

## CHAPTER 7

# MARRIAGE: THE MYSTERY OF HUMAN LOVE CROWNED IN GLORY AND HONOR

The mystery of marriage is a holy act, of divine origin, in which the Holy Spirit is imparted through the priest to a man and a woman who unite themselves to one another freely in marriage. This holy act sanctifies and elevates the natural bond of marriage to the dignity of representing the spiritual union between Christ and the Church.<sup>1</sup>

### A. The Place of Marriage among the Other Mysteries

A first question that might arise in conjunction with this sacrament has to do with its place in the succession of the mysteries. This question implies a similar question about the place held by ordination. If the priest is the celebrant of all the mysteries, then why does not ordination come first or last in the list of the sacraments? Why does the tradition of the Church place ordination after baptism, chrismation, the Eucharist, and confession but before marriage and holy unction? A first response might be that through the four earlier mysteries, a human being is placed within a direct relationship with Christ and only indirectly is he placed in a relationship of service with other human beings, whereas through the mystery of marriage a human being is placed in a close relationship with his fellow human being, and through holy unction he receives help for his body. Hence this would justify placing ordination too after the first four mysteries, which place someone in direct relationship with Christ, inasmuch as his salvation depends

upon those four mysteries, whereas the principal role of the priest is to help men, through Christ, to achieve their salvation.

This response could also take the following form: the four mysteries listed before ordination give man the grace with which he collaborates in achieving his salvation, but this grace bears its fruit fully through ordination and marriage. The majority of human beings live out the fullness of the relationship of marriage by actualizing the virtues as fruits of their collaboration with this grace, or as forms of their consecration within this uninterrupted and intense relationship. Now, once this relationship is entered into, it has a certain quality of prominence that determines in a positive sense all the other relationships that a human being has in society, which marriage multiplies. This occurs all the more with the priesthood. Hence the mystery of marriage and the mystery of priesthood help the faithful, through the grace given to them, to apply the graces of the remaining sacraments in an appropriate way within the concrete familial and social situation in which the vast majority of them live by nature, or within the ecclesial role assumed by the others.<sup>2</sup> These two sacraments help them—in their relationships with their fellow men, in marriage, in priesthood, and in the many problems and relations that these states give rise to—to encounter God or to develop their relationship with Christ especially through one fellow human being with whom they are united for life, or with the faithful for whom they are responsible. Marriage and priesthood as mysteries bring to light the fact that the person is not fulfilled except in communion, that person and communion are two inseparable polarities; they make evident the fact that the mysteries bear their fruit in the responsibility of human beings toward one another. From this point of view, the priesthood is a richer fruit than that of the other sacraments, and hence it is listed after them and before the other sacraments in which the former bear fruit.

Perhaps the fact that the monks, through a charism that overcomes nature, succeed through their effort in holding themselves apart from the relationship of marriage and the complex of necessary relationships and problems imposed by marriage, keeping themselves within a direct and in some fashion strictly personal relationship with Christ, explains why the Church does not consecrate the entry into the monastic state through a separate mystery but only through a sacramental.

Paul Evdokimov observes, "Through the grace of the sacrament [of marriage], failures are never mortal wounds, nor are imperfections condemned without recourse. What the monks attain *directly*, the spouses work out *indirectly*, and their *means* is the sacramental sphere of grace. The one through the other they look at Christ, and it is 'the Other,' His love, that is the gift of grace."<sup>3</sup>

The fact that we can see God through the other, that love toward the other makes him transparent to God for us, is a gift of the Incarnation of the Word. Through this the Word of God gave us the power to see Him through the human face, first in Himself, then in all those in whom Christ takes up His dwelling, or continues to be incarnate through the mysteries. Only because Christ as God is transparent in the other and beautifies the other does this other show himself to us as worthy of an unending love; the love for this other is never exhausted. Apart from Christ a permanent love for a concrete person would be impossible. "If one were to stand outside of the Incarnation, the infinite, qualitative, unbridgeable distance between man and God, His absolute otherness, it would make love unhappy and all communion, even communication, indirect and veiled. Projected into the relationships of the betrothed, the fundamental otherness of the other makes love especially unhappy and impossible."<sup>4</sup> The monk, though unmarried, stands nevertheless within a relationship with God as person, hence in a state of acute responsibility. That is why the patristic literature gives to monasticism the name of "the true philosophy."

The fact that in marriage God is known through the other, whereas in holy unction He is known through the comforting that those in a state of bodily sickness receive from Him, causes these two mysteries to be given their place after that of ordination, after the priest has placed man in direct relationship with Christ through the other four sacraments. But there are two facts that bind these two mysteries with the four previous ones: the fact that the mediated form in which Christ is known through these two final sacraments is nevertheless a direct knowledge of Him through the transparence of the other or of the weakened body, and hence it is not a simple *a priori* or *a posteriori* kind of knowledge of the fellow man or of the sick body; and the fact that, like sickness, marriage is a type of concrete situation in which the graces of the other sacraments are brought forth as fruit. But priesthood is linked even more with the four previous mysteries through

which Christ is received as a personal Savior, as it is with these last two through the more responsible relationships with men in which the fruit borne from the grace received is made manifest.

### **B. Marriage as a Natural, Lifelong Bond between a Man and a Woman**

Marriage as a natural, lifelong bond between a man and a woman is based on the fact that only together do man and woman form humanity in its completeness. "There is but one suffering: to be alone."<sup>5</sup> Not even God is a single person. For in that case, there would be no love, and indeed no person, and hence God would not be everywhere. Nor therefore would the human being exist as the image of God; he would be a monad confined within himself. In that case his existence, if he existed at all, would be torture. Genesis says that God made Eve because He saw that "it is not good that man should be alone" (Gen 2:18). God created Eve not only so that she might help Adam but also so that she could protect him from loneliness, for they constitute the complete human being only because they complete one another reciprocally. "He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind [Adam] in the day they were created" (Gen 5:2). Man is a complete unity, hence the image of God, because his unity as man is realized in this duality, which is personal. It is not uniform; rather, man and woman complement each other: "And indeed from the beginning, God appears to have made special provision for this union; and discoursing of the twain as one, He said thus, 'Male and female created He them' [Gen 1:27]," notes St. John Chrysostom.<sup>6</sup> St. Cyril of Alexandria says, "God created co-being."<sup>7</sup>

The taking of Eve from out of Adam means that Eve was contained in Adam potentially even before she was brought into her distinct existence. But she did not exist in Adam as something identical with him, and therefore she is not the result of a mere development of his own reality. Man has a double polarity in his very essence, and only in this way is he a dialogical being. Partners in a dialogue must have something in common but also something that is different, of a difference greater than that which exists between one individual member of the same sex and another. "We can state that these two aspects of man are at this point inseparable in the mind of God, and that a human being,

taken in isolation and viewed by himself, is not fully human."<sup>8</sup> He is only half a being that is not identical with the other half.

The complementary bodily distinction reinforces and conditions a complementary spiritual difference. This does not make each human being less human, but each one experiences humanity in a different mode and within reciprocal complementarity. Each one is as much a human being as the other, but the two live the fullness of humanity only together, in reciprocal complementarity. In other words, this human unity that is at once differentiated and complementary is a conjugal unity. "It is from the beginning, *in principio*, that the human being has been a nuptial being."<sup>9</sup> The human couple in paradise was a conjugal couple. This was the "paradisiacal grace of marriage, *tes tou gamos charitos*," which had its foundation in the dual nature of man; but this couple also had a particular grace.<sup>10</sup>

In order for it to be a perfect union, marriage entails a perfect love. For this reason it must be indissoluble. Thus from the beginning marriage possessed the attributes of unity and indissolubility. The man possessed fully, within the perfect union with a woman, all that was essential to his own completeness, and likewise for the woman. Passing from the bond with one woman to a bond with another, or from the bond with one man to the bond with another, never provides anyone with this full complementarity through a perfect union. The feminine is always sought but never fully found within the giving of it fully and for all one's life long, and the same with the masculine. Each half remains to a greater or lesser degree an incomplete individual as a human being; each half remains in its loneliness to a greater or lesser degree.

Complete unity between a man and a woman, corresponding to a perfect love, is not a passing reality. For each has found in the other not an object whose possibilities for satisfaction are limited, and who is hidden as a person so long as he or she is treated as an object, but an inexhaustible person—a person who is eternally new in his or her capacity and imagination for self-giving.

These two love one another because they complete one another, because they are not uniform. "Love arises not between two souls who make the same sound but between souls that sound in harmony," to use Schiller's phrase.<sup>11</sup> Love is a change of being, a reciprocal activity for completeness. Love enriches each because it receives and gives

without ceasing, while hatred impoverishes,<sup>12</sup> because it gives and receives nothing.

The man discovers in the woman a boundless mystery. She recognizes certain of her own insufficiencies, which seek their completion through the man, and so she loves the man; and the same is true for the man. Marriage is at one and the same time love and help, joy in the other, and patience with the other. For all of these reasons, the two who marry are given divine grace. Love unites awe before the mystery of the other person with patience to endure the other's limits and incapacities and with help for each person in dealing with these. In love, both become strong.

Marriage as a natural bond has been weakened and disfigured in many ways after the Fall, because of the selfishness that the Fall set loose and helped to develop. Thus it has lost the grace connected with the primordial state. Nevertheless, in its essence it was not completely destroyed, just as human nature itself was not completely destroyed by sin.

The man is thus made complete through woman because she is the other half of the species, and it is only together with her that the man forms the complete human being, and only in union with her that he is realized as man. And the same is true for woman; man completes woman, and vice versa. And if the man does not in fact complete the woman and is not completed by her, he does not achieve his realization as a man, nor does the woman achieve hers as a woman. In this way, in his wife the husband possesses the entire other half of the species, and vice versa, so that neither one has need of another man or another woman.

But every man or woman is not simply a uniform example of one half of the species; he or she also bears the unique characteristics of an unrepeatable person. By living together, the two persons conform themselves to one another under their mutual influence, because the man is also completed as person through the woman, and vice versa. Each becomes a kind of co-person, and both form a co-personal unity. Hence the man who passes from one woman to another no longer realizes himself as person, defined through sharing one life with a woman. His personal traits will become fluid, undefined. Strictly speaking, he will become rather an individual-species, for whoever lacks an authentic and permanent personal communion is more a faceless example of

the species than a person. In him the passions of the species develop to a great degree; they are not harmonized and not curbed so as to become the traits of a person with spiritual qualities, traits that stand out in a personal way. Through education, a couple's children too acquire the parents' combined personal characters, or indeed the two parents in time can come under the influence of the personal traits of their children. In this way human beings are prepared to become a universal co-personal community within the Kingdom of Heaven. This reciprocal and personal conforming of the one to the other did not become totally absent even after the Fall, and has even received a certain support from the natural law. "The Orthodox Ritual specifies: 'Neither original sin nor the flood has in the least damaged the sacredness of marriage.' St. Ephrem the Syrian adds, 'From Adam until Christ, authentic love was the perfect sacrament.' . . . St. Augustine teaches the same: 'At Cana, Christ confirms what He instituted in Paradise.'"<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, the natural attributes of marriage, unity and indissolubility, were ignored by many people, and even by many entire nations. Yet the consciousness that marriage is one and indissoluble persists among human beings. It is this consciousness from which the question that the Pharisees put to Jesus stems: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" (Matt 19:3).

### **C. The Strengthening and Ennobling of Marriage by Christ**

Christ strengthens anew the bond of marriage between man and woman and raises it up from the order of nature to the order of grace, and through His participation in the wedding at Cana, He enshrouds marriage in that atmosphere of grace that pours forth from His Person. By performing this first miracle at Cana through His supernatural power and by giving the newly married couple to drink the wine of exhilarating love that He offers through His grace, Jesus wishes to show that, beginning from the strengthening and ennobling of marriage, He has begun to raise up human life into the order of grace.

Later He affirms directly that marriage must be returned to that unity and indissolubility that it had at the beginning. To the Pharisees' question as to why Moses permitted a man to forsake his wife, Christ responds, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I

say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery” (Matt 19:8–9).

Jesus considers that the man who leaves his wife and takes another, or the man who marries the abandoned woman, is an adulterer, because He believes that the bond of marriage has not been abolished between the man who has left his wife by the simple fact that he has left her. Earlier He had said this directly when He replied to the question as to whether it was permitted for someone to divorce his wife for any reason at all, except for that of adultery (Matt 5:32). In the latter response, He affirms the unity of the married couple based on the fact that God made man male and female, and therefore whoever unites himself to his wife completes his own reality so totally with her that they form a single unity. The man has become a whole human being through this woman, and vice versa. God Himself has united them through the fact that He made them male and female, and hence through the fact that each becomes wholly human in union with the other, and this unity that each has found cannot be disintegrated and then refashioned with another partner. Because they no longer respect one another as persons but treat one another as temporary objects of pleasure, such persons fall from that human dignity that they received at creation: “And He answered and said to them, ‘Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning “made them male and female,” and said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt 19:4–6).

Based on the word of the Savior, the Orthodox Church does not divorce those who are married except in the case where one of them has broken the unity between them by adultery. Still, the Church does not marry anyone more than three times. For a second marriage she imposes a penance and exclusion from Holy Communion for a period of two years; and for a third marriage, for a period of five years. In the prayers provided for a marriage of this kind, the forgiveness of the sins of those being married is asked: “O Master, Lord our God . . . forgive the wrongdoings of Your servants, calling them to repentance and giving them the forgiveness of their mistakes and the cleansing of their sins committed with or without their will, You who know the weakness



of human nature."<sup>14</sup> However, in the case of the death of one of the two spouses, the other is admitted to a second marriage without any ecclesiastical process of divorce, because the marriage is considered to no longer exist (Rom 7:2).

But this indissoluble unity, established between a man and a woman, exists as a unity on the human plane, and so is not an organic, physiological unity but a unity through love. It is based on the love between two existing human beings who complement one another not only on the plane of the body but also of the spirit. For this they receive a particular grace in the Church. As such, this grace is not to be received passively but should be developed actively by the couple. Thus the indissolubility that is implied in nature and refashioned through grace is also a work of the will of the two persons.

If the two conceive of marriage only as a means of satisfying the desires of the flesh, the two will rapidly grow bored with one another. Marriage begins with a love that synthesizes bodily and spiritual attraction, with a love in which each partner values the mystery of the other and affirms in his or her love a limitless readiness to respect the other as person and to accept any sacrifice and weariness for the sake of the other.

But the synthesis of this total initial love is a bond that becomes real through deeds and in which the spiritual aspect assumes a more and more important place. Each of the two inscribes in his or her own being a greater and greater number of signs of attention, understanding, service, and sacrifice on the part of the other, and these bind the two persons more tightly together and cause them to know and appreciate one another more and more. This vital spiritual memory, which elevates each of the two as person, raising up the one through the other, causes their acts of bodily love to be penetrated with an ever-greater spirituality and familiarity.

The body of each becomes for the other a transparency of his or her spirituality; it acquires an ever-greater spiritual depth and clearly becomes his or her place. Each becomes a mystery for the other, all the more known but at the same time all the more indefinable. But this mystery that belongs to each one can be seen fully only by the other and is realized only through the other and for the sake of the other. The mystery of each of the two combines with that of the other within a unique mystery, for each one bears more and more of the

other in his or her own person. Thus marriage is a genuine living mystery of duality, or a dual unity that begins to make itself felt and to become real from the moment of the union of the two in their wedding and indeed even before that time, and its potentialities are actualized throughout the whole course of their lives without the one growing tired of the other.

In this gradual pneumatization of the couple's bond, an important role is played by the exercise and growth of the responsibility that the one bears for the other. Love grows through the exercise of this reciprocal responsibility, and the responsibility grows through love. The love between beings who are subject to the conditions of so many of life's bodily needs is not just a happy contemplation of the other's bodily beauty, and then an increasingly experienced contemplation of the other's spiritual beauty too (although it certainly is this), but it is the motivation behind ceaseless acts of responsibility for the good of the other. And this imprints itself upon the acts of bodily love as a very important factor in the process of pneumatization.

This responsibility shows itself in deeds performed in the midst of society, for the family cannot properly be cared for without the fulfillment of certain obligations in society. The grace given to those who are married thus has effects in both society and the Church.

As long as we visualize marriage as the concern of those alone who are being married, as something that happens to them and not to the whole Church, and, therefore, to the world itself, we shall never understand the truly sacramental meaning of marriage: the great mystery to which St. Paul refers when he says, "But I speak concerning Christ and the Church." . . . In this sense the sacrament of matrimony is wider than family. It is the sacrament of divine love, as the all-embracing mystery of being itself, and it is for this reason that it concerns the whole Church, and—through the Church—the whole world.<sup>15</sup>

A healthy family is a healthy cell in the structure of the Church and of society.

It is in the exercise of this responsibility that the human being acquires the fullness of his seriousness and solemnity. He becomes truly man, that is, a "man for others." This responsibility makes him truly a person, a factor of great and conscious effectiveness in the life of the other and of society, but this responsibility is sustained also by the

respect for the other as person. Through a reciprocally sacrificial attitude, each of the two accentuates both his or her own character and that of the other; their union is accentuated all the more as a personal communion in which each person grows spiritually according to the degree of the union between them. Without experiencing and exercising this responsibility, man remains in a state akin to inconsistency, differing from a child only insofar as he lacks the child's innocence.

Within this responsibility the personal presence of God becomes ever more transparent for each through the other as an element that gives immeasurable value to the spouse. In the degree that the other discovers his or her own depth, he or she becomes more transparent to Christ, who guarantees both persons' eternal value as human beings, because He Himself became a human being. And this in turn causes the responsibility of each to grow toward the other. Therefore each one is placed by the other within a direct relationship with Christ, without any diminishment in either's own worth and consistency. Each experiences Christ in a specific way through the other, as a unique transparent medium. Both experience Christ as the one who appears through the other as through a transparent and unique medium of His complete revelation and as the one who imposes special responsibilities toward the other. Both experience Christ as Him who gave the one to the other and as the special medium through which communion and the persons themselves are revealed and developed through their mutual service. In this way each reveals himself or herself to the other in the deepest and most mysterious and most alluring dimension of his or her humanity. Neither one of them could experience Christ in such a profound way or within such a pronounced responsibility, nor could another man or woman reveal himself or herself so entirely in his or her own mystery and in the mystery of an ongoing and intensified personal communion, if either were to separate himself or herself from the spouse or if he or she were to form some ephemeral union with another man or woman. In that case each such union would be something more carnal, incapable of advancing ceaselessly into that reciprocal union and knowledge of the couple's profound spirituality in Christ.

This is the way in which the mystery of indissoluble love between a man and a woman—as a union that, in ever-deeper communion, is rendered spiritual—is a mystery in Christ. Their union in Christ is a

small church, as St. John Chrysostom explains, or a part of the Church, for the Church too is made up of these kinds of units married in the Holy Spirit, who breathes into the Church. "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32), says the Holy Apostle Paul. Marriage "is a mystery and a type of a mighty thing . . . It is a type of the Church," says St. John Chrysostom.<sup>16</sup>

According to Clement of Alexandria, "But who are the two or three gathered in the name of Christ in the midst of whom the Lord is? Does He not by the two mean husband and wife?"<sup>17</sup> And St. John Chrysostom says, "When husband and wife are united in marriage, they are no longer seen as something earthly but as the image of God Himself."<sup>18</sup> And Theophilus of Antioch declares, "God made the woman together with the man, not only that thus the mystery of God's sole government might be exhibited, but also that this mutual affection might be greater."<sup>19</sup>

The wife is the human being who is closest to her husband, and vice versa, and they are thus because they complement and complete one another. In his wife the husband possesses humanity in the highest possible degree of intimacy that can be reached with him, and the same is true of the wife with her husband. They are revealed completely the one to the other within a state of total sincerity; each is to the other as another "I," while remaining nevertheless a "thou" who is necessary to the spouse if he or she is to reveal himself or herself. Each forgets the self, making himself or herself the "I" of the other. St. John Chrysostom says, "For the other party thereafter is yourself, when you love: since this is friendship, that the lover and the beloved should no longer be two persons divided, but in a manner one single person."<sup>20</sup> And he adds in another place, "He who has a friend, has another self."<sup>21</sup>

Thus each of the two spouses brings into reality the state for which he or she is yearning and realizes himself or herself as person in reciprocal communion. But this realization only comes about when their bodily love is penetrated by and submerged in a spiritual love.

When the wife has achieved for her husband the kind of intimate and chaste humanity that comes from the immersion of bodily love in spiritual love, then he is capable of looking upon any woman with pure eyes, and the wife upon any man. Marriage is thus a path toward the spiritualization of the two spouses not only in the relationship of the

one vis-à-vis the other but also in all their relationships with all other human persons. All wives accept a spiritual depth for the sake of their husbands, who have come to this point in the persons of their wives, and all husbands for the sake of their wives, in the persons of their husbands. Then each knows all in their spiritual dimension. But the husband remains united with his wife in order to familiarize himself with her uniqueness, in order to achieve his own realization as person, and in order to know Christ through the medium of this uniqueness; and the woman in the same way. Here the social importance of marriage shows itself again.

But it must be made clear that even though it knows this great importance of marriage, Christianity remains nevertheless realistic. It does not look down upon the need for bodily union between man and woman. The prayers of the wedding service do not at all avoid speaking of this, but the service takes the view that it is only in marriage that bodily union becomes a means for complete spiritual union, or deepens this union more and more. Hence even while approving of marriage so that the need for bodily union between man and woman may be satisfied, at the same time it considers this union as a means of promoting their spiritual union.

Hence Christianity recognizes only two correct attitudes toward the desire of the flesh: either total abstinence from it outside the context of marriage, or the satisfaction of this desire as a means of spiritual union and of making progress in spiritual union. This is what is meant by the undefiled bed and the conjugal chastity to which the prayers of crowning make allusion. The Church attributes chastity to marriage also and considers it a path that leads to a deeper and deeper chastity; like monastic chastity, it too is a freedom of the spirit. Both also require a spiritual struggle. If it is satisfied outside the context of marriage, the desire of the flesh robs the man in such a way that he no longer sees in the woman anything beyond an instrument of satisfaction, and the same is true on the part of the woman. This same deformation can also occur in marriage, but only when the couple make no effort to transfigure and spiritualize their bodily union through the union of their souls. The deformation is almost inevitable when the grace of faith is missing, for in that case the desire of the flesh experienced by the man or the woman quickly grows bored and looks for satisfaction elsewhere.

Based on a realistic understanding of the inability of the majority of people to bring the desires of the flesh completely under control, and on the understanding of marriage as a unique means of transfiguring this desire, of transforming it through the penetrating influence that the spiritual union of man and woman has on their union in the flesh, the Church in consequence bestows a very great honor upon the mystery of marriage.

It is true that St. Paul says, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband . . . But if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor 7:1-2, 9). However, this passage does not show that St. Paul understood marriage only in a negative way, as a remedy for the disordered manifestation of concupiscence, as a means tolerated for the purpose of satisfying sinful impulses without the social disorder that comes in the wake of satisfying them outside of marriage. Paul has shown elsewhere the eminently positive content of the marital union between man and woman (see Eph 5:28-32).

Others have gone beyond a justification of marriage as a remedy for concupiscence and have taken the view that it justifies its existence only through the procreation of children. But this view clearly includes an implicit understanding of marriage as a union that is more than merely physical. Among its more prominent representatives, mention must be made of the Blessed Augustine. Taking up a position opposed to this interpretation, Paul Evdokimov sees the marriage bond as something sublime in itself, needing no justification by the birth of children. He rightly disapproves of the doubts cast on the irreproachable moral quality of union in the flesh.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, St. Paul does not accept the satisfaction of the desires of the flesh outside of marriage and hence considers this extramarital satisfaction a sin. But why is it sinful outside of marriage? Clearly it is not only because of the social disorder that it provokes but also because it cannot be transfigured into a union of souls that is produced by the spiritual love proper to marriage. Who is not aware in fact that the man who desires a woman outside of marriage is reducing her to a carnal object of sensual pleasure? Only in marriage is she revealed as a person who needs to overcome her isolation and who bears a whole complex of her own problems in which she needs the help of another, just as a man

does. Only marriage raises the relationship between man and woman to the level of friendship and deepens the level of their practical and reciprocal responsibility, in which each one must make a total commitment.

Thus marriage is not a simple remedy that is tolerated so that a desire that remains sinful by nature may be satisfied. Instead, it is a means that causes the bond between man and woman to truly become a complete bonding, a bonding that leads toward a total personal communion in which each person achieves a complete personal or truly human realization and helps the other to the same end, just as God willed when He created man and woman with a view to their reciprocal complementarity. In this sense the Church conceives of the connection of the spouses as a complete bonding, in body and soul. Where marriage is authentic, the spouses progress in this union of their souls, because it is only within this spiritual union that such progress is in fact possible for them. They must contribute to it, however, through their own wills, and the grace of the sacrament is given to them for this purpose. They need to be aware that if their bond diminishes to the level of the satisfaction of bodily desire, this bond itself will slide into sin and be prone to fall apart.

Although Christianity does not contest the importance of bodily union, neither does it justify it in isolation from everything else. When St. Paul declares that marriage is a remedy against a burning that is hard to bear or a remedy against its disordered satisfaction, he includes alongside this dimension of the meaning of marriage that of its being a means for the transfiguring of bodily union. This sense is even more evident in the words of St. John Chrysostom, in which he also attributes to marriage the meaning of procreation:

There are two reasons for which marriage was instituted . . . to bring man to be content with one woman and to have children, but it is the first reason that is the most important. As for procreation, it is not required absolutely by marriage . . . The proof of this lies in the numerous marriages that cannot have children. This is why the first reason of marriage is to order sexual life, especially now that the human race has filled the entire earth.<sup>23</sup>

Other sections in Chrysostom's writings, where he presents marriage as an image of unity, show that he also attributes to marriage the sense of the realization of a spiritual union.

It is also true, however, that an important means that helps the two spouses to make progress toward an ever more profound spiritual union is the birth and rearing of children. When the couple takes on this responsibility, their acts of bodily union are imbued with an even more pronounced spiritual element. In this way, in the first phase of the marriage the taking on of this responsibility for the birth of children assumes a great role in the transfiguration of their union in the flesh (a transfiguration that plays a greater part in the spouses' union), so that in the second phase of the marriage this bodily union may be transcended to a great degree in its nature by the spiritual union in which the spouses have advanced. It is true that in the text of St. John Chrysostom cited above, he declares that a marriage is accomplished even when only its principal purpose—the regulating of sexuality—is achieved without the fulfillment of its second purpose, the procreation of children. He adds, however, that the marriage is realized without the birth of children when this occurs not through the will of the spouses but apart from their will. For when the birth of children is intentionally avoided, the bond between spouses declines into a simple occasion of satisfying the desire of the flesh and thus shifts toward acts that are sinful.

The children who are born and raised within a marriage do not have their place outside the bond that binds the spouses together; rather, they cause the communion between the spouses to grow in an essential way through the common responsibility for the children, a responsibility in which the two are united. Hence children make the essence of the marriage more profound, for without children marriage is impoverished of its interior spiritual substance. The spouses in the majority of these cases become a kind of selfish unit *a deux*, and their selfishness can be even deeper than that of a single individual, because one spouse has in the other virtually all that he or she needs to be satisfied in the material and bodily sphere, and they do not even suffer from the state of being alone as much as does the one who is locked up within the prison of a single self.

Through their children the spouses transcend this selfishness and open themselves up toward others. Through their children they open up more toward society in general, which they need in order to raise the children and in order to incorporate them into the framework of society. Through the children, the parents enter into richer relationships



with society. Pavel Florensky has observed that society—and hence the Church too—is formed of dyads, not of individuals; we might paraphrase this by saying “of molecules rather than atoms.”<sup>24</sup> But a family that has no children is not vital, in the full sense of this term, to society. It is the family, not individuals, that promotes social and ecclesial cohesion. The cell of the family, although it is not dissolved within the ecclesial or social organism, must be in communication with the other cells through their common “blood,” that is, their children.

It is clear that the birth and rearing of children, the service of Church and society, as a curbing of the selfishness of the two (or of more, including the children), implies a cross. This is why at the ceremony of crowning in the marriage Liturgy, a hymn dedicated to the martyrs is sung. The spouses who do not curb the temptation toward this selfishness *a deux* will become in the end completely opaque even to themselves. They will constitute together an instinctual selfishness of the kind characteristic of a small group of animals, a group insensitive to the others even within the same biological family, a group enclosed like a city within its own walls and capable of going outside the walls only to plunder and acquire, never to give.

A marriage which does not constantly crucify its own selfishness and self-sufficiency, which does not “die to itself” that it may point beyond itself, is not a Christian marriage. The real sin of marriage today is not adultery or lack of “adjustment” or “mental cruelty.” It is the idolization of the family itself, the refusal to understand marriage as directed toward the Kingdom of God. This is expressed in the sentiment that one would “do anything” for his family, even steal. The family has here ceased to be for the glory of God; it has ceased to be a sacramental entrance into His presence. It is not the lack of respect for the family, it is the idolization of the family that breaks the modern family so easily, making divorce its almost natural shadow. It is the identification of marriage with happiness and the refusal to accept the cross in it. In a Christian marriage, in fact, three are married; and the united loyalty of the two toward the third, who is God, keeps the two in an active unity with each other as well as with God.<sup>25</sup>

Properly speaking, Christ is the one who celebrates the mystery of marriage, but He celebrates it by uniting the two in Himself, and as such He remains permanently as the means of union between them.

If they separate themselves from Him, the unity between them is also weakened.

The curbing of this egoism *a deux* includes also the curbing of the use of the conjugal bond merely for the sake of pleasure alone with the intention of avoiding the conception and birth of children.

#### **D. The Mystery's Constitutive Aspects and Their Significance for the Spiritual Power Bestowed by the Mystery**

The more explicit enunciation of all the purposes of Christian marriage, raised up by grace, occurs within the liturgical order of the mystery, and through this mystery the grace of God is imparted to those who are being married in order to help them make these purposes a reality.

*The celebrant* of the mystery in the Orthodox Church is the priest, because through him Jesus Christ Himself comes invisibly before and into the midst of those who are being married. It is Christ who places His seal upon the natural bond that the two bring into being through their mutual consent, and it is Christ who sustains their union in Himself. A further reason is that it is through the priest that the marriage of the two is inserted as a living cell within the Church, filled with the grace of Christ that flows from the Church. To think that the marriage is contracted only through the consent of the spouses (as is the case in Catholicism, where the priest is only a witness) is to understand marriage only at the level of a natural bond. However, already at the beginning of the second century, St. Ignatius of Antioch said, "But it becomes both men and women who marry, to form their union with the approval of the bishop."<sup>26</sup>

*The recipients of the sacrament* are two faithful members of the Church, of opposite sex, single, neither of whom has been married in the Church more than twice previously and who are not found within the fifth degree of consanguinity. Mixed marriages between Orthodox Christians and those of other Christian confessions are permitted on condition that the children will be raised in the Orthodox faith and the mystery will be celebrated in the Orthodox Church.<sup>27</sup> Marriage is not permitted for deacons and priests after they have received ordination, and no one is admitted to ordination as bishop if he has been married

before, except in the case of the death of the spouse or her entry into the monastic life.

As far as *the liturgical order of the celebration of the mystery* is concerned, it is introduced by the rite of betrothal, that is, the promise exchanged between the future spouses that they will be united in marriage, a promise that is also blessed by the priest. This betrothal used to take place (and occasionally even today can take place) some time before the celebration of the marriage itself, as a way in which the young people can prepare themselves for the wedding and as a way of making a mutual engagement before they are ready to marry. Inasmuch, however, as the Church considers that those who have gone through the rite of betrothal are obligated to one another in the same way as through marriage itself, today in the great majority of cases the betrothal rite occurs immediately before the wedding.

The betrothal is celebrated through an exchange of rings between the future spouses after the priest, with the rings, has made the sign of the cross over the couple; the priest then says to the man, "The servant of God (N.) is betrothed to the handmaid of God (N.) in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."<sup>28</sup> He does the same in the case of the woman, also using her name as a way of showing the personal equality of the two and the freedom of each in accomplishing this act. To each of the betrothed, however, the priest recalls the name of the other, and with each ring he makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of each to show that through the rings they are united, the one with the other, for the whole of their lives in the name of the Holy Trinity, and that they are to also keep in mind the meaning of the spiritual power that the cross possesses to strengthen their unity.

Already from the beginning of the rite of betrothal, each member of the couple, the man and woman (or their godparents on their behalf), holds a lighted candle, showing that they will walk in the light of Christ and of His will, thus making their marriage one filled with a higher meaning.

Whereas the priest began the betrothal rite with the exclamation "Blessed is our God," as in the rite of any sacramental, he begins the wedding service with the words "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," as in any of the mysteries through which grace is bestowed. For it is from this point onward that the obligations of a life lived together begin, obligations that stand in

need of the assistance of grace; and it is from this point onward that the couple, destined to grow as a union of love and of fruitfulness in their children, takes its place within the framework of the Kingdom of God and in the Church. In the first prayer the priest asks Christ to be present Himself as He was at the wedding in Cana and to grant to those being married “a peaceful life, length of days, discretion, mutual love in the bond of peace, healthy issue, the joy of grateful offspring, and that crown of glory that never fades . . . Give them both of the dew from heaven and of the earth’s bounty . . . so that in turn they may share with those who are in want.”<sup>29</sup> Thus the prayer is for all those positive things that their union as a couple will need, and most especially for mutual love and for protection against the temptation to infidelity, the thought of which might steal into the mind of the one or the other; yet the duty of generosity to those in need is not forgotten either, for marriage is not a monad selfishly taken up with its own interests alone.

In the second prayer, after recalling that God created man as “king of creation” and, thinking that it was not good that he remain alone, gave him woman to be one indivisible body with her, the priest asks especially from God for the two being married the grace of being protected from all manner of dangers. In this regard he prays God to give the couple the same joy that the Empress Helen experienced when she found the cross and to remember them as God remembered the Forty Martyrs when He sent them crowns from heaven. Thus allusion is made to the difficulties that can arise in the family and the cross that these difficulties represent, a cross that the spouses will need to bear with patience in order to lay hold of the heavenly crown. The prayer also displays, therefore, the understanding that the marriage service has of the crowns with which the couple will soon be crowned: they represent the necessity of an effort full of firm resolve in the life of the family. Again the priest prays to God on their behalf for “fair children,” “harmony of soul and body,”<sup>30</sup> and growth into every good thing. A happy marriage implies the harmony of souls and bodies, and both of these depend upon the couple being “of one mind.”

In the third prayer the priest asks, “Now, too, Master, reach out Your hand from Your holy dwelling place and conjoin these Your servants (*N.*) and (*N.*) for by You is the woman married to the man. Unite them in one mind. Wed them into one body. Grant them fruitful issue,

the delight of fair children.”<sup>31</sup> Their bodily union springs from their oneness of mind within an agreement of their hearts that moves them together toward this unity. It is this “symphony” to which Pavel Florensky alluded above in which each of the two is preserved in his or her personal reality because each one thinks and wills and feels, but this thinking and willing and feeling happens in accord with the other, for the sake of the other, and in convergence with the other. No thought that goes against the other has a place within their bond, and hence their union is like a crown of glory and honor. Nevertheless, this is only because they accept the possibility of the procreation of children; through this assumption of a common responsibility, they grow in the process of their own pneumatization.

In this way the bodily union between man and woman, instead of being an act of sinful concupiscence as it is outside of marriage, becomes an act willed and blessed by God.

After the third prayer the priest places the crown on the head of the groom, after he has touched the forehead of each of the two with it and has made the sign of the cross over the man with it, and says, “The servant of God (*N.*) is crowned in marriage to the handmaid of God (*N.*) in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”<sup>32</sup> He then places the crown on the head of the bride in the same way. This is the central act of the mystery, the act through which the sacrament is in fact accomplished.

By touching the forehead of each of the two separately with each crown and by making mention of both of them when each is crowned, the marriage service shows that the crown of each one is also in a certain way the crown of the other. Each one bears his or her own crown inasmuch as each one is united with the other and inasmuch as the crown of each is united with the crown of the other: in the love between the two, the crown and the glory of each are found.

The crown is the sign of glory and honor, as the priest says immediately after the crowning: “O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor.”<sup>33</sup> The glory is linked to the honor, and vice versa, and their glory is visible to God and man. It consists in the fidelity and love between the two spouses, in the sacrifices each makes for the good of the other, in the exercise of responsibility that one assumes on behalf of the other, and in the making of all the efforts demanded by the good of their family life. It is in the fulfillment of all these that their happiness

as a couple is realized, insofar as this happiness can be realized on this earth. From the harmony of such a couple, the whole of creation draws benefit as it moves along the path toward the harmonization willed for it by God.

The wedding crown is at the same time a diadem, a sign of honor and dignity. The crown is worn by the king, and both Christ and the high priest are kings. It is a sign of a certain seriousness, maturity, and responsibility entrusted to a particular person for the protection, safeguarding, and guidance of others. By the act of their crowning, it is apparent that the two have emerged from the care of their parents and have received responsibility for their own lives; a mutual responsibility for one another; and a common responsibility for their own family and their own future children, their very own fortress. Human beings are not truly whole until they have come to the point at which they are capable of receiving this responsibility for themselves and for others. But human beings were brought into existence by God to be “sovereigns over creation,” and they realize this dignity—which is a dignity of responsibility—in a special and concrete way when they take upon themselves the responsibilities bound up with family life, because their further responsibilities for the life of society and of the world in general are implicit in these.

“St. John Chrysostom sees in the crown the symbol of a nuptial asceticism, in order to obtain chastity, integrity of being.”<sup>34</sup> Crowns are in fact given to the martyrs for their perseverance in the faith. The spouses too have to persevere through the assault of many temptations met with in their conjugal life; they have to suffer patiently through many difficulties in order to win the crown of love in its fullness. The glory that comes with the crown also comes with the bearing of a certain ascesis, a curbing and enduring, and with the resolute and trying fulfillment of various responsibilities. This is why the sign of the cross is made with the crowns over the faces of those upon whose heads they are placed.

After the readings from the Epistle and from the Gospel, the priest once again says a prayer in which he asks that God may “keep their marriage honorable” and “their household above reproach,”<sup>35</sup> clearly with reference to a blind and irresponsible licentiousness and to any thought of infidelity, both of which can cause the couple to fall away from their reciprocal respect for one another as persons and from their

personal communion with one another. The deeper and the more complete love is, the more chaste it is at the same time. Hence the priest goes on to pray God for His help that "their life together be blameless."<sup>36</sup> Only in this way is their love complete. The undefiled bed, like the spotless or chaste sexual union, consists in the pneumatizing of the spouses and of their sexual relations through all of their love, respect, and responsibility to bear with one another, to help each other reciprocally, and to make progress in all these areas. In this way they gain the respect of other human beings and glory from God.

Then the couple drinks from a common cup as a sign that their lives will grow sweeter from this shared sweetness of their love and joy. Next the priest leads them, with their hands joined together, three times in a circle around the *analogion* as a symbol of the unbreakable character of their love and relationship. "The pathway of the nuptial life is no longer a simple itinerary; it is placed on the road to eternity, and the shared advance of the couple is therefore like the still point of a turning wheel,"<sup>37</sup> of the stable movement of their souls in God. Nothing will break apart their love and fidelity; nothing will intrude into their love; nothing will deflect it from its steadfastness.

During the time taken by this circular procession, a hymn is sung, the hymn of the joy of the Prophet Isaiah at the conception of the Son of God in the womb of the Virgin. Now the foundation has been put in place for the building up of the new human beings, images of the incarnate Christ. Those who will be born from this new marriage will themselves also be members of the eternal Kingdom of God. Heaven itself rejoices because of this new extension of the Kingdom of God, and during the time of the circling of the *analogion*, the holy martyrs are asked once again that through their prayers the souls of those being crowned may be saved by a patient endurance that imitates that of the martyrs themselves. The joy that comes from the birth of children, the joy of the love shared by the spouses, does not lack the element of abstinence, of suffering sorrows, and of struggle. These are the same hymns that are sung at baptism and at ordination and for the same reasons: to celebrate the birth of new members of the Kingdom of God and to rejoice in their future growth, even though this will not come about without the efforts of abstinence, of patient endurance, and of many struggles.

As he takes the crowns off the heads of the crowned spouses, the priest speaks once again of their glory, for they will wear their crowns invisibly for their whole lives, so long as they live in genuine love, in chaste fidelity, and in mutual responsibility and respect. With these crowns they will journey all the way to the Kingdom of Heaven: "O God our God . . . receive . . . their crowns into Your kingdom, preserving them spotless, blameless and without reproach forever."<sup>38</sup>

In the final benediction of the marriage service, a commemoration is made of the Emperors Constantine and Helen and of the Martyr Procopius. They who have been crowned are raised up, like the Emperors Constantine and Helen, to the honors of royalty and to the work of collaborating in the defense of the faith; and, like the martyrs, to the patient endurance of sufferings and difficulties. The enjoyment of the good things of life and their exaltation to the heights of a chaste and perfect love are linked to the struggle for these same benefits and to the burdens of self-denial and patient endurance. These difficulties are mixed together with the sweetness of union in body and soul and play a role in the spiritualization of this union.

Christianity is realistic. It makes no exaggerated promises of unclouded happiness, free of all burdens and difficulties, for life is made up of both of these dimensions. Happiness will win out in the end, but whoever expects from marriage only happiness, only pleasures, will not be able to stand it for long.

By way of summary, we can say that prayer is offered on behalf of those who marry so that they may receive the grace of God for many purposes: the grace to be able to control the tendency to exclusively seek the satisfaction of the desires of the flesh, for this degrades each member of the couple to the status of an object of the other's selfish passion; the grace to be able to curb any other type of selfishness or infidelity of one spouse in his or her relations with the other; the grace to strengthen the patient endurance of each when confronted with the limitations of the other; the grace to strengthen the will of each spouse to be of help to the other so that their love in Christ may grow deeper, something that is not possible unless the selfishness of each is brought under control; and finally, the grace of having children, which in itself is identical with the curbing of every kind of selfishness and with the progress of the couple toward the fullness of communion. All these graces give many gifts: chastity to their conjugal relations; honor and



nobility to each of the spouses; real openness of each toward the other, and toward God and their neighbors. Through these graces they gain salvation for themselves. And these are the graces that they pledge to one another and for which they pray—together with their relatives and friends, as well as the priest—at the time of their wedding service.

A slightly different and simpler formulation by way of conclusion might be this: the grace of this mystery is bestowed so as to make possible and to promote between the married persons a love that is total and therefore pure, a mutual help and persevering endurance, and a patience to bear and to overcome all their difficulties. The life of a couple is something complex. In part it is made up of the joy that comes from mutual love and self-giving, which bear in themselves a certain dimension of the infinite, but in part it is also made up of the burdens and weaknesses that, paradoxically, are connected to the mysterious and indefinable reality of human beings.