MARRIAGE: 
THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS
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INTRODUCTION


Pope Francis has had the courage to declare that now—precisely in the midst of the battlefields of human suffering that become more apparent every day—the Church must remember that she has received the healing love and the merciful truth of the Lord not for herself only, but for the whole world. She has the task to proclaim anew “the Gospel of the Family.” The 2014 Extraordinary Synod and the 2015 General Synod on the family hope to mark a path of reflection and pastoral renewal that draws on the rich heritage left by St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. In union with Pope Francis, the universal Church will focus once again on the family as the “inexhaustible resource and font of life in the Church’s pastoral activity.”

The Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America, with the cooperation of Communio: International Catholic Review, offers this booklet to English-speaking readers as a simple and accessible text to accompany the Church on this path of reflection and renewal. It contains summaries of articles published in the Summer 2014 issue of Communio written by current and former members of the Institute’s faculty. In agreement with Pope Francis’ hope that the light of marriage and the family be seen anew, these articles address some of the most pertinent questions affecting our current understanding of marriage and the family.

At a point in history when many in the West seem to have lost perspective for what it means to be human, the authors seek
to help the men and women of today rediscover the significance of marriage. They do so by answering questions on why marriage is indissoluble; how one accompanies civilly divorced and remarried Catholics; what is the real nature of the crisis of the family; in what sense faith and the sacrament of matrimony are related; what is the relation among sexuality, love and fecundity; what it means to “accompany” couples in difficult circumstances or those whose marriages have broken; and how “gay marriage” affects natural marriage.

It is our hope that the analyses presented here will assist those whose responsibilities include the pastoral care of families, as well as families themselves, to find a renewed and deepened awareness of their mission. In this way, this booklet is intended to help married couples to live their nuptial love with greater joy and maturity and thus to witness to the beauty of the state of life to which they have been called.

For those who are interested in reading further, the articles in their entirety are available online at www.johnpaulii.edu or www.communio-icr.com.
Marriage and Family between Anthropology and the Eucharist: Comments in View of the Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Family

Cardinal Angelo Scola

As the Church prepares for the upcoming Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, we see that the preliminary work for the meeting, in the “Preparatory Document” and the Instrumentum laboris that summarizes the responses to it, has revealed a tension in the general understanding of Christian doctrine on marriage and the family. Although the Church’s teaching and the lessons of experience continue to be seen as the expression of love’s ideal, they are also perceived by many as unsuitable to the emotional experience of the men and women of our time. The origin of much of this misunderstanding lies in the reduction of the Church’s teaching to a series of moral guidelines that are not perceived to spring from a uniform and true vision of the human person.

An adequate response to this misunderstanding and to the pastoral situation in which we find ourselves in relation to marriage and family will be found in a holistic proposal of life that starts from the experience shared by every person. This adequate anthropology, offering a comprehensive understanding of the human person, his experience and desires, will also shed light
on the nature of marriage as a sacrament. Sacramental marriage, in its very nature, reveals and provides for everything that a man and woman desire in their authentic experience of mutual love: the gift of self, open to life, and continuing forever.

1) An adequate anthropology and sexual difference

A crucial consideration of this adequate anthropology is the fundamental experience that every human being lives out his or her existence in a sexually differentiated body. Every individual finds himself inscribed within this difference and is always confronted with this other way of being a person that is inaccessible to him. The sexual dimension is something internal to the individual person and indicates his or her essential openness to the opposite sex. Already this is an indication that male and female are not merely biological data. Rather, the biological fact of sexual difference provokes a “labor” of human freedom by which each individual can open himself up to the other, decide in favor of the other, and thus embark on the way of love. Marriage offers the objective form of this labor and this choice.

In service of a particular understanding of equality between the sexes, gender theory has sought to abolish sexual difference in favor of various orientations of gender and to reduce it to a cultural construct that is completely at the disposal of the individual. This tendency is further fostered today by the extraordinary development of science and technology, which gives man an unprecedented sense of his power to manipulate every reality, including his own self. However, basic human experience still attests to an original openness to the other and to the fruitfulness of relation, inscribed in the self-evidence of the sexually differentiated body. The body reveals that human existence, situated as it is within sexual difference, always happens within relations (to God, to others, and to ourselves) marked by this difference, and that this difference, relation, and fruitfulness are inseparably intertwined, forming what we mean by the “nuptial” dimension that is proper to every form of love.

2) The relation between marriage and the Eucharist

Taking up this anthropological understanding of nuptial love in
relation to the sacrament of marriage allows us to see the sacrament as the form that renders nuptial love comprehensible and practicable as it was willed by the Creator “from the beginning” (Matthew 19:8). The sacrament offers the love of Christ the Bridegroom for the Church his Bride to the married couple as the resource, criterion, and guarantee that the promise engraved on the heart of every human being, with his insuppressible need to be loved and assured of love forever, is practicable. Especially in the trials and wounds of their conjugal union, Christ’s sacramental action never leaves the spouses lacking the gifts they need to be able to live out their love fully.

The Holy Eucharist is the efficacious sign of the gift of the body of Christ the Bridegroom to the Church, his fruitful Bride. Thus, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, the spouses encounter the trinitarian foundation of their own nuptial love. The eucharistic sacrifice is in fact the condition within which matrimonial consent is given and allows the spouses to accept the call of Christ the Bridegroom as the origin of their own decision. Seen in this context, marital and family life takes place within the horizon of life as a vocation to holiness, a particular and privileged way to live out the possibility offered in Christ’s eucharistic self-gift entrusted to the believer, that he or she might freely opt for Christ in every circumstance of life. We find a clear statement of this relationship of marriage and the Eucharist in Benedict XVI’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation, Sacramentum caritatis, 27:

The mutual consent that husband and wife exchange in Christ, which establishes them as a community of life and love, also has a eucharistic dimension. Indeed, in the theology of St. Paul, conjugal love is a sacramental sign of Christ’s love for his Church, a love culminating in the Cross, the expression of his “marriage” with humanity and at the same time the origin and heart of the Eucharist.

How does this understanding of nuptial, sacramental love inform the Church’s understanding regarding those who have divorced and remarried without annulment? The denial of access to the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist hinges on the Church’s awareness of the inseparable bond uniting the Eucharist and marriage. What makes access to these sacraments
impossible is the state in which those who have established a new bond find themselves—a state that in itself contradicts what is signified in the bond between the Eucharist and marriage. The grace of the eucharistic mystery effects the unity of the Church as the Bride and Body of Christ, and this requires in the recipient of sacramental Communion the objective possibility of allowing himself to be perfectly incorporated into Christ.

The non-admission of the divorced and remarried to these sacraments should not be seen as a “punishment” for their condition, but rather a sign pointing the way to a possible path, with the help of God’s grace and continued membership in the ecclesial community, for the life of these faithful does not cease to be a life called to holiness. The practice of spiritual Communion with the eucharistic Christ, offering to him in prayer one’s desire for his Body and Blood together with one’s sorrow over the impediments to the fulfillment of this desire, is a form of participation that is available to all the faithful and is suited to the journey of someone who finds himself unable to approach the sacrament. When it is not possible to receive sacramental absolution, it will be useful to promote practices that are particularly suited to expressing penitence and fostering the virtue of repentance: works of charity, reading the Word of God, and pilgrimages. These gestures can express the desire to change and to ask God for forgiveness while waiting for one’s personal situation to develop in such a way as to allow one to return to the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist. The company of the person’s pastor and the ecclesial community are a much needed support and aid to persons who find themselves living in this difficult situation.

A note may be made here considering the situation of those who believe in conscience that their original marriage was invalid. When the spouses request an annulment, it becomes essential to verify rigorously whether the marriage was valid and therefore is indissoluble, taking into account in the Church’s pastoral approach the difficulty for the persons involved to confront their own past, which is marked by profound suffering. It is to be hoped that a way may be found to expedite cases of nullity and to make the intimately pastoral nature of these processes more clear, while respecting the (at times obscured) unity of doctrine, canon law, and pastoral practice.
3) Witnessing to the Gospel of the family

The promotion of a deeper understanding and lived experience of marriage and family, which is the task of the upcoming Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, must rely constantly on the solid experience of familial holiness found throughout the people of God. The strongest point for the renewal of pastoral care for the family can only be the witness of many, many spouses who have lived their married life in love and fidelity, through whose example and experience it is possible to address situations of suffering and difficulty. The lives of these witnesses give testimony that even today, the Church’s understanding of marriage corresponds to human experience and desire as the objective form that both transcends and contains all an individual’s cravings to “break out” of its bonds and to assert itself. Marriage is that indissoluble reality which confronts with an iron hand all existence’s tendencies to disintegrate. And it compels the faltering person to grow, beyond himself, into real love by modeling his life on the form enjoined. When they make their promises, the spouses are not relying on themselves—the shifting [sands] of their own freedom—but rather on the form [ultimately Jesus Christ] that chooses them because they have chosen it. . . . [T]his form extends through all the levels of life—from its biological roots up to the heights of grace and of life in the Holy Spirit.¹

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY
WITHIN THE SACRAMENTALITY
OF THE CHURCH:
CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

Cardinal Marc Ouellet

In the face of the deteriorating situation of marriage and the family in contemporary society as well as Pope Francis’s call for a pastoral renewal based on mercy, the first task is to explore the theological foundations for such a renewal. What would be an adequate response to the new challenges of evangelization that remains consistent with the Church’s tradition?

To answer this question, it is crucial to situate the sacrament of marriage within the sacramentality of the Church.

Vatican Council II laid the foundations for a new evangelization of the family with its renewed vision of sacramental theology. Beginning with Christ, the “light of Nations,” the Council enlarged the notion of “sacrament,” applying this term to the Church as “sign and mystery of communion.” All the sacraments can thus be understood as expressions of the Church’s sacramental identity with respect to the world. The sacraments, as articulations of the nuptial relationship between Christ and the Church, are intrinsically ecclesial. They are also intrinsically missionary, constituting the Church’s visibility in the eyes of the world.

With this ecclesiological shift, the Council began anew from Christ to proclaim a Gospel of the family that has yet to be fully implemented in the Church’s pastoral activity. The Council
explained that the sacrament of marriage is an encounter with Christ, the Church’s Bridegroom; through the sacrament, the spouses receive a real participation in Christ’s exclusive, faithful, and fruitful love for the Church. Human married love is thus indwelt by and witnesses to the Covenant. This participation of married love in divine love grants the family the properly ecclesial status of a “domestic church.”

In sacramental marriage, the Church offers the baptized couple to Christ in their mutual self-giving, and they receive the gift of his nuptial Love through a charism of his Spirit. Thus the couple belongs to the Lord, who “abides with them.” From him, they receive the ecclesial mission to witness to his love in the daily life of their family.

Baptism and the Eucharist, the two particular “moments” of the Church’s nuptial relationship with Christ, provide the context for the sacramentality of marriage. Baptism is the fundamental condition for the exchange of gifts that happens in sacramental marriage and for the couple’s belonging to Christ—which is really effected in the sacrament of marriage and not merely a motivating ideal. The Eucharist, as the permanent celebration of Christ’s nuptials with his Church, is its privileged locus.

The baptized married couple belongs intrinsically to the eucharistic mystery, since the grace proper to Christian spouses is the content of the sacrament of the Eucharist: Christ’s love for the Church unto death and resurrection. This intrinsic link of marriage and the Eucharist implies an openness and respect on the part of the spouses to Christ’s commitment in their regard. The Church thus maintains a limit concerning the reception of the sacrament by divorced and remarried Catholics—without excluding these persons from the community—in order not to impose on Christ a sacramental sign contrary to his own witness.

On the basis of this understanding of the sacramentality of marriage within the sacramentality of the Church, one can identify openings for a pastoral conversion centered on God’s mercy.

A pastoral approach centered on mercy must be a new proclamation of Christ the Savior, who frees human beings from a fear of loving as the Creator established this love and the Redeemer restored it. It must develop and disseminate the rich heritage left to the Church by the Council and by St. John Paul II,
through an organic approach to Christian initiation, marriage preparation, and the accompaniment of families.

Those who have divorced and remarried must be welcomed and helped to set out on a path of conversion and spiritual growth. The wide reach of God’s mercy, which includes but also extends beyond a properly sacramental framework, must be proclaimed anew to them. This mercy reaches them intimately in their new situation, yet the Church cannot permit them to give public witness to Christ’s union with the Church through the reception of holy Communion. The reason for this limit is not primarily moral, but rather sacramental: What is at stake is the truth of the sacraments and, above all, Christ’s fidelity to his own witness.

Persons in this difficult situation can ask for the grace to be united with Christ through spiritual communion, which is a dimension of sacramental Communion. In this regard, the Church must help the faithful to understand more clearly all the facets of sacramental Communion in the light of the sacramentality of the Church.

All the faithful would benefit from a broader and deeper understanding of communion in Christ’s ecclesial and eucharistic body. Persons who have divorced and remarried would at the same time be helped to see that they are not excluded from the Church or from God’s mercy and a life of authentic grace, despite their sacramental handicap. Their very abstention from sacramental Communion is a form of respect for the divine Partner who remains faithful to their first union and cannot contradict his own witness of indestructible love for the Church.

The sacramental economy is an expression of divine mercy even in the limits imposed upon the reception of the sacraments, for the happiness God desires for every human being is found in the truth of the Covenant. From this truth of God’s mercy, the Church’s pastoral approach stands or falls.

In the pastoral renewal needed for our time, marriage tribunals also play an important role. They must carry out their work in an authentically pastoral spirit, facilitating the resolution of cases of nullity. Canonists and theologians must also continue to reflect on the relation between faith and the sacrament. Particular attention must be paid to pastoral dialogue with couples preparing for marriage.
Through these openings for a pastoral renewal, the Church’s fundamental mission is to spread the communion of the Trinity. The family that allows the beauty of trinitarian love to shine through it does precisely this: It is evangelized and evangelizing, drawing the gaze of the world around it. Indeed, the family itself is the great resource for achieving a pastoral conversion, in which all pastoral care is reconceived from the perspective of the family.

At the heart of this necessary pastoral conversion is the divine-human witness of Christ and the Church to a love that is indissolubly faithful and fruitful. This love—that is, this Covenant—is given in every sacramental marriage as a pledge of happiness for all.

In the face of the fragilities and failings of many couples today, a proclamation of the Gospel of the family, based on the merciful truth of the Covenant, is needed more than ever. Such a proclamation and pastoral approach can offer God’s peace, reconciliation, and healing to all families.
What is the relationship between faith and matrimony? The question is indicative of a pastoral challenge that the Church needs to face in our secularized society. Many of those who seek to be married admit that they do not practice their faith, or have lost it. They marry into the Church for motives that seem foreign to Christian life, such as family custom, societal rules, or the desire for a beautiful ceremony. Can a person so little prepared be admitted to the sacrament? Is an indissoluble marriage confirmed in this case through the mediation of Christ and his Church?

St. John Paul II, in *Familiaris consortio*, has offered some criteria for responding. While upholding the importance of nourishing the couple’s faith, there are also reasons to admit persons who are imperfectly disposed. If two engaged people who have received baptism accept the Creator’s design for marriage (i.e., an indissoluble union, monogamous, open to life), and do not explicitly reject the sacramentality of their nuptials, they can be admitted to the sacrament. Why is this possible? In order to answer this question, we shall examine the essential elements of the relationship between faith and marriage.

*a) Creaturely marriage, a road to faith*

There is a close connection between natural marriage and Christian faith. Whoever accepts the original experience of conjugal love already lives the beginnings of faith. His life anticipates the *leitmotif* of faith. Indeed, in the first place, faith consists in *recog-
nizing God as the fundamental origin of life, and in putting trust and finding support in him. Now, this recognition of origin passes through the relationships of the family, especially fatherhood and motherhood, which reveal our provenance from God. Conjugal love also reveals the primordial fatherhood of God when it discloses the meaning of the sexually differentiated body received from the Creator and enables us to accept the gift of the beloved and to give ourselves in return.

Faith also consists in trusting the faithfulness of God, whose love never abandons us throughout our history. He keeps his covenant and makes men and women, through faith, capable of fulfilling their obligations as well. Conjugal love, likewise, moves toward a promise that embraces the whole of life. It is open to a transcendent dimension, revealed in that same love, which is capable of sustaining us on our way. One may note in this regard, following Benedict XVI, the common root of the words *fides* ("faith") and *foedus* ("pact" or "alliance"); the latter being a Latin term that aptly describes marriage.

In short, faith confesses the presence of God in the flesh of Christ, a fullness of love revealed to man. In marriage and the family the openness of all flesh to God is seen through the interpersonal communion of persons. Marriage, from this point of view, is a road that leads to the acceptance of Christ, who bodily reveals the total love of the Father.

For all these reasons, it can be said that in marriage one already encounters the essential features of Christian faith. To accept the creaturely conditions of marriage implies participating, to some degree, in the sacramentality of marriage, even if one does not profess faith. Note that all of this is already very demanding. To admit to matrimony someone who accepts its natural truth is not to set the bar very low. On the contrary, it implies recognizing the presence of God that is at work in conjugal love.

*b) The mark of baptism, permanent substrate of faith*

To this primary element (creaturely marriage as a road to faith) we must add a second: Those who get married, if they are baptized, have already had an encounter with Christ and have been transformed by him into new creatures. Even if they do not confess or practice faith, this fact has continued to have an influence
on their lives and draws them, in a certain sense, into the sphere of faith.

Today this is difficult for us to understand. When we speak of the importance of faith in matrimony we insist on subjective faith, a self-conscious faith that tries to express itself in works. Without a doubt this feature is essential to faith, but it does not explain it completely. For faith is much more than what consciousness recognizes and the will embraces. In reality, faith is a new life into which we are born, and life cannot be reduced to conscious knowledge and will. No living person comprehends the totality of his life with a glance or a wish. To put all the emphasis on the conscious aspect of faith is to impoverish it.

A concrete example, which also relates to the family, helps us to explain why it is an impoverishment: the baptism of infants. An infant lacks self-conscious faith. This lack of faith, however, is not an exception to the general rule but is in a sense the paradigm of all baptism. That is to say, infant baptism reveals the truth of what occurs in the baptism of adults. For baptism is in reality a birth—through it we are engendered into a new life. Just as in the birth of a child, what counts is not primarily the act of the “I” but the web of relations that receives us, confers on us a name and identity and sustains our steps, so too is it only from baptism that we will be able to receive a new life and walk through it in freedom.

St. Paul expresses this new birth using the imagery of the body—“incorporated into Christ” (Romans 6:5)—precisely because the body situates us in the world and introduces us into a web of personal relations before we want or choose it. In baptism we received, so to say, a new body—we entered into the relational world in which Jesus lived. We are placed in the same horizon of his world, from which we now are able to think and act. This horizon comes before our free action, sustains it, and channels it. And so, just as our being in the body, with all that we received at birth, will always be the basis of whatever we do even if we rebel against life, so baptism is the new foundation of all our actions, which will be realized from Christ, even if we rise up against him.

This explains why, even when faith is no longer practiced, it is not completely extinguished. In order to “lose” faith it is not enough to have abandoned an interior conviction. For faith does not dwell in the conscious “I” alone, but is also found in ties with
the world and with others, in tradition and memory, in institutions and culture, and in family history, which are all an integral part of our own names. The mark of baptism reminds us that, even if someone should want to shrug off his baptismal faith, he will remain linked to Christ through ties deeper than his own knowledge and will. So it happens that the baptized live in a new corporeality, which is that of Jesus and his Church. This implies that when they make a one-flesh union among themselves, they do so in accordance with the characteristics of this new body.

c) The faith of the Church, an internal element of the faith of the baptized

There is a third feature of faith that helps us to pinpoint its role in matrimonial consent: Faith has to be understood in a relational manner. Whoever believes does not do so in isolation but out of an original belonging, a common life, and a shared vision. Faith consists, above all, in entering into a web of relations touched by Christ. Our faith lives in the faith of others—it lives, above all, in the faith of the Church, which has given birth to faith in us.

The example of infant baptism can help us again. If such a thing is possible, it is because the faith of the child is received from the faith of the Church, through the mediation of parents and godparents. It occurs as if the child belonged to others and, in them, could be welcomed into the life of faith, not as an isolated subject, but as a personal relation. Just as the child’s name has been given to it, just as its origin comes from ancestors, and just as the education its parents provide anticipates its destiny, so also faith can be given through this vital communion with others.

What has been said of baptism can be applied, in a similar way, to matrimony, precisely inasmuch as it is realized from Christ and the Church. This sacrament shows clearly that faith is not an isolated act. Matrimony can only be lived when one opens oneself to a bigger and richer reality: The spouses entrust themselves one to another and to the mystery they perceive in their love. From this viewpoint it is not difficult to see that their act is open to the participation of society and the Church.

So in order to assess the faith of the engaged couple, one does not have to consider it in isolation. The important thing is that they want to enter into the Church’s current of faith, and that in her, they accept a road congruent with her matrimonial
path. Moreover, when they receive from the faith of others, the love of the bride and the groom is enriched. What little faith they have can grow and mature according to the dynamic proper to the sacrament. In this way, being accepted for marriage preparation becomes an opportunity for catechesis. Faith also knows this way of practice, in which to see it, it is necessary to put ourselves on the road, or as Pope Francis says: “Faith ‘sees’ to the extent that it journeys” (Lumen fidei, 9). Inviting the spouses to marriage preparation, even if their faith is weak, is to say to them: “Come and see; begin to walk and you will understand the great promise that dwells in this love, whose mystery you already see as through a glass, darkly” (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:12). For this step it is enough that they wish to be included in the faith of the Church.

These minimal conditions for not snuffing out the “smoldering wick” (Matthew 12:20) remind us of the close connection between faith and matrimony. Faith is essential if the marriage is to bear fruit. We have found two guidelines for fostering that faith. First, preparation for the sacrament must work by profoundly fanning the flames of the basic experiences of marriage and the family to which the person is open from his origin, showing how they refer to a horizon of faith. Second, it is essential that the spouses feel welcomed into the Church as a “family of families,” which not only admits them to the sacrament, but also promises to accompany them in their walk of faith, year after year, until their definitive encounter with Christ. Only a renewal of the pastoral approach to family, one that is able to see the Church as one great family on a pilgrimage of faith, will offer an adequate response to these two great crises of our time: the crisis of family and the crisis of faith.
Marriage’s Indissolubility: An Untenable Promise?


The Catholic Church, following Christ’s message, teaches that marriage is indissoluble. God wants men and women, through marriage, to participate in and enjoy a love like his: a communion of love that is faithful over time. Yet given the fact that circumstances change, emotions are fleeting, and human freedom is fragile—not to mention the reality of widespread infidelity and divorce—is it not naïve to set such a high standard for human love? Is it not rather the case that irrevocable vows many times obstruct individual fulfillment? Is the sacrifice of faithfulness always worth it? The Church understands these challenges very deeply. Born from Christ’s sacrificial gift of self for her, she knows from her own existence the difficulties the human person has in loving God and his or her spouse. But she also knows what divine love can endure and bring forth. Loved indissolubly by Christ the Bridegroom, the Church bears human nuptial love into Christ’s unfailing love for the Church, within which the indissoluble love of the spouses encounters its fulfillment and grows ever truer.

The challenges that married love faces today are governed by a specific conception of the human person. Today we think that what we are most truly is our own freedom, that is, the capacity to determine who we are on our own. Relation to one’s own body, to others (parents, spouse, children, neighbors), to the world, and to God are secondary to this abstract, self-determining freedom. Inevitably, when the person is thus detached from others, individual feelings acquire an understandable but undue
significance. Although not totally dependent on us, feelings are seen as the expressions of what our freedom desires, rather than as the echoes of something greater than or external to our individual selves. Feelings, then, come to be regarded as especially important because they seemingly represent the connection that our freedom establishes between our abstract self and our bodies, others and the world. Our culture thus thinks that only what we feel is real.

When a person understands himself in this way, questions central to the nature of marriage and married life—when to live together, whether to have children, the role of sexuality and work, etc.—are answered before they are even formulated according to what feels right. Thus, while we all agree that one enters into matrimony desiring to give oneself to the other and share life with them, for our culture there stands something prior to this giving that is non-negotiable: One must be able to fulfill one’s freedom according to what one feels. Married love, therefore, rather than the sharing of all of oneself, is reduced to the interaction of two independent freedoms and two subjective intentions. The covenant of love—despite all good intentions and actions—has the form of a divorce rather than being a communion of life and love. When the person is understood primarily as self-determining freedom, the matrimonial bond becomes a negotiated contract subject to the spouses’ wills and to the duration of their emotions.

The Church’s teaching on indissolubility does not aim to empower this conception of human freedom. It is not about trying harder when feelings are no longer there. Instead, since indissolubility has to do with the nature of human, nuptial love, it rests in and unveils the truth of the human person: Man is free because he is totally given to himself. The irrevocable gift of oneself to another in freedom is governed by this wonderful grace: We are allowed to be and called to discover the meaning of our existence within the experience of love. Spouses give themselves to each other freely and truly only when they acknowledge that their very lives and the love they have for each other are first given to them. Nuptial love is something that they receive and follow, and in so doing, each spouse contributes to its existence.

If we look at the consent given in the liturgy of matrimony, we see that the spouses first “take” one another; that is,
one receives the other into oneself even as one entrusts oneself to that other. Spouses gratefully accept each other and their love as gifts from God, the source of their love, saying “yes” to the path of marriage chosen by God for them. Through his “yes” the person offers all of himself for all of life to only one person. This nuptial gift can be offered only once. If, however, the spouses do not relinquish the possibility of taking back their total and exclusive “yes,” then they do not give themselves but only something they have (affection, sexual intimacy, wealth, wisdom, etc.). Giving what one has is an action that does not endure when detached from what one is. In contrast, the promise of faithfulness over time consists in the spouses’ irrevocable decision to live their existence and entire future together with the other person and to do so in the certainty that the original giver will fulfill the promise of their call to live a communion of life and love. The promise to remain faithful for one’s entire life neither expresses a foolhardy romanticism nor rests on a mastery of the future. It rests on the good of the communion of love, on the gift-ness of the spouses and, ultimately, on God’s faithfulness in keeping the promise he makes in giving those gifts.

The Church knows that the person, made for communion, is also born with an insurmountable tendency to claim that he is the author of himself. One can thus reject the gift of the other or discontinue the gift of self to the other. In light of this weakness and the difficult situations arising from it, and in contradiction to Christ’s absolute claim that marriage is indissoluble (porneia in Matthew 19:9 is not “adultery”—the Greek word for which is moicheia—but rather the Greek translation of the Hebrew word zenût, “illegitimate union”), some theologians contend that the Church could make exceptions to her teaching on indissolubility. In so doing they adopt the modern conception of freedom described above and think of the marriage bond as a moral reality, that is, as the fruit of the spouses’ freedom and feelings for each other. If these feelings cease, according to them, the marriage bond disappears.

Christ, in contrast, brings nuptial love to the truth of its beginning (Matthew 19:8) and enables spouses to live a life that, if left to their own resources, would seem to be impossible—as the apostles themselves declared (Matthew 19:10). The invitation to husbands to “love [their] wives, as Christ loved the Church
and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25), and to wives to “be subject in everything to their husbands” just as “the Church is subject to Christ” (Ephesians 5:24), is, rather than a culturally biased or exhortatory speech, the proposal of a real taking-part in Christ’s love. Christ’s sacrifice of himself for the Church unites man and God in a relation of nuptial love and is, therefore, the possibility for spouses to participate in his love. In marriage, as a sacrament of the new covenant, spouses are given the grace to love each other with the unconditional, gratuitous love of Christ. This real participation is brought about by the Holy Spirit, who draws spouses together in love, gives them faith and hope so they can entrust themselves to Christ and takes them up in Christ’s own offer of himself to the Father. The Holy Spirit is the source and seal of the spouses’ love and is given to them “as the communion of love of Christ and the Church,”¹ which is also the love of the Father. Spousal love, then, participates sacramentally in the love that the triune God is. This, ultimately, is how a spouses’ love is greater than themselves, and is what reveals the full meaning of Christian matrimony to be the confirming, elevating, and fulfilling of natural spousal love. By participating in God’s unity, the spouses’ communion is a sign of God’s merciful restoration of unity between himself and the world. When understood in this way, we see that the Church’s defense of indissolubility is not to be taken as inflexibility before suffering, but the proclamation of God’s mercy.

The Church, following Christ’s revelation, seeks to educate people in the truth of married love by revealing to them the truth of who they are and the greatness to which they are called to participate in through nuptial love and the sacrament of matrimony. She also educates them to discover and embrace the sacrifice integral to married love, a sacrifice without which the beauty of spousal love does not take flesh. As long as we hold on to our culturally predominant perception of man, sacrifice will only ever be understood as an effort requiring something extra to accomplish, a giving up of something one thinks is due to him, or a putting up with an abuse or misfortune. Instead, if we let ourselves be guided by the anthropology of gift and by Christ’s redemption of human nuptial love, we discover the real nature

¹. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1624.
of sacrifice. To sacrifice is to deny the lie, that is, to not affirm what denies the truth of something and where it is destined to go. Sacrifice is therefore the affirmation of the whole truth. Accompanying them, the Church encourages spouses to live the sacrifice proper to their state of life and hence help their lives be human and fruitful.

In marriage we can say that the sacrifice consists in affirming one's spouse and the communion of life and love for what they are, not for what one feels or thinks they should be. It is this constant opening oneself up to the whole truth of one's spouse and vocation to marriage that is the most difficult yet most needed sacrifice—and often means welcoming the other anew when he or she has betrayed the truth of love. To welcome again the other and the union with him or her as part of oneself is to forgive, which is the apex of sacrifice. If the consent is the total and irrevocable giving of the spouses to each other in the embrace of the nuptial form that has chosen them for all of life, indissolubility reemerges in history as forgiveness. Embracing the sacrifice of married life, spouses contribute to their love becoming truer and deeper because through their sacrifice and communion they participate in Christ’s own way of saving the world. Indissolubility, therefore, is not something spouses make or a prohibition against living freely; rather, it is the foretaste of eternity in time, the possibility of experiencing love and freedom without being at the mercy of one’s own instincts, emotions, fears, and ideas. It is thus a gift given within a communion that lives from and shares with others Christ’s merciful love for the Church.
In his noted interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro in August of 2013, Pope Francis summed up his vision for the Church with a memorable image:

What the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds. . . . I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars. You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds. Heal the wounds.¹

Among the most painful and most serious wounds of our time is the widespread breakdown of marriages. This wound is both a human tragedy—a source of deep suffering for the spouses and especially for their children—and, as Pope Francis argues, a “profound cultural crisis . . . because the family is the fundamental cell in society.”² So too, within the Church, the breakdown of

². Pope Francis, Evangelii gaudium, 66.
marriage represents a crisis of faith in the sacramental economy. The sacrament of marriage is a privileged point of contact between the order of nature and the new gift of grace. Marriage is a real symbol of the fidelity and mercy of God in his covenant love for creation.

The situation is made more complicated due to the fact that many, if not most, of those whose marriages have apparently failed have received a civil divorce and have entered into new civil unions. Here we approach one of the difficult questions at the center of the upcoming synods on the family: How ought the Church to offer pastoral care for Catholics in a situation of divorce or remarriage? How can the Church help to heal those wounds?

In the discussion surrounding the synods, a proposal that emerged in Catholic theology in the early 1970s has gained new currency. The proposal, which represents a departure from Catholic teaching and practice, is that civilly divorced and remarried Catholics should be readmitted to eucharistic Communion—not as a “general norm,” but in particular cases. The best known proponent of this view is Cardinal Walter Kasper, who set forth his vision of pastoral care for the family in a lecture to the extraordinary Consistory of February 20–21, 2014.3 In a forward to the published text, Cardinal Kasper said that he hoped his presentation would “trigger questions” and provoke discussion.

One aspect of Cardinal Kasper’s proposal that calls for more reflection and discernment concerns the status of the first marriage. If the Church is going to extend mercy and pastoral solicitude, it matters a great deal to know whether or not the individual person is married. As other authors have noted, Kasper’s proposal leads to an impasse. Pastoral care that views the prior marriage as irreparably broken or dissolved effectively denies the Church’s teaching on the indissolubility of marriage. Through the grace of the sacrament, the indissoluble bond of marriage is the fruit, sign, and requirement of a total and permanent gift of self that participates in Christ’s love for the Church. For this reason, a sacramental marriage concluded and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved.

Kasper has responded to this concern by emphasizing that “the first marriage is indissoluble because marriage is not only a promise between the two partners; it’s God’s promise too, and what God does is done for all time. Therefore the bond of marriage remains.” However, this response entails a new difficulty: By upholding indissolubility, and thus the continued existence of the marriage bond, Kasper is forced to abandon the exclusivity at the heart of marriage both as a natural institution and as a real symbol of Christ’s love for the Church. Allowing multiple marriages or conjugal relations outside of the context of marriage represents a clear departure from the words of Christ and the constant, universal teaching of the Church.

An alternative pastoral approach would help the faithful rediscover the inseparable connection between indissolubility, exclusivity, and mercy. The ground of indissolubility is the total and permanent self-giving of the spouses through the exchange of vows and through their one-flesh union. Indissolubility—the fruit, sign, and requirement of a total and permanent gift of self that participates in Christ’s love for the Church—includes and requires exclusivity. The gift of an indissoluble bond is at once the form and fruit of Christ’s going to the end of love by handing over the very substance of his life to the Father and to the Church and the form and fruit of a genuinely human love that desires to give the totality of one’s life so as to receive the beloved in an irrevocable communion. As such, sacramental indissolubility is a supreme gift of mercy whereby divine love indwells human love and allows this love to grow beyond itself to participate in God’s love and faithfulness. This grace enables those who exchange wedding vows to say, in truth, “I pledge my life to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, unto death,” and know that these words are true. The gift of indissolubility means that despite the vicissitudes and suffering that come with human failure and sin, the sacramental marriage bond remains an abiding source of mercy, forgiveness, and healing.

In this light, let us return to the image of a field hospital after a battle. In one sense the Church is the hospital and the

sacraments are the medicine that really contain and mediate the healing grace of God’s love. But there is always more to the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist, which sums up our faith and encompasses the whole of our lives. The sacraments are not just medicine; they are more like the hospital itself—a place of healing and renewal. And more than simply a hospital, the sacraments also disclose the deepest truth of our origin and our final destiny. They open a space for authentic human life, for mercy and forgiveness, and for the renewal of all creation.

The sacraments are surprisingly capacious gifts. In the Eucharist the whole mystery of Christ’s life and love is, as it were, concentrated and really given to the Church. So too in marriage, there is a sacramental bond that can encompass all of one’s life, even the most difficult and painful situations of illness, suffering, and abandonment. Forgiveness and mercy are always present, not simply as an ideal or in spite of the supposed failure of the marriage, but in and through the undying marriage bond. It is this sacramental bond, “strong as death” (Song of Songs 8:6), that remains a sign and source of mercy and a real symbol of Christ’s victory over death.
The current crisis of marriage demands a rethinking of the Church’s pastoral approach to couples, both those who are married and those who are preparing to enter into the sacrament. But these efforts will be most fruitful if we go back to the root sources of the problems encountered in marriage and view them from a comprehensive perspective. One of these root problems is what St. John Paul II called the “crisis of meaning,” which is, among other things, a failure to experience being an integral part of something larger than ourselves as individuals. In *Fides et ratio*, the pope diagnosed the crisis of meaning in terms of a loss of confidence in our reason and our capacity to know “total and definitive truth” (*FR*, 82). But it seems that there is also a complementary dimension that afflicts modern culture; namely, the loss of confidence in our will and our capacity to give ourselves in a “total and definitive” way through our choices—all, in our consent to another person in marriage.

Historically, a sign of this impoverished sense of the will can be seen in the development of a purely contractual understanding of marriage. Instead of representing a genuine and permanent gift of self that spouses make to each other, marriage became a merely legal entity. For the Catholic Church, however, marriage is more than a legal reality, because it has an ontological depth. When a man and woman fulfill the conditions for marriage, they join to become what Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger re-
ferred to as a “single new existence.” This unity has a reality that transcends the individuality of the spouses. They form a “We” that is more than the sum of its parts, and more than the interpersonal “I-Thou” relationship that constitutes it. To say that the spouses become members of a real whole larger than themselves does not mean, of course, that they cease to be individual persons in their own right. But it does mean that, henceforward, their identity as persons is no longer the same as it was before. An ontological transformation of sorts takes place in marriage.

How is this possible? For the modern mind, wedded to an atomistic conception of reality, it is not possible. Today, we tend to think of the language of love as “self-gift” as metaphorical, however common the expression might be or however appreciated it is. When we say that we give ourselves, what we typically mean is that we do something with special emotion or effort. In the context of marriage, we translate “gift of self” into a promise regarding external possessions and future behavior—things that we have or do, but not first of all as something that pertains to our very being.

In order to understand the gift of self in a “more-than-metaphorical” way, it is crucial to recover the classical Christian conception of the will and freedom. According to this conception, the will is not most essentially the power to make its own choices, as it is in the usual modern view. Instead, the will is understood first of all as responsive to goodness. I choose a thing because of the goodness in it that attracts me. This means that I “move myself” in my choices only as a function of being moved by something outside of myself; namely, the goodness that I seek. In the choices I make, in other words, I am being “called,” as it were, outside of myself. My will is not simply a power over which I have total control, but is first of all the faculty by which I respond to something beyond myself. Moreover, what distinguishes human beings from other animals is our intellect, which is what allows us to be moved not just by the good that appeals to our immediate desires, but by the true good. Human beings are thus capable of a special self-transcendence: We are able to choose what is good in itself, even if it does not seem, in an immediate way, to gratify our sensible appetites.

Because of the view that the will operates always in response to goodness, the classical tradition has spoken of the will
as an expression of love. Using the language made popular by St. John Paul II, we could say that the will is not just a faculty of response to the good, but specifically a faculty of love as self-gift: the good that “calls” us in our choices in fact calls us to give ourselves to what we choose. This is true, in some respect, in every single choice we make, insofar as we are always seeking the good (however unconsciously), but it is most evidently true in the acts of will with respect to other persons. The paradigmatic act of the will turns out to be the consent to give the whole of myself and to receive another’s whole gift of self in the “one flesh” union of marriage. When we view this act in relation to the classical, rather than the typical modern, conception of freedom, we see that the total self-gift of marriage is not the relinquishing of freedom, but rather its perfection.

In his first encyclical, Pope John Paul II famously said that man “remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is meaningless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own” (Redemptor hominis, 10). This is because in every act of will, we are seeking to give and receive the gift of self. The modern conception of the will as nothing but the power to choose presents an obstacle to this notion of love. It entails what we might call a “sterility,” in which the will is prevented from connecting to any reality outside of itself. One of the implications of this notion is a conception of marriage that is wholly at the mercy of the two wills that constitute it. As such, it “exists” only as long as it is willed to exist by the married partners.

A deep response to the crisis of marriage requires that we overcome the modern, “insubstantial” conception of freedom, and retrieve instead the rich and fruitful notion of the will as an expression of one’s very being. We must come to recognize, once again, that the joining of wills in the consent of marriage is fruitful in a manner analogous to the joining of bodies in the marital act. This consent gives birth to a genuinely new reality, which has a number of properties that belong specifically to it, the most basic of which is indissolubility. There is thus a deep connection between the gift of self that the spouses make in their vows and the ontological reality of the marital bond. To empty the bond of its substance is to render the will essentially sterile and thus to contribute to the crisis of meaning that plagues our age.
“What God Has Conjoined, Let No Man Put Asunder”:
A Meditation on the Conjugal Embrace

Adrian J. Walker

When the Pharisees attempt to draw Jesus into a tricky debate about the technicalities of divorce law (Matthew 19:3), he responds by recalling the Creator’s original intention for marriage. The marital bond uniting male and female in exclusive lifelong communion, he reminds his interlocutors, is not a merely human institution, much less a malleable plaything of human caprice, but was created by God himself in the beginning as an enduring testament to his own absolute unicity. This is why “a man shall leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh, so that they are no longer two, but one flesh. What God has conjoined, then, let no man put asunder!” (Matthew 19:6).

According to Matthew 19, then, the indissolubility of marriage is not simply a topic for learned debate among lawyers and moralists. Before anything else, it is the revelation of the Creator’s original intention for male and female, the archetypal paradigm in whose light we begin to see the sexually differentiated body as it truly is: not as opaque, indifferent, inert, and amoral stuff, or as a neutral tool for our arbitrary self-expression, but as the sacrament of an inexhaustibly generous divine intention. To perceive and affirm this intention is not to betray our sexuality, but to liberate it into its primordial truth, which shines forth most brightly in the radiance of what St. John Paul II called “God’s plan for marriage and family.”
God’s original intention for sexuality is written into the very pattern of our male and female bodies. We could think of this intention as a word or logos that the Creator speaks into our nature, but it is more than that too: It is also our first acknowledgment of, and answer to, this divine speech in turn. Though truly ours, this initial response is assured to us before we can will it consciously; indeed, it is given to us as the internal ground and direction sustaining and orienting all our volition from within. To obey this direction is not to become a de-personalized instrument of sub-human forces, but to receive the right form of self-possession, which is itself the condition and the fruit of the vice-regal dominion over nature included in God’s original gift to mankind: “And God blessed them and said ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and have dominion over it’” (Genesis 1:28).

Now, one of the most eloquent expressions of the divine intention for male and female is the act to which each of us owes his existence. This act imposes itself as the unique paradigm of what we mean by “sex.” For what other use of the sexual organs could conceivably interweave the intimate bodily commingling of male and female, their face-to-face encounter, and their conjoint fruitfulness in the same seamless whole more than the sexual act? If this incomparable act is a sign, as it clearly is, the chief thing it signifies is the society of man and woman in marriage. For if sex is inseparable from fruitfulness, fruitfulness is also inseparable from fidelity, so that the twin goods of fidelity and procreation co-constitute the substance of marriage. By marriage, of course, I mean “natural marriage,” understood as an indivisible unity of fecundity and fidelity originally ordered to, and apt for, the sacramental representation of Christ’s fruitful covenant with his Church. “This,” in fact, “is why a man shall leave father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery. But I speak concerning Christ and the Church” (Ephesians 5:32).

But why must sexual union be open to fruitfulness in order to represent conjugal fidelity? An initial answer has to do with the nature of that union itself, whose essential idea is as immutable in its own way as that of the triangle. Just as you cannot separate the idea of the triangle from its three sides, you cannot separate the idea of sexual union from procreation. Even contraception presupposes the procreative “signification” of the act,
whose movement it cannot reverse, but only hinder from reaching its goal, like a player who intercepts a long pass at the touchdown line. Clearly, the union achieved under such circumstances—like the wilfully frustrated pass—is vitiated by an infidelity whose inner logic radically contradicts even the unitive nature of the sexual embrace. Deliberately sterile sex cannot be a positive achievement of carnal union, but can only produce a parasitic replica lacking any true unitive power of its own. But how could such an adulterated simulacrum of union validly express the truth of the marital bond?

What I have said so far implies that only the fruitful union of man and wife—the conjugal act or, as I prefer, the “conjugal embrace”—can do full justice to the original vocation of sex, which is to signify the indissoluble conjugal bond. In conclusion, I want to emphasize how this vocation depends on a kind of self-offering inscribed in the natural pattern of the sexual act itself. Far from degrading their union to a mere pretext for generation, this oblative gesture consummates it as a share in the supreme joy: the most intense experience of life coincident with the most irrevocable act of giving it away. Even as a reality belonging to the order of nature, sexual union is a kind of liturgical act uniting enjoyment and kenosis, self-possession and self-sacrifice, in a gesture analogous to the Eucharist. And through this eucharistic gesture we catch a glimpse of the (trinitarian) unity of being and gift in God himself. This is why, in defending the natural integrity of the conjugal embrace, the Church is also defending the “most high calling” inscribed in our sexuality from the beginning: its ordination to bear witness to the unicity of the Father, who, in generating the Son, also gives him the spiration of the Third Person, so that “the common Gift might also proceed from [the Begotten] as well” (Augustine, De Trinitate, 15, 17, 29).
When Catholics speak of “gay marriage” they often ask how marriage contributes to the common good and how “gay marriage” might negatively impact that contribution. Assessing the issue in this way is understandable. Marriage’s natural role in conceiving, nurturing and educating children makes its contribution seemingly obvious. Unfortunately, arguments appealing to such observations have repeatedly failed over the last decade and more. U.S. courts—and increasingly, legislatures and public opinion—have countered that having children has never been a legal requirement for marriage and that, in any case, some homosexual couples do decide to have children, whether through newly modified adoption laws or artificial reproductive technologies (“ARTs”). Indeed, the courts have said that arguments based on the contribution of procreation do not even rise to the level of legal rationality.

Perhaps, then, we need to take stock and ask ourselves not only why arguments that seem so compelling have failed but also how we might deepen them. Several implications of the debate may help in accomplishing this task.

First, in feeling free to modify the meaning of marriage, the courts and others seem to assume that civil marriage is merely a creation of the state, rather than a natural relationship that the state ought only to recognize, support, and stabilize through its laws. In doing so, the courts have lost track of the fact that marriage is by nature a life-long union of a man and a woman that normally leads to children. Indeed, they have lost track of
the relation of law with natural, human communities altogether.

Once the concept of natural communities is lost, the debate can be framed in ways that have sweeping implications. For example, insofar as “same-sex marriage” follows a logic that separates marriage from its natural ordination to children, it pushes marriage in the direction of an entirely private relationship. But no society has ever before understood marriage in this way. The tendency suggests that children (that is to say, society’s future) are merely a lucky outcome of adult life-style choices. This treats having children in a way similar to that of a consumer choice. Insofar as the substance of marriage then becomes a sexual relationship abstracted from procreation, the question arises as to why the state has any interest at all in institutionalizing and regulating such a relationship. Hence, “gay marriage” calls into question the whole concept of “civil marriage.”

Here is another implication. The courts and others have now defined marriage so that “gay marriage” is indistinguishable from traditional marriage, other than the sexes of the “spouses.” Of course this implies the reverse as well: Traditional marriage is then no different from “gay marriage.” Put differently, if the attraction of a man and a woman to each other is only an “orientation,” then it does not reflect a natural attraction between man and woman, but only that each happens to have the “orientation” known as “heterosexuality.” In other words, to understand sexuality and therefore marriage in this way is to understand them on essentially gay terms.

However, the courts and others have not simply detached the idea of marriage from its procreative role. In assuming that sexual desire can be just as reasonably directed to one’s own sex as to the other, the courts seem to suggest that the sexual correlation of man and woman to each other is only materially or physically important, that it is perhaps only an artifact of evolutionary biology and therefore not entirely determinative of personal identity. From here it assumes that when there are children present, having both a mother and a father offers no substantial benefit. This perpetuates a fragmented view of the human person. It implies a division of the person into a biological, sub-personal “half” and an immaterial, conscious “half” in a manner that slights the significance of both fundamental human realities. These include not only fatherhood and motherhood and their natural complemen-
tarity, but also the fundamentally human experiences of conceiving in a bodily act of love, giving birth, being carried in a womb, being born, being nursed, and so on. But can these fundamental realities be swept aside so easily? That they cannot is precisely why Pope Francis has reaffirmed the Church’s constant teaching that children have a right to both a mother and a father.

Undoubtedly, these considerations are difficult to present in public debate. This leads to yet another consideration. If the current cultural situation makes these considerations difficult to express in a way that seems relevant to the common good, the problem may lie with our way of understanding the common good. Our culture tends to think of the common good as the aggregation of those goods society is able to provide its members. Of course this sense of common good is not simply wrong. But if it is our sole focus, our attention is diverted from the community itself.

Now, the common good does refer to the community as well, a fact especially true of marital and familial communities. When we lose sight of the community as a good, we tend also to lose sight of its nature and come to view it instrumentally, that is to say, only in terms of what we receive from it. But things that are only good because of what they produce are in principle interchangeable with anything else that seems to produce similar results. Furthermore, the parts of something viewed instrumentally are also interchangeable, so long as the new part contributes equivalently to the overall result.

This reflects what is currently happening in the “gay marriage” debate. Insofar as homosexual couples can adopt or use ARTs, “gay marriage” seems to be interchangeable with the traditional idea of marriage.

Because we no longer perceive natures in our treatment of the common good, the standard for interchangeability tends to be rather mechanical. Hence, if a womb can be replaced by lab equipment, the womb and the equipment are treated as equivalents. If being a man or a woman is only biologically sub-personal, then having a mother and a father amounts to no more than having two parents whose body types happen to differ. Hence, insofar as they can “have” children by means of ARTs, homosexual relationships seem like genuine equivalents to heterosexual relationships.

If, on the other hand, we were to see the common good in terms of natures, we would understand that the parts of the
whole are fundamentally non-interchangeable. Hearts and livers are not the same kind of thing and cannot be interchanged, but both are necessary for life. Only their complementary but differing structures allow the whole to live. Marital and familial communities are very much like this. Not only are man and woman naturally “complementary”—so are the children and all of the relatives of natural marital and familial communities. When a woman sees her husband and parents-in-law melded seamlessly with herself and her own parents in her children, she understands very concretely the Biblical idea of man and woman becoming “one-flesh.” When a man looks in the mirror and sees his father and mother and grandparents, the simple existential experience helps him to remember who he is—his limitations, his weaknesses, his strengths. Most of all, it helps him to see his destiny and the gravity and significance of life. Unfortunately, these are precisely the fundamental human experiences that “same-sex marriage” and ARTs, by their very logic, seem to vitiate.

We can see, then, why the “interchangeables” are not in fact interchangeable. Yet, public discourse lacks the categories necessary to speak the truth. For this reason, we need to deepen our own understanding of what natures constitute the common good and use it to challenge and expand those underlying categories adopted by our contemporary culture.

A final practical consideration: In order to save marriage, some have supported a “compromise”—namely, the idea of “civil unions.” Civil unions would grant benefits equivalent to those of marriage, but deny the name. But is the idea really a compromise? To say that gay couples are entitled to civil unions implies that they are entitled to the basic legal substance of civil marriage. But if we say that gay couples are entitled to this substance, on what principle do we deny them the name? The concept of “civil union,” therefore, only strengthens the claim for recognition of the relationship as marriage.
The mission of the Church is pastoral because of her divine motherhood: The Bride of Christ conceives, gives birth, and nurtures children she receives gratuitously from God. She is mother to all peoples, with a motherhood that is not an abstraction but—like all motherhood—a function of her indissoluble and ever-deepening unity with her Bridegroom. We know and participate in this unity in a particular and elevated way through the sacrament of the Eucharist. Thus, we see that a special relationship exists between the sacraments of the Eucharist and marriage.

The sacrament of the Eucharist brings the Church and all within her fold into an organic unity with the Lord, the fruit of which we see in the faith of believers and in the believers themselves. This unity and fruitfulness is imaged in a particular way in marriage, where two spouses, male and female, come together in a unity that bears the fruit of a child. It is these two unities—the mysterious and gratuitous unity of creature and Creator in the Eucharist, and the equally mysterious and gratuitous unity of a man and a woman in a child—that direct the Bride in all her actions in the world.

Therefore, when we speak of the Church’s pastoral action, we must first and foremost know that it only comes from and is the fruit of the Bride’s deep unity with her Bridegroom. Marriage is in some way a privileged glimpse of this unity; thus, it is no surprise that the sacrament of marriage is not simply an object of pastoral care. Because life in the family of God is the reason for the Church’s creation and existence as Christ’s spouse,
marriage becomes the real subject, foundation, and active structure of any serious and true pastoral work of the ecclesial community. In fact, pastoral activity should be molded and structured upon marriage and family.

Concretely, what does this mean? We must again emphasize that marriage is a real symbol of the unity of Christ and his Church. As such, it is one of the last places we can look to on this earth and realize that fidelity is truly possible. The spouses desire to give themselves to each other irrevocably, body and soul. Because of our woundedness, however, it seems as if this desire can never be fulfilled. But this is the grace of the sacrament: The spouses’ desire is taken up into God’s fidelity toward his creation, and thus fulfilled in a way heretofore unimaginable. At the same time, marriage is given the gift of being a symbol of unity and fidelity in a world lacking such signs. Pastoral care founded on marriage, then, always keeps this truth at the heart of its work. We are all to be a symbol of Christ’s fidelity to his Church.

Truth is remaining in the Father, and mercy is being restored and fulfilled by Paschal life. These two characteristics and activities of God meet and embrace in the sacrificed and risen Lord. There is no possible separation of the two; in their unity in the risen Body, they give form to life.

The saving truth about marriage focuses on the real difference between man and woman, which makes possible their unique and indissoluble unity and love. This indissoluble unity bears fruit in children, who are the irreversible sign of the spousal communion and unity between Christ and his Church. Marriage is a true sacrament in light of baptism, which itself is the indissoluble marriage between God and his people. In breaking away from the conjugal sacrament, the subsequent unions of a divorced person can never be equated to the marriage willed by Christ. It is difficult to understand how it is possible, on the one hand, to proclaim and witness to the indissolubility of sacramental unity, and, on the other hand, to allow pastoral behavior which permits exactly the opposite. Dissolving what God has united can hardly be described as an act of pastoral mercy, but only as unfaithfulness in need of conversion and repentance.

It is amazing how many contemporary theological and pastoral reflections about this topic simply avoid any serious reference to the moral gravity of freely breaking up a valid marriage.
In the contemporary debate, there is not enough serious interest in the good of the children injured by the divorce and new unions of their biological parents. It seems that pastoral care for divorced and remarried people focuses only on the two persons in their second or third marriage. Even at its natural and creaturely origins, marriage is not just a simple construction of subjective will, human emotions, and private free consent. Conjugal unity and children are bodily, fruitful witnesses—like the primordial sacrament—to man and woman’s social nature and to a transcendent openness to God’s spousal love. This spousal love is always already fuller and stronger than human freedom and lovers’ feelings.

In his love for the Church, Christ demonstrates how man and woman are concretely capable of fruitful conjugal love. Their human love, sexual difference, and free, matrimonial consent are taken and fulfilled beyond their natural capacities by Christ in the Church without destroying the original dimensions of creaturely love, free will, and human emotions. The simplistic reduction of the sacrament of marriage to individual subjective love heralds the death of the sacrament and opens the door to the pastoral recognition of any other type of subjective love.

We must take seriously the fact that destroying the unity in any marriage affects the Church’s capacity to proclaim and bear witness to unity, the sacraments, and the gift of fruitfulness itself. The breaking up of a sacramentally valid marriage wounds Christ and thereby his spouse, the Church. In addition, such a split damages the inherent aptness of the human body to express and make visible God’s fruitful love, both in the eucharistic Body and in conjugal bodily unity. Divine mercy always aims at restoring sacramental communion with God, never tearing it asunder. And it always does so in light of the truth that God is and has given us: his love for his Church, to whom he remains ever-faithful.