

The Foundation of the Sacramentality of Marriage according to the Theology the Body

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John Paul II finds the basis of the sacramental nature of marriage in the fact that “from the beginning”, i.e., in the “original design” of God, the union between man and woman is created in the “image and likeness of God.” The parallelism we find in Genesis 1:27: “He created them in his own image / male and female he created them” reveals that the “union of the two” represents the visibility of the original love of God (or God who is love) in the world. This idea is summed up by John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* n. 11:

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.

The “unity of the two” in the second chapter of Genesis is expressed as a union in “one flesh.” Adam, after having reviewed the animals without finding in them a “helper” similar to him (an “appropriate help” translates John Paul II), recognizes in the body of Eve his own humanity, the image of God: “This is at last bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gn 2:23) and from this recognition union arises: “that’s why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife and they become one flesh” (Gn 2:24). The human sexual body bears “inscribed” (we may also say “carved” or “incised”) in its visibility the call to love and intimate communion. This is what John Paul II calls the “spousal meaning” of the human body.

Jesus Christ, to express his conception of marriage in his answer to the question of divorce (cf. Mt. 19 = Mc. 10) goes back to the “the beginning”: Moses permitted divorce, but “in the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8) and connects Gen 1:27 with Gn 2:24: “Have you not read that the Creator in the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said: ‘Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. Well, what God has united, let no man put asunder (Mt 19:4-6).”

St. Paul, picking up the teaching of Christ, has in mind Gn 2:23-24 when he expresses what John Paul II called the “great analogy” between the union of man and woman in “one flesh” and the union of Christ and the Church. In Chapter 5 of the Letter to the Ephesians, urging Christian husbands to love their wives, presents as a model the love between Christ and his Church: “Because no one ever hated his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it with love, as Christ does to the Church, for we are members of His Body. ‘Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery; I speak concerning Christ and the Church (Eph 5, 29-32).”

This “great analogy” runs through the whole Scripture. It comes from the prophetic tradition and connects seamlessly with the fact that “the unity of the two” in “one flesh” be “image and likeness of God” from the point of view of love and communion. And love and communion of God with regard to humanity in Scripture is called “Alliance,” first, of God

with his people, then, perfectly fulfilled in the union of Christ with his Church, the “New Covenant.”

Marriage, for St. Paul is “mystery” regarding Christ and the Church, that is, expression and participation in God’s plan of salvation, hidden from eternity and in the fullness of time revealed and realized in Christ. It is a sacrament of the New Covenant.

Let us go deeper in this line of thought starting from the expression “one flesh”: what is its significance? The expression “one flesh” in its physical sense, refers to a biological fact common to all sexual beings, that male and female organs function as a single organ to perform a function that neither can do alone: the generation of a new living being, similar to the father and mother and of the same species.

This biological fact, in the human being acquires a much greater significance, as it integrates the unity of the human person and his relationship with others and with God: “The sexual characteristics of man and the human faculty of reproduction wonderfully exceed the dispositions of lower forms of life,” teaches the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 51). It is a meaning of love, a “spousal meaning” that, at the same time, is a moral imperative, a “vocation to love” because every truly human relationship is somehow summed up in love. This “vocation to love” is fulfilled in marriage or in chastity consecrated for the kingdom of heaven. (We can also say that it is fulfilled by the person who, unmarried or not consecrated, lives chastity and strives to fulfill the commandment to love God and the neighbor.)

The difference-complementarity between man and woman is the most basic being-one-for-the-other that exists at the level of human relations and makes possible the love we call sexual. In humans, sex is open to procreation as an act of love. The love of the parents flows in the love for the child who is procreated. Marriage is the only existential “place” in which the physical exercise of sexuality achieves the dignity of love, because it is integrated into the mutual gift of the whole person. John Paul II says in *Familiaris Consortio* n. 11:

The only “place” in which this self-giving in its whole truth is made possible is marriage, the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God Himself which only in this light manifests its true meaning.

That’s because in humans, this phenomenon of the difference-complementarity between man and woman we call sexuality, covers all levels of the person: biological, psychological and spiritual. The latter understood not only as intelligence and freedom but also in its openness to God. This opening is filled with God's grace, raising man to the level of participation in the divine life itself, to the supernatural level. The first three levels are linked by human nature, which is rational, capable of knowledge and love, the nature of the human person. The supernatural level, which gives love the ultimate fullness it tends toward, is reached only by God's gift, and although directly involving in the first place the spiritual level, precisely because of the substantial unity of the human person, also reaches the other levels. It's the whole person who is joined by grace to God. Again we quote from *Familiaris Consortio*, n.11:

As an incarnate spirit, that is a soul which expresses itself in a body and a body informed by an immortal spirit, man is called to love in his unified totality. Love includes the human body, and the body is made a sharer in spiritual love.

The sacrament of marriage finds its ultimate sense and explanation precisely at the crossroads of two realities which concern the whole human person: sexuality and grace. Marriage takes on a meaning and a higher reality, supernatural, in light of the “mystery,” i.e.

the realization of the eternal plan of salvation in Jesus Christ.

As the Second Vatican Council teaches, “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.” (Gaudium et Spes, n. 22). Where does the capacity and the need for interpersonal love which is called human sexuality ultimately come from? All true union of love between human beings shares in the love of God; it’s its mirroring “in his image and likeness.” More specifically, the union of love between man and woman is the most “original” way in which God’s love for humanity is mirrored, love that finds its culmination in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, the perfect Image of the Father.

Jesus Christ in the Gospels is presented as “the Bridegroom”; he comes to bring to its fullness the Covenant between God and humanity. By the love received from God in Christ, the person regains his integrity and harmony among all levels of his being; he becomes himself the “image” of God. At the same time, he is able to truly love others as the “image” of God’s love. This love has been poured into the hearts of Christians with the Holy Spirit that has been given to them (cf. Rom 5:5). And it is not only that marriage is the image of Christ-Church communion, but also of the Father-Son Communion in the Holy Spirit. These two analogies are deduced the latter from the former: the mutual self-surrender of Christ and his Church is the image and performance in the history of salvation of the eternal mutual self-surrender of the Father and the Son. So says John Paul II, in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, n. 7:

Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other “I”. This is a prelude to the definitive self-revelation of the Triune God: a living unity in the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

(...)

God, who allows himself to be known by human beings through Christ, is the *unity of the Trinity*: unity in communion.

(...)

The fact that man “created as man and woman” is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a “unity of the two” in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life.

We can say that if the unity of man and God in Jesus Christ is affirmed and accepted, then it also affirms the unity among the various components of the human person and the unity of the human persons among themselves in relationships of true love. If one denies the incarnation of Christ, then he denies the link between humanity and divinity, and ends by denying the psychophysical unity of man and the union among human beings. The human significance of the biological, let alone the supernatural significance of the human, is no longer understood. This disintegration of meaning is, according to John Paul II, the great mistake of modern thought, as we see in the *Letter to Families*, n. 19:

The separation of spirit and body in man has led to a growing tendency to consider the human body, not in accordance with the categories of its specific likeness to God, but rather on the basis of its similarity to all the other bodies present in the world of nature, bodies which man uses as raw material in his efforts to produce goods for consumption. But everyone can immediately realize what enormous dangers lurk behind the application of such criteria to man. When the human body, considered apart from spirit and thought, comes to be used as *raw material* in the same way that the bodies of animals

are used — and this actually occurs for example in experimentation on embryos and fetuses — we will inevitably arrive at a dreadful ethical defeat.

(...)

For rationalism it is unthinkable that God should be the Redeemer, much less *that he should be “the Bridegroom,”* the primordial and unique source of the human love between spouses. Rationalism provides a radically different way of looking at creation and the meaning of human existence. But once man begins to lose sight of a God who loves him, a God who calls man through Christ to live in him and with him, and once the family no longer has the possibility of sharing in the “great mystery,” what is left except the mere *temporal dimension of life?* Earthly life becomes nothing more than the scenario of a battle for existence, of a desperate search for gain, and financial gain before all else.

The great effort of the Church in modern times is still the suturing of this tear, this fragmentation in the self-understanding of human being. The Second Vatican Council, in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*; the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Pope Paul VI; the *Catechesis on Human Love in the Divine Plan* of John Paul II, along with the monumental production of his pontificate on marriage and family, are the milestones on this road countercurrent to a civilization that, with implacable logic, plunges to the conclusions of misplaced and blindly maintained assumptions.

We can summarize the gospel of marriage, now more than ever, that the Church must proclaim:

The love between man and woman, based on their sexual difference-complementarity, which makes them be one-for-the-other and opens them to the transmission of human life, reaches its worthy fulfillment in marriage, which, in the light of God's plan of salvation, is the image and participation - in the visible and sensible world - in the one, indissoluble and fruitful love of God for humanity, which finds its fulfillment in the love between Christ and the Church, image and participation in its turn of the love between the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit, within the Trinity.