

THE NATURAL ORDERING TO MARRIAGE  
AS FOUNDATION AND NORM  
FOR SACRAMENTAL MARRIAGE

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GRACE PERFECTS NATURE, as the oft-quoted Thomist adage goes. If this is true anywhere, it is nowhere more so than in the case of marriage, an institution that belongs to the order of nature as owing to the natural law and which Christ, wishing to grant it its proper share in the economy of salvation, has at the same time elevated to the level of a sacrament. In short, all that belongs to marriage as a natural institution belongs also to sacramental marriage, even if this latter far exceeds the former in what it signifies and in its superadded elements. The intelligibility of sacramental marriage can be retained, then, only with reference to natural marriage as its norm and foundation. More specifically, since sacramental grace—which St. Thomas Aquinas calls the *res tantum* of the sacraments—has a twofold aim, namely, to heal and to elevate or divinize, we can understand exactly what is being healed and divinized in the particular case of the sacrament of matrimony only if we first gain a sufficient grasp of the proximate and natural ends of marriage (its natural teleology).

In what follows, and taking my chief inspiration from Aquinas, I propose to accomplish this on two counts: first, by arguing that marriage (natural marriage) comprises the joint goods of procreation and unitive love as its proximate and proportionate natural ends; and, second, by arguing that the healing and divinizing power of the sacrament of marriage (the *res tantum*) targets these same joint goods, since both suffer acutely under the

burden of sin. In a word, I shall argue that Christ, wishing that married partners attain the happiness in marriage they desire, has given the natural institution of marriage, of which he is likewise the author, a share in the fruits of his redemption, inasmuch as the grace of the sacrament of matrimony transforms this institution's intrinsic ordering to procreation and unitive love. Throughout, I shall attempt both to ground myself in the thought of Aquinas and to offer a faithful adaptation of the Dominican Master's thought.

#### I. MARRIAGE AS A NATURAL, PROCREATIVE-UNITIVE INSTITUTION

Human sexuality shares in a special way in our hylemorphic constitution as body-soul composite beings. First and foremost, it is primarily as embodied that we own a sexed nature in the first place. Indeed, the very basis of the sexual differentiation between male and female, obviously the distinguishing mark of sexuality as such, is our animal bodiliness, as seen in the simple biological fact that the sex chromosomal complement determines one's sex. In brief, without our bodiliness, without our animality, we have no truly satisfactory way of explaining the male-female sexual complement. Human sexuality implies embodied alterity, embodied complementarity.

While this point may seem incontrovertible, especially as we consider it in light of the entire animal kingdom, we should not take it for granted, since one would search in vain for references to human bodiliness in certain Cartesian-styled definitions of human sexuality that are in circulation today (e.g., "Sexuality refers to an intimate aspect of identity through which human beings experience an understanding of self and connectedness to others, the world, and God").<sup>1</sup> The point holds as well for those well-intentioned Catholic moralists who are in good standing with the Church but who, representing the "personalist" school of thought, locate the ground of human sexuality not in our embodied animality per se, but in the Trinitarian relations;

<sup>1</sup> This comes from the University of Notre Dame, whose Gender Relations Center, in its 2009 brochure, answers the question "What is sexuality?" with the quoted statement. This brochure boasts that Notre Dame's Gender Relations Center "is the first and only office of its kind within collegiate student affairs nationwide."

maleness and femaleness, they argue, should be looked upon as strict relational properties constitutive of personhood, like the Trinitarian relation of Father and Son, rather than as constitutive of our embodied, animal-like nature.

Now, it is obvious that sexual dimorphism, manifested primarily in the biological complementarity of male and female genitalia, exists for the sake of procreation. Since human sexuality arises immediately, and thus essentially, upon the body, upon our animality, human sexuality owns an intrinsic teleological ordering to procreation.<sup>2</sup>

However, if we say human sexuality is ordered exclusively to procreation, we distinguish in no way the meaning and purpose of our sexuality from that of the rest of the animal kingdom. We are not “centaur-like” creatures lacking integration, where the animal in us remains isolated in a subrational sphere of activity. To be genuinely *human*, our sexuality must share in what is unique and noblest in us; it must be integrated into the totality of our lives as rationally ensouled embodied beings. As matter is for the sake of form, as the body is for the sake of the soul, as lower is for the sake of the higher, so is human sexuality for the sake of the soul’s highest, noblest functions: intellectual knowing and loving. Sexuality implies, then, not only the offering of one’s (procreative) body, but the offering of one’s entire self in the deepest bonds of knowledge and love, in the deepest bonds of personal communion and friendship.

Therefore, we can say that human sexuality owns an intrinsic teleological ordering not simply to procreation, but also to unitive love (to the “love-making” end). Human sexuality, in its primary ordering to procreation as owing to the body, is at the same time ordered essentially to personal, unitive love as expressive of our rationality. And while it is true that Aquinas the medieval Scholastic does not name this latter ordering “personal” or “unitive,” he has nearly the equivalent. He affirms, for instance, that “the form of marriage” (*forma matrimonii*) consists in an

<sup>2</sup> This is a very brief summary of what Aquinas argues in *De ente et essentia*, cc. 5-6. For a fuller treatment of this, see my “The ‘Inseparable Connection’ between Procreation and Unitive Love (*Humanae Vitae*, §12) and Thomistic Hylemorphic Anthropology,” *Nova et Vetera* 6, English edition (2008): 731-64.

“indivisible union of souls” (*in quadam indivisibili coniunctione animorum*), and that marriage constitutes a “society of domestic fellowship” (*domesticae conversationis consortium*).<sup>3</sup> These denominations approximate, and to a certain extent encapsulate, what the classical tradition, beginning with St. Augustine, calls the “secondary” (read: “personalist”) goods of marriage: first, life partnership (or mutual help); second, sexual fulfillment (or remedy for concupiscence); and, third, conjugal love.<sup>4</sup>

Though we can distinguish the two essential orderings of our sexuality, to procreation and to unitive love, it is imperative that we avoid separating the two, just as we must avoid separating body from soul. As the human being is a fundamental unity, as each human individual is his material body *and* his immaterial rational soul, so is human sexuality a fundamental unity of the procreative (expressive of the bodily) and the unitive (expressive of our rationality).

Only marriage (heterosexual marriage) unites the procreative and unitive, as corresponding to the substantial union of body and soul. We can therefore say that marriage, nuptiality, marks the intrinsic and proportionate teleological meaning of human sexuality. Better yet, human sexuality has but one end, marriage, with its two proximate and complementary ends: the procreative (expressive of the body) and the unitive (expressive of the soul). Georges Cottier, theologian of the pontifical household under Pope John Paul II, calls sex the “great paradox” in that it symbolizes the paradoxical union of body and soul in man.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The form of marriage as an indivisible union of souls comes in *STh* III, q. 29, a. 2, while *domesticae conversationis consortium* appears in *Summa contra Gentiles* III, c. 123. One also finds Aquinas calling marriage a “conjugal society” (*associatio matrimonium*) in *STh* Suppl., q. 41, a. 1 (reproduced from *IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 1). See also *STh* II-II, q. 26, a. 11. For a definitive treatment of love in Aquinas’s thought, see Michael Sherwin, *By Knowledge and by Love: Charity and Knowledge in the Moral Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005). See also Peter Kwasniewski, “The Ecstasy of Love in Aquinas’s *Commentary on the Sentences*,” *Angelicum* 83 (2006): 87-93; and Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), esp. 277-306.

<sup>4</sup> These secondary goods are indeed called “personalist” by the moralists John C. Ford and Gerald Kelly, *Contemporary Moral Theology*, vol. 2: *Marriage Questions* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1963), 38-39, and 75-76.

<sup>5</sup> Cottier, *Défis éthiques* (Saint-Maurice, Switzerland: Editions Saint-Augustin, 1996), 25.

Now, when we bring natural law into the picture, we see the proper moral thrust of this truth.<sup>6</sup> For, when in natural law parlance we speak of the natural inclinations, we are affirming the fundamental reality that we are teleologically “hard wired,” so to speak, to certain goods that God the author of our nature intends us to pursue. And there is one natural inclination that pertains immediately to our sexuality, namely, the inclination to procreation and to the rearing of children. Yet this inclination, which links us to the animal kingdom, remains in need of finalization, inasmuch as it must be integrated into the higher natural inclinations, commensurate with our rationality, if it is to serve our ultimate moral good.

This integration and finalization is achieved by the inclination to living in society, one of the inclinations following upon our rationality. And the only human society that can embrace the procreative inclination to bodily sexual union is, obviously, marriage. To be sure, while the inclination to communal living orders us to many forms of social institutions, that society which represents the bedrock of all other societies is what Aquinas terms the *domesticae conversationis consortium*, namely, marriage.<sup>7</sup>

In short, the inclination to living in community joins with the inclination to procreation and to the rearing of children in the way that form (representative of human rationality) joins with matter (representative of our animal-like bodies) in order to inscribe in the deepest fabric of our being a most powerful inclination to marriage.<sup>8</sup> This hylemorphic-styled inclination to marriage means that our sexuality targets not merely the good of sexual enjoyment or pleasure, but the two higher coessential goods of procreation

<sup>6</sup> For a much fuller treatment of the ordering of our sexuality to the joint goods of procreation and unitive love through the natural law, see my “The Natural Law Ordering of Human Sexuality to (Heterosexual) Marriage: Towards a Thomistic Philosophy of the Body,” *Nova et Vetera* 8, English edition (2010): 553-92.

<sup>7</sup> *ScG* III, c. 123. Repeating a long-held Catholic teaching, Vatican Council II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, §12, affirms marriage is the bedrock of all social institutions.

<sup>8</sup> This is essentially Aquinas’s argument in *STh* Suppl., q. 41, a. 1 (pulled from *IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 1), where, in answer to the question, “Whether matrimony is of the natural law,” Aquinas replies in the affirmative, as we are inclined by nature both to “the good of offspring” and to “the society of marriage,” whereby the spouses render to each other “domestic service” (*mutuum obsequium . . . in rebus domesticis*).

and unitive love-making (or spousal friendship), and into which sensual pleasure is subsumed. Since nature targets these goods together, it intends them always to be together, which only marriage accomplishes. Nuptiality, heterosexual marriage as a natural institution, operates, then, as a kind of intrinsic measure of what constitutes proper sexual activity.

We proceed now to the perfection of marriage through the power of the sacrament. First, though, I should sound a cautionary note on method. Having abandoned the project of the *Summa Theologiae* in the midst of his treatment of the sacraments, that is, before getting to matrimony, the mature Aquinas penned no actual treatise on this sacrament. In what follows, I will continue to draw upon the thought of Aquinas, but will rely chiefly upon his general sacramental theology. In a second adaptational move, I will attempt to fit the sacrament of marriage within this general theology.<sup>9</sup>

## II. MARRIAGE AS SACRAMENT<sup>10</sup>

### A) *Dynamic Actions of the Person of Christ*

First, let us underscore the inseparable connection between the sacraments and the person of Christ. Catholic doctrine professes that we best understand the sacraments, marriage included, if we see them as dynamic actions of the person of Christ himself. We

<sup>9</sup> Angela McKay (“Aquinas on the End of Marriage,” in *Human Fertility: Where Faith and Science Meet*, ed. Richard J. Fehring and Theresa Notare [Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 2008], 53-70, at 60) points out that Aquinas’s most developed treatment of marriage comes in his *Commentary on the Sentences* and in his slightly later *Summa contra Gentiles*. While McKay has in mind Aquinas’s philosophical (natural-law) teaching on marriage, her point holds for his treatment of the sacrament of marriage as well: for the earlier work, this treatment comes in *IV Sent.*, dd. 26-42 (subsequently reinserted in *STh Suppl.*, qq. 41-68); for the later work, this treatment is reduced to one chapter only, namely, *ScG IV*, c. 78 (though the study of marriage as a natural institution is covered in *ScG III*, cc. 122-26). We should also note that Aquinas’s remarks on the creation of the first man and woman in *STh I*, q. 92, aa. 2-3, make significant appeals to the sacramental nature of marriage.

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller and more developed treatment of this, see my “The Redemption and Divinization of Human Sexuality through the Sacrament of Marriage: A Thomistic Approach,” *Nova et Vetera* 10, English edition (2012): 383-413.

obtain salvation only by attaching ourselves, inclusive of our (sexed) bodies, to the person of Christ. This the sacraments accomplish. Already in the fifth century, Pope St. Leo the Great professed: “What was visible in Christ has passed over into the sacraments of the Church.”<sup>11</sup> Later in the High Middle Ages, we see this same understanding of the sacraments exhibited in the magnificent bas-relief sculpture of Christ on the central portal of the famous Romanesque church of Ste.-Madeleine in Vézelay, France: “There [on the portal],” explains the French Thomist scholar Jean-Pierre Torrell, “the sacraments are depicted as rays that come forth from (Christ), meeting the world of men at his feet, his hands meeting us through time and space.”<sup>12</sup>

In short, the sacraments of the Church extend the humanity of Christ in time. They mark the historical continuation of the Incarnation, the prolongation of God’s embodied presence among us.

Few theologians have amplified this teaching more than Aquinas. At the outset of the treatise on the sacraments in the *Summa* (III, q. 60), a treatise that follows upon this work’s comprehensive treatment of the mystery of Christ (III, qq. 1-59), he makes this doctrine unequivocal: “the sacraments of the Church derive their efficacy from the Incarnate Word himself.” A bit later he adds: “the sacraments of the Church derive their power from Christ’s Passion.”<sup>13</sup>

The sacraments of the Church represent the historical extension not simply of the Incarnation, then, but more precisely of Christ’s Passion, death, and resurrection. To quote another succinct line from Aquinas: “Christ’s Passion is, so to speak, applied to man through the sacraments.”<sup>14</sup> The sacraments derive their efficacy from Christ’s death and resurrection, from his divinity joined to his suffering humanity.

<sup>11</sup> Leo the Great, *Sermon 74*, 2 (PL 54:398), cited in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 45.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Aquinas’s Summa: Background, Structure, and Reception*, trans. Benedict M. Guevin (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 59.

<sup>13</sup> *STh* III, q. 62, a. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *STh* III, q. 61, a. 1, ad 3. Similarly in *STh* III, q. 64, a. 3, he asserts “the merit and power of Christ’s Passion operates in the sacraments.”

*B) “Instrumental” Actions of Christ*

Aquinas’s general sacramental theology is especially distinguished by his appropriation of the Aristotelian notion of efficient causality (i.e., principal and instrumental causality) to flesh out this teaching and thereby make it intelligible to human reason.<sup>15</sup> (This provides us, Torrell promptly observes, with an example of how “the Master of Aquino . . . boldly transpose[s] a principle he gets from Aristotle to put it at the service of a reality that the Greek could never have imagined.”)<sup>16</sup> Further, this philosophical notion of efficient causality allows Aquinas to avoid the tendency, seen especially at the time of the Reformation, to reduce the work of our salvation to an “either/or” proposition, namely, either to God’s producing justifying grace (the grace that saves) in us or to the sacraments doing the same.<sup>17</sup> If the latter, then one must affirm that something earthly and material produces something divine and spiritual, which on the face of it is patently absurd and idolatrous.

Armed with the notion of principal/instrumental efficient causality, Aquinas succeeds in affirming that both God and the sacraments produce justifying grace in us, but in different respects: God by way of principal efficient cause (the One who is proportioned to the effect or to the production of justifying grace as such, the cause which operates by the power of its own form) and the sacraments by way of instrumental efficient cause (God’s chosen channels or mediums through which he produces sanctifying grace, and which thus play a necessary role in the production of said grace). Since the principal cause and the instrumental cause operate at two different levels, each causes the

<sup>15</sup> The key texts are found in *STh* III, q. 62, aa. 1 and 4. For more on the philosophical solidity of this teaching, see Steven Long, “The Efficacy of God’s Sacramental Presence,” *Nova et Vetera* 7, English edition (2009): 869-76.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 140 (with my own slight modification of Royal’s translation).

<sup>17</sup> “The Spirit Saves, Not the Waters of Baptism,” as the title of a recent Protestant tract puts it.



action completely, not partly and partly. As Aquinas explains in a key passage from the *Summa contra Gentiles*:

When the same effect is attributed to a natural cause and to the divine power, it is not as though the effect were produced partly by God and partly by the natural agent: but the whole effect is produced by both, though in different ways, as the same effect is attributed wholly to the instrument, and wholly also to the principal agent.<sup>18</sup>

Without contradiction, then, we can and must affirm that justifying grace is produced both one hundred percent by God and one hundred percent by the sacraments, just as Michelangelo's *David* was produced both one hundred percent by Michelangelo, as principal cause, and one hundred percent by his chisel, as instrumental cause. Indeed, as Torrell points out, it is the constant teaching of Aquinas that an instrumental cause always leaves its mark, it truly modifies the action of the principal efficient cause (as the type of chisel used by Michelangelo would have played a role in the quality and style of his carving).<sup>19</sup>

Wishing to highlight the inseparable link uniting the sacraments with the person of Christ, Aquinas drives the notion of instrumental causality further. He observes that an instrument can be either conjoined (like the hand of the painter) or separated (like the paint brush). In the sacraments, God in the person of the Son acts as the principal efficient cause of our justification, but through his assumed humanity ("Christ's divinity working through his humanity," is how Aquinas suggestively puts it) as through a conjoined instrumental cause and through the sacraments as separated instrumental causes.<sup>20</sup> Working not independently of Christ's Passion, the sacraments work by way of extension of or participation in Christ's Passion.

<sup>18</sup> *ScG* III, c. 70 (translation: Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 5 vols. [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955-57]). For the same idea as it pertains to the Bible's being authored both by God and by human beings, see Charles Morerod, *The Church and the Human Quest for Truth* (Ave Maria, Fl.: Sapientia Press, 2008), 33-37.

<sup>19</sup> Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2:128-31, esp. 130. For texts in Aquinas (provided by Torrell), see *STh* III, q. 62, a. 1, ad 2; but also *STh* I, q. 45, a. 5; and especially *ScG* IV, c. 41.

<sup>20</sup> *STh* III, q. 62, a. 5; see as well q. 64, a. 3.

Holding in mind, then, this grand organic “chain” of efficient (principal and instrumental) causes, Aquinas explains for us how the sacraments operate as dynamic actions of the person of Christ. Christ on the Cross is the one who is active in the sacraments through his humanity as through a conjoined instrumental cause and through the words and material signs of the sacraments as through separated instrumental causes. As instruments in the hands of our Savior, the material earthly realities of water, oil, bread, wine, and words truly produce our salvation. The sacraments are dynamic actions of the person of Christ at the same time that they retain their own integrity, and thus nobility, of being veritable instruments of Christ; they are not mere occasions of Christ’s dynamic justifying activity, they do not simply point to Christ’s saving actions, but they are true causes of Christ’s sanctifying activity (“not only as signs, but also as causes”).<sup>21</sup>

### C) *The Power to Justify Marriage*

That the sacraments derive their power from Christ’s death and resurrection, that they have the power to justify in virtue of their applying the fruits of Christ’s Passion, has direct bearing on our sexuality. Christ chose the natural institution of marriage, to which our sexuality is ordered as its normative proportionate good, as fit for inclusion in the sacramental economy. Catholic teaching affirms that by raising marriage, an institution common to all human cultures as deriving from human nature (natural law), to the level of a sacrament, Christ made it possible for marriage to share in the fruits of his Passion.

Holding in mind, then, Aquinas’s tripartite formula, or three distinct moments, of the sacraments—*sacramentum tantum* (the external rite, or the outward sign of the sacrament), *res et sacramentum* (the symbolizing reality, or the intermediate cause and effect of the sacrament), and *res tantum* (the grace conferred, or the ultimate effect of the sacrament)—we can say the

<sup>21</sup> *STh* III, q. 62, a. 1, ad 1.

following.<sup>22</sup> In the sacrament of marriage husband and wife attach themselves, in faith, to the person of Christ, that is, to the person of Christ in his very redemptive act. Just as the sacrament of baptism has us undergo symbolically, though really, Christ's own death and resurrection, with water as the sign or symbol (the *sacramentum tantum*) of it (see Rom 6:3-4), so does the sacrament of matrimony place the love between husband and wife symbolically, though really, on the Cross with Christ, with the vows acting as the sign or symbol (*sacramentum tantum*) of it.<sup>23</sup>

So what happens to marriage, as an institution, by its participating in the redemptive offering of the Son of God? Here we take our cue from the fact that marriage as a natural institution remains normative for sacramental marriage. What the grace of matrimony perfects is precisely what natural marriage is ordered to: children and unitive love. The sacrament of marriage redeems and divinizes marriage as a procreative-unitive institution. It does so through the configuring of the natural and indissoluble loving bond of husband and wife unto the supernatural and perfectly indissoluble loving bond of Christ and the Church (the *res et sacramentum*). The *res et sacramentum* of matrimony, in other words, gives husbands a share in Christ's perfect self-emptying love and wives a share in the Church's perfect reciprocal love: "(Marriage) is a great mystery," St. Paul asserts in Ephesians 5:32, "and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church." The graced effect (*res tantum*) of this sacrament, because it draws upon Christ's power over sin, confers upon husband and wife Christ's power over sin, especially over sin's assault on marriage (let us call it power over "marital" sin). To be sure, each sacrament confers its power to justify in view of the particular human need Christ intends it to meet. This includes "over and above [sanctifying]

<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Rev. Paul J. Keller, O.P., for providing me with his (unpublished), "Tri-Partite Formula (Three Moments of the Sacraments: *Sacramentum Tantum*, *Res et Sacramentum*, *Res Tantum*)," the insights of which have proved invaluable to me.

<sup>23</sup> For a textual analysis of the notion of marriage vows in Aquinas, see Mary Catherine Sommers, "Marriage Vows and 'Taking Up a New State,'" *Nova et Vetera* 7, English edition (2009): 679-95.

grace,” affirms Aquinas, a special divine assistance that targets the precise aim of that sacrament.<sup>24</sup>

*D) In Need of Particular Divine Assistance*

That the institution of marriage stands in particular need of divine assistance is fairly obvious in today’s culture. Facing obstacles particular to the married state, all spouses would admit that being married is not easy. The challenges that come with marriage are only too easy to enumerate: riding through the inevitable dissipation of romantic feelings, which come and go of their very nature, and the subsequent temptation to reduce one’s marital love to a mere “feeling”; learning to live in intimate communion with another person who remains subject to inevitable “mood swings” and who retains his or her shortcomings and personality quirks, not to mention his or her distinctive male/female “hardwiring” (and the tension that results); handling the strain and stress that result from financial straits and from the countless sacrifices of time and desire demanded of spouses each day, especially when raising young children; learning to resolve the disagreements that inevitably arise, even between spouses who are committed to growing in holiness, and which are often exacerbated by the human tendency to dig in one’s heels when in a dispute, no matter the objective truth of the matter; bearing the annoyances and personal grievances, often quite minor, that commonly occur in marriage and that often gnaw at each others’ hearts, especially as these pull towards hurtful arguing; learning to forgive each other of and to bury in the past, even when they do not “feel” like it, those unavoidable hurts that spouses inflict upon each other on account of human shortcoming; learning to deal with and to overcome that ubiquitous albatross on all human relationships, especially marriage, namely, misunderstanding and miscommunication; and the list goes on, to say nothing of the more grievous harms, such as divorce or marital infidelity (including “virtual” infidelity, where a spouse, usually the

<sup>24</sup> “[S]acramental grace confers, over and above [sanctifying] grace commonly so called, a certain divine assistance in obtaining the end of the sacrament” (*STb* III, q. 62, a. 2).

husband, falls—often quite regularly—to the allure of internet pornography, or, worse yet, to chat-room sex or “cybersex,” often with the inability to break himself of said allure, though he might desire to do so, and no matter the documented deleterious effects pornography has on marriage and family).<sup>25</sup>

These challenges make it clear that there must be more than just the spouses’ own wills, however good intentioned, to fall back on in order to make their marriages work. Indeed, it would hardly be surprising if many couples getting married today, bearing in mind the plague on marriage marked by the near fifty-percent divorce rate, the rising tide of cohabitation and out-of-wedlock sex, or the growing legal recognition of gay marriage, were to approach the institution of marriage with a cynical attitude. More than ever married couples today need divine assistance.

While it would be silly to deny this need, many yet remain unwilling to acknowledge their personal inadequacies, both moral and spiritual, relative to their relationships, or to renounce the propensity to resort to one’s own will and to “go it alone” without God’s help in their marriage. Pelagianism, that ancient heresy that encourages us to think we are capable on our own of always making the right choices, remains an ever-persistent temptation.<sup>26</sup> Particularly insidious to marriage, the Pelagian trap induces us, foolishly, to think that we possess the inherent ability, the right

<sup>25</sup> In his “Pornography—and Marriage” (*The Catholic Thing* online [nfiproofs.com], 29 Jan. 2010; a duplicate of “The Effects of Pornography on Individuals, Marriage, Family and Community,” from the Family Research Council website [frc.org], 2 Dec. 2009), psychologist and researcher Patrick F. Fagan enumerates some of the “documented effects [of pornography] on family life,” including: infidelity and divorce; a loss of interest and satisfaction in sexual intercourse with one’s spouse; emotional distancing from and general dissatisfaction in one’s spouse; the perception of infidelity by the other spouse (usually the wife), resulting in a sense of “betrayal, loss, mistrust, devastation, and anger,” as well as of sexual inadequacy, if not in outright depression; a strong tendency by men who engage in voyeurism to view women as “commodities or as ‘sex objects’”; etc.

<sup>26</sup> Specifically, “Pelagianism is the heresy which holds that man can take the initial and fundamental steps towards salvation by his own efforts, apart from Divine Grace” (*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone [2d ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press], 1058). The *Dictionary of Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Pietro Parente, et al., trans. E. Doronzo (Milwaukee, Wis.: Bruce Publishing, 1951), 211, adds as one of Pelagianism’s “basic principles” the view that “[m]an, with his natural forces and his free will, can avoid all sin and win the beatific vision.”

judgment and the strength of will whenever we call upon them, to make our marriages work and be happy: “Whatever happens, we’re never going to get divorced,” is how one journalist, sounding a distinct Pelagian-like ring, describes her mindset when she got married, determined as she was, along with much of Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1980), not to inflict the pain and anguish of divorce upon her children, and yet who later got divorced herself.<sup>27</sup>

Contra the Pelagian mindset, Christian revelation makes clear that every human individual possesses a fallen condition, that we all, without exception, are born into original sin. It is this—sin—that accounts in large measure for the struggles that all married persons face. Moral shortcoming, sin, remains a fact of life—of everyone’s life—and thus of married life, no matter how good the spouses’ characters. Sin and sin alone poses the greatest obstacle to marital happiness. All our relationships, but especially marriage, bear witness to the moral brokenness within all of us and how we carry that brokenness into our relationships.

#### *E) Divine Grace Needed Even for Natural Virtue*

Catholic tradition proclaims that God, the author of our sexed nature with its teleological ordering to marriage, wishes that couples might attain the happy, fulfilling marriages they desire. Indeed, he wants happiness in marriage for us more than we even want it ourselves. (The happiness here, of course, is that relative to the present life, namely, a happiness that is partial and ordered to the attaining to beatific glory, or to the immediate beholding of the Triune God “face to face” [cf. 1 Cor 13:12], wherein all

<sup>27</sup> Susan Gregory Thomas, “The Divorce Generation,” *The Wall Street Journal*, “The Saturday Essay,” 9 July 2011 (online.wsj.com). Continuing in a Pelagian-like strain, Gregory Thomas elaborates: “No marital scenario, I told myself, could become so bleak or hopeless as to compel me to embed my children in the torture of a split family. . . . Call us helicopter parents, call us neurotically attached, but those of us who survived the wreckage of split families were determined never to inflict such wounds on our children. We knew better. We were doing everything differently, and the fundamental premise was simple: ‘Kids come first’ meant that we would not divorce.” Yet as all Pelagianism in the end comes to naught, so too Gregory Thomas’s determination to avoid divorce through her (and her spouse’s) sheer will power: “And yet divorce came. In spite of everything.”

human desire, bodily and spiritual, shall find complete and everlasting satisfaction. At the same time, as “face to face” typifies the very physical posture that is unique to human sexual union, and thus is symbolic of how the sexual joining of bodies becomes elevated to the level of personal union, we can appreciate how the sexual union of husband and wife “face to face,” in its own faint yet privileged way, points toward our final aim, toward supreme human glory. It is precisely this glory to which the sacraments order us.) In view of this, and aware of the particular struggles against sin that the institution of marriage wages, Christ the Lord wished that married couples might share in the power which he alone, in virtue of his Passion, death, and resurrection, possesses over sin. Christ wishes to place himself squarely in the center of our marriages.

Concretely, this divine assistance, of which Christ alone, because of his redemptive accomplishment, is the source, again takes the form of justifying (or sanctifying) grace.<sup>28</sup> The only real antidote to sin, Christ’s justifying grace alone can heal us of our brokenness, of our fallen condition. It is this grace that gives the sacraments, employed by Christ as separated instrumental mediums, the power to justify, the power to redeem. This power to justify, the ultimate effect of the sacraments, is precisely what the term *res tantum* signifies in Aquinas’s sacramental theology.

Is it possible to obtain happiness in marriage without this grace? Since the corrosion of sin does not succeed in completely extracting the human ability to do good—“human nature is not altogether corrupted by sin, so as to be shorn of every natural good,” insists Aquinas<sup>29</sup>—it would seem that we should, in principle, respond in the affirmative.

However, without Christ’s healing justifying grace, the natural good we can do on our own, like being honest or just, or a self-giving spouse, will never amount to much. Wishing to underscore this very point, Aquinas gives rather paltry, almost laughable, examples of “good works” (and the context implies that he is speaking of good moral works), that we can perform without

<sup>28</sup> For Christ as the source of all grace, see *STh* III, q. 7, a. 9.

<sup>29</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 109, a. 2.

grace: “build dwellings, plant vineyards, and the like.”<sup>30</sup> He does not put forward such examples trivially, as he knows that virtue denotes a stable disposition for doing good (as signified by the term *habitus*), which implies the unity of all the virtues. The virtuous individual, in other words, loves and does the good in all areas of his life, not just in some areas. While the judge who is an adulterer may appear to be honest and just, at most we can say that he performs honest and just external acts, or that he attains an external approximation of virtue. Strictly speaking, though, we cannot say he is virtuous.

So it is with anyone without grace. As Aquinas makes clear, our sinful condition leaves us with a diminished ability even for purely natural virtue.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, to excel even at purely natural virtue, that is, to attain to the habit (*habitus*) of natural virtue, one must have more than the acquired moral virtues, as these virtues result from our own, very limited efforts. With a fallen condition, we can perform nothing more on our own than good external acts, or imperfect virtuous acts; we cannot attain to the true (natural) habit of virtue. To attain to this, we must have benefit of the (natural) habit of virtue consequent upon the healing effects of divine grace, namely, the infused moral virtues.<sup>32</sup>

Divine grace is therefore necessary to excel even at the natural love of man and woman, to excel even at doing the moral good that is natural (or proportionate) to us. Only sanctifying grace, God’s supernatural assistance, can give husband and wife the

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Later, in *STh* I-II, q. 109, a. 5, showing that he follows Augustine on this point, he reiterates the same view: “without grace man . . . can perform works conducive of a good which is natural to him, as ‘to toil in the fields, to drink, to eat, or to have friends,’ and the like, as Augustine says in his third reply to the Pelagians.”

<sup>31</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 85, a. 1. Later, in a significant passage (I-II, q. 109, a. 3), Aquinas adds: “unless is it cured by God’s grace, the appetite of man’s rational will follows its private good, on account of the corruption of nature. . . . [I]n the state of corrupt nature [then], man needs the help of grace to heal his nature.”

<sup>32</sup> On this point, I am indebted to Steven A. Long, “The Gifts of the Holy Spirit and Their Indispensability for the Christian Moral Life: Grace as *Motus*,” given at the annual conference of the Academy of Catholic Theology, May 26, 2011, Washington, D.C. On the practical benefits of infused moral virtue, Long writes: “Reason is fortified and elevated [by infused moral virtue] so as to be able to discern the practical implications of the Christian life, and to remediate the wounded natural inclinations so that action is befitting both to the proportionate natural and to the ultimate supernatural end.”



power to overcome their selfish tendencies and moral shortcomings. Indeed, lest our desires to have happy marriages, which most newlyweds deep down yearn for, all in accordance with God's design, be left frustrated on account of sin, God fittingly offers us the help necessary to attain happy, fulfilling marriages.

*F) Divine Marital Assistance Given ex opere operato*

Scholastic theology employs the phrase *ex opere operato*, famously canonized at the Council of Trent (1545-63), to stress that this divine assistance is necessarily given in the sacrament of matrimony, as it is given in all the sacraments whenever they are validly celebrated.<sup>33</sup> To put it in Aquinas's equivalent phrasing, the sacraments necessarily "effect what they signify."<sup>34</sup> The phrase *ex opere operato* is much maligned (especially in Reformation theology, which sometimes speaks pejoratively of the sacraments as autonomous "magical" rites), and is much misunderstood. At bottom, it signifies the fact that the sacraments are, indeed, dynamic actions of the person of Christ, that in the sacraments we are guaranteed to encounter Christ on the Cross, receiving from him his power over sin: "The efficacy attributed to the sacrament is subordinated to the efficacy attributed to Christ as Mediator of salvation," writes the sacramental theologian Colman O'Neill.<sup>35</sup> The sacraments possess an objective integrity, whereby the person of Christ, as principal efficient cause of justifying grace, promises

<sup>33</sup> The phrase *ex opere operato* is used in canon 8 of the Council of Trent's decree on the sacraments (Session 7, 3 March 1547): "If anyone says that grace is not conferred by the sacraments of the New Law *ex opere operato* . . . let him be anathema" (*Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman Tanner, 2 vols. [Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990], 685).

<sup>34</sup> *STh* III, q. 62, a. 1, ad 1.

<sup>35</sup> Colman O'Neill, *Sacramental Realism: A General Theory of the Sacraments* (Princeton, N.J.: Scepter, 1998), 16. Just before this, O'Neill observes how sacramental personalism, i.e., seeing the sacraments as dynamic actions of the person of Christ, helps "clear up misunderstandings about what the Council of Trent was trying to say when it attributed to the sacraments efficacy *ex opere operato*." See as well O'Neill's extended discussion on *ex opere operato* in his *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments* (rev. ed., ed. Romanus Cessario; New York: Society of St. Paul, 1991), 119-26.

to be present in the sacraments conferring the grace he intends to give.

For married persons this means that they are guaranteed to share in Christ's power to break them from the grip that sin holds on their conjugal life, they are guaranteed a divine assistance whose aim is to heal marital brokenness and to bolster and perfect spousal love. Giving our marriages a share in Christ's redemptive victory over sin, a share in Christ's power to justify, the sacrament of marriage has the power to redeem human sexuality in its inherently nuptial meaning, and so promises spouses a happy, successful marriage (the partial happiness proper to the present life, as noted above). Does this mean that spouses will be spared the hardships mentioned above, spared the manifold ways that sin assails the institution of marriage? By no means! The grace of the sacrament of marriage does not erase the effects of our fallen condition. But it does mean that Christian marriage will not succumb to these hardships, that Christian marriage is guaranteed not to fail, since husband and wife are guaranteed the divine assistance to overcome their marital struggles.

*G) The Duty of Cooperating opus operans with the Grace of the Sacrament*

At this point, calling to mind St. Paul's assertion in Romans 3:22 that "the righteousness of God [is] through faith in Jesus Christ," we must stress the requisite role of faith in reaping the fruits of the grace offered *ex opere operato* in the sacraments, as Aquinas himself insists.<sup>36</sup> Colman O'Neill explains the way in which it is a mistake to separate the act of faith, and more precisely faith acting through charity, from the objective action of Christ *ex opere operato* in the sacraments.<sup>37</sup> Faith and ritual sacrament are two (necessary) heads of the same coin. If properly understood, in other words, and in order to avoid being reduced to a static, purely formalized and impersonal reality, the doctrine

<sup>36</sup> *STh* III, q. 68, a. 8 (here Aquinas is speaking of baptism proper).

<sup>37</sup> O'Neill, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, 38.

of *ex opere operato* demands as its necessary counterpart what O'Neill terms the *opus operans* of the sacrament. This means:

[the believer's] personal dedication of himself to God, [which] is the effect of God's loving action within him, [and the corresponding] obligation [that] lies on the recipient to exercise his liturgical [i.e., sacramental] function with full deliberation and whole-heartedly; this applies not only to the period of preparation for the sacrament and the actual moment of reception but also to the time afterwards. . . . [T]he sacraments . . . are seen in a false light if they are thought of as sudden inputs of spiritual energy having no relation to what goes before or afterwards.<sup>38</sup>

“What goes before or afterwards.” We can appreciate the practical demands this places on couples, not only in their preparation for their wedding, but throughout the whole of their married lives. At the very least it demands faith—faith on both partners' parts, since marriage is indeed a partnership—that Christ can and does effect what he intends to effect in this sacrament. It demands faith in the supernatural quality of the marriage. In their preparation for marriage, couples should at the very least seek to inform themselves adequately of the Church's teaching on the sacrament of matrimony and, more generally, of the Church's vision of the meaning and purpose of human sexuality and of marriage's role in it. (This places no small duty to articulate this teaching faithfully and clearly on those responsible for marriage preparation, whether through the Pre-Cana program or its equivalent, as some dioceses in the United States seem well to understand.<sup>39</sup>) Strict lifelong fidelity to each other and openness to children are, in this regard, the *sine qua non* starting point. Full, deliberate, and wholehearted participation in their sacramental function also means bride and bridegroom must ensure that the primary focus—and for them the prayerful focus—is placed squarely on the wedding ceremony and on the exchange of vows (how often do we find the wedding

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 126-27.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, the Diocese of Phoenix, Arizona, has recently inaugurated a nine-month marriage preparation course “in an effort to reverse a trend to marital breakdown,” as reported by Catholic World News ([catholicculture.org](http://catholicculture.org); 27 Jan. 2010). This course includes “instruction in natural family planning, the theology of Christian marriage, and common problems that face young married couples.”

reception afterwards, rightfully a joyous occasion, to be the highlight of the wedding day?).

It is important not to minimize the sometimes thorny moral issues relative to the ordering of marriage to procreation and unitive love that a life of faith united to charity must resolve according to the mind and heart of the Church. The principal point to stress here is that the only sure road to follow in properly disposing oneself for faithful reception of the sacrament of marriage, beyond the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation (which the Church's common tradition invites engaged couples to receive just prior to the wedding ceremony), not to mention reception of the sacrament of confirmation, is to live in strict fidelity to the Church's moral teaching. This necessitates living chastely and avoiding all occasions of premarital sexual intimacy, including, obviously, cohabitation. Ideally, couples should follow this path with a view not so much to observing Church "rules" per se as to the true good of the marriage and to the "new beginning" in the relationship that living in accordance with the Church's moral teaching promises. It is no mere coincidence that those married couples who live in accordance with Church teaching enjoy an exceedingly lower divorce rate.<sup>40</sup>

Extending throughout the whole of their married lives, this moral duty of cooperating with the grace of the sacrament through fidelity to the Church's moral teaching implies, among other things, avoidance of all use of artificial contraceptives, even in those circumstances where responsible parenthood might for a time mitigate against having children (in which case the natural method of birth control can be observed). It also includes, if we consider the opposite dilemma relative to procreation, the resolve not to resort to artificial methods of reproduction (IVF) when encountering difficulty in achieving pregnancy. Artificial methods either of contraception or of reproduction contravene the

<sup>40</sup> For instance, those couples who avoid the use of artificial contraceptives and instead rely upon the (morally licit) natural method of birth regulation enjoy a divorce rate potentially as low as 0.2%, and certainly no higher than 5%. See Erika Bachiochi, ed., *Women, Sex, and the Church: A Case for Catholic Teaching* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2010); and John F. Kippley, *The Legacy of Margaret Sanger, the Foundress of Planned Parenthood* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Couple to Couple League International, 1988).

objective moral law (natural law), whereby they constitute intrinsically disordered actions (*malum in se*).

Not meant to stand in isolation from the other sacraments, sacramental marriage also requires the spouses' full participation in the sacramental life of the Church (regular Mass attendance, frequent reception of the sacrament of reconciliation, etc.). And since grace perfects nature, the grace of marriage presupposes a certain kind of natural human compatibility between the partners, as well as the disciplined effort of observing the practical duties which growing and sustaining marital love and friendship require (such as the regular communication that friendship normally demands, expressing guilt and contrition when the spouses wrong each other, granting forgiveness whenever such guilt and contrition are expressed and then letting the issue rest, and the like). Hence, the duty to marry the right person, namely, the person of living faith and of sound moral character who has proved his or her commitment to living virtuously and to handling relationship issues maturely—and to turning to God for help.

It is imperative to realize that Christ's guarantee of a happy marriage does not release married couples from their duty to work diligently at their marriages; indeed, it requires it. In particular, it requires couples continually to call upon and exercise that most necessary and useful of virtues for the conjugal life: prudence, the aim of which is right judgment in all our practical decisions. Prudence, as one Thomist scholar puts it, "involves doing the right thing, for the right reason, with the right choices and emotions, at the right time."<sup>41</sup> In a word, as grace perfects nature, so does the grace of this sacrament perfect the partners' own natural efforts to make their marriages work. Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais sum up well the grace-perfecting-nature dynamic of Christian marriage when they write:

<sup>41</sup> Craig Steven Titus, "Reasonable Acts," in *Philosophical Virtue and Psychological Strength: Building the Bridge*, ed. Romanus Cessario, Craig Steven Titus, and Paul C. Vitz (Manchester, N.H.: Sophia Institute, 2013), 81-116. For an enlightening study on the role of "right reason" in the moral life, cf. Laurent Sentis, "La lumière dont nous faisons usage: La règle de la raison et la loi divine selon Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 79 (1995): 49-69.

[T]he natural life and the supernatural life do not exist as two separate planes of existence. Instead, they interpenetrate each other. The supernatural life reaches down to heal and to elevate the natural life without destroying its integrity. For example, Christ has elevated marriage into a sacrament of his grace. Christian marriage, nevertheless, has many aspects belonging simply to the natural order of marriage: earning a living, sexual intercourse, having and raising children, and so on. Yet in Christian marriage each of these natural elements now participates in the power of Christ's cross and resurrection.<sup>42</sup>

The *opus operans* of marriage implies, then, all the (natural) practical demands enumerated above. Only by observing all these demands can married couples hope to share in Christ's guarantee of a happy and successful marriage delivered through the Church's sacrament of matrimony. Otherwise this sacrament would indeed simply amount to an empty "magical" rite.

#### *H) The Divinized Love between Husband and Wife*

Turning again to the *res tantum* of marriage, the ultimate effect of this sacrament, we can see that there is still much more to the redemptive or sanctifying work of the sacrament of marriage. Aquinas clues us into this deeper reality when he observes that the sacraments (each of them) offer us not merely a remedy for sin, but also a supernaturalizing principle. In brief, Christ's justifying grace offered in the sacraments has a twofold aim: first, to heal us of our corrupted nature by restoring us to our natural abilities; and, second, to elevate us, proportion us, to our supernatural good, whereby we are ordered to acting in a genuinely supernatural, divine-like way.<sup>43</sup> Wishing to give full weight and veracity to the supernaturalizing power of Christ's justifying grace,

<sup>42</sup> Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, *Knowing the Love of Christ. An Introduction to the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 50.

<sup>43</sup> "[T]he sacraments of the New Law are ordained, first, as a remedy against sin and, second, for the perfecting of the soul in things pertaining to the divine worship" *STh* III, q. 63, a. 1. This is even clearer in I-II, q. 109, aa. 2 and 5: "in the state of corrupt nature, [man needs a gratuitous strength added to natural strength, i.e., he needs sanctifying grace] in order to be healed, and in order to do and wish supernatural good [and thus] to carry out works of supernatural virtue...[Indeed, since] everlasting life is an end exceeding the proportion of human nature... a higher force is needed, namely, the force of grace."

and following the lead of both Scripture (2 Pet 1:4 refers to grace as a “participation in the divine nature”) and the Greek Fathers, Aquinas does not hesitate to use the bold terms “deify” (*deificare*) and “deiform” or “divinization” (*deiformitas*) in reference to the *res tantum* of sanctifying grace.<sup>44</sup> In one famous passage, Aquinas insists that by grace we gain a participated likeness of the divine goodness after the manner of “whiteness mak[ing] a thing white.”<sup>45</sup>

While distinct, then, the two aspects of the *res tantum* of the sacraments, namely, healing medicine and divinizing power, must not be seen as separable realities, as if the one were simply “stacked” on top of the other, but instead as deeply interpenetrating principles. To be precise, as grace perfects nature, so the deifying element implies and subsumes the healing one. In divinizing the purely human love of husband and wife by likening it unto the indissoluble love between Christ and the Church, by likening it unto the God who is himself love, the *res tantum* of marriage implies also the healing of marital sin.

Much more than a mere safeguarding against the manifold ways sin assails the institution of marriage, then, the sacrament of matrimony, through its deifying work, elevates the natural human love of man and woman, of husband and wife, to the level of the divine, making it attain to the very love that is proper to God himself. As the economy of salvation, of which the sacraments are expressive, makes clear, God never intended marriage, common to all human societies as owing to the natural law, to remain a purely natural institution; he never intended the love between man and woman to satisfy nothing more than natural, proportionate needs. Christ, in his sacramental (instrumental) action, takes the institution of marriage and divinizes the human love (*eros*)

<sup>44</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 112, a. 1. For more on “deification” or “divinization” in Aquinas’s theology of created grace, including references to ample texts and to the patristic heritage, see Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2:126-28; Torrell notes in particular that “grace is a deiform structure . . . [and] Thomas uses the terms ‘deify’ and ‘deiform’ so often as to leave no doubt on the subject.” For even more extended discussion on this, see Jean-Hervé Nicolas, *Les profondeurs de la grâce* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1969), 56-76; cf. as well Luc-Thomas Somme, *Thomas d’Aquin, La divinisation dans le Christ* (Geneva: Ad Solem, 1998).

<sup>45</sup> *STh* I-II, q. 110, a. 2 ad 1.

between husband and wife and orders it immediately to the supernatural love of God (*agape*).<sup>46</sup> For when bride and bridegroom pronounce their vows before an ordained Church minister, their natural love becomes, truly, albeit symbolically (symbolized, that is, by the consent or exchange of vows), Christ's own perfect, indissoluble (or unending) love for his Bride, the Church, and the Church's own perfect, indissoluble love for her Bridegroom, Christ.<sup>47</sup>

We are now in a position of appreciating the full import of the Scholastic adage that the sacraments necessarily effect what they signify, at least as it applies to the particular case of the sacrament of marriage. In Christ we see what kind of lover God is, namely, a lover who takes on our lowly body and soul not for his benefit but for ours, and who offers himself completely, to the point of undergoing the worst imaginable (not to mention undeserved) suffering, utterly for our sake. What the sacrament of marriage proclaims is that God, desiring that we enjoy truly happy, fulfilling marriages, wants husband and wife, man and woman, to be this kind of lover to each other as well, and guarantees to communicate to them the divine grace (or help) that alone can bring it about. Without the sacrament of marriage, the love between husband and wife would never become the kind of love God intends it to be; with the sacrament of matrimony, it is *guaranteed* to become this kind of love.

We know that the best husband, the best father, is the one who serves the needs of his wife and children before his own, who gives of himself to his family completely without thought of cost

<sup>46</sup> "Matrimony as ordained to natural life is a function of nature. But insofar as it has something spiritual it is a sacrament" (*STh* III, q. 65, a. 2, ad 1). While not addressing the sacrament of marriage per se, the first part of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est* makes this very argument of *eros*; if *eros* is to avoid degenerating into a dehumanizing love, it needs to be taken up into and finalized by *agape*.

<sup>47</sup> "Since there is in the human species a natural exigency for the union of male and female to be one and indivisible, such unity and indissolubility must needs be ordained by human law. To that ordinance the divine law adds a supernatural reason, derived from the fact that marriage signifies the inseparable union of Christ with His Church [*ex significatione inseparabilis coniunctionis Christi et Ecclesiae*], which is one as He is one" (*ScG* III, c. 123). For similar wording, see Aquinas's commentary on Romans, *Super Romanos*, c. 7, lect. 1 (cited in Sommers, "Marriage Vows," 693).



to himself. The best husband and father is the one who loves like Christ; the best wife and mother is the one who loves like the Church. So it is that in the sacrament of marriage, Christ transforms the husband's love into his own and the wife's love into the Church's: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave his life up for her," St. Paul adds in Ephesians 5:25, just after telling wives to be subject to their husbands "just as the Church is subject to Christ." Because, as Aquinas tells us, the union of Christ and the Church is "one to one to be held forever," in that "there is one Church" and that "Christ will never be separated from his Church," it follows that the sacrament of marriage "is a union of one man to one woman to be held indivisibly [or indissolubly]."<sup>48</sup> Too rarely do those who partake in this sacrament understand or appreciate the "great mystery" that marks Christian marriage, a mystery that the ancient Christian author Tertullian (d. ca. 220) grasped and sought movingly to describe in a treatise addressed to his own wife:

Both [Christian spouses] are brethren, both fellow servants, no difference of spirit or flesh; nay, they are truly 'two in one flesh' (Gen 2:24). Where the flesh is one, one is the spirit too. Together they pray, together prostrate themselves, together perform their fasts; mutually teaching, mutually exhorting, mutually sustaining. Equally are they both found in the Church of God; equally at the banquet of God.<sup>49</sup>

### *I) A Ministry of Body and Soul*

When looking for a term that denotes the heart of this sacrament, Aquinas opts for a term that may surprise the modern reader: ministry. Christian spouses, Aquinas tells us, "are those who propagate and safeguard the spiritual life by administering to

<sup>48</sup> ScG IV, c. 78. Previous to this Aquinas writes: "Because the sacraments effect what they signify, one must believe that in this sacrament a grace is conferred on those marrying, and that by this grace they are included in the union of Christ and the Church."

<sup>49</sup> From "To His Wife," trans. H. Ellershaw, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 4, *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minicius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 47-9, quoted in Matthew Levering, ed., *On Marriage and Family: Classic and Contemporary Texts* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 26.

both body and soul . . . [since] husband and wife are joined together in order to beget children and to bring them up in the fear of the Lord.”<sup>50</sup> The ancient Christian author Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215) puts it nicely when he interprets the passage in Matthew 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered in my name,” to signify the Christian family of father, mother, and child praying together.<sup>51</sup>

Behind this recognition of marriage as a type of ministry stands Aquinas’s teaching, unique to him, that the sacramental life (or the Christian spiritual life) parallels the dynamic growth and development of bodily life (providing another example of how retaining a robust view of nature with all its ontological density pays dividends in the perfecting supernatural order).<sup>52</sup> It is proper to the nature of our embodied life to live in society (i.e., to live in community with other embodied persons), and for this marriage is essential, inasmuch as its fecundity makes human society possible.<sup>53</sup> Since marriage not only unites in love a man and a woman, but also and especially brings human individuals into

<sup>50</sup> ScG IV, c. 58.

<sup>51</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 3.10.68.1, quoted in Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 135.

<sup>52</sup> *STh* III, q. 65, a. 1. While the foundation for this teaching on the sacramental life paralleling bodily life is laid in *IV Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 2, its first explicit appearance comes in ScG IV, c. 58, as Torrell (*Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2:295 n. 60) points out. On the uniqueness of this teaching, Torrell continues: “[W]hile the theologians of Thomas’s time sought to justify the number of seven sacraments by a correspondence with the seven deadly sins (Albertus Magnus) or by the three theological virtues completed with the four cardinal virtues (Bonaventure), Thomas seems to be the only one to develop this parallel between corporeal and spiritual life, simultaneously more natural and fecund. Virtues or vices, good works or sins, the expressions of the spiritual life do not appear in him as more or less artificially tacked on to the Christian life, but rather as manifestations of a living organism, one which can certainly be affected by illnesses and recover its health or even die, but whose growth is the usual rule and which can also, through regular exercise, firm up and consolidate itself.”

<sup>53</sup> This view can also be found in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.12.1162a17-19; for Aquinas’s commentary, VIII *Nic. Ethic.*, lect. 12 (nn. 1719-23); *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger (Notre Dame, Ind.: Dumb Ox Books, 1993). In his “Children as the Common Good of Marriage,” *Nova et Vetera* 7, English edition (2009): 697-709, Michael Waldstein points out that while marriage puts us squarely in relation to the common good of human society, this notion is largely ignored in current discussions on marriage and human sexuality. The ill fruits of this are especially apparent in the same-sex marriage debate.

existence, all of whom (spouses as well as children) have a supernatural destiny, or all of whom God wills to deify, marriage entails profound spiritual and bodily needs. It is in order to meet these needs that Christ elevates the natural institution of marriage to the level of a sacrament.<sup>54</sup> More specifically, because marriage, as a natural institution, comprises a unity of proximate goods or ends, in particular, procreation and unitive love, the healing and divinizing efficacy of the *res tantum* of marriage perfects these same joint goods. It bears repeating: the whole of married life, encompassing both spousal and parental goods and duties, is sanctified, that is, healed and deified, in this sacrament.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, when husband and wife administer to their own and their children's physical and spiritual needs, they perform a ministry of body and soul. Summing up these physical and spiritual needs, at least as regards the rearing of children, Aquinas writes in one passage, "the young need not only bodily nutrition, as animals do, but also the training of the soul."<sup>56</sup> That marriage demands a "training of the soul" (*instructione quantum ad animam*)—a splendid phrase for parental undertaking that points to the "personalist" strain of Aquinas's views on marriage against those who criticize him for being overly "physicalist" in his emphasis on procreation—we should interpret broadly, inasmuch as it covers a whole gamut of needs (emotional, moral, and spiritual), not only

<sup>54</sup> "The spiritual life has a certain conformity to the life of the body, just as other corporeal things have a certain likeness to things spiritual. Now a man attains perfection in the corporeal life in two ways: first, in regard to his own person; secondly, in regard to the whole community of the society in which he lives, for man is by nature a social animal. . . . In regard, then, to the whole community, man is perfected . . . by natural propagation. This is accomplished by Matrimony both in the corporal and in the spiritual life, since it is not only a sacrament but also a function of nature" (*STh* III, q. 65, a. 1). Although Aquinas, common among medieval authors, gives exclusive attention to the procreative ordering of marriage, his argument holds for the unitive ordering as well.

<sup>55</sup> In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, §11, the Second Vatican Council implies this when it proclaims: "Christian spouses, in virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony, whereby they signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and His Church, help each other to attain to holiness in their married life and in the rearing and education of their children."

<sup>56</sup> *ScG* III, c. 122.

in the children but also in the spouses.<sup>57</sup> Each member of the family is made to know and love the good, each is called to holiness, and so husband and wife must administer both to their children and to each other. To this administration the sacrament of marriage is ordered.

In short, this administration, or this ministry of body and soul, follows upon the procreative and unitive orderings of marriage. As I have argued in this essay, marriage as a procreative-unitive institution suffers mightily on account of human sin, for which reason it seeks a share in Christ's redemption. Granting it this share, the sacrament of matrimony confers a grace, or a divine power, that is both healing and deifying, and that targets, specifically, the procreative and unitive dimensions of marriage (Aquinas in one passage affirms that this grace helps spouses attend to "fleshly" and "earthly" matters "in such a way that these are not disconnected from Christ and the Church").<sup>58</sup> Through their partaking in the sacrament of matrimony, then, Catholic married couples find themselves healed, strengthened, fortified, perfected, and divinized in their very spousal (unitive) and parental (procreative) roles, that is, in the natural teleology of their conjugal union.

## CONCLUSION

In a world where the institution of marriage labors under an unprecedented assault, whether from widespread marital infidelity (including the invasive allure of internet pornography and

<sup>57</sup> For a sustained argument on Aquinas's recognition of what today is called the "personalist" dimension of marriage, see McKay, "Aquinas on the End of Marriage." Further, Charles J. Reid (*Power over the Body, Equality in the Family: Rights and Domestic Relations in Medieval Canon Law* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004], 87) notes that this teaching on parental responsibility by Aquinas marks a significant theological development. Indeed, Reid explains that by appealing to 2 Cor 12:13-15 in expressing his view on the matter in *STh* Suppl., q. 49, a. 2, ad 1 (which opens with the assertion "offspring signifies not merely the begetting of children, but also their rearing"), Aquinas suggests that "sacrificial giving should characterize the parents' relationship with the child." Indeed, Ford and Kelly (*Contemporary Moral Theology*, 2:49) quite rightly point out that "one should not make the mistake of imagining that procreation and the rearing of children are not personalist values, too, or that the so-called personalist values do not contribute to the biological or social ends."

<sup>58</sup> ScG IV, c. 78.

“cybersex”) or the near fifty-percent divorce rate, or whether from rampant cohabitation or the push to redefine this institution to cover same-sex unions, the Church, in its sacrament of marriage, acts as a true beacon of hope. Dynamic acts of the person of Jesus Christ that are fitted to seven particular human needs, the sacraments have as their aim the on-going application of the fruits of Christ’s salvation. By electing marriage as fit for elevation to the level of a sacrament, Christ has willed to include this natural institution within his economy of salvation. The sacrament of marriage joins our sexuality in its nuptial ordering to the person of Christ, thereby redeeming it.

If on the outside, then, it seems that those who are sacramentally married are no different from any other married couple, including those who have contracted a purely civil marriage, the reality is quite different: Christian marriage inhabits another world, so to speak; it is of a whole other order. Deep within Christian marriage flows, as from a wellspring, divine sanctifying or justifying grace, whereby husband and wife gain a share in Christ’s redemption; they become sacramentally joined to the person of Christ in his very redemptive act, namely, in his Passion, death, and resurrection. Carrying with it both the power to heal the wounds of marital sin and the power to divinize or deify our sexuality, the grace of this sacrament (*res tantum*) targets marriage as a procreative-unity institution, that is, it heals and divinizes marriage in its very procreative-unity ordering. Thus, those who, with a living faith, cooperate *opus operans* with this grace are guaranteed to attain happy, successful marriages *ex opere operato*, since the signifying reality (*res et sacramentum*) of Christian marriage, which causes or disposes one for the *res tantum*, is nothing other than the indissoluble love between Christ and the Church. This is not to deny that many couples with living faith undergo much suffering in their marriages, and that this suffering capacitates them for eternal glory. But without the sacrament of marriage, the love between husband and wife would never become the kind of love God intends it to be, namely, the love between Christ and the Church. With this sacrament, it is *assured* of becoming this kind of love.