

Colloquium: “Courtship: A Journey Toward the Love that Moves the Stars”
April 3-4, 2009
Opening Remarks
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Introduction

This colloquium is a “first” for the Center for Cultural and Pastoral Research, though it sinks its roots within the JPII Institute for Studies in Marriage and the Family.

The guiding idea of that Institute is the central preoccupation of the its founder and namesake to understand the human person in terms of love, love revealing the meaning of the human person. That central preoccupation naturally brought out certain key themes, the ones that surfaced at the beginning of his pontificate: the human body, and sexual difference as the expression of the human aptness for fruitful love (known as the “theology of the body”). But it was no narrow preoccupation; for it is, as he said incessantly, repeating the words of the Second Vatican Council, only in the horizon of God-made-man that “the mystery of man truly becomes clear” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). He could not then avoid the question of who Christ is and who God is (nor can we). And going in the “other direction,” since all creation was “groaning for” this mystery, his central preoccupation took him to the heart of created being (as it takes us).

The Center’s method

The Center for Cultural and Pastoral Research, being anchored in the John Paul II Institute, naturally has these same interests, but it takes them up with an eye to some of their concrete implications, especially where they bear on the most innocent. Moreover, its modality wishes to be that of a dialogue or conversation with others outside of our Institute and in other disciplines, who share our interests and, from the perspective of their disciplines and their distinct places, are putting to the test (verifying) insights that we too are putting to the test. With them we wish to be in a kind of “community of conversation” about the things we mutually hold dear.

In a letter to Marcello Pera (2006), Benedict XVI addressed the question of Europe and its need to be revitalized by the religious ethos that had generated it. Benedict said that such work must be done chiefly not by experts, committees, and councils but by *communities*; for, as he said, “something living cannot be born except from another living thing.” The work would thus be done most adequately through communities—even *minority* communities, who are nonetheless convinced of having something great: a “precious pearl,” something of great value for them and for the world. In this way, transformation will occur through people who believe they have something of value for everyone (so no relativism); and at the same time in the manner of an *attractive humanity*—lived together—a humanity more beautiful, more satisfying, and thus more compelling (though without compelling).

And in this manner with you we wish to do what communities do, not settling for a polite (and “tolerant”) exchange of opinions to which the opinion-holders are defensively (and “conservatively”) tied, nor circling the wagons and telling each other what we already know, smug in our common agreement and common enemies. Rather we wish to seek an ever deeper understanding, through mutual enrichment *and correction*, of the *truth about things, about reality*, in which we, too, have a personal stake.

Our Theme: Why Courtship?

Many of us look upon the various changes that marriage has undergone recently as woes: The difficulty of staying in a marriage, within our *Divorce Culture*.¹ The difficulty for children of being suspended *Between Two Worlds*,² between parents who *were* married. Not to mention the difficulty of getting *into* a marriage, with the now socially identifiable “single young female” (SYF) who can find “no good men left,”³ and their counterparts, the new “child-man,”⁴ or so-called “odyssey male” (now a member of “menaissance,” which gives the man who is angry with the new female, confused about how to take her out, and generally disincentivized to marry her, new fraternal support for his baser “Darwinian” instincts).

It began to become clear that these marriage problems had something to do with what *preceded* marriage (or in this case what didn’t precede it). And this was so because *courtship carried with it implications about what life was for, what marriage was, and what freedom and fulfillment look like*—so that marriage could not but be affected (adversely in our judgment) by its lack.

And what are those implications? Without being exhaustive, we attempted to identify in the topics (and questions) guiding tomorrow’s work, what we judged to be the core implications. I will try to introduce them (without concluding them).

“A Path” vs. Aimlessness

The first theme concerns *what life is for, where it is going*. Implicit in the idea of courtship is the (almost imperceptible) idea that human life has been *placed on* a path (an “Odyssey”) that is *going somewhere*. And that where it is going is something to be “*stepped into*.” There is nothing about it that is simply “made to order,” in the manner of improvised make-it-up-as-you-go tour (“walk-about”). Indeed neither *the being on the path* nor the nature of the destination are simply “choices.” Its terms are *given*, even if, then, consent will be asked, and even required!

¹ See Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

² See Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005).

³ See Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Why There Are No Good Men Left: The Romantic Plight of the New Single Woman* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003).

⁴ See Kay S. Hymowitz, “Child-Man in the Promised Land,” *City Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Winter 2008).

And that requirement of consent indicates another factor, and that is that the “being put on the path” is not a *forced march* toward bondage, but a liberating journey—an adventure—toward an awaiting presence, love, a home (Ithaca).

In the absence of courtship we are not given an *alternate path*, but rather a kind of aimless wandering—a kind of vagabondage. If there was the idea of a “ladder” with courtship, there is now the idea of a “cyclical relationship system,” serial relationships, which may or may not lead anywhere (Barbara Dafoe Whitehead). This new generation has been called by David Brooks the “Odyssey Generation,” because there is now no longer an idea of growing up into an adulthood defined as getting a job, finding a mate, and having children. Significantly, it is an *Odyssey* Generation because it is on an *adventure* and on an adventure *because* it avoids bonds. For this generation, if there were an Ithaca, *there could by definition be no odyssey, no adventure*.

Rootedness vs. Rootlessness

Another theme that the courtship question raises concerns exactly *who* is on the path or not, as the case may be. It concerns, that is, just how much “baggage” comes along with him or her. In the world of courtship, one is not alone on this path. (The courtship scene in *The Godfather* comes to mind). It is simply a given that those to whom one is naturally tied (family and place) matter. The fact that one comes from a people and a place (a “Port William”⁵) is not a matter of indifference when weighing whether or not to bind oneself to another. Nor are those same people lacking when it comes to making the necessary prudential judgments.

Perhaps one of the most notable features of the post-courtship world is how minimally one has to reckon with “the family.” Only the most token gestures are made and usually after an already established fact. Bloom⁶ and Kass⁷ ask if this is not something more than a mere lack of manners. Is it not a symptom of the “rootlessness” of the modern self? What need is there to “come calling,” if the modern self is, in effect, *from nowhere*, homeless, that is if the place where it sleeps at night says little about it, and is in no condition to make claims on it?

Relation/Sexual Difference/Complementarity (“hive”) vs. Sovereign Selves/Androgyny/Careerism (“herd”)

Closely associated with this theme is the one that looks at the subject on the path (or not) but this time from the perspective of the relations that he or she is *about to enter into*. This is a question about just how deep those *about-to-be* relations go. Bloom has set forth the two underlying anthropologies nicely with his “hive”/“herd” distinction.⁸

⁵ See the fiction of Wendell Berry, which centers on the histories of the “membership” of the town of Port William. In particular, see *Hannah Coulter* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004), a portion of which was read in preparation for this colloquium.

⁶ See Allan Bloom, “Relationships,” in *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar*, ed. by Amy A. and Leon R. Kass (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 45-76.

⁷ See Leon R. Kass, “The End of Courtship,” in *The Public Interest* 126 (1997): 36-63.

⁸ Bloom, 58.

Implied in courtship, he suggests, is the “hive” idea of the person, whereby *relation to the other is the very stuff of our being, reaching down to the most subcutaneous levels, defining us*. This is why the courtship idea is at home with sexual difference, and in fact, does much to enhance it (especially with modesty, which, again with Bloom, is as much in the business of keeping desire ignited as it is in regulating it). Sexual difference is the inscription on our bodies of a *being turned towards another* in view of a *common enterprise* which each will serve in uniquely different ways (“ordering one’s loves,” in view of it, as Kass puts it). And inasmuch as this basic relation and its common project *defines* the person, it is the most interesting thing. Jane Austin’s introduction to *Pride and Prejudice* comes to mind: “it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife.”

On the contrary, the “herd,” in its “state of nature,” is the prevalent anthropology implied in the so-called “odyssey” view. And with the sex/gender distinction having been made so effectively, we no longer must be reminded by our differentiated bodies what everyone used to see (and only simpletons today see), namely a *reciprocal relation*. We no longer draw such conclusions. Indeed we *must* not! The difference no more implies complementarity than other differences like those between races or ethnicities.

Having this obstacle now out of the way, the “state-of-nature” man can now come forward in all his/her androgynous, undifferentiated equality. The liberal soul now has a liberal body. Now the “two sexes” are merely grazing together.⁹ They are on *parallel lines*.

Indeed after the “one-day spree” of the sexual revolution, now there is nothing between them (unless they decide to “have a relationship”). (This is the post-modern feminist touch—what Bloom calls the “Reign of Terror”!). No need for modesty. No one is even looking! She is lifting weights, sweating in her yoga pants. And he is her “personal trainer” standing over her bare midriff giving instructions on how to perform a proper bench press. Not a hint of passion. Not even of a potential attraction. (They might as well be “exercising naked” as in Plato’s utopia.) It’s as though something had been put in the water, unless perhaps he’s faking it, lest he be implicated in the new and only remaining mortal sin of “sexual harassment.”

Even “marriages” that do manage to be forged, when constructed on these foundations, feature “married people” who seem to be doing what they were doing before—“defining and fulfilling themselves”—only that now they are doing it “together,” “on the commuter train,” so to speak. They remain relatively undifferentiated from the others who are not “married.”¹⁰ They are in “a relationship,” *working on* their “commitment,” honing their “communication skills,” “making time” for each other in schedules which are not aimed at each other in the first place. And they are doing all this anxiously because *they are not in fact related*. They are on parallel lines.

⁹ Bloom, 57, 58.

¹⁰ Bloom, 67, 63.

And just as parallel lines don't expect to meet, they too are not looking forward to, nor investing themselves in, a common enterprise, with its inevitable divisions of labor. The woman has graduated from the "girl project" (promoted in many schools, especially all-girl schools) which has successfully re-oriented her more natural aspirations, by turning her gaze, with the help of a soccer ball, to becoming strong, confident, assertive, and above all an independent career woman. (No "ordering of loves.") The man, for his part, lacking the various kinds of motivation, is "non-committal" both to her and to her children.

Fulfillment by way of risk vs. Caution with an Exit Plan

The next theme concerns fulfillment and its relation to risk.

Implied in the courtship idea is that the most fulfilling things (at the end of the path) are had through the taking of a risk.¹¹ Happiness and joy are associated with engaging oneself whole and entire with the life of another (Another), and into the *mystery* of another who is *beyond one's grasp*. One looks forward to, and eventually consents to, a future which is "in the hands of another," not a "life goal" achieved through the discipline of time-management skills.

On the contrary, in the post-courtship world it is almost impossible to think of such risk as anything but "unsafe." One must *in the very movement toward* the other *already prepare for separation*. "The energies people should use in the common enterprise are exhausted in preparation for independence"¹² with conditional attachments and "pre-nuptial arrangements." And this, again, as Bloom suggests, is not a mere moral failure. It exists on account of the *fact of separation* assuming, that is, an anthropology of the whole and self-sufficient individual (of "social solitaires") in which "one cannot risk interdependence. Imagination compels everyone to look forward to the day of separation in order to see how he will do."¹³

In the words of Rousseau, in the *Emile*:

I would even want the pupil and the governor to regard themselves as so inseparable that the lot of each in life is always a common object for them. As soon as they envisage from afar their separation, as soon as they foresee the moment which is going to make them strangers to one another, they are already strangers. Each sets up his own little separate system; and both, engrossed by the time they will no longer be together, stay only reluctantly.¹⁴

Add to this divorce and what better proof of the validity of the lesson we have already learned by heart that *people are not made to live together* (that we are to *be protected from them*). Now, with divorce, we know it's really true!

All of this resulting in the incapacity to take the risk of love (or even to find it).

¹¹ Kass, 13.

¹² Bloom, 62.

¹³ Bloom, 62.

¹⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or, On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 53.

Eros/Transcendence vs. the Fall of Eros

The question about what makes for a happy life leads us to the relation between love, sex, marriage, and transcendence, what is in fact the *first theme* for tomorrow's discussion. (It is not, therefore, an ornamental "add-on").

Can it be a coincidence that the lack of interest in marriage (or care for it) coincides with a forgetfulness of God, and more precisely, especially for Americans, of the relevance of God in the whole of things?

It is difficult not to think that what is, in effect, a relaxing of desire (notwithstanding all the recourse to sexual entertainment) and the inability to take the risk of binding one's life whole and entire to that of another, is a symptom of not being able to see something, a promise, for which the risk is worth taking. (Lacking this, the risk is not reasonable.)

What Plato perceived, and what could be affirmed with certainty in Christianity, was that the human experience of love stood at the intersection of a horizontal and vertical axis.¹⁵ If one was "smitten" by another "beautiful body," it was because he or she was smitten by the Beautiful, the Eternal. Love, it seems, is always after the eternal. (On this intersection, Bloom notes the coincidence in young people of the onset of puberty the most interesting part of their education.)¹⁶ Once aroused, it demands eternity ("will you love me *forever*?"), and seeks it together, in children, even as it eyes virginal love and virginal fruitfulness, without which these would not suffice.

How can it be done, Teresa,
For you to stay in Andrew forever?
How can it be done, Andrew,
For you to stay in Teresa forever
Since man will not endure in man
And man will not suffice?¹⁷

If indeed there is this coincidence between "being in want of a wife" (or of a husband) and the desire for God, then we have much more than a moral problem on our hands. Absent a desire for the eternal—and the perception that it is the depth of *the world, of this woman and of this man*—there can be no love, only "relationships."¹⁸

In Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, we see in the striking ending (which everyone thinks will end in a marriage between Julia and Charles) that where the beloved is not transparent to that which human desire ultimately seeks, there can be no marriage.

¹⁵ See Bloom, 56, 64, 65, 66, 74.

¹⁶ Bloom, 75.

¹⁷ Karol Wojtyła, *The Jeweler's Shop* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 41 (Act I, 5, 11).

¹⁸ Allan Bloom, "The Fall from Eros," in *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 15.

Perceiving this, Julia says to Charles: “the worse I am, the more I need God. I can’t shut myself out from His mercy. That is what it would mean; starting a life with you, without Him.” This would be for her the “one thing unforgivable.” She can’t “set up a rival good to God’s.”¹⁹ By contrast, Manzoni, in his *Betrothed*, has his protagonist marry in the end (after having been absolved from a rash *ex voto*, by the priest who now *encourages and blesses* their marriage). The priest says to the young man:

if the Church now gives you back this companion in life, she does not do so to provide you with a temporal and earthly happiness, which, even if perfect in its kind and without any admixture of bitterness, must still finish in great sorrow when the time comes for you to leave each other; she does so to set you both on the road to that happiness which has no end. [Love each other as fellow-travellers on that road, remembering that you must part some day, and hoping to be reunited later for all time. Give thanks to the Power that has led you to this blessed state not by the path of turbulent and passing pleasures, but by the path of toil and affliction, to bring you to a steady and tranquil gladness of heart. If God grants you children, you must endeavour to bring them up for him, and to instill in them the love of him and of all men; for it you do that you will surely guide them well in all else.²⁰

In Dante’s cosmos every movement, every affection or desire, is the reverberation of the Love at the foundation of the whole world, “the Love that moves the stars.” It is for this reason that he can speak longingly of Beatrice. It is because of the longing that Beatrice aroused in him, the desire for the love that moves the stars, that we see him ascending the mountain (and *looking for her!*).

Unhappiness

We could be indifferent to the question we have undertaken if it weren’t for the fact that the recent itinerary is also a “trail of tears.” There is no end of literature telling of those (often the authors themselves) who have borne the brunt of recent social experiments. Children of divorce (*Between Two Worlds*); and those left in an empty home who have to make do with a few hours of “quality time” with their mothers (*Home Alone America*²¹); the new “single young female” who can’t “find someone” (“*No Good Men Left*”), and her counterpart the new frustrated and retaliating “child-man”; ex-feminist career women who have delayed motherhood too long and are now in the hands of fertility clinics and their impersonal methods.²²

It is here where we check ourselves from thinking “progressively” that each new stage is an inevitable and therefore desirable stage, even if it may not look so great. And we check ourselves with vigor against the conservative romanticism of “throw backs” wishing to “turn back the clocks.”

¹⁹ Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1999), 340.

²⁰ Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 683

²¹ See Mary Eberstadt, *Home Alone America: The Hidden Toll of Day Care, Behavioral Drugs, and Other Parent Substitutes* (New York: Sentinel, 2004).

²² See Anne Taylor Fleming, *Motherhood Deferred: A Woman’s Journey* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1994).

As for the latter, if we stop to think, we don't do so on account of some precious attachment to things antique, to English Country Dances, lace petticoats, and fans (though these are not excluded). We are not interested in conserving old things to conserve old things ("conservatively"), but in identifying something which is perennial (and therefore also "contemporary") in the nature of the human heart. Only that is worth conserving.

As for the former, "progressivism," the broken heart is perhaps the most compelling evidence against it. It unmasks the view of an "elastic" heart which can get used to anything (with the help of all the quick salves and anesthetics offered to dull the nerves of the heart's desire and pain). Recent experiments have been performed "at tremendous cost in personal happiness, child welfare, and civic peace."²³ We would do well to stop and think before bulldozing ahead.

In the words of Leon Kass:

New arrangements can perhaps be fashioned. As Raskolnikov put it—and he should know—'Man gets used to everything, the beast!' But it is simply wrong that nothing important will be lost; indeed, many things of great importance have already been lost, and, as I have indicated, at *tremendous cost in personal happiness, child welfare, and civic peace There may be no going back to the earlier forms of courtship*, but no one should be rejoicing over this fact. *Anyone serious about 'designing' new cultural forms to replace those now defunct must bear the burden of finding some alternative means of serving all these necessary goals.*²⁴

Necessary goals, that is, of the heart. So, it is in this spirit, without "romanticism" but also without superficiality about the desire of the human heart that we engage the question of courtship.

²³ Kass, 13.

²⁴ Kass, 13, 15. Emphasis added.