

Does History Conquer Love? The Good of the Family and the Gift of Self

Antonio López

*The Catholic University of America
Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies of Marriage and Family
620 Michigan Avenue, N.E. Washington, D.C. 20064
alopez@johnpaulii.edu*

Summary. *The aim of this article is to show how the modern liberal view of marriage as a temporary association contracted by two equal and autonomous individuals overrides and obscures an essential anthropological truth of the human person. Specifically, a reduction of marriage to the level of a purely historical good results in the obfuscation of the gift-like character of human existence and in the subordination of nuptial love to a mere “means” in service of some extrinsic, impersonal goal. Only a more robust anthropological vision, informed by categories of man’s filial and nuptial existence, is able to secure a historical order that can be a genuine “end” of indefatigable love unto itself. Only by attending to the paradoxical character of God creating man in his image as “male” and “female” does history avoid becoming an order of mere chronological or biological succession, and only thus does the rationale and gratuitousness of an indissoluble sacrament of marriage come to be seen as indispensable for preserving and promoting the dignity of historical man.¹*

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Introduction

The social sciences have long upheld the dignity and importance of the family as being the most basic unit or “original cell” of the societal life of human persons. However, in recent years, the value of this natural institution, and its role in society, have become increasingly difficult to evaluate. This is due, in large part, to the widespread acceptance of so-called “alternative” familial expressions, which have produced a vast array of new, and often divergent, social “facts” whose causes and outcomes remain largely unknown. Such disorientation not only serves to reinforce a view of marriage as an essentially arbitrary and formless historical invention (one which, in turn, can be dissolved on the basis of an equally arbitrary change of feeling on the part of individuals), but also makes any attempt to assess the experience of modern family life equally groundless. The question of this essay is thus whether history has conquered love, and whether it has it done so by so obscuring the nature of the institution of marriage and the family that it is no longer considered a valid object of rational, scientific investigation. What this essay seeks to

¹ A version of this paper was given at the international academic conference “Family and the Common Good” at Vilnius University, Lithuania on May 3, 2016.

offer, then, in service to the social sciences, is a theological reply to the contemporary crisis, one based on a consideration of the fundamental relations that constitute man in his orientation to love. Most basically, these relations are what will be described in terms of *filiality*, which is the primal relationship of man to God, or to the ground of his existence, and *nuptiality*, which is the essential orientation to the person of opposite sex. When the human person is observed in light of these two constitutive dimensions, his historical expressions of love in marriage and the family receive an integral form that is not reducible to mere history, and only then does this institution, once again, become available to the fruitful insights of sociological and theological investigation.

Does History Conquer Love?

The common good of any society is grounded on the dignity of the human person. This good, therefore, will only be realized to the extent that a society upholds the truth of human nature. While it is perhaps common in today's Western liberal societies to consider human nature and dignity primarily in terms of individual freedom, understood as the capacity for self-determination, this view of the human being as a simple individual elides the paradoxical dignity that more fully expresses who and what the human being is. Each human person is given to himself and thus exists for himself. Yet, man is only truly for himself when being for another. In other words, man is given to himself to be his own end, but since he is essentially a gift, man is himself only when simultaneously giving himself to another person. In contrast to the image of the self-sufficient individual, the paradoxical nature of the human person shines forth most fully in the family, the fruitful "communion of life and love" formed by a man and a woman (CCC 1994, §1660).²

The family as a communion of persons is not amorphous but is instead structured by the constitutive relations of filiality and nuptiality.³ It is through these most fundamental human relations that each person is constituted, that is, given to himself to be in relation to others. As

² *Gaudium et spes* states: "The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws, and 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 one. For the good of the spouses and their offspring as well as of society, the existence of the sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone. For, God Himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes. All of these have a very decisive bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of the individual members of a family, and on the dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of the family itself and of human society as a whole. . . . A man and a woman, who by their compact of conjugal love 'are no longer two, but one flesh' (Matt. 19:ff), render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions. . . . As a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union and the good of the children impose total fidelity on the spouses and argue for an unbreakable oneness between them" (Second Vatican Council 1965, §48).

³ When asking what the human being is, one must ponder the metaphysical meaning of these "constitutive relations." In doing so, it is important to avoid both the dissolution of man's *esse* in these relations and the reduction of these relations to mere accidents. Put more positively, it is a task that requires thinking of man's *esse* from the point of view of the mystery of birth and of a metaphysics of creatureliness. From the theological perspective, this task requires that one explore the analogy between these relations and the trinitarian relations of the divine persons. Lastly, one must bear in mind that, given the difference between human nature and the human self, personal identity is not reducible to these constitutive relations. The question regarding *who* a specific human being is—which is also the question of concrete personal singularity—must integrate the historical mission that constitutes the existence of a human being (López 2014a; Balthasar 1992).

such, filiality and nuptiality speak to the paradoxical nature of the human nature. In the first place, filiality regards the mystery of being begotten, which is both the historical beginning of a person and a permanent dimension of his or her being. Here, we learn that being oneself means, most fundamentally, being let be, that is, one is given to oneself to be one's own end (*telos*).⁴ Yet, as one learns within the family, the person only truly possesses the gift of himself—he can be a genuine gift—when he is for others. For this reason, being a child also means receiving the gift of oneself and reciprocating it through to one's origins—first to one's parents and ultimately to God.

In time, the filial gift of self matures into nuptiality, which is the total gift of oneself to another who is equal to oneself but sexually different. In their mutual gift, spouses are themselves in being for each other. This “being for,” which is a being in the service of the beloved, means more than just living side by side in a shared existence. As it is expressed in actions and their common life, the spouses' being for one another also witnesses to the fact that their lives together—their very existences and the marriage bond that joins them definitively—come from a love that precedes them. Nuptial love is given to the spouses from a source that transcends them, which means that the love in which they live as husband and wife is bigger than them and their efforts. This participation of spousal love in a greater love makes possible the intrinsic fruitfulness of the nuptial union. The spouses, in becoming a father and mother and receiving through their mutual self gift the further gift of a new person, learn even more deeply that their love is given and that the marriage bond is mysteriously greater than them and their being for each other.

Through filiality and nuptiality, held together by fatherhood and motherhood, the family reveals the paradoxical character of human nature.⁵ Building on this insight, a deeper consideration of the nuptial gift that establishes the family will help us better appreciate why it, as John Paul II (1994, §11) contended, “is indeed—more than any other human reality—the place where an individual can exist ‘for himself’ through the sincere gift of self.”⁶ The answer I wish to offer here is that the family is this place because the gift of self that grounds marriage, which is the gift expressed in the consent given at the wedding ceremony, is irrevocable and as such constitutes an indissoluble

⁴ The Latin term for the Greek *physis* is *natura*, which comes from *nascor* (*to be born, to be begotten*).

⁵ While the first two constitutive relations—filiality and nuptiality—remain in eternity, fatherhood and motherhood do not. This, of course, neither means that human freedom will lose its creative capacity nor entails that relations among human beings will be lost when God is “everything to every one” (1 Corinthians, 15:28). For an explanation of the role of freedom in the eschaton, see Hans Urs von Balthasar (1998, p. 402–410). As will become clear through the course of our reflection, these human relations enjoy a specific order. From the ontological point of view, filiality is asymmetrically prior to and more fundamental than nuptiality. Nuptiality is chronologically prior to childhood.

⁶ The text explains further, “This is why it remains a social institution which neither can nor should be replaced: it is the ‘sanctuary of life.’” In this passage the pope refers to *Gaudium et spes* (Second Vatican Council, 1965, §24): “Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, ‘that all may be one . . . as we are one’ (John 17:21–22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.” This citation must be read together with another from *Gaudium et spes* (1965, §22), which John Paul II cited even more frequently: “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. 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.”

bond. Only an irrevocable gift of oneself—a gift of all of oneself for all of life—welcomes and affirms the other for his or her own sake as the unique person he or she is. If the gift of self could be taken back, the person would not be affirmed as an end in himself or herself. Instead, both the other and the nuptial union would simply be means to a further end. Were this to be the case, the family, rather than guarding the dignity of the human person, would foster its opposite: the relativization of the self, that is, its elimination.

Although the spouses' gift of self may be totally offered at the moment of consent, it seems that history, finite existence in time, undermines the reality of gift that constitutes the good of the person and of the family. History confines marriage within its own limits and seems confirmed in doing so by the fact that marriage is indeed brought to an end by death (Mathew 22:30). Does this not lead us to understand "indissolubility" as meaning only that spouses bravely hold on together until death, and not that their love, by its very nature, was unbreakable because the gift was irrevocable? Furthermore, it is not uncommon that, throughout their life together, spouses face events (such as adultery, grave sickness, radical loss of interest for the other) that seem to put an end to their spousal union. If each of these events is a death of sorts, why can they not engage in a new relationship (see Schillebeeckx 2000)? In light of man's finitude and weakness, which is given ultimate and inevitable expression in death, we may wonder about the reasonableness of Christ's claim that married love *is* indissoluble. After all, Christ did not teach that spouses *should not* divorce but that they *cannot* divorce once those who belong to him in baptism, and love each other in his love, have freely and validly assented to each other and consummated their union.

Admittedly, this teaching that marriage is indissoluble without exception is hard to accept (see López 2014b). Even the apostles thought that if this were the case, it would be better not to marry (see Mathew 19:10). However, instead of rushing to offer guidelines for sympathetic action in the midst of difficult situations, it is more suitable to heed Christ's invitation to be mindful of "the beginning" so that we may see what indissolubility truly means (Mathew 19:8). Since the "beginning" is also a name for God, who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as triune love, it is more fitting to think about indissolubility in terms of the nature of love instead of seeing it as a moral challenge added to love. Indissoluble love is love that remains true to itself (Bruaire 1983, p. 144–157). It is, preeminently, divine love, the eternal gift of self of the three divine persons, whose eternal being for each other constitutes the highest degree of union, according to which they are themselves in each other. Only because God is tripersonal gift is man also gift, given to himself in order to be himself in being for others. Precisely because God created man in his image as male and female, nuptial love is a historical participation in the mystery of love that, as St. Paul says, "never ends" (1 Corinthians 13:8). On this foundation, let us now further elucidate what "indissolubility" means.

Divine and Human Love

The creation account narrated in the first four chapters of the book of Genesis portrays the dynamic of gift that is constitutive of every human nuptial love. Let us look briefly at this account in order to ponder how the human person is a gift, why man exists as male and female, and in what sense the nuptial union is fruitful. Looking at these chapters of Genesis will also help us perceive how

married love participates in God's love. With this insight, we can avoid a dualistic account of marriage that sees the relation with God as an arbitrary religious imposition on human love.

The second and oldest (Yahwist) creation account introduces us to Adam before the creation of Eve. Formed of dust, Adam was created to be with God and for God (Genesis 2:15–17). Before proclaiming, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (2:18), God had already created Adam, put him in the garden of Eden, and instructed him to till it, keep it, and eat of every tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:15–17). Adam knew God and was aware that God had given everything to him as a gift (1:28). His being for God, his "original solitude," as John Paul II (2006, §5–7) described it, is the foundational experience of every human being. This solitude, discovered through the experience of his own body as different from that of the rest of the animals, indicates that it is the relationship with God that constitutes man.⁷

If man, most fundamentally, *is* relation with God, and God is everything, then why does Adam need a helper fit for him? Why is Eve created, and why is he called to be one with her (see John Paul II 2006, §8–11; Balthasar 1990; 1992)? The first (Elohistic) account of creation (Genesis 1:26) implies an answer in stating that God wanted to create man in his image and likeness. If Eve belongs to this created image, then Adam alone would not image God as fully as possible; that is, he would not be able to experience the richness of the gift of self that constitutes love's nature.⁸ I would like to offer three reasons to see what this means.

(1) The creation of man as male and female enables the human being, an incarnate spirit, to be aware of himself not simply as an individual but also as a person; that is, not only as an anonymous member of a species but also as a singular self, endowed with his own destiny. We can better understand what a person is by retrieving the literal meaning of the Latin term, *personare*: "to sound through," or, we might say, to utter the word that one is through another. That man is a person means that he can know and love himself and others only through the relation with one who is equal to him and yet different from him. While Adam knew himself and his task in dialogue with God, he needed Eve in order to learn that love and knowledge (which only acquires its meaning in the light of love) are not simply about his divinization—his loving God and ascending to become more like him. Love is not a means to the end of "self-improvement," as it were. It is *for its own sake*; love is its own reward, and only in learning this does Adam know the real truth of becoming like God. The beloved, then, in having been made for love, is for his or her own sake made for himself and for another.

After encountering all the creatures he was given to name, it is only in Eve that Adam finds the simultaneous equality and difference proper to personal relations (Genesis 2:20–23). She, however, is not created from the dust, as Adam was. She is taken from his side by God. This is important in two respects: First, Eve is in Adam but she is not born from him, nor can he take her out by himself. Instead, God makes Adam fall into a deep slumber (2:21) as a sort of return

⁷ The mystery of our own birth, whose memory is constantly made present by our male and female bodiliness, helps us to avoid confusing "original solitude" with "loneliness." That we are let be means, as we saw, that we are given to ourselves by God and are in relation with him who makes us be.

⁸ With this, of course, I am not saying that a human being is incomplete unless he or she is married. Every man and woman is a complete human being by nature. Yet, a theological account must be given as to why the human being exists always and only as either male or female.

to the nothingness from which he came, and fashions Eve from Adam's rib (2:27). This means that Eve is of the same nature as Adam. Second, she is given to Adam by God. The fact that it is God who gives Eve to Adam (and Adam to Eve) as one equal to him means that she is a personal being who can receive Adam and respond to him. They can therefore reveal and give themselves to one another. Adam's first gesture towards Eve is, in fact, to receive her into himself as one like him and for him. Scripture does not tell us what Eve said, but we can assume that she, as a fitting helper, called Adam by his name and thus entered into a personal and fruitful relation with him (2:24). Motherhood, although it takes place only after original sin, is Eve's gratuitous, superabundant response to Adam's reception of her and to his gift of himself to her. Adam would not have known himself as a person, nor would he have been able to carry out his task of uniting creation with God, if he could not have called and been called upon by someone equal to him.

(2) That Eve was given to Adam, and he to her, helps us understand the kind of unity ("one flesh") they were given to live. If Eve had not been created, Adam would have known only one dimension of the nature of gift: giving. He would not have been like the triune God who created him, but more like a human instantiation of the Platonic Good, that is, a monadic, self-diffusive good. In order to clarify why Adam needed Eve in order to know the nature of love in all its profundity, we must look ahead in Scripture to the fullness of the revelation of God in Christ and then, with this light, return to the beginning. While the people of Israel knew that God is love, that he wants man to love him back and to be himself in a covenantal relation of dependence on Him, it is only Christ who reveals the full nature of love as gift. He reveals God to be tri-personal, that is, an eternal communion of personal, reciprocal indwelling.⁹ Living his eternal relation with the Father in history and opening this relation to man, Christ also reveals the ever-ungraspable depth of what human experience merely tastes: love is complete when it is freely reciprocated. Had Eve not been fashioned from Adam's rib and given to him by God as sexually different from yet equal to him (Genesis 2:21–23), Adam would not have known that just as giving is a good, receiving too is a good. With Eve, Adam discovers that love is full only when it can fruitfully both give and receive. Had he remained a solitary being, Adam would not have been able to know, at the level proper to the finite creature, the reception, reciprocation, and indwelling that characterizes divine love.

(3) Finally, because Eve is created, Adam can know and enjoy love's fruitfulness. One of the most remarkable characteristics of God, so Scripture tells us, is his omnipotence. He gives life: both in himself, and, by loving into being what was not before, outside of himself.¹⁰ How could man participate in God's life, how could he be in God's image, if he were not given the capacity to be fruitful, that is, to participate in God's gratuitous giving? The gift that constitutes the human

⁹ In the Old Testament, God reveals himself as love through the covenant he establishes with the people of Israel. As he is one, he desires also to be one with Israel in what the prophets describe as a spousal union ("For your Maker is your husband," Isaiah 54:5). The Old Testament thus secures both the unity and fruitfulness of nuptial love. The fittingness of the sexual difference is perceived adequately, however, only when man learns through Christ that there eternally is personal difference in God himself (Barsotti 1996).

¹⁰ God's omnipotence appears in history also as infinite fruitfulness. Jesus constantly refers to God's infinite fruitfulness to reveal the nature of God's being, which is love, and of his kingdom (see Aquinas, *De Potentia Dei*, Q. 2).

being would not be totally given if God did not bestow on the human being the capacity to give of itself. This not only entails man's capacity to act and to create, but, most importantly, to participate in the giving of another human life, of one who is other from the spouses and who is endowed with his or her own personal destiny and mission. Human fruitfulness is the letting be of another person, and it is, as such, an expression of personal communion. We can verify this by recognizing that the child is both other from the parents and, at the same time, the personal expression of their unity. God's creating man as male and female and calling them to live in unity allows them to share in the divine omnipotence that posits a new life (Genesis 1:28, 4:1).

The three reasons we have considered—awareness of personhood, unity in reciprocal giving and receiving, and fruitfulness—allow us to realize that human nuptial love, although infinitely unlike God's love, exists only in relation with God and therefore maintains a certain similarity to it. Spouses' knowing and loving each other as persons takes place only in their being known by God, who gives each one to the other and calls them to know and love each other in him. Their unity allows them to participate in the giving and receiving of love without losing their respective identities, since, as their bodily existence as male or female suggests, each one is first determined by his or her unique relation with God. Finally, their fruitfulness is a participation in God's never-ending power to give life (Genesis 4:1).

Scattering the Gift

Given the intrinsic relation between human nuptial love and God's being, it is no wonder that when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:6), their nuptial relation was fractured. Instead of abiding love and communion, what now prevails is power, that is, freedom detached from the true and the good: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (3:16).¹¹ The unwillingness to acknowledge God for what he is and to accept his plan for man causes man to believe that he is no longer capable of loving his spouse over time in a way both similar and dissimilar to God's. It is not that Adam's sin eliminates marriage or that the constitutive filial and nuptial relations no longer convey and participate in the depth of love. Rather, because of his "hardness of heart" and rejection of God, man cannot welcome the other fully, and nuptial love, in turn, tends to be torn asunder.

In our Western culture—that is, in our way of being in the world—this original fracture between God, man, and the world, and between man and woman, has acquired a radical depth. The

¹¹ Enmity between man and God also ruins fraternal relations. No longer able to see God's fatherhood, brothers, like Cain and Abel, compete for the Father's love and kill each other. Man is born to die and, out of fear that God may be a deceiver, gives death (Genesis 4:3–16). The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004, §27) explains well the fragmentation provoked by Adam's original sin: "It is in the free action of God the Creator that we find the very meaning of creation, even if it has been distorted by the experience of sin. In fact, the narrative of the first sin (cf. Gn 3:1–24) describes the permanent temptation and the disordered situation in which humanity comes to find itself after the fall of its progenitors. Disobedience to God means hiding from his loving countenance and seeking to control one's life and action in the world. Breaking the relation of communion with God causes a rupture in the internal unity of the human person, in the relations of communion between man and woman and of the harmonious relations between mankind and other creatures. It is in this original estrangement that are to be sought the deepest roots of all the evils that afflict social relations between people, of all the situations in economic and political life that attack the dignity of the person, that assail justice and solidarity."

exacerbation of this fracture renders marriage's indissolubility even more incomprehensible and divorce even more painful.¹² According to our cultural view, marriage is nothing but a temporary association brought into existence when two fundamentally equal and autonomous human wills feel the desire to live an intimate life together for the purpose of helping each other fulfill their personal lives. Judith Wallerstein (2000) suggests that this perception of love and marriage has "created a new kind of society that offers greater freedom and more opportunities for many adults." Sociologists and historians of marriage like Stephanie Coontz (2005) are aware that this perception of love as intimacy is inseparable from a culture of divorce. Such authors think that, although marriage has become a very fragile and insurmountably transient reality, we are now better off. While no one wants to go through a divorce, and no one wishes it for anyone else, the appreciation of the self as an autonomous will and of love as transient, irrational feeling is so harmonious with our current liberal democracy that, despite the fact that this conception of love contains the seeds of its own demise, very few are willing to put it into question. To do so would require that one completely reconceive the contemporary horizon of meaning and the concrete social way of life in Western liberal democracies. Still, is not the defense of the true dignity of the human being that which alone can secure the common good of society? Is not the humble and courageous proposal of what marriage is—rather than accommodations to cultural standards or human febleness—what the human person and families long to hear?

God's Faithfulness

Unless the original condition of estrangement from God in which every human being is born is healed, the claim that human love is indissoluble will continue to elicit the same reaction the apostles had when Jesus confirmed the absolute character of marriage's indissolubility: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry" (Mathew 19:10). This incredulity will remain until one sees that God's love is faithful over time, and that he does not shun the one who hates and rejects him but makes possible anew the original indissolubility intended for human nuptial love, all without bypassing human freedom. Were man not to encounter God's faithful love, he would think that indissolubility is a great and lofty "ideal" to which spouses

¹² Let us recall some of the key features of Western culture: The body is objectified and treated as a tool, separated from what is considered to be most properly human, that is, the spirit. This spirit is conceived mainly as a freedom that defines itself and relates to everything only as it chooses. Thanks also to contraception, man detaches love from conjugal intimacy (sex) and separates these two from fruitfulness. One can love without having sex, have sex without loving, and, nowadays, have children without either love or sexual intimacy. Today we are also governed by the unfounded belief that one can choose to identify his own gender apart from consideration of the body, which is therefore conceived in merely biological terms, abstracted from the person himself. We all know how much suffering this fragmentation causes. The breaking apart of the three elements that constitute nuptial love (i.e., unity of love, sexual difference, fruitfulness) is the outcome of replacing the image of God (which constitutes man's dignity) with a new image of power, according to which man fashions himself for himself. The fragmentation in turn reinforces the rejection of God—and in so doing, it reveals itself as love of death. Needless to say, if the person conceives himself today as sheer spirit or freedom, having only a secondary relation to his or her own body, then the basic human relations (sonship, fatherhood and motherhood, nuptiality, brotherhood) cannot but be secondary to the person. This "theomorphic anthropology"—that is, the self-conception of man who tries to be like God without God—reduces marriage to a ridiculous caricature: a romantic love subject to the emotions one experiences, which, as emotions, escape the spirit's power to determine itself. The one who loves, after all, is in the hands of the beloved, not in his or her own hands.

aspire but that does not pertain to the nature of marriage as such. To put this view more starkly: indissolubility would primarily concern the spouses' moral behavior over time, and not the nature of love in itself. If this were the case, societies, cultures, and religions would continue to accept divorce as an inevitable evil that nonetheless both secures peaceful coexistence and reinforces the theological anthropology undergirding modern societies.

No one doubts that married love requires the consent of the spouses and that they must live out their communion of life and love. Yet, if indissolubility were simply "moral"—the outcome of many years of willed and hard-won faithfulness—then what prevents us from concluding that love as such, and hence God, does not remain true over time and that marital faithfulness is just an exception to what is the case by nature? Why should we not accept that fidelity is merely the exception to the norm "love fails"? If, however, love is faithful, then those reasons normally thought sufficient to justify divorce lose their cogency—although they still preserve their dramatic nature and their capacity to inflict suffering.

In the Old Testament, God proved numerous times that he is faithful to his promise. Yet the Father's faithfulness was not reciprocated fully by a human being until the beloved Son of the Father became flesh and offered himself on the Cross for man's salvation. Through his obedience unto death, Christ returned—divinely *and* humanly—the Father's love in a way that enabled every human being to reciprocate this same love anew. In his unique way—unique because only Christ could do it and because he made every other human "yes" to God possible—Christ's offering of himself revealed that God's love is faithful. He thus reveals that faithfulness is the permanence of love and that love is the gift of self to the end without remainder, a gift according to which one is for, with, and in the other.

Christ's redemptive love allows man to enjoy the Father's love, to be a son in the Son. His filial love, however, is also nuptial (Ephesians 5:25–27). Christ gives all of himself for mankind, yet, at the same time, as the incarnate Son of the Father, he cannot but give himself to someone. The gift of himself is thus for the Church, mankind made new, who is represented in Mary, most holy, standing at the foot of the cross. The Church is "the Bride, the wife of the Lamb," says the book of Revelation (Revelation 21:9). Christ's union with the Church is such that the Church, born from his pierced side, can receive the love of the Father and respond to him. When St. Paul exclaims, "This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church" (Ephesians 5:32), he gives us light to see the mystery of marriage in its full depth. Man is created in the image of God as male or female because he is called to enter a communion of persons that participates in and reveals God's love and that has in Christ's union with the Church its concrete and eternally desired realization. In Christ's gift of self for the Church, therefore, spouses find more than just encouragement to live an ideal. At the liturgical exchange of vows, when they accept to welcome and give themselves to each other for all of life, baptized spouses are given to participate in a love that is unspeakably faithful over time and in which they can love each other throughout all of their lives and face both good and difficult circumstances.¹³ Indissolubility is thus made humanly

¹³ John Paul II (2006, §90.3) puts it well: "Marriage corresponds to the vocation of Christians as spouses only if that love [the reciprocal love of Christ and the Church] is mirrored and realized in it. This will become clear if we attempt to *reread the Pauline analogy in the opposite direction*, i.e., beginning with the relationship of

possible by God's grace, a grace that confirms the very nature of the gift as something that must be totally and irrevocably offered.

Faithfulness until Death

After Christ's redemption of human nuptial love, to go on thinking that certain events—some of which, like a betrayal or a grave sickness, are indeed tragic—can end marriage before the death of one of the spouses is to reduce marriage to a purely historical good.¹⁴ Before Christ's redemption, a purely historical perception of marriage was comprehensible due to man's feebleness. Nevertheless, after Christ enabled the human nuptial gift to be faithful over time by integrating it into his own gift of self, to maintain that marriage is purely historical and hence can be torn asunder is to reject the intrinsic relation of man and every nuptial union with God. It is this rejection, characteristic of our modern culture and anthropology, that reduces the bond of marriage to a merely moral entity and makes of it an ever-changing reality without a given form.¹⁵

Modern anthropology conceives man as independent of his relation with God. One manifestation of this broken relationship is Western culture's belief that there is only "pure existence without essence" (Ratzinger 1981). On this view, the human being does not think of himself according to the image of God described earlier. He gives himself a new image, according to which his essence does not have a prefigured form; it is radically undetermined. He is thus free to invent himself and to determine what he will be without having to refer to anything but his very self.¹⁶ Without an essence, all that counts is the future and thus the person's acting. Progress, development, moving forward, open paths, and transitions are the concepts that best capture today's imagination.

Christ with the Church and turning next to the relationship between husband and wife in marriage. The text uses the tone of exhortation, 'Wives, be subject to your husbands . . . as the Church is subject to Christ.' And on the other hand, 'You, husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church . . .' These expressions show that what is at issue is a moral obligation. Yet, to be able to urge such an obligation, one must admit that the very essence of marriage includes contains *a partice* of the same. Otherwise this whole analogy would hang dangling in the void. The invitation with which the author of Ephesians addresses the spouses, that they model their reciprocal relationship according to the likeness of Christ's relationship with the Church ("*as – so*"), would be deprived of a real basis, as if it had no ground beneath its feet."

¹⁴ The following discussion of nuptial union as a gift from God that, as such, bears always an intrinsic relation to him must be supplemented with a sacramental and pneumatological account of the marriage bond able to show in what sense the spouses and their nuptial love is transformed by their insertion in Christ's love for the Church. The pneumatological account of the good of indissolubility centers on the gift of the Holy Spirit as the seal of the nuptial bond. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994, §1624) teaches, "In the epiclesis of this sacrament the spouses receive the Holy Spirit as the communion of love of Christ and the Church. The Holy Spirit is the seal of their covenant, the ever available source of their love and the strength to renew their fidelity." For a cogent articulation of this issue see Marc Ouellet (2015, p. 75–89).

¹⁵ In making this claim we do not entail that every marriage so conceived relinquishes its intrinsic relation with God, or that the spouses cannot live their marriage religiously, or that modern marriages are inevitably doomed to fail. Our concern is simply to present the liberal anthropology that justifies the spread of the culture of divorce in the Western world.

¹⁶ As Joseph Ratzinger (1982, p. 96–97) elsewhere writes: "Philosophisch findet dies seinen Ausdruck in der Idee, dass es ein vorgezeichnetes Wesen des Menschen nicht gebe, so dass er frei ist (und zugleich von der Freiheit genötigt wird), sich selbst zu erfindend—zu bestimmen, was Mensch in Zukunft sein soll."

Modernity's view of the human person without God cannot but color its understanding of human love and marriage. Without God, modern man knows no infinite against which, or in dialogue with which, to conceive himself. Without some knowledge of the true Infinite, his understanding of himself and all of reality is confined to a framework of unprecedented finitude.¹⁷ It remains true, however, that the human being needs someone or something other from himself in order to fulfill himself. For this reason, modern man still seeks transcendence but within a purely finite horizon, the only transcendence he can concede to himself and to married love is one determined by the spouses' capacity and willingness to continually enact unrealized possibilities.¹⁸ When marriage is thus made a vehicle for spouses' self-transcendence, it becomes simply a "process" that cannot but be always underway—and that dies out when its members can no longer cohere. Determined only by the spouses' wills for the future, family life is no longer founded upon personal dignity and the nature of love.¹⁹

While the understanding of married love as a purely finite reality is a death wish that no account of the married bond as an ideal or moral entity can hide, one cannot forget that human nature is greater than what one can do to it and that Christ's offer of his love to man shines ever more brightly in these dark hours of Western culture. Baptized spouses who marry in the Lord participate in Christ's faithful love for the Father and for the Church. They receive at the liturgical exchange of vows the gift of indissolubility, according to which they irrevocably decide to live all of the future only together with the other person and to do so in the certainty that the original giver, God, will fulfill the promise of their call to live a communion of life and love (see Spaemann 1996, p. 235–251). Thus, given as a vocation, nuptial love is not formless; it is not, as modernity claims, an undetermined emotion that spouses feel. Instead, it has its own form given to it by God, and it is within this form that spouses can flourish. When spouses receive this gift, the future is welcomed as an opportunity to deepen their God-given love. It is neither a threat nor an open field in which to realize ever-new possibilities.

It may seem like the spouses' gift of everything at once can only trap them in a static, abstract instant, making their future together nothing but burdensome monotony since everything that could

¹⁷ While our diagnosis of modern epistemology and its undergirding ontology may make these seem anything but attractive, we cannot disregard that for Western culture the rejection of dependence—of filiality and the intrinsic relation with God—is an exhilarating experience. Modern man's love of independence celebrates the creative side of human freedom. It disregards, however, the fact that man's creative capacity is given and hence is in itself a response to the Giver. This one-sidedness comes at a cost. Human creativity becomes unable to affirm the other for what he or she is and for this reason cannot but establish a dialectic and violent relation with the other. In such a relation, one inevitably tends to make the other subservient to oneself—unless, of course, one decides to lose one's identity in the other.

¹⁸ As Ratzinger (1991, p. 16) said, "Die Moral liegt nicht im Sein, sondern in der Zukunft."

¹⁹ This perception of finitude tends to eliminate or explain away everything that opposes it: a marriage bond that is not entirely at the disposal of the spouses' wills, or one that is more than a contract under the surveillance of positive, ever-changeable laws; a gendered bodiliness that is not the product of personal choice; a permanent sexual difference that determines the very nature of marriage; a fruitfulness that is neither predictable nor malleable through artificial reproductive technologies; and any religious or civil institutions that do not share this mindset. The human body and the child, more than anything else, are reminders of the human being's natality and hence of each person's permanent dependence on God. What kind of common good can any society hope for when society's most important element, the family grounded on marriage and the dignity of the spouses, is thus conceived and lived?

has already taken place. To question the goodness of the irrevocable gift in this way, however, is to depart from the truth of gift. We have seen that the human person, as gift, is given to himself as his own end and entrusted to his own freedom, thus the spousal gift of himself by its very nature requires that he live it out and contribute freely to its fulfillment. We have also seen that Christ revealed the Father's faithful confirmation of his gift and gave himself to redeem human love, allowing man to participate in divine love anew. In contrast, the suspicion of indissolubility as a long future in which nothing new ever happens is rooted in a return to the framework of pure finitude and the corresponding truncation of the spousal gift. On this view, in which the eternal can only be seen as extrinsic to history, the spouses' life together is nothing more than a constant flow of finite moments (see Augustine, *Confessions*, §11.11.13). Even with the best of intentions, in such a situation, one could only give to the other what passes away. Newness, construed as the uninterrupted succession of new things or constant change, is but repetition.

True novelty can only come from God's faithful confirmation of the love that he has already given. Newness, in this case, is what is definitive (Revelation 21:5). The character of its being unprecedented that we experience in something new is a foretaste of the definitive and personal nature of love. Married love, in its relation to God, is always new because it lives in Christ's love as the personal encounter of two human freedoms. The spouses' exclusive, total, and irrevocable gift does not annihilate their freedom but roots them in the definitive nature of love and, for this reason, enables them to surprise each other with the ever-creative gift of themselves to each other. It also helps them to judge every difficult circumstance and temptation to break apart in the light of Christ's love. They thus learn the precious meaning of sacrifice: the denial of whatever contradicts the truth of the love they have been given to have for each other. The sacrifices that spouses will have to face throughout their lives—of forgiving betrayals, asking that a quenched love be renewed, or accompanying the other through physical difficulties—will purify the love to which they have been entrusted and which they have accepted freely (see López 2014c, p. 55–93).

The foregoing account of indissolubility as the historical participation of nuptial love in divine love may have dissipated the concern that married love is an ideal that few can reach and may have clarified how spouses can give themselves totally and exclusively throughout their lives. We must still consider, however, what the end of their life together represents for nuptial love. Undoubtedly, death—a grave word that inadequately describes the mystery of our passing and the grief it causes to those who have to let us go—confirms that married love is circumscribed by history. Yet, it does not make the gift of self a vain illusion. On the contrary, it enables the gift to be complete. Since they are finite, human beings know a finite totality, that is, one that has both a beginning and an end. Consequently, man's gift must be circumscribed by both of these in order to give himself totally. Negatively stated, if human life as we know it lacked a historical end, spouses could not give all of themselves to each other and promise faithfulness. Married love would be, once again, just a creation of the spouses' wills and would remain at their disposal. Positively stated, death is one of the reasons that man can offer all of his life at the liturgical moment of consent. Paradoxically, it is precisely because man's spiritual existence is limited that he can take all of it up in freedom and offer it for another. In giving himself away fully, he transcends history, and only in this gift does he own himself truly in gratitude.

The mystery of death is more than a chronological or biological ending point. After all, it is not only our bodies that pass away; it is *we* who die. Given that death is exclusively personal, it cannot be seen as the dialectic counterpart of life. It must instead be seen in light of the more primordial mystery of human existence: birth, the mystery of natality that represents the beginning of a person. The real miracle is man's coming to be from nothing. After Adam and Eve, every birth, as the existence of the soul witnesses, is a synergic, theandric act: it involves both God and man. If this gratuitous letting be of the human person illuminates the reality of death, then death becomes the reminder that life is a gift. Though man is not consulted in the matter of his coming to be, death, seen from the point of view of the gift of life, is a form of accepting that gift by giving it back in full. To die is to allow oneself to be taken.

It goes without saying that the experience of death is not always that of a free gift of oneself. We all know that death was not meant to be and that, as Revelation teaches, it was Adam's sin that deprived man of the possibility that death could be an expression of love. Death as something "unnatural" is thus tied in its origins to the rejection of God, and for this reason it will be experienced differently by spouses who understand and live their nuptial gift of self differently. For spouses who consider their gift of self to be simply something that they do, death as the apparent end of action cannot but be seen as an insufferable contradiction. Instead, those who let the mystery of birth inform their nuptial union and in this way consent to receive everything anew from another can become aware in time that death is part of the gift of self that is required of them. If natality is the primordial mystery, then death cannot silence the hope of a final confirmation of the gift.

Christ's death on the cross, unlike all other human deaths, was an act of redeeming, nuptial love to which he freely consented. This means that his letting himself be put to death was a gift of himself to the Father for mankind's salvation. By freely placing himself in the hands of Satan, he transformed the nothingness of death that burdened every human being into a complete gift of self. Undergoing death as an expression of love, he, so to say, robbed death of its power. Living men are still bound to die, but within Christ's love, they are no longer fated to undergo death. They can, in Christ, let the mystery of their birth engender a new deed, letting themselves be taken by God, the giver of all good gifts.

This final gift of self, so the Church believes, is gathered and confirmed in the eschaton for those who do not finally oppose Christ's mercy. Eternal life with God, in which men and women will no longer be given in marriage, is the ever-new nuptial gift of self. This gift regards first of all the gift of the triune God in himself, and then his gift of himself to man, to which man responds with the gift of all of himself. This reciprocal gift, as the images adopted by the book of Revelation portray it, is a marriage, a wedding feast. It also generates a new life together of men with each other in the communion of saints. In being totally for the triune God, they will be for each other without experiencing any distrust or betrayal. In the communion of saints, the love that spouses shared will not be lost; it will be transfigured and purified of all lies. It is true that since God will be all-in-all, the exclusivity and natural fecundity proper to marriage will neither take place nor be necessary. Yet, this does not entail that the spouses' earthly life together was simply meaningless. On the contrary, we could venture to say that their being for each other in this life

will be taken up in eternal life by their definitive and total being for God and for the communion of saints. We can see here in its final form the sense in which married love shares in divine love. It is a historical instantiation of the overabundant gift of self, proper to God and the communion of saints—a historical participation in God’s ineffable and eventful life. Marriage is thus a foretaste, and hence a preparation and education, for the final eschatological truth of life and love: the gift of self that is ever given, reciprocated, and confirmed. Marriage’s indissolubility, in a certain sense, echoes this final gift of self. By virtue of indissolubility’s intrinsic tie to eternal life, it can secure the true good of man’s gift of being: being for oneself in being for another. This controversial good of marriage is thus indispensable for the preservation and promotion of the dignity of the human person without which no common good of society can be built.

Conclusion

A primary takeaway of this consideration is that marriage and human relationships possess an integrity and dignity that lie prior to their being secured historically in some extrinsic body or convention. Indeed, whether it be the capacity of the human will, the authority of some societal power, or the seemingly absolute horizon of death, none of these are capable of circumscribing the value of the human person and the call to married love. Theological and sociological reflections on marriage and the family require to be grounded on an adequate anthropology in order for their elucidations to bear fruit. Careful observation of marriage and family life suggests marriage and the family have a natural, inviolable integrity as a result of their being expressions of a primal human existence. Such responsibility is not an arbitrary or pre-rational imposition, imposed from without, nor is it simply some sentimental, moral exhortation. It is rather the very basis of a genuine freedom, which cannot but involve living in accordance with what actually *is*. One urgent challenge facing modern society is that a historicist view of marriage, which deprives the institution of any natural integrity and its proper transcendence, invariably leaves individuals vulnerable to the manipulation of extra-natural bodies of power, such as governments or economies. Such entities, precisely because they operate out of a pursuit for their own interests and not (necessarily) from any deference to a preceding order of truth or goodness, cannot help but subject orders of human love and personhood to undue burdens and suffering. The excessive weight of unjust obligations is the primary symptom of a culture that has dispensed with the question of nature, and is a leading reason why so many marriages today end in separation. Thus, as we have tried to show here, it is critical that the dignity of the human person be secured on the basis of certain crucial questions; namely, why is the human being male and female; why does nuptial union require sexual differentiation and how does this fruitful union preserve personal distinctiveness? Why, also, must the bond of marriage therefore be indissoluble, and how does the mystery of death inform our understanding of the nature of this bond? For sociology, theology, or any other human endeavor, to respond positively and constructively to this modern crisis, one must first uphold and acknowledge the integrity of the institution that is our object of study.

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