value than those who procreate. This is absurd. The value lies in the love and communion of spouses, while children are the “supreme gift” that God in His loving providence may bestow on this union (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 50).

The Sanctifying Power of Marital Love

Through their mutual, self-giving love, spouses actually participate in each other’s sanctification. They become a channel through which Christ confers grace to live the Christian life. Saint Paul writes, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (Eph. 5:25-26). This speaks of total self-giving, as Christ gave Himself for us. The submission of wives to husbands in the same passage is not an issue of equality or a designation of value, but a response to that love.⁵ As the Bride of Christ, the Church—and thus all her members—are called to love Christ without holding anything back.

The sanctifying power of marital love is so great that the Apostle Paul says even an unbelieving spouse is sanctified by the believing one, and thus the children are also holy (1 Cor. 7:14). When couples do not love each other in total self-donation, they fail to fulfill completely the high calling of marriage. Sin is the cause of the struggle, yet we must strive to love as Jesus loves. We must take advantage of every means possible to grow in holiness and perfect ourselves, especially through the sacraments.

Marriage and family in God’s plan is a “civilization of love.” It is first in the Christian family that new persons are introduced into the world. Through this family, the “first herald” of the Gospel (*Lumen Gentium* 11), children are introduced into God’s wider family, the Church. The family, then, is the school of social life and a deeper humanity. To understand these points, every Christian should read *Familiaris Consortio* as well as the rich teaching on marriage in the Catechism.

Total Gift of Self

Man’s communion with God is the reason for which he was created. The Sacrament of Matrimony serves this purpose in its own unique way with the other sacraments of the Church. It must be kept in mind that Christ restored marriage to its original integrity and elevated it to the dignity of a sacrament (cf. Mt. 19:3-9; Catechism, nos. 1614-17, 1660). If we are to grasp the full impact of marriage as a sacrament, it must first be understood what it is in itself—a deep and intimate communion of persons.

Like each of the seven sacraments, so also marriage is a real symbol of the event of salvation, but in its own way. “The spouses participate in it as spouses, together, as a couple, so that the first and immediate effect of marriage (*res et sacramentum*) is not supernatural grace itself, but the Christian conjugal bond, a typically Christian communion of two persons because it represents the mystery of Christ’s incarnation and the mystery of His covenant. The content of participation in Christ’s life is also specific: Conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter—appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, the unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands indissolubility and faithfulness in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to fertility (cf. *Humanae Vitae* 9). In a word it is a question of the normal characteristics of all natural conjugal love, but with a new significance which not only purifies and strengthens them, but raises them to the extent of making them the expression of specifically Christian values” (*Familiaris Consortio* 13).⁶

¹ For a fuller explanation and development of these ideas, see John F. Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1996); Karol Wojtyla, "The Subjectivity and Irreducible in Man," *Person and Community: Selected Essays* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), trans. by Theresa Sandok.

² Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 40-44.

³ Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Ethics* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972), ch. 17.

⁴ The value of a child is not measured by the degree of love in the sexual act. But since a human person of inestimable worth is created by this act, the beauty and sacredness of the act must be respected.

⁵ In Ephesians 5:21, Saint Paul makes clear that there is a mutual submission between the spouses. Verse 22 explains how each must submit to the other. This is clearly explained by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter On the Dignity and Vocation of Women *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), especially no. 29.

⁶ This text quotes from Pope John Paul II's "Address to the Delegates of the Centre de Liaison des Équipes de Recherche" (November 3, 1979).

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. Marriage is a Christian vocation. What does this mean to me? What is the mission of Christian spouses?
2. (For married persons) Do I give totally of myself to my spouse? Do I understand sexual intercourse as a total gift of myself, and not merely as a biological act? Am I open to the gift of children and the mission of parenthood? How do I draw upon the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage?
3. What couples have best modeled for me the ideal of Christian marriage? What is it about these marriages that most impresses me?

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