



HLI EDUCATIONAL SERIES

Looking at life and family issues in the light of faith and reason.

PART II: MARRIAGE: TO GIVE AND RECEIVE A TOTAL GIFT OF SELF

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procreative married
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In the first part of this series, we discussed what God has revealed about Himself and His love for us by giving us the great gift of marriage, the point of origin for each family, the basic cell of every society and every nation. We arrived at its definition as confirmed by the Church He established:

Marriage is a lifelong partnership of the whole of life, of mutual and exclusive fidelity, established by mutual consent between a man and a woman, and ordered towards the good of the spouses and the procreation of offspring. (Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 1601)

Take away anything, even one bit, of this well-considered definition and you have deformed what marriage is meant to be, both naturally and supernaturally. From this definition comes its purpose, and understanding this purpose requires much greater attention on our part. Our own vocations, after all, either in marriage or religious life, depend a great deal on the proper understanding of marriage.

The Two Ends of Marriage

The Catholic bishops of the United States, in their wonderful 2009 pastoral letter “Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan,” take us from the definition of marriage into its purpose:

Men and women are equal as persons. As male and female, they are two different ways of being human. These differences relate them to each other in a total and complementary way. They

make possible a unique communion of persons in which spouses give themselves and receive each other in love. This communion of persons has the potential to bring forth human life and thus to produce the family. No other relationship symbolizes life and love as marriage does.

The two purposes of marriage are inseparable; they are two aspects of the same self-giving. The unitive purpose of marriage means that husband and wife participate in God's own self-giving love. The two become one flesh, giving mutual help and service to each other through their intimate union.

We are created in such a way that this unitive aspect, fully achieved in a Christian marriage, is the fulfillment of God's plan for creating us as male and female, both fully in possession of human nature, yet ordered one to the other for completion.

This union is both of body and spirit, it is a union of persons. The human person is neither simply body, nor simply soul. We are embodied spirits, who, in freedom, choose to give a complete gift of ourselves to our spouse, and to receive him or her totally as well.

When you marry someone you marry their whole person. The bishops express this very well in the letter when they state, "The human person is a union of body and soul as a single being. Man and woman are two different ways of being a human person." Note that the difference between man and woman is not merely biological, it extends to their whole being, because their whole being is a unity.

This love is most beautifully symbolized in the fact that it is potentially creative. Just as the love of God Himself is a creative love, so He permits humans to become co-creators, cooperating with Him in the greatest of all tasks, the production of new humans who can grow to know, love and serve God, fulfill their natural inclinations to happiness, and achieve their spiritual end ordered through Christ. This is possible only through the creative and unitive love of the spouses.

The bishops continue:

The procreative purpose recognizes that married love is by its



nature life-giving. The children who result from this union are the supreme gift of marriage. Some couples experience the tragedy of infertility and may be tempted to think that their union is not complete; however, it remains a distinctive communion of persons.

It is in this procreative aspect that the unitive aspect finds its perfection and goal. Historically, the procreative aspect was seen as the fundamental end of human marriage, and indeed this remains the case theologically. More recently, however, popes and theologians have rightly understood that this procreative aspect is indivisible from the unitive aspect. Each is necessary and indispensable in a truly human and Christian marriage.

Because of the unity of the person, procreation is not merely biological but has ramifications in both the personal and spiritual dimensions. (This is incidentally a fundamental problem with the lie of so-called “casual sex,” something which is ultimately impossible for human persons, and something we will discuss in a later article in this series.)

It is then absolutely necessary to assert that the two fundamental purposes of marriage, the unitive aspect which unites two complementary people in a lifelong and unbreakable association of life and love, and the

procreative aspect which is ordered towards the birth of children and the creation of families and societies, can never be severed. You cannot have one without the other, which is why, as we shall see in the next article in this series, the use of contraception is a grave evil and not merely another licit means of postponing pregnancy.

The Theology of the Body

In trying to understand in a deeper way the concept of “gift” as the Church uses it throughout her teaching on marriage, it may be helpful to pause just for a moment and consider perhaps the most profound meditations ever offered on the subject of the *person as gift*. Over the first four years of his pontificate at Wednesday audiences, Pope Saint John Paul II gave a series of talks that became known as “The Theology of the Body.” That these were given so early in his pontificate is evidence that it was a subject which he had been considering for some time, not only as a bishop, philosopher and theologian, but as a pastor who worked with hundreds of couples. He knew intimately both the joy of romantic love and the pain that men and women suffer as they try to come together in marriage, as sin has so often corrupted what should be a natural and beautiful journey.

With *The Theology of the Body*, Saint John Paul wanted to give the Church a new way to approach and understand the good of marriage and sexuality, and his teaching has had a far reaching impact on the Church. The idea was to help the Church begin with an “adequate anthropology,” or a proper understanding of the human person upon which to base moral, ethical, and social reflections on how we should live as men and women. Even in this series of articles you are now reading, the language of gift has been a constant theme as we, following John Paul, begin with the Word of God in the creation narrative of Genesis and examine how He reveals Himself and His love to we who are created in His image. By beginning with “original man” in the story of Adam and Eve, we see how God clearly created man and woman for each other, in original innocence.

In the very physicality of Adam and Eve as man and woman, as in their spirituality, God had made His intent known. That is to say that their Creator wrote into their bodies a “nuptial meaning,” which, though it can be expressed to some degree spiritually by anyone who gives of himself

completely in his vocation, is lived completely only in marriage. So when St. Paul speaks in Ephesians chapter 5 about the submission that husband and wife owe to one another, we understand through John Paul's *Theology of the Body* that the controversy surrounding this passage is misplaced. Understood as mutual and complete giving of oneself, and recognizing the sexual difference and complementarity of men and women, the language of submission is less threatening. And as St. Paul says in verse 32, this mystery is also to be understood as illustrating the relationship between Christ and the Church He established.

Of course much more can be said here and we will provide sources at the end so that this important teaching can be further investigated, but we introduce *The Theology of the Body* here both to give proper credit to our saintly and sorely missed Holy Father, and to prepare for our consideration of the great gift of children and family.

Toward Family and Flourishing

The family is the root and soul of human society; it is the reason why men and women are ordered one towards the other. Fatherhood and motherhood are built into the human person, so that one can say that if one is not a father or a mother *in some way*, then one has not fulfilled his potential. In a passage from *Gaudium et Spes* that Pope Saint John Paul II referred to often throughout his pontificate, this point is rendered by the Church in a new and powerful way:

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. (GS n. 24)

This oft-quoted passage has been understood as one of the keys to interpreting the expansive work of the late Holy Father, illuminating as it does the nature of the human person made in the image of His Creator, and

his mission here on earth. It means that gift is in our very being as persons, as it is a reflection of God Himself – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And it means that motherhood and fatherhood are intrinsic to a complete human being, giving orientation to our lives.

Take for example the life of virginity and celibacy, objectively superior to the state of marriage (though exceptional holiness is the proper end of both). Simply because one remains celibate or a virgin does not mean that one vacates the responsibility for parenthood, it just shifts to a higher level, a spiritual level. There is one reason why we call our priests, “Father” and why the superiors of female communities are called “Mother.” They exercise a real, spiritual parenthood.

Likewise, the unmarried and couples who are infertile can exercise a parenthood of charity, prayer, mentoring, and leadership. But it is spiritual and biological parents who guide their offspring to holiness and the experience of the life of Christ through the sacraments and through the Christian life. This is the object and perfection of the sacrament of marriage.

When the Gift of Self Becomes the Gift of a New Person

From this sacrament of mutual and total gift comes the greatest of the signs and goods of human marriage, children. For in the end we should stand in awe of the awesome power of procreation, and not as so many moderns do, as one more technology to manipulate. The power of procreation is the power of co-creation: It is cooperating with God in the origin of new human persons, with individual souls, wills, intellects, and freedom. It is the opportunity to participate in the most intimate way possible with the working of providence, the progress of humanity, and of the growing of the number of the elect. This participation is itself a gift, manifested in the unity of persons who become “one flesh,” that makes marriage an intimate icon of the inner Trinitarian life of God, both loving and life-giving.

Though it may seem intuitive to us that a baby is a gift, it is tragically clear that a large portion of our nation and the world does not see children this way, that many powers even see this basic truth as a threat to progress or personal fulfillment. We will look into this threat to life and marriage soon, but let’s first reinforce the point from Church teaching, as we cannot be too clear:



A child is not something owed to one, but is a gift. The “supreme gift of marriage” is a human person. (CCC, #2378)

Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents. The God Himself Who said, “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18) and “Who made man from the beginning male and female” (Matt. 19:4), wishing to share with man a certain special participation in His own creative work, blessed male and female, saying: “Increase and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). Hence, while not making the other purposes of matrimony of less account, the true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of the family life which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Savior. (Gaudium et Spes n. 50)

As St. Francis de Sales says in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, “[Marriage is] the nursery of Christianity, which supplies the earth with faithful souls to fill up the number of the elect in heaven. Hence the preservation of holy marriage is of the highest importance for the state since it is the origin and source of all that flows from the state.”

Indeed, the need to defend the most innocent life at its beginning and to

preserve holy Christian marriage has never been more urgent. In the next part of this series on marriage we examine the implications of God's amazing self-revelation in marriage. Here, with the beginning of every family, we see the beginning of other human communities, cities and states. Here the field of social science confirms the theology of the Church and the necessity of a gift-perspective from all who strive to live the faith with courage and generosity.

Human sin has darkened and corrupted even this most essential institution, but it has not come close to abolishing it. Renewed with the grace of Christ, it is now elevated to a vehicle of supernatural life. All of the challenges that face marriage are not as powerful as the grace of Christ, for "where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more." (Rom 5:20)

Portions of this article are adapted from a contribution by Professor Donald Prudlo to HLI's *Truth and Charity Forum*. See his entire 5-part series on the US bishops' pastoral letter "Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan" at www.TruthandCharityForum.org/article-series.

Resources used in this article, which we recommend for further study:

- Pope Saint John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, translated by Michael Waldstein, 2006
- *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, especially paragraphs 1601 – 1666, 2201 – 2213
- *Gaudium et Spes, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*: especially n. 48 – 52
- *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, a 2009 Pastoral Letter from the US Bishops

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