

Christian Marriage

The New Challenge

David M. Thomas, Ph.D.



A Michael Glazier Book

LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

A Michael Glazier Book published by Liturgical Press

The Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Catholic edition, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Cover design by Ann Blattner.

© 2007 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, P.O. Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thomas, David Michael, 1938—

Christian marriage : the new challenge / David M. Thomas. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

“A Michael Glazier book.”

ISBN-13: 978-0-8146-5224-4

ISBN-10: 0-8146-5224-7

1. Marriage—Religious aspects—Catholic Church. 2. Catholic Church—Doctrines. I. Title.

BX2250.T4555 2007

234¹.165—dc22

2006019919



Contents

Introduction v

Chapter One

Why did God create marriage? 1

Chapter Two

Why is love so important? 17

Chapter Three

Can sex be holy? 34

Chapter Four

Why does marriage need rituals? 48

Chapter Five

What makes marriage last? 64

Chapter Six

How do children fit into marriage? 79

Chapter Seven

What's spiritual about marriage? 97

Chapter Eight

What makes marriage a sacrament? 113

Suggested Readings 127

Index 128



Introduction

Powerful winds of cultural change now blow with great force over the hallowed institutions of church and society. One of the places feeling the full force of these winds is marriage. They also fan a large cluster of issues that influence married life. Receiving the most public attention lately is whether government and religious bodies will sanction same-sex unions as marital. Some countries have given full rights and privileges to both heterosexual and same-sex unions. Marriage obviously has its benefits, both personal and legal. In the United States there is a movement to establish a constitutional amendment declaring marriage to be only between a woman and a man. The debate shows no signs of lessening.

Those looking for a resolution of this issue will not find it here. While I have deep respect for those on both sides of this issue, I chose to deal only with the terrain I know best, marriage between a man and a woman. My intent is to support traditional marriage with the best arguments and reflections I can. That's where I will focus my attention and energy. Besides I'm not the arguing type. I leave that to others who seem to enjoy controversy. From the start of this book, I focus on the challenges and rewards of heterosexual marriage. A positive side of the marriage debate is that it invites us to rethink basic questions. That's always a good move.

Other issues stirring the waters around marriage come from personal choices influenced by social and economic forces. Statistics indicate that fewer people of marital age are deciding to marry. One of the most interesting examples of this is the large number of elderly couples living together, but remaining unmarried "on the books." They fill retirement communities from southern Florida to the far west. If they married, they

might lose needed financial benefits. Looking at the younger set, it is now a social norm for most that couples cohabit before entering married life in the eyes of family, friends, and state. Some will never marry although they will live together, beget children, and share most everything with each other, except marriage.

Quite a few years ago I was teaching a college course on Christian marriage and conducted an informal survey on the students' living arrangements. I was surprised to learn how many were at that time living together as preparation for eventual marriage. Wanting to know more, I asked them why. Most responded by telling me that they didn't want to make the same mistake as their parents. They saw their own actions as a better preparation for entering a lifelong union. The research seems to suggest that it's not that simple. Those who cohabit before marriage experience slightly higher divorce rates than those who do not. Like all the issues touching marriage, complexity reigns.

With all these new living arrangements, I wonder about the personal, social, and moral implications of these relationships. The world now offers us not only a hundred varieties of ice cream, but also almost as many lifestyles. Abundant arguments pro and con flow on all sides of these social situations. Eventually the debate includes a discussion of the very essence of marriage. Who would have even imagined a few years ago that marriage would become such a debated, even controversial, topic?

A little over twenty years ago I wrote a book called *Christian Marriage: A Journey Together*. At that time I was married and a young father. Now I'm a young grandfather and still married. Now I must write with an awareness of the changed world of the twenty-first century firmly in mind. Like everything human, marriage bears the imprint of the time in which it exists. The marriage of my wife and me and the marriages of those of our children are always evolving. And that's not a negative. They are alive, and a basic sign of life is change and adaptation to new circumstances. The river of life continues to flow.

For starters, marriage has moved from being a simple journey together (part of my original book title) to being an ever new, quite decisive challenge. As I write this updated account of Christian marriage, I must certainly be attentive to those many issues swirling around marriage. But I also want to pay careful attention to the personal lives of the married. I want my theological reflection on marriage to be grounded in real experience. The true experts in the spiritual and theological meaning of marriage are those who are married.

In Stephanie Coontz's recent book, *Marriage, A History*, she tells us that from the standpoint of society and from what's happening between married couples these days, there is nothing in the past that can equate with what's happening today. Nothing! She notes that more has changed in the last thirty years than in the previous three thousand years. That's a bold assertion, but I think she's basically right. Of course, she's using the tools of a social scientist to support her view. As a theologian, I would add that marriage also contains some important constants, a few essential characteristics that are part of all marriages. I would trace this back to God's creative intent for humankind. More about that later.

So what's it like when a couple announces to family and friends that they are getting married? What's going through their minds? Or those of their parents and friends? Is there delight, approval, concern—or a mixture of all three? Most would agree that getting married these days signals the taking of a big step involving no small amount of risk, especially if one is thinking of a lifelong union. And once married, the challenges might even escalate. No, I take that back. They *will* escalate. And given the variety of “social arrangements” or “quasi marriages” involving couples these days, maybe the act of getting married in traditional fashion may be thought of as almost countercultural.

Not too many years ago, society supported marriage as an institution, and religious bodies affirmed its value and importance without qualification. Thirty years ago more than 90 percent of adults in America married. That number has dropped. In the recent past, marital success was always thought of as no small achievement, but it was certainly not thought of as an impossible achievement. Today some would say it is. A few years ago virtually everyone in society saw marriage as an obvious good, a fully worthwhile way to live and beneficial to both those married and those around them. But times have changed. And like so many areas of life, while some of the changes appear to be positive, some seem negative.

Trained as a sociologist and a theologian, I'm always observing the interface between culture and religion. That's a big part of the framework I use when studying the rich phenomena of contemporary marriage. In my own list of primary cultural influences on marriage, I would include the presence of a growing desire for self-satisfaction that may or may not include the good of others. I see lifestyles geared primarily toward personal, individual survival. There are job-related requirements diminishing the time spent at home with family. The most recent studies of gainful employment show that workers in the United States work more

hours each week than workers in any other country in the world. We recently overtook the Japanese. People seem to want more and are willing to work more to get it. People work hard to assure their own employment, too. There's little security these days in the world of work. Most of these "trends" seem to have a negative impact on marriage.

I see two specific societal developments that I would label as positive. First there is the almost universal view that marriage be based on mutual love. In Coontz's study of the history of marriage, we find compelling evidence that marriage throughout history existed much more in the worlds of politics, economics, and family needs than in the world of love. We would hope that love has been a part of marriage, no matter what the historical period. But it has not been a primary determining influence until the last century. And even then, its importance was not universal.

The coupling of marriage as a social institution with love between the wife and husband has been an important aspect in developing a theology and spirituality of marriage.

A second significant social trend is that of gender equality in marriage. Both giving and receiving form essential interpersonal dynamics in marriage. Clearly, this goes a long way to ensuring the full personal dignity of each spouse, a value strongly supported in contemporary theology.

You can see that my list of the positives and negatives touches on the basic value of respectful, loving interpersonal life. In a word, if marriage is in trouble, it's because as a society we are tending to push the "self-other" dynamic too much toward the side of the self. Marriage is essentially communal; our culture is becoming more and more individual. It doesn't have to be that way because the tilt toward the individual is directed by freely made decisions. But at the same time we continue to affirm the value of deep, interpersonal love. So some forces pull us apart; others draw us together. On this field, contemporary marriage unfolds. Also within marriage, spiritual possibilities of immense value to the persons involved and to God's loving Spirit unfold.

Chapter One

Why did God create marriage?

Children often ask the best questions. Like how can flies walk on the ceiling? Or how does the moon change its size? Or why are people different colors? They enter life with insatiable curiosity. Sadly, some of them lose it much too soon.

Theology, the academic field I work in, also moves under the power of good questions. Most of them include questions about God. Why did God create the universe? Or what was God like before creation? Or can God prevent earthquakes, hurricanes, and tsunamis? Good theologians are wonderers. So it's with a question that I begin this book. "Why did God create marriage?" What was God thinking about when Adam and Eve came into existence?

And while it's always a bit presumptuous for us to ask questions about God, it seems we can and we should. And to help us in our inquiry, it's best that we talk with each other about our views of God and God's creation. Shared wisdom is usually closer to the truth than when we try to figure things out all alone. In fact, among the many reasons why God became human, which was the question so brilliantly worked on by Anselm of Canterbury a thousand years ago, one conclusion is that Jesus came as a teacher of the truth about God and us. So as we seek to learn why God created marriage, we'll have to listen to what our religious tradition says as well.

I looked across the table at my wife who was quietly reading the morning paper. We were present to each other, but no words passed between us over the coffee and buttered toast. How many mornings have I begun with this same scene? Thousands? Certainly, there were too many to think about. I felt at peace, but I also knew that I was very good at denying reality. At least, that's what my wife says. She has often

told me that she liked that about me, at least most of the time. Occasionally, my endearing narrowness gets on her nerves.

Over the years I have come to know that the life between wife and husband, if not the most complex of all interpersonal connections, certainly stands near the top of the list. It's almost always demanding, at times frustrating, occasionally confusing, and always a challenge. It requires strength of resolve and character, understanding and compassion, and most of all, if it is to survive, altruistic abiding love. Marriage can give one the deepest, happiest moments of life. And that's one of the reasons God created it. It was part of God's "Happiness Plan."

To use a compelling image, like skydiving, marriage may not be for everyone. But for those who have the strength and courage to marry (some would say "to answer this calling or vocation from God"), it is a wonderful way to spend one's life. I believe that, through marriage, our humanity can be wonderfully shaped into a magnificent "image of God," to use theological or spiritual language, especially during those inevitable hard times of stress and anxiety.

But having said that, I am reminded that marriage was not always thought of by society in general or the Church in particular as a sanctified and sanctifying way of life. It was not always perceived as one of God's finest ideas for humankind. On my bookshelf sits a large reference work called *Christian Spirituality*.¹ It's a hefty book of 694 pages, a compendium useful for hundreds of topics relating to the spiritual life of the Christian. Here's what it offers to married persons seeking wisdom for their spiritual life. If you look in the index under "marriage," you will find the following: "Marriage, renunciation of."

Well, we need not be discouraged. That's changing, thank God. There are now many published resources that can be quite helpful and positive supporting married life as both wonderfully human and spiritually enriching. I will be pointing to many of them in the pages ahead. Today, there's truly some good news about Christian marriage, at least from a spiritual or theological perspective. And that's where we begin our conversation in this first chapter. Now, more than ever, church leaders, theologians, spiritual writers, even poets are creating deep insights about marital life. Part of my task, as I see it, will be to summarize for you some of the supportive insights, ideas, and approaches now available to married Christians. When we have a positive interpretation of our lives,

¹ Frank N. Magill and Ian P. McGreal, *Christian Spirituality: The Essential Guide to the Most Influential Spiritual Writings of the Christian Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

when we understand God's intent for marriage, we can more easily deal with difficulties. We can live with greater hope and confidence.²

Today's marriage scene

As mentioned in the introduction, we are going through changing and challenging times. Some of it can be quite helpful to the married; some is obviously not. For instance, there is clearly a deep valuing of interpersonal life. Maybe not everyone does, but many do. Also we now possess a rich understanding of the deep potential connection between sexuality, intimacy, and love. On the negative side, some still pay little attention to the value of marriage. I guess I could say that our culture is at best ambivalent about marriage.

My own suggestion is that it's best not to be overly fearful of the modern world and its challenges. I do not share the apocalyptic judgment that the end is near or that the world is growing more evil by the minute. By trade, I am a historical theologian, which means that I study theology and church teachings with special attention to their historical setting. Our attempts to understand many helpful truths must be filtered through the particularities and limits of the times in which their human theorists lived. This is not to say that there are not timeless truths about God and us, because I believe there are. But truth is always wrapped in and limited by the finite language and thought form in which each idea is expressed.

My historical sensitivity also reminds me over and over that there were always "Chicken Little" types warning us about falling skies and descending morals. The fact remains that we can trace the presence of evil right back to the dawn of humankind, actually to the story of Adam and Eve. There's always enough of the bad stuff around to fill the evening news and the daily newspapers. But there are also a thousand random acts of kindness filling the world each day. Sadly we don't hear enough about the positives. Further, it's important to remember that there is also the forgiving and loving presence of God, right in the middle of it all. In other words, take heart. Now is the time of your redemption and mine. Now is the moment of opportunity for great holiness, and this especially includes those of us who are married.

² See the remarkable presentation of the power of hope to assist in survival. Jerome Groopman, M.D., *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness* (New York: Random House, 2004).

The Catholic Church supported this more balanced approach toward good and evil quite clearly through the documents so eloquently brought forward by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). I believe it's very important to engage in straightforward and balanced thinking about these matters. Maintaining a positive Christian approach to marriage is vitally important because of a historical tendency, it seems to me, to find evil and sin more in those parts of human life touching on sexuality and intimacy. Vatican II initiated a challenge to the Church to be more real, more in touch with the wonderful lives of its members. I began my career as a professional theologian during the years when the Council was in session. It has profoundly influenced my thinking, but even more to the point, it has touched my life especially as a married person. I suppose that it can be said that I am a child of Vatican II and deeply grateful to be so.

So let me share with you some of the words of that Spirit-filled gathering of church leaders that serves as background for the best thinking in the church, both when they were first written down and today as they challenge us to live fully Christian and human lives. These words come from the final document of that council. Its Latin title is most significant: *Gaudium et Spes*—Joy and Hope—the great virtues of the Christian life needed to confront today's issues, trials, and temptations. Here's what was and is written on our behalf. I've added a bit of commentary in brackets.

The world this council has in mind is the world of women and men, the entire human family seen in its total environment. [Note the inclusive nature of this opening statement.] It is the world as the theatre of human history, bearing the marks of its travails, its triumphs and failures. [The realities of good and evil are always with us.] It is a world which Christians believe has been created and is sustained by the love of its maker [note the positive foundations for all that is], has fallen into the slavery of sin, but has been freed by Christ, who was crucified and rose again [bringing about a New Creation] in order to break the stranglehold of the evil one, so that it might be fashioned anew according to God's design and brought to its fulfillment. [The world's goodness is affirmed especially because it exists in a positive relationship to God. The world is bent in the direction of God.]³

³ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). Quotations will be from *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations: A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996).

When we think about these words, at the whole Christian tradition for that matter, and we seek to connect it with our lives, we do theology. Theology assists us in connecting Christian faith with our daily ups and downs of life in this wonderful and very fragile world created by God. It helps us see with greater clarity what's behind the headlines and beneath the surface of our everyday experience. That's why the study of theology is often associated with developing a vision of life. The connection is extremely important for those wanting to live deeply in faith. Having a clear vision is the first step to living a deep life.

Theology, in general, has been accused of expressing itself in abstract or airy language. In my mind that's not good theology. I want to avoid that in this book about marriage. Those who do their theological thinking in the ivory towers of academia or church sometimes fail the proper task of theology, which is to provide inspiration to all humankind, give direction to those struggling along the way, while uncovering the deep presence of God beneath the surface thus awakening in us a deeper understanding and appreciation of our lives.

One of the most ancient and revered descriptions of theology was created by St. Anselm of Canterbury in the twelfth century when he described theology as "faith seeking understanding." I would add that it helps people of faith gain a greater awareness of created reality, a fuller connection between God and our lives as they are lived day by day. In a sense, Jesus often played the role of theologian by constantly pointing to what God was doing in the midst of the world, like a light on a tall mountain revealing God's somewhat hidden presence and actions in human life. For me, theology is the preeminent life science.

A Godly vision for marriage

I enjoy traveling to new places, especially outside the United States. I have been blessed with many opportunities to do this. But I always visit the local library or a favorite bookstore first to read about where I'm heading and to look at a map for indicators of what are often termed "points of interest." In a general sense, I sometimes think of myself as a tourist on this earth.

Thinking of theology as mapmaking is something I took from the writings of C. S. Lewis, the Oxford professor who did much to connect theological wisdom with ordinary life. We all know what it's like to be in a strange place with no idea of where we are. It can be a very anxious moment.

But thankfully there are maps available to us, and many are quite good. One map of Christian marriage describes it as a journey by a man and woman into the deepest parts of human interpersonal life. Upon acquiring fuller knowledge of each other (there's *always* more to learn), there follows affirmation, acceptance, and a pledge to stay together for the duration of the journey.

That's at the basis of the promise made at the time of the wedding: to remain together whatever happens. It's a daring statement. Some would say it's an almost irrational promise. Many might note, for instance, that people change. New circumstances arise. There is a whole cartload of "what ifs" that can challenge those making such bold promises to each other. But that's the greatness of Christian marriage. Its claims defy calculation and assessment. Once made, the promise to be with and for each other travels ahead in time defying much of the so-called wisdom of the world. This is especially so when the promise stretches to the whole of life and includes in its formulation the condition of "for better or for worse." It's always worthwhile to think about what a courageous act marriage can be.

Now here's where some theological wisdom can enrich and enlighten this mix. I like to think that theology helps us connect heaven with earth, God's ways with our own. That's what God wants marriage to be: a grand mimicking of perfection.

Marriage, for example, is about unconditional commitment. The question is: where else does this sort of thing happen? Well, if you think about it, with God and us! That's the underlying theme of the message of Jesus. God stays with us, loving us so much that even when we stray off the path, God is there to pull us back. God's love is not like ours because it exceeds ours in intent, intensity, and perseverance. Nevertheless, we are gracefully equipped to do a good job of imitation. And that's what we do in Christian marriage. We attempt to seed into marital love some semblance of God's love. Certainly the thought of John Paul II was based on this idea. No other pope ever said or wrote so much about Christian marriage as did this pope. When connecting the salvific work of Jesus with the life of the married, he wrote the following, "the marriage of baptized persons thus becomes a real symbol of the new and eternal covenant sanctioned in the blood of Christ."⁴

We do the work of Jesus in many kinds of social settings. It's not just in marriage. But in marriage many of us obviously fall short of this

⁴ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (On the Family) sec. 13.

exalted challenge. Too often we settle conflict with violence. We solve problems by running out the back door. We fail to communicate. At times, we don't even want to! This is not by any stretch of the imagination unconditional love.

But there are moments when the barrier between earth and heaven falls away. And nothing does this more effectively than when we act in ways that are genuinely kind, altruistic, and loving. Christian marriage is one of those instances where "symbolically" this happens. Now, before going on, I must say something about symbols because this use of language is often misunderstood.

Symbols participate in the reality they signify. Symbols connect with the reality expressed. For instance, smoke is a symbol of fire. A kiss is a symbol of affection. A smile symbolizes a positive inner disposition. Symbols can be fraudulent or fake. A political candidate shakes hands with every passerby. Is that handshake a symbol of genuine connection and concern? We all know the answer. It depends on the candidate. So symbols can be real or fake. Most people are quite able to know the difference. Teenagers seem especially adept at identifying fake symbols. Nothing is worse for them than "a fake." It violates their basic order of reality. They are quite correct in their judgment.

But there are good symbols, and Christian marriage lived day after day is one of the best.

In the history of theology, there's a most interesting text relating to the use of marriage as a symbol of the love between man and woman. In the Bible, it's called *The Canticle of Canticles* or *Song of Solomon* or *Song of Songs*. It's filled with wonderful love poetry that seems to describe the love between a husband and wife. And current biblical scholars agree that these songs were often sung at wedding feasts, which, for the record, were rather wild and lengthy celebrations in the time of Jesus and before. Here's where it gets interesting.

The language and images in *The Canticle of Canticles* are borderline erotic. Read it and you'll see. Maybe that's why we rarely hear it read in church. Now you might have heard that for many centuries the Catholic Church was not quite comfortable with the physical side of human sexuality. So when Christian theologians of the first millennium commented on this book of the Bible, they labeled it as allegorical. What that means is that its literal meaning was not its true meaning. It was like "code language" pointing to something secret and mysterious like God's love for us. This was correct except the commentators skipped a step. They failed to acknowledge the symbolic sacredness of marital love that was, of course, quite sexual.

Two clear examples of a nonsexual interpretation of this biblical book would be Origen (185–254) who wrote ten volumes of commentary without once referring to real marriage. His spirit of understanding was pretty much followed by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) who composed and published eighty-six sermons on this book again seeing nothing in it that was connected with the human. It was all about God.⁵

We can even read of how the church of that era valued marriage without intimate sexual relations, the so-called Joseph and Mary marriage, as an ideal. My guess is that two thought currents were operative at that time. First, there was great reverence for the life of consecrated virginity. Those who pursued such a life were considered the direct descendants of the early martyrs of the church. So the closer one came to being a dedicated virgin in God’s kingdom, the closer one was to God.

Second, as we learn more about the typical marriage of those days, the more we realize that it was not a life of love and freely-chosen service, but more one of servitude to the demands of the extended family. We will look without success to find in the literature of that time the words “marriage” and “love” in the same sentence. The fact was that most marriages, especially among those with some economic status, were prearranged by families who used such unions for their own gain. Progeny was also important as a means of securing long title to land and other economic resources. We would hope that a certain amount of love became part of the marriages of those times, and perhaps it did. But that’s not what marriage was for. In fact, the close association that we make today between love and marriage is a rather recent phenomenon.⁶

In no way do I want this to sound as if the church did not value marriage. But as late as 1917, the church was still using the language that the primary purpose of marriage was the procreation and education of children. It was not until Vatican II that the wonderful love language of our faith was woven into the description of marriage.

Many people are surprised to learn that when the church finally and officially listed its seven sacraments at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, it was marriage that was the final sacrament to make the cut. In previous centuries, various theologians included marriage in

⁵ To see how much the church has used the Song of Songs as an allegory of God’s love, see the four volumes of *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983, 1980, 1979, 1971).

⁶ See Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005).

their own personal accounting of the sacraments, but their opinions did not have the weight of being considered official church teaching.

It's also interesting that two other rituals were also considered as possible sacraments. One was the coronation of kings, which for years was closely related to the life of the church, and a theology developed that supported a so-called divine right given to proper regal authority. The other ritual vying for consideration as a sacrament was religious profession. Eventually it was argued that religious vows were more an extension of baptism so they didn't "need" further sacramental identity. Religious profession was described at times as a second baptism.

It's worthwhile to reflect on why marriage came to become an official sacrament of the church. I would like to think that it had something to do with the life and witness of ordinary Christians who were married. Their experience of married love gave to them some inkling or sense of God's love. Refer back to what I mentioned about symbol. Genuine symbolism participates in the reality it symbolizes.

Using good maps

While no one has kept a daily journal describing how the Christian map of marriage changed, we have the hindsight of historical investigation to help us view this happening. There are two sections of the Bible that alert us to this discovery. The first is found in the book of Hosea.

There, the prophet's own life becomes a kind of parable or symbol of God's relationship with Israel. He had married a rather spirited woman whose name was Gomer. Apparently her life with Hosea left her with some kind of an unsatisfied hunger so she went off to the local Canaanite hill shrines for additional excitement. Now these "places of worship" were not your typical sacred gathering place, although the Canaanites claimed they were. Their religion was especially focused on achieving fertility both of the land and of humankind. In other words, Gomer was most likely engaged in hilltop fertility rites which were forbidden to God's chosen people. We don't know how it went for her, but we do know she returned to Hosea asking for reentry into his life. Here's where the symbolism comes in. God invites him to take Gomer back, forgive the trespasses she did, and start their marriage once again. The symbolism refers to the fact that what happened in Hosea's marriage also happened to the Israelites in general. Once connected to God, they left their religious practices and went off to the hills, much like Gomer. God wanted

to show through the marriage of Hosea that God could and would forgive.

The second instance where the Bible compared God's covenant with the people and marriage occurs in chapter five of the Epistle to the Ephesians. Once again, a parallel is drawn between human marriage and divine covenant. The author is describing Christian marriage and states the following. "This [marriage] is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church."⁷

Slowly marital symbolism crept into the consciousness of the church. The use of the word "mystery" played an important role in the church's recognition of Christian marriage as sacramental because it was the Greek word for "sacrament." But I think it would take more than biblical passages to bring the church to its positive portrayal of marriage. It had to overcome a couple of obstacles like the fact that marriage included sexual relations, which the church mostly failed to appreciate as holy and good during most of its early years. Also, marriage was clearly something that was part of creation. It went all the way back to the Garden of Eden. The other sacraments of the church, like Eucharist and Baptism, came from the ministry of Jesus. And while St. John's Gospel has that wonderful account of Jesus attending the wedding feast at Cana, there is no indication that he "instituted" a sacrament there. Mostly we see him extending the party in a rather miraculous way. Biblical scholars would say that the passage is symbolic, but not about marriage. It's symbolic rather of the beginning of God's kingdom with a great banquet, a favorite image in the Bible.

Let's summarize. The Christian map of marriage was officially redrawn at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. The idea of sanctity in marriage has been advanced in more recent times with some of this awareness being captured in Vatican II and subsequent papal writings. As I have suggested, the experience of married Christians also had a role to play in this "discovery" of sanctity and holiness in marriage. Like all historical changes, however, this revision, as we are calling it, took time. In fact, the shift in awareness and appreciation is still happening.

Part of this change happens as we more fully connect our interpersonal lives with our life with God. The New Testament has Jesus saying that the two great commandments, love of God and love of neighbor, are really one commandment. We love God in and through our neighbor.

⁷ Eph 5:32 (NRSV).

John's first epistle boldly states that if we say we love God and don't also love our neighbor, we're liars. You can't get much clearer than that.

I would also add that the treasure of experiencing God's love in and through marital love was always there. But it was more like a buried treasure. It required discovery at a personal level and at a communal level. Christianity is basically about God's love shining forth in the life of Christ. Jesus was God's living word in our midst. His love was so great that he gave his life for us. Imitation of that love is at the core of Christian belief and life. As our appreciation of the presence and power of love deepens, so too will our theology of marriage.⁸

But this orientation of neighbor love does not come easily in a culture so geared to serving the desires and needs of the individual person. It's a very long journey from an over-stimulated ego to a sensitive relational self. The flow of contemporary life goes in the other direction. Popular culture says put yourself as number one. Your needs should be placed before those of anyone else. In the next chapter we will talk about the complexities of love, so here we will simply mention that it must possess some sense of altruism. While healthy love of self remains important, our love journey must leave the privacy of self-centered concerns and reach outside to others. And even then we have to be careful that we don't fall into a false orientation.

I recall a statement that captures this illusionary love quite well. It was: "I need you to be me." Taken literally that turns the other person into a means of my own selfish pursuit of identity. The other is simply a function in my life. Martin Buber would say this is not a genuine I-Thou relationship but one of an I-it kind. In that sense, it is not truly interpersonal, but rather a using of the other for my own needs. Pope John II described this as a demeaning of the person, a loss of genuine human life.

Interpersonal awareness is another aspect of living that may not come easy. We have to "get into the shoes" of the other, see the world through the eyes of another. It's akin to leaving oneself or better, a stretching of oneself into the personhood of the other. We transcend all stereotypes and role descriptions when we do this. It's just me and you and that is enough. I believe that people are capable of this, but it requires a certain level of receptivity and listening, an openness to hear the word of the other, an expansion of mindfulness to include a reality completely unique and different from oneself.

⁸ See Michael St. Clair, *Human Relationships and the Experience of God: Object Relations and Religion* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994).

Christian marriage is deeply interpersonal in that sense. Because it is so deeply interpersonal, every instance of the sacrament of Christian marriage is quite unique. That's because of another wonderful feature of the theology of marriage. The true ministers of this sacrament are not the priest or the deacon (they serve as the official church witness to the exchange of vows) but the couple themselves. The wife administers this sacrament to her husband and he does the same for her. Later on in this book I will add that the sacramental life of marriage is not just "given" at the time of the wedding, but it is an ongoing possibility, a genuine reality in their life together. That means couples can be administering this sacrament, to use some rather formal church language, time after time. It's helpful also to think of marriage as a special kind of friendship and, therefore, it has some of the same dynamics as does friendship, a privileged aspect of life.⁹

Further, because the basic material of this sacrament is interpersonal and each person and couple is unique, these new sacramental events are as varied as are the peculiarities of each married couple. In other words, there's no one way. I make this point for two reasons. One, we are a culture of copiers. We like to imagine ourselves as superstars and winners. Maybe that's an ancient need because these archetypes have served many cultures and embody certain idealized forms. The point is that each of us is not always comfortable in being ourselves. We imitate. Second, the church itself often uses the language of imitation. We are called to imitate Christ or Mary, his mother, or one of the saints. Certainly this imitation is not to be taken simplistically. Such directive is a call to imitate their faith, their love for others, their goodness.

A few years ago I was addressing a large gathering of married couples on the topic of the sacrament of Christian marriage. I made the point of uniqueness and that each could co-create their own sacramental expression of marriage. I wasn't arguing that anything goes and that there are no guidelines or rules for Christian marriage. I simply wanted people to feel their uniqueness as they contribute their own gifts to their marriage. After my presentation a couple came up to me in tears. My first inclination was to think that I presented so poorly that I drove some of my listeners to tears. Fortunately for me, I was able to quickly interpret their tears as joyful. They said that for a long time they had felt inferior as a married couple. They had friends who were very affectionate, who

⁹ An excellent theological work that uses friendship as a basic model for understanding the sacramental dimension of life is Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, 2nd ed. (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994).

spoke openly about their marriages and had no difficulty expressing their feelings for each other in public. The couple before me was quiet and reserved. Their feelings of inferiority arose from their not being like the others. They told me that my words gave them the assurance that they were okay even though they were a little different from their friends. Good for them, I thought. It's always satisfying to realize that one's words are helpful, especially when I felt the principle of sacramental distinctiveness applied so well to Christian marriage.

Staying on the map

Catholic theology is a rich blend of basic beliefs from the Bible and from the tradition of the Catholic Church extending all the way back to Jesus. It is captured in creeds, teachings from church councils, and the writings of popes and respected Catholic theologians. Theology is very much a living and dynamic project expressing the richness of the church's intellectual tradition. It is ultimately founded on the church's acceptance of divine revelation especially through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, God's Word made manifest in human history.

Theology will also bear the imprint of those professionally committed to this ministry. In recent years it has been enriched and blessed especially by the contributions of lay men and women as well as theologians from non-Western countries. Making theology an inclusive venture is critical to assuring ourselves that we have the means to fully reflect on God's word for today.

The theology of Christian marriage has greatly profited from dialogue and writings stimulated by the insights encapsulated in the documents of Vatican II. Since then, this theology has become more personal, pastoral, and practical—qualities certainly welcomed by the married and those who minister with them.

The theological map of Christian marriage may appear more like an adventure map or one that notes all the scenic side trips rather than a simple map starting at point A and going directly to point B. That's because of what I have already mentioned about the uniqueness of every marriage. But its uniqueness doesn't imply that the couple wanders aimlessly on a personal spiritual journey.

We have already noted that it is, first of all, a journey specified by the love between them. It also demands the human qualities of freedom, responsibility, and openness to learn from God's Spirit particularly as that Spirit communicates through the teachings of the church. But I have

to add that these teachings are meant to liberate and support marriage so that it can reach its full potential before God and before the rest of the world. Sometimes we think of rules or directives as only confining or restricting, rather than freeing and being there for our own betterment. Jesus said that the truth will make us free and this applies directly to our holy lives as married couples. The truth about love and commitment that Jesus proclaimed is “good news” to those who seek with an open and honest heart the best life imaginable.

Included in a theology of marriage for our times must be a discussion of the equality between the sexes. Here we listen to the wise and penetrating assessment of women theologians who have pointed to deeply-seated prejudices and unjust structures in society that have almost a timeless beginning. Today we are trying to rectify past violations of women’s rights especially as they connect with the social institution of marriage. With marriage being primarily a relationship between the sexes at the most personal level of all, it is incumbent that all social ills touching their relationship be named and corrected. This will be a lifelong challenge in each marriage.

Another area of pressing concern has to do with the procreative or generative side of marriage. We have already noted a cultural danger that invites us to pursue our own private goals without serious consideration of others. This is no small matter because marriage was not intended by God as “private property” or a relationship that is to be used simply to fulfill individual needs. There is more to marriage than just the couple. Christian marital love is to extend outward from the couple. For most, this will mean procreation of new life. Such love is founded on expressions of love that are rooted in the teachings of the church relating to responsible parenthood. But the generative love of the couple will also be responsive to the needs of others outside the immediate family. It may involve care of aging parents or other family members. It might include caring for foster children. It might entail the adoption of children. In recent years, generous couples have gone to the far reaches of the world seeking orphaned or abandoned children in great need.

Generous marital love seeks opportunities to serve the needs of the world outside the home. Again, this outreach may feel somewhat counter-cultural when the home is felt more to be a fortress than a place where strangers can find a welcoming hand.

When Jesus addressed the topic of marriage, his disciples thought that his view seemed overly demanding. During his time, marriage was in somewhat of an unhealthy state. Divorce and separation were commonly based on the will of the husband. Jesus lived in a patriarchal

society. Women were often thought of in the family as the man's property. So were children, slaves, and animals. In many ways, Jesus supported the dignity and rights of all. He called for lifelong marital fidelity and commitment. When his disciples questioned him on this, he agreed that it was a challenge but said that God's presence and assistance would be available. The need for divine assistance was needed both then and now. He laid down some basics: the equality of all, the importance of deep, altruistic love, the importance of children, respect for the body, and the importance of giving thanks and celebrating God's gifts.

He gave us a good start in understanding why God created marriage. Marriage is filled with deep human and religious meaning. Recall it being described as a mystery in the Epistle to the Ephesians. Mystery, in the biblical sense, does not mean it's like a mystery novel. Mystery means that the reality pointed to has roots so deep that they extend into the person of God. When something is mysterious in that sense, God can be touched in some way if we go deep enough into the reality. In a sense, all God's creation is a mystery. Marriage is one of the best places to find it.

Astronomers and other scientists often say the deeper they enter the reality they are observing, the closer they feel to seeing the hand of God. Many claim to sense something of God when seeing the wonders of nature, like a beautiful sunset over the ocean or the fury of waves smashing against a rocky coastline. Both the storms and the calm of nature can carry questioning observers into a depth of perception that defies ordinary surface observation.

It also seems that some parts of created reality more easily allow us deeper than usual entrance into their secret depths. Celtic spirituality speaks of places in creation where the barrier between earth and heaven, the created and the Creator, are thin. In those places, the divine can seem close at hand. I believe a marriage, seasoned with deep love, is one of those "thin" places. As the biblical text just mentioned notes, marriage can symbolize and embody the relation between God and us, between Christ and the church.

Vatican II described Christian marriage as "the intimate partnership of life and the love which constitutes" it.¹⁰ The interconnection of life with love mirrors the most basic act of God creating our universe. God loves, and life comes into existence. When this happens in marriage, one could say that God is close by, or better, part of this event. The New

¹⁰ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

Testament names God as Love. The essence of God is to love. So too is the essence of Christian marriage. No wonder Christian marriage is characterized as a great mystery within Christian faith.

It has taken most of the lifetime of the church to come to a clear description and definition of marriage that incorporates marital love at its core. But it's also worth remembering that connecting deep human love with marriage was late in appearing in general human history. Mostly, marriage in past times served to meet the needs of the larger family unit, the clan, the tribe, or the state. Love between husband and wife would be welcomed, but not required. Plus, the full demands of deep, altruistic, and generous love are not easy. Of course, anyone observing the dynamics of contemporary marriage will recognize this. Marital love invites our fuller attention and understanding and we will explore this in the next chapter.