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Marital Aspects of Religious Life

In religious life members live in community, permanently vowing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In marriage, a man and woman exchange vows and consent, permanently committing to both the ends of having and educating children, and supporting one another (Cahall 2014, 104-105). Both of these commitments are community-based and lifelong, yet while marriage is an "intimate partnership of life and love" (*GS* 48), religious life "derives from the mystery of the Church," that it may "show forth Christ and acknowledge herself to be the Savior's bride. Religious life in its various forms is called to signify the very charity of God in the language of our time" (CCC 926). It is therefore apparent that while religious life is not the same thing as holy matrimony, it nonetheless represents an equivalently all-encompassing commitment, even a "marriage" in verisimilitude. What follows then offers context and reflection on different marital aspects of religious life, that it may be better understood as a marital commitment in its own right.

First I refer to scripture, in which the bases for each commitment are rooted. In a Christian context, marriage is by far the elder, described in Genesis 2:21-25:

> The LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.' Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

To some it would be surprising to consider that the life Adam and Eve subsequently lived was a type of chastity, yet chastity "means the successful integration of sexuality within

the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being" (CCC 2337). For married couples this means living in a sexually exclusive relationship with one another, while for religious, chastity means consecrated celibate continence with the intent to inclusively love all with the love of God.[1]

As such, what Jesus has to say about celibacy follows:

> For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can (Mt 19:120).

Here we are presented with two types of celibacy. At first the quote indicates being a "eunuch" from birth due to impotence, or having been made so by others, implying castration – these unfortunate examples demonstrate an imposed, involuntary celibacy. A voluntary, chosen celibacy taken on for a higher ideal such as "the kingdom of heaven" however, is the intended perspective for religious to embrace. Yet when it comes time to make an all-encompassing life commitment, people overwhelmingly choose marriage between persons. Religious life simply does not occur to most people to take on, even though Jesus himself encouraged it: "let anyone accept this who can."

Regardless of what the chosen commitment ends up looking like, when people get ready to commit, they do so to simultaneously feel complete and opened to life in a new way. They desire a means of understanding themselves and the world, their sense of generativity and leaving behind a legacy, and know of no deeper waters to plunge into

[1] "People should cultivate [chastity] in the way that is suited to their state of life. Some profess virginity or consecrated celibacy which enables them to give themselves to God alone with an undivided heart in a remarkable manner. Others live in the way prescribed for all by the moral law, whether they are married or single. Married people are called to live conjugal chastity; others practice chastity in continence. There are three forms of the virtue of chastity: the first is that of spouses, the second that of widows, and the third that of virgins. We do not praise any one of them to the exclusion of the others…This is what makes for the richness of the discipline of the Church" (CCC 2349).

than creating new life in their Creator's image. Due to its directly God-given, pre-Christian status at the creation of the world, marriage can even be considered primordial:

> To call marriage the 'primordial sacrament' also means that marriage provides the basic model of the whole plan of salvation (TOB 98:2). It is according to this model of a nuptial gift of self that Christ creates the Church as his bride and offered her the grace of redemption. Thus *'the sacramentality of the Church remains in a particular relationship with marriage,* the most ancient sacrament' (TOB 93:7). (Cahall 2014, 293)

Yet according to St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), the bonds of marriage are vastly predated by "the relationship of the soul to God as God foresaw it from all eternity as the goal of her creation" (Stein 2002, 946). This relationship "simply cannot be more fittingly designated than as a nuptial bond" (Stein 2002, 946).

> Once one has grasped that, then the image and the reality directly exchange their roles: the divine bridal relationship is recognized as the original and actual bridal relationship and all human nuptial relationships appear as imperfect copies of this archetype – just as the Fatherhood of God is the archetype of all fatherhood on earth. By reason of this copy-relationship, the human bridal relationship becomes useful as a symbolic expression of the divine, and in view of this function that which is a purely human relationship in actual life takes second place. Its actual reality has its highest reason for existence in that it can give expression to a divine mystery. (Stein 2002, 946-947)

So while marriage may be the primordial sacrament, religious life represents an ur-primordial commitment that predates creation and proceeds from eternity.

This life is thereby knowable as spiritual marriage, which is defined as follows:

> The calm, abiding, transforming union of the soul with God. Raptures and ecstasies may occur, but they are replaced by a marvelous peace and serenity enjoyed in the presence of a reciprocated love. St. Teresa describes this stage of intimacy with God as one of complete forgetfulness of self, thinking only of God and his glory, leaving her with an insatiable thirst to suffer with Christ in love and in sole conformity with his will. An ardent zeal for the sanctification of other souls follows the repose. Aridities disappear, leaving only a memory of God's tenderness. (Hardon 2017)

Clearly this definition focuses on the most culminative expressions of spiritual marriage, appearing to describe a heavenly orgasm and afterglow. Yet Stein's explanation of the divine/human relationship as ultimately spousal counterbalances the view, for marriage in any sense perpetually unfolds throughout life in proximity between persons, be they human/human, or divine/human: there are moments of union, but a life consisting of nothing but orgasmic ecstasy simply cannot be actualized in spacetime.

Why even think about religious life as a type of marriage? What contextual analyses gave rise to it in the first place? The Church Fathers used various terms to describe their exegetical method, and though allegory in this sense has its precedent in St. Paul's statement that the "story of Abraham's two sons was an 'allegory' of the two covenants" (Gal. 4:24), the Fathers were really employing both allegory and typology, which are distinct. Allegory treats texts as symbolic of spiritual truths, with the literal, historical sense playing a minor role. The goal here is to "elicit the moral, theological or mystical meaning which each passage, indeed each verse and even each word, is presumed to contain."[2] Typology works differently, and was used essentially as the "technique for bringing out the correspondence between the two Testaments" (Kelly 2012, 70). Taking "the Biblical view of history" seriously as the "scene of the progressive unfolding of God's consistent redemptive purpose," typology was the most "characteristically Christian" exegetical method (Kelly 2012, 70).

Given the intellectually vernacular Platonic theory in Alexandria "that the whole visible order is a symbolical reflection of invisible realities," a straight-ahead typological

[2] Consider Augustine's example of the Good Samaritan, in which "the traveller stands for Adam, Jerusalem for the heavenly city from which he fell, Jericho for his resulting mortality, the thieves for the devil and his angels, the wretched plight in which they left him for the condition to which he was reduced by sin, the priest and the Levite for the ineffective ministrations of the old covenant, the Samaritan for Christ, the inn for the Church, and so on" (*Quaest. evang.* 2, 19 [cf. Kelly 2012, 70]).

approach from one Testament to another was interpretively problematic (Kelly 2012, 70). One example of how this was addressed is found in Origen's injecting an allegorical strain into typology through a triple classification of Scripture as historical corresponding to physicality, morality relating to psychic properties, and mystical union with God relative to spirituality. Respectively, this interpretive practice is comprised of "the plain historical sense," the "typological sense," and the "spiritual sense in which the text may be applied to the devout soul" (Kelly 2012, 72, 74-75).[3] This is where everything becomes integral for those who are called to religious life as a type of marriage, for Origen's "teaching was bound together around a central theme, the relationship of the Word and the Church," (Casey 1987, 43) which he believed was being referenced throughout the Song of Songs.

> This interpretation, already found in Hippolytus and Tertullian, understands the Song as a description of the continuing drama of the love of Christ, the heavenly bridegroom, for his bride, the Church. Origen innovates in this respect, understanding the bride of Christ not only as the whole body of Christians which constitute the *Ecclesia,* but also, in a derivative sense, as the individual, believing *Anima.* (Casey 1987, 43)

Though this interpretation can present challenges in terms of anthropomorphic gender distinctions, grace and human will working together can nonetheless provide sufficient understanding of what a spiritual marriage-based union with God entails: "first of all, the image of God is to be found reflected in the *animus* or soul" (Casey 1987, 148). Though this rightly denotes God's primacy of place in the relationship, "there is no anomaly, for instance, in a male speaking of 'spiritual marriage' with the Word, since

[3] *De princ.* 4, 2, 4: cf *in Matt.* 10, 14; *hom. in Lev.* 5, 5. E.g. *hom. in Num.* 8, (Baehrens, 49). E.g. *in Cant.* 2 (Baehrens, 165), cf. ibid, 73. Later building on Origen's approach, Augustine "employed allegory with the greatest freedom, delighting particularly in the mystical significance of names and numbers" (ibid, 75). He in turn listed four "senses of Scripture: the historical, the 'etiological' (an example is Christ's explanation in *Matt.* 19, 8 of the reasons for Moses' allowing a bill of divorcement), the analogical (which brings out the complete harmony of the Old and New Testaments), and the allegorical or figurative" (ibid.).

neither the Word nor the soul" is "of a determinate gender. Notwithstanding the fact that it is always the soul who is described as the bride," such distinctions are "largely dictated by the inner logic" of applicable passages, along with "the biblical texts used or by considerations of style" (Casey 1987, 207).

There are as many ways to speak of this union are there are personalities who experience it. The traditional idea in this context, however, is that Sisters are brides of Christ, and priests are married to the church.[4] These concepts reduce to an equivalent commitment through comprehensible symbols that allow people to unite their human wills in a total commitment within the grace of God. Albeit a marriage of verisimilitude, it is a joyful thing to be in an exclusive commitment with God through the church as a religious. Theologically, there is no greater relationship than that which is provided by residing deep in divine grace and created solitude, even in the absence of a physical spouse.

We are caught up in a "relationship with the incarnated Word" that "transcends the human categories of sex, nationality, culture and time" (Casey 1987, 207), and assume a serious maturity in our capacity to creatively develop a deeply contemplative relationship with God. While professing vows demonstrates that "God and the soul are to be *two in one flesh,*" (Stein 2002, 272), it is also the case that "the surrender of oneself to God is simultaneously a surrender of one's own self – a self which God loves – to the entire created world, and in particular to all spiritual beings united with God" (Stein 2002, 457). In other words, being one with God means that we are simultaneously to be one with creation itself! In this dynamic, God leads while we follow. Examining marital

[4] Throughout initial formation as a priest, I encountered many different ways of referring to such religious espousal. Two ways that immediately spring to mind are the idea that monks are "married" to the Psalter, and that, as a microcosm of the church, a priest's breviary is his "wife."

aspects of religious life has revealed it as the human will cooperating with grace toward actualizing union with God, and as such ought to be embraced by all who are called.

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