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Theological Anthropology in the Theology of Marriage and Family¹

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Abstract: The Catholic Church is faced with the challenge of theologically interpreting families that have experienced divorce, remarriage, and children outside of wedlock. The anthropology of conjugal self-gift, though valuable as an analogy to the Trinitarian communion, makes the nuclear family into an ideal. Since fewer than half of children in the U.S. live in the “traditional family,” it remains a problematic ideal. I suggest that familial and marital situations outside of the norm—often seen as problems illustrative of the breakdown of marriage in contemporary society—may be regarded in another light. A more adequate anthropology must consider how diverse marital and family forms can contribute to a theology of marriage.

Keywords: Anthropology, Marriage, Norm, Separation, Divorce, Traditional Family

The meaning and practice of marriage is at the heart of a contemporary Catholic crisis of identity. Because many forms of societal and political institution that bound modern people to religion have largely dissolved, the parish and the family have become the primary

¹ This is an expanded version of the paper I gave at “The Theological Enterprise in Light of the New Evangelization,” a Multi-Society Workshop for Theologians and Bishop sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on March 13, 2015, Washington D.C. Representing the Black Catholic Theological Symposium, I responded to the prompt, “What anthropology is essential to a proper understanding of marriage?” The topics addressed by the workshop are inspired by the recent extraordinary synod of Catholic bishops and the *Relatio Synodi*. The original version of the document was published in Italian as *III Conventus Generalis Extraordinarii Episcoporum Synodi, “Relatio Synodi: Provocationes pastorales aetatis nostrae de re familiari in Evangelizationis conexu,”* in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 106 no 11 (November 07, 2014), Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014, 887-908. The English translation is *III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Relatio Synodi: Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization,”* *The Vatican*, last modified October 19, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141018_r elatio-synodi-familia_en.html

standing institutions of faith. Naturally, marriage, the family, and sexuality have become flashpoints over Christian identity and the authority in the Catholic Church.² In our contemporary context, divorce and remarriage, out-of-wedlock births, same-sex marriage, single parent homes, and cohabitation before and apart from marriage have placed additional stress on Catholic identity and challenge the intelligibility of Catholic teaching on matters of marriage and family. The recent emphasis on marriage and family in synodal and episcopal teaching reflects these challenges.³

Recent documents from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) teaching look to human nature as a source for addressing complex pastoral issues and challenges to Christian marriage. Human nature is conceived as the universal and essential structure of human beings that can be grasped by the power of human reason. This account of human nature makes normative certain marriage and family arrangements built around the core of conjugal love and the nuclear family. There is a tension insofar as the arguments that ground marriage in an account of the human person make normative family and spousal arrangements that simply do not exist for many people. This tension is not merely a dissonance between traditional Catholic accounts of marriage and a contemporary culture that fails to appreciate it. Rather, it is a dissonance between the philosophical/theological account of human nature and the lived experience of being human. What we often imagine as exceptions to the model of normative family arrangements—divorce, divorced and remarried couples, foster parent/child relationships, childless marriages, step parent/child relationships, other mothering, and grandparents as primary caretakers—are in reality closer to the norm. They constitute the historical and existential situation of human beings, yet are not represented in accounts of human nature.

² Since *Casti connubii* (1931) and *Humanae vitae* (1968), sexual ethics and reproduction were placed at the center of this crisis. See Leslie Woodcock Tentler, "Souls and Bodies: The Birth Control Controversy and the Collapse of Confession," in Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley, eds., *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 293-315.

³ The Extraordinary Synod of Catholic Bishops (2014) has taken up the challenge of addressing issues surrounding marriage and family in contemporary society. "Relatio Synodi: Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization" (2014), the final document produced by the Synod, addresses key challenges facing married couples and families. The World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia in September of 2015 recognizes the family as the natural milieu of Christian life.

In what follows, I present a brief review of the intersection of anthropology, family, and marriage in recent episcopal documents. These episcopal teachings articulate an anthropology in which the nuclear family is normative. Second, I argue that relationships often imagined as departing from normative family relationships are sufficiently common that they cannot be called exceptions. Third, I develop an outline of the traditional three ends of marriage, reconceived in light of contemporary situations and pastoral conditions. I suggest that an adequate theology of marriage must draw also from those exceptions as sources for understanding its very nature.

I. Anthropology, Marriage, and Family

The connection between anthropology and marriage is prominent in recent episcopal responses to the controversy over civil same-sex marriage. Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone, the chairman of the USCCB Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage, issued a press release responding to the Supreme Court of the United States to review a decision by the Sixth Circuit Court over marriage laws in Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and Tennessee. He wrote,

It's hard to imagine how the essential meaning of marriage as between the two sexes, understood in our nation for over two hundred years, and consistent with every society throughout all of human history, could be declared illegal. To those arguing for a constitutional redefinition of marriage, one must ask: when did the Constitution suddenly mandate a novel and unfounded definition of marriage?...The central issue at stake is: what is marriage? The answer is: a bond which unites a man and a woman to each other and to any children who come from their union. Only a man and a woman can unite their bodies in a way that creates a new human being. Marriage is thus a unique and beautiful reality which a society respects to its benefit or ignores to its peril.⁴

For Cordileone, there exists a clear link between human nature and Christian marriage. The natural structure of the human being—involving a description of sexual complementarity and the union of bodies that leads to procreation—constitutes the basis for a particular understanding

⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "USCCB Chairman Responds to Supreme Court Decision to Take Marriage Cases," USCCB, last modified January 16, 2015, www.usccb.org/news/2015/15-011.cfm

of marriage, as a lifelong, exclusive, public relationship open to procreation between one man and one woman. Cordileone's statement typifies recent episcopal approaches to grounding Christian marriage in an account of human nature.

In an effort to address pastoral challenges to marriage, the USCCB pastoral letter, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* (2009), grounds its understanding of marriage in an account of human nature and, then, examines marriage as a sacrament.⁵ The bishops write, "Our pastoral letter is an invitation to discover, or perhaps rediscover, the blessing given when God first established marriage as a natural institution and when Christ restored and elevated it as a sacramental sign of salvation."⁶ The document presents marriage as a relationship ordained by God that constitutes a symbolic anticipation of salvation.

The section titles of the letter reflect its method: Part I is entitled "Marriage in the Order of Creation: The Natural Institution of Marriage" and Part II is entitled "Marriage in the Order of the New Creation: The Sacrament of Matrimony." The dyad of creation/new creation parallels the dyad natural/sacramental. Part I's treatment of marriage avoids a merely philosophical or sociological treatment of marriage as a merely *natural* institution as opposed to a *supernatural* reality. Instead, it exegetes the Old Testament, especially Genesis, for an understanding of marriage in the economy of salvation.⁷ The opposition between marriage as a "natural institution" and as a "sacrament" serves to show that marriage is (nearly) universal reality discovered beyond Christian society, and that God has elevated marriage to be a means of salvation.

Where *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* treats contemporary controversies, the creation/new creation dyad effectively becomes a natural/supernatural dyad. Emphasizing the universality of human nature, the bishops explain, "marriage is also a natural blessing

⁵ The USCCB has prioritized "strengthening marriage and family life" as the first of four Conference-wide initiatives in 2008-2012 and in 2013-2016.

⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan: A Pastoral Letter of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops* (Washington D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 2009), 6, www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/love-and-life/upload/pastoral-letter-marriage-love-and-life-in-the-divine-plan.pdf. The document follows the three Augustinian goods of marriage—*bonum prolis* (offspring), *bonum fidei* (faithfulness), and *bonum sacramenti* (the indissoluble bond)—in two parts. Part I gives primary attention to procreation and union (*bonum prolis* and *bonum fidei*) while Part II treats marriage as a sacrament (*bonum sacramenti*).

⁷ This exegesis is dependent upon Pope John Paul II's theology of the body and recent papal teaching.

and gift for everyone in all times and cultures.”⁸ Referring obliquely to same-sex marriage, the document states, “we bishops feel compelled to speak out against all attempts to redefine marriage so that it would no longer be exclusively the union of a man and a woman as God established and blessed it in the natural created order.”⁹ Here, “natural order” is conflated with “created order.” This conflation is significant, for it implies that the concept of marriage interpreted from the book of Genesis—as a union between one man and one woman involving procreation—can be known and understood within every society on the basis of a rational examination of human nature and human society. Without this claim to universality there is no basis to claim that the nature of marriage can be known and understood by non-Christians or that a particular understanding of marriage should be enshrined in law. In a similar way, the USCCB website emphasizes emphatically that the benefits of marriage to spouses, children, and society are universal and can be understood apart from explicit religious commitment.¹⁰

Drawing from a range of ecclesial documents, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* outlines an anthropology of personal exchange as the basis of marriage. Marriage involves conjugal love, the “complete and total gift of self between husband and wife,” which constitutes a communion of persons.¹¹ The communion of persons constituted by the marriage of a man and woman uniquely joins “life and love.” Spousal unity and sexual reproduction are, it claims, the inseparable ends (or purposes or goods) of marriage. A life lived in union with the other is the first end of marriage. Quoting from *Gaudium et Spes*, the document names the “procreation and education of offspring” as the second end. Reflecting Augustine’s three goods of marriage, procreation includes the care for and raising the child:

“The procreative meaning of marriage involves not only the conception of children, but also their upbringing and education, including spiritual formation in the life of love. This formation can take place only within a human community formed in love. The loving communion of the

⁸ *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “To be sure, these goods are affirmed and reinforced by most religions. But they do not rely on any religious premises; they are based instead on the nature of the human person and are accessible to right reason.” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Marriage: Unique for a Reason,” *USCCB*, www.marriageuniqueforareason.org/faq/#sec3q6

¹¹ *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, 8.

spouses is the primary context in which children are both conceived and brought up in love."¹²

Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan frames the procreative and unitive ends as the inseparable elements of mutual self-gift. By implication, the dimension of interpersonal gift is lacking if one of these elements is missing. Procreation should not take place apart from unity with one's spouse, and union with one's spouse involves the procreative.

In addition, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* elaborates the social role of the family in reference to an anthropology of interpersonal self-gift. The familial communion forms the superstructure for the family's social role:

With regard to the good of the children, a stable marriage between the parents is—the most human and humanizing context for welcoming children, the context which most readily provides emotional security and guarantees greater unity and continuity in the process of social integration and education. The findings of the social sciences confirm that the best environment for raising children is a stable home provided by the marriage of their parents.¹³

The pastoral document clearly implies the nuclear family as the normative social unit, the "original cell of social life."¹⁴ The total mutual self-gift of the spouses forms the ecology for a loving and life-giving familial communion of persons. The familial communion of persons generates and sustains the communion of persons in society. The social role of the family reduces to a dynamic internal to the spousal communion.

While the pastoral letter admits social and economic challenges exist for Christian marriage, it points out several challenges that it describes as "fundamental": contraception, same-sex unions, divorce, and cohabitation. These are fundamental insofar as they challenge "the meaning and purposes" of Christian marriage itself, that is, the inseparability of the procreative and unitive meanings. It is on the basis of the anthropological account of marriage as a total self-donation—in its inseparable procreative and unitive aspects—that the document analyzes

¹² Ibid., 16.

¹³ Ibid., 27-28. Referring to Institute for American Values, "Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences," Institute for American Values, http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/why_marriage_matters2.pdf

¹⁴ Ibid., 28. Quoting from *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), no. 2207.

the fundamental challenges to Christian marriage. For example, arguing the benefits of marriage over cohabitation, the U.S. Bishops indicate that cohabitation represents a failure to make a complete commitment to the other. In this way, the pastoral diagnoses various failures in Christian marriage in reference to an anthropology of interpersonal self-gift.

The key problem with the anthropological approach in *Marriage* is that by making conjugal love the sole generative basis for family life, elements of marriage and family life that are not sustained by conjugal love, or are merely tangential to it, are displaced as unessential.¹⁵ Take, for example, a married couple who are the primary caretakers for the children of a relative. Their commitment to these non-biological children is not directly implied by their complete self-gift to one another. Like foster parenting, the care for children in a single-parent household is not essentially related to an ongoing conjugal relationship. The single-parent household is diagnosed as lacking something essential, regardless of the history or concrete conditions of that household.¹⁶ Because other forms of marriage and family organization—like foster families and step families, and practices such as othermothering, a woman caring for children not her own—are not sustained by a narrowly defined conjugal relationship, they fall outside of the norm by definition. If the family is sustained by the spousal communion of persons, it is difficult to see how non-nuclear families and extended families can be understood as authentically family.¹⁷ By presenting conjugal love as the exclusive basis for family life, *Marriage* neglects to account for non-nuclear families.

¹⁵ Similarly, David Matzko McCarthy criticizes a tendency in contemporary personalist accounts of marriage to emphasize relationships interior to the marriage and family at the expense of external relationships. McCarthy recognizes in the account of marriage as interpersonal communion congruence with what he calls the “closed family” or “self-contained home” or nuclear family, which prizes its “emotional and financial independence.” David Matzko McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home: A Theology of the Household* (London: SCM, 2004), 93. In this model of marriage, relationships to the *outside* become optional and unessential to the happiness of domestic life. For McCarthy, the emphasis on conjugal love risks relegating social justice, relationship with community, relationship with the church to the outside of marriage itself.

¹⁶ In contrast, *Follow the Way of Love: A Pastoral Message of the U.S. Catholic Bishops to Families On the Occasion of the United Nations 1994 International Year of the Family* (1994) largely avoids the problem of the closed nuclear family by beginning with a diversity of forms of family structure and life.

¹⁷ There is also a danger that the anthropology of self-gift serves a nuclear family ideal that contains strong racial and class biases. See Isabel Heinemann, “Preserving the Family and the Nation: Eugenic Masculinity Concepts, Expert Intervention, and the American Family in the United States,” in *Masculinities and the Nation in the Modern World: Between Hegemony and Marginalization*, ed. Pablo

Despite having the merit of holding together sexuality, reproduction, and interpersonal relationship, the anthropology of self-gift presents an incomplete foundation for understanding for marriage and family. It yields a norm—an ideal of marriage as an unreserved interpersonal union and, by extension, the family that is rooted in that union—that is insulated from the complex situations in which marriage exists. Yet these other forms of marriage and family can and do pursue authentic interpersonal and social goods, even if they do not fit neatly into a philosophical anthropology of self-gift. As a result, this anthropology may misdiagnose the challenges to Christian marriage and misdiagnose diverse family arrangements and composition as mere aberrations. Because many people experience the ideal as practically unattainable (or a too-late-to-be-attained ideal), it risks becoming a falsification and a pastoral liability. If marriage is part of God’s plan for human beings and rooted in our nature, we must discover how in a variety of circumstances, we can continue to live life within that plan.

II. Anthropology and the Experience of American Catholic Families

Recent episcopal letters and individual bishops appeal to an account of human nature to make the nuclear family with a married couple and biological offspring the normative model of marriage and family life. Other arrangements fall short of this ideal. The lived realities in the United States show diverse and complex forms of family and domestic structure. A headline from a recent Pew Research Center article reads “Fewer than half of U.S. kids today live in a ‘traditional’ family.”¹⁸ It is true for my extended family members, who have experienced out-of-wedlock birth, cohabitation, divorce, remarriage, adoption, step-parenting, marriage without children, and othermothering. Recent studies from the Pew Research Center, The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the National Survey of Family Growth, and the General Social Survey confirm that many American families look like mine.¹⁹

Dominguez Andersen and Simon Wendt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 71-92.

¹⁸ Gretchen Livingston, “Fewer than half of U.S. kids today live in a ‘traditional’ family,” *Pew Research Center*, last modified December 22, 2014, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family/

¹⁹ I admit my interpretation of the realities affecting marriage and family life drawn here is incomplete. I have sought to provide an accurate picture of the facts from

A significant percentage of Catholics are divorced, separated, or living with a partner. According to the 2015 Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 8% of Catholics are living with a partner, 12% of Catholics are currently divorced or separated, 7% are widowed, 21% have never married, and 52% of Catholics are currently married.²⁰ The 2007 Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) study finds that 4% of Catholics are living with a partner, 1% of Catholics are separated, and 12% divorced, while 53% are married.²¹ The same survey finds that 11% of Catholics who are currently married have been divorced. The General Social Survey 2014 data indicate that 32% of Catholics who have been married divorced at some point in their life.²² In sum, more than one in ten American Catholics are currently divorced and not remarried and almost one in three Catholics who have been married have divorced at some point in their life.

The statistics on childbirth indicate that most first children are born to unmarried parents. The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) indicates that in 2011-2013 48.3% of mothers 15-44 years of age were married when their first child was born.²³ 28.6% were cohabitating while 25.2% were unmarried and not cohabitating. While 57% of fathers 15-44 years of age were currently or formerly married to the child's mother at the time of their first child's birth, a full 26.4% were cohabitating and

the following social scientific sources: Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," (May 12, 2015); Mark M. Gray, Paul M. Perl, and Tricia C. Bruce, "Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics," Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (October 2007); National Survey of Family Growth, "Key Statistics from the National Survey of Family Growth-B Listing," *National Center for Health Statistics*, last modified April 20, 2015, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key_statistics/b.htm; and Tom W. Smith, Peter V. Marsden, and Michael Hout, "General Social Survey, 1972-2010," Cumulative File ICPSR31521-v1 (Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center, distributed by Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2011).

²⁰ Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," (May 12, 2015), 62.

²¹ Mark M. Gray, Paul M. Perl, and Tricia C. Bruce, "Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics," Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (October 2007), 18.

²² Tom W. Smith, Peter V. Marsden, and Michael Hout, "General Social Survey, 1972-2010," Cumulative File ICPSR31521-v1 (Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center, distributed by Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2011).

²³ National Survey of Family Growth, "Key Statistics from the National Survey of Family Growth-B Listing," *National Center for Health Statistics*, last modified April 20, 2015, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key_statistics/b.htm, Based on Gladys Martinez, Kimberly Daniels, and Anjani Chandra, Division of Vital Statistics "Fertility of Men and Women Aged 15-44 Years in the United States: National Survey of Family Growth, 2006-2010," *National Health Statistics Reports*, 51 (April 12, 2012), 19.

16.4% were unmarried and not cohabitating.²⁴ Of all the first-born children in the United States, over half have parents that are not married at the time of the child's birth.

Almost ten percent of children live with non-biological parents, not including arrangements such as living with grandparents. According to 2010 U.S. Census data, 92.3% of all children of householders are biological children, 2.5% are adopted, and 5.2% are stepchildren. In the 12-14 age range, 2.7% are adopted and 6.4% are stepchildren. In the 15-18 age range, 2.7% are adopted and 7.1% are stepchildren.²⁵ The NSFG indicates that 11.3% of women 18-44 years of age have cared for a non-biological child in 2011-2013. This statistic does not account for grandparents 45 years or older as primary caretakers. While most children are living with biological parents, around 8% of all children are adopted or stepchildren, and the percentage of adopted or stepchildren increases with the age of the children. With over one in ten women caring for a non-biological child, family composition often reflects arrangements other than the nuclear family.

Though this survey of the data is incomplete, it provides a window into the lived realities of many American Catholics that theologians and pastors must honestly address.²⁶ The prevalence of divorce, high out-of-wedlock childbirth rates, and a variety of family structures present a radical disjunction between the image of marriage presented by a philosophical anthropology and the lived reality of marriage and family life. The closed, nuclear family presents a problematic ideal.²⁷ While grounding marriage in conjugal love does affirm a connection between marriage and procreation, it does not account for the variety of marriage and family arrangements.

The data suggest the need to reconsider the role of theological anthropology in developing a theology of marriage. The anthropology of

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Rose M. Kreider and Daphne A. Lofquist, "Adopted Children and Stepchildren: 2010: Population Characteristics," U.S. Census Bureau (April 2014), 4.

²⁶ Similarly, Peter Steinfels recently called for honestly addressing the disjunction between the teaching on contraception of *Humanae vitae* and the lived experience of lay Catholics. Peter Steinfels, "Contraception and Honesty: A Proposal for the Next Synod," *Commonweal* 142, no 10 (May 14, 2015): 12-19.

²⁷ Contemporary challenges to marriage may indicate the demise of the *closed* nuclear family, but may not mean the demise of the family itself. Lisa Sowle Cahill argues the nuclear family is really a modern construction and that the extended family/kinship model of family is more natural to a biblical and Christian conception of family. See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

self-gift is a helpful analogy for relating human relationships and the Trinitarian communion. At the same time, making conjugal self-giving normative and foundational for family and social life obscures the other forms of loving communion present in, and often flourishing, in non-nuclear families. An account of the anthropological foundations is indispensable as long as it remains attentive to human beings in their concrete, historical situations. When we ask "what kind of anthropology is essential to a proper understanding of marriage?", *our understanding of what humanity is has to come not just from an abstract essentialist account of human nature but from concrete human beings and their real situations*. Spouses in prison, living across borders, living in poverty, working sixteen hour days, and being a foster parent or stepparent is *closer to the norm than the exception*. A proper understanding of marriage must account for how marriage functions within an economy of life and death, as a vehicle for survival, and not infrequently as an impediment to survival of the family. An adequate anthropology must account for the diversity of ways in which family life is lived.

III. The Goods of Marriage Revisited

Augustine's elaboration of the threefold good of marriage—offspring (*bonum proles*), faithfulness (*bonum fidei*), and the marriage bond (*bonum sacramenti*)—has become a classic in Christian theology of marriage. Deriving from Augustine, there is a long tradition embedded in catechesis, preaching, and seminary instruction of speaking of the three goods or threefold of marriage. The goods of marriage relate human experience to the supernatural gift of grace. Distinguishing the three goods—the physical, psychological, and spiritual—served to correlate marriage with theological anthropology, namely the distinct human ends. Human beings possess distinct ends and operate on distinct though interrelated levels: life, the good life, and eternal life.²⁸ The first is the vital or biological end, namely life. The second concerns the life of virtue in community: the good life. Finally, human beings are created for union with God, eternal life. While we can distinguish between these various levels, each is connected in human experience: friendship and

²⁸ I am grateful to M. Shawn Copeland of Boston College for her perspectives on the threefold end from Bernard Lonergan. Lonergan relates the threefold good of marriage to a threefold and hierarchical human end: life, the good life, and eternal life. See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "Finality, Love, and Marriage," in *Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988), 17-52.

grace are not disconnected from the vital level. A meal shared (vital level) can be the opportunity for friendship (virtue), and occasion the communion with God in the Eucharist (grace). Marriage may be interpreted according to these ends: On the vital level, marriage has *life* as its end. On the level of virtue, marriage is a friendship between the partners. On the level of eternal life, marriage conduces to the sanctification of the married partners. In marriage, the cooperation in providing concrete necessities for each other and for children becomes the opportunity for friendship, and the occasion for grace. What follows is a reflection on the classic goods of marriage in light of the realities of marriage and family in contemporary life.

a. The Vital Level: Survival

Marriage serves not only procreation of offspring, but also survival, which requires networks of support outside the nuclear family. I am married and we are blessed with children. In my everyday experience, being married primarily concerns the practical realities of life—being together, cleaning up, and taking care of tasks. Keeping children clean, clothed, and socialized to the world are exhausting tasks, even for a husband and wife who are employed and able-bodied. I am aware that my wife and I are interdependent to provide stability and to supply basic needs to our children. However, these needs cannot be fully satisfied within the nuclear family, since we are dependent upon others to educate our children and sometimes care for them. My church is a small parish in Louisville, Kentucky. Many members of the community are immigrants, non-native English speakers, and almost everyone has family living across borders. For my family, but also for many in our church, the mutual cooperation and mutual dependence entailed by marriage serves the purpose of survival.

Many survive without a spouse present, whether due to migration, separation, divorce, or death. For many people, especially women, marriage has often been an insecure proposition. In some communities, people have not always been afforded the opportunity to marry. Historically, American slavery meant that a woman's body was property destined for breeding and that her husband and children could be sold away. The punishment and incarceration of black men under Jim Crow systematically placed black fathers at risk. Today, the prison- and detention-industrial complex functions to incarcerate a significant percentage of black and Latino fathers. Due to systems that prevent

spouses from being together or that dis-incentivize marriage, many women have generated ways of “surviving and flourishing” apart from marriage and apart from spouses living under the same roof, including practices of “othermothering” and “community mothering.”²⁹ The classic good of marriage—procreation—should be understood within the broader familial task of survival, common to spouses without children, to single parents, and to nuclear families.

The vital good of marriage, therefore, is shared by many forms of family structure that are necessary for survival. This understanding is consonant with Pope John Paul II’s theology of the body in which the body carries a theological meaning and is the entry point for friendship and grace. In the words of Pope John Paul II, “the body through its own visibility manifests [the person] and, manifesting [the person], acts as intermediary, that is, enables man and woman, right from the beginning, ‘to communicate’ with each other according to that *communio personarum* [communion of persons] willed by the Creator precisely for them.”³⁰ Similarly, M. Shawn Copeland presents the body as the image of God and the locus of communion. Against the dehumanization of slavery and racism, black women reclaimed a freedom of the flesh and embodied solidarity.³¹ God’s image is engrained in the flesh. Communion with others and with God is possible only by being a body. The practices of survival that mediate human flourishing and communion with others can be found in diversely constituted families and marriages.

b. The Level of Virtue: The Good Life

On the level of virtue, the human goal is not just life, but the “good life.” Human beings are fulfilled by a life of virtue lived in community and friendship. Contemporary theological treatments of marriage—

²⁹ Karen Teel, *Racism and the Image of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 95.

³⁰ John Paul II, “General Audience: The Fullness of Interpersonal Communication,” (Wednesday, December 19, 1979), Vatican, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19791219.html

³¹ Copeland appeals to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, in which Baby Suggs enjoins her audience of former slaves to love their flesh: “Here, in this place, we flesh, flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. You do not love our flesh...and you do not love our neck unnoosed and straight. We got to love it! This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved.” In M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 52.

without abandoning theme of procreation and care for children—have turned to the notion of interpersonal fulfillment: friendship, life partnership, interpersonal love. Marriage fulfills part of this need for human friendship and sharing. It would be a mistake, however, to restrict the interpersonal good of marriage to the self-gift between spouses, or to restrict this good to the bounds of the home. There is a societal dimension whereby marriage orders spouses in virtuous relationship to one another and to a broader community. Marriage orients the human being to virtue because it can orient the human being to shared goods.

I experience marriage as an orientation of our lives to my spouse, to our children, and to our communities. Having young children has been an isolating experience, but it is also a grounding experience. I am now grounded to place and patterns, responsible for a small piece of earth. I am now bound to the world in a way that I wasn't prior to the birth of my first child. Marriage is creative of a relationship to a neighborhood, a church, and a public school that I didn't have before. Yet, I must recognize that the virtuous patterns of life are not only constituted in marriages like mine, but may be constituted through different kinds of family arrangements and friendships.

c. The Level of Grace: Eternal Life

Because Saint Paul believed that Jesus's return was imminent, he had a preference for celibacy and thought marriage to be a concession to human weakness. Yet, he sets both celibacy and marriage against the backdrop of the coming Kingdom, as a form of life "assigned" by the Lord (1 Cor. 7:17). The famous Pauline instruction on spousal love in Ephesians makes a parallel between the love between spouses and the love of Christ for the church. Talking about the spouses as "one flesh," Paul writes, "This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). For Paul, *mysterion* has a broader meaning: it refers to the hidden plan of God that is unfolding through time, the mystery of the unity of the church and Christ. His instruction, evidently *directed toward real married disciples*, suggests that their spousal love participates in the unfolding of this mystery through time. The "one flesh" of the married couple is a form of life through which discipleship is lived and holiness attained. Spousal love anticipates the union of Christ with the church. Building on this Pauline perspective, the church fathers envisioned human nature as a *single, unitary* reality that had been

divided by sin. Salvation was humanity united by and gathered into Christ. Marriage images and anticipates the future union of humanity through Christ.

The Pauline perspective on marriage should be applied to the diverse forms of family life.

If there is a gradualism whereby the imperfect anticipates and tends toward the perfect, it isn't that imperfect marital and family situations anticipate the perfect, autonomous nuclear family. Instead, marriage, celibacy, and diverse forms of family may anticipate the perfect union of Christ and the church.

IV. Conclusion

The Catholic Church is faced with the challenge of theologically interpreting families that have experienced divorce, remarriage, and children outside of wedlock. The anthropology of conjugal self-gift, though valuable as an analogy to the Trinitarian communion, makes the nuclear family into an ideal. Since fewer than half of children in the U.S. live in the "traditional family," it remains a problematic ideal. I suggest that familial and marital situations outside of the norm—often seen as problems illustrative of the breakdown of marriage in contemporary society—may be regarded in another light. A more adequate anthropology must consider how diverse marital and family forms can contribute to a theology of marriage.

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