

Proposing the Christian Vision of Marriage: What Can the Dominican Tradition Teach Us?*

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IN THIS ESSAY, I do not so much take up the content of a Christian vision, but rather consider what one might call a matter of rhetoric. What does it mean to take the Christian vision of marriage—or, indeed, the Christian vision in a broader sense—and to “propose” this vision to the world? (I would quickly add, however, that even this wording must be slightly amended: in the present context, where our work is re-evangelization, we must also speak of proposing this vision to our students and to our parishioners, to our fellow Christians, and, in fact, even to ourselves.)

We would do well to consider briefly the term “propose”—one which I believe to be salutary. Pope Benedict himself has increasingly used this language. Speaking recently in advance of the Holy Father’s visit to his homeland of Germany, Jean-Claude Perriset, papal spokesman in Berlin, told news media this: “The pope will not come to impose Christian values, but to propose them, like Christ himself did.” Indeed, even more clearly, he continued: “People are free to accept [these Christian values] or not.” What the speaker suggests, then, is that it is a particular, and limited, task that we undertake. We are not called to compel assent, but only to display a certain reality, truthfully, beautifully, well. We might say, furthermore, that “a vision” is a helpful way of putting it. We do not seek simply to communicate ideas or principles, or even images. We propose for consideration the whole of a reality, a certain *vision*, as it has been given to us by God, and as we ourselves have lived it. What, then, does it mean to do this *well*?

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Especially, what does it mean to tell this vision, so to speak, in a world that, in many ways, does not even speak the same language that we do? This is a question that is just as important as discussion of the content of that vision. “The medium is the message,” Marshall McLuhan famously asserted—but in the incarnational world inhabited by Christian theology, that is more true than in any other context. In this essay, then, I undertake reflection on the media, and the ways in which we tell the good news that we ourselves have come to know.

Drawing on the Dominican Tradition

My subtitle suggests that I will consider what it is that the Dominican tradition has to teach us on the matter. This, of course, is a little presumptuous of me, one with no formal connection to the Order of Preachers. But, then again, I do feel as if my life is immersed in the Order. Over twenty-odd years of theological study, my own scholarly interests have come increasingly to center on St. Thomas. Now, in my position at Providence College, I work and teach together with Dominican friars of the St. Joseph Province. I am a member of a parish run by the Dominicans, and my children are taught at our parish school by Dominican sisters who come to us from the Congregation of St. Cecilia, in Nashville. Between these friars and the sisters, there are three Dominican houses within a half-mile of my own home—as I sit on my front porch, it is not at all unusual for me to glimpse a white habit or two, to exchange a few words with this Dominican or that out for an evening stroll, even occasionally to be blessed in our home by the presence of a friar for a meal or just a cup of coffee. So, I suppose I could put it simply: *I’m surrounded!* The fact is that not only as a scholar, but also as a wife, a mother, and a Christian who lives among the Dominicans, have I learned a great deal from the Dominicans around me, including St. Thomas himself. What, then, might the Dominican tradition teach us?

To Act as *Magister*

Let us begin with St. Thomas as he fulfilled a particular vocation, that of the medieval *magister*, or master—a teacher in the emerging university system. A *magister* such as Thomas Aquinas had many responsibilities, but none was more important than participating in the practice of the *disputatio* and of concluding that *disputatio* by rendering a *determinatio*. In general, masters were required to carry out this responsibility at a minimum of once a year.

Public disputations, which were the more elaborate form of disputation, commonly consisted of several elements. The master decided upon

a *quaestio*. An announcement was made, and usually, within a day or so, the event commenced. In the initial session, the master introduced the question and offered the first arguments both for and against. A debate ensued, with various students offering arguments from different positions. Finally, the *disputatio* concluded with the master summarizing arguments for and against a particular position and then rendering a *determinatio*, or an authoritative judgment.

Now, present-day professors and teachers, please note: in this role, the teacher did not simply repair to his office and compose a lecture. In announcing a question, the *magister* intentionally opened the gates to a flood of evidence and arguments, all of which had to be dealt with. And this is, in important ways, the situation that confronts us in relation to the contemporary question of marriage. In the last few weeks alone, I myself have had conversations with individuals who wanted to know why the Church ignores science in opposing same-sex marriage, why the Church punishes those who are divorced, and “why the pastor won’t let us have a unity candle at our wedding.” (I should add that there was also one Catholic who wanted to know why the Church is so lax with regard to annulments!)

And there are more complicated questions, too. If a couple is using natural family planning to space the births of their children, what principles or examples or criteria might they follow in order to go about that in a holy and faithful way? *Humanae Vitae* refers to the “serious reasons” that might lead a couple to natural family planning, but what are those? Or consider another complex question, raised by a reality increasingly common in the culture in which we live, of same-sex couples raising children to their adulthood. The question I would raise is: what account do we give of that ongoing work of parenting project? Is it a good? In what respects? Unless I’m mistaken, from the perspective of Catholic theology, this is a complicated and difficult question. These are matters to be discerned carefully, and conversations among the faithful, governed by prudence and love, would serve us well.

The ability to respond to an avalanche of questioning, the ability to respond to some very difficult questions, depends upon honing the skills of the *magister*. Especially, I want to point to the way the master did his work in the form of intense intellectual precision. The sword of truth is sharp not in order to inflict injury, but in order to divide precisely and delicately between truth and error (Hebrews 4:12).

This task of the *determinatio* is re-presented, of course in a sense, in Aquinas’s *Summa*, which many still continue to study not only to learn certain arguments, to understand certain directions of thought, but to learn how to argue, to understand how to think. I believe the *Summa* continues

to serve us well in this task. Think of the dictum traditionally ascribed to St. Thomas—"Never deny; seldom affirm; always distinguish." When my students hear this, I find, they understand it as timeless and detached, almost as a general state of disinterest. They hear only a stereotype: a perpetual scholastic propensity for one more miniscule, cerebral distinction. The whole of the *determinatio*, though, is something more than that; it is a way to come to an avalanche of opinion, in order to to affirm—not halfheartedly, but with precision. In the end, and at its best, the scholastic way is not a commitment to endless mental gymnastics. It is a way to recognize and respond to the complex and really interesting ways in which those around us—and indeed, we ourselves—get things wrong, often, in fact, at the moment we are also, in some other way, getting them right.

Anyone who has immersed himself or herself in Aquinas's work in the *Summa* knows that Thomas's scholastic way goes beyond simply reacting and responding, to offer a full, reasonable, and beautiful picture of his position—a position that is always attempting to reflect the mind of the Church. The work that we take up, also, involves not simply dealing with problems and questions and difficulties but offering a picture of sobriety and joy, of dignity and respect, of humility and forgiveness. With specific reference to marriage, this means a vision in which everything—from courtship to cultivating and managing a life together, to living through the painful disappointments and losses that are shared within marriages—can come to share in those characteristics. In this, then, the *magister* represents the kind of intellectual rigor that must be brought to the task of proposing a Christian vision of marriage.

Before leaving the historical figure of the *magister*, one final point should be made. At a certain point in his career, a student was invited to step into the role of master and to determine disputed questions himself. In order to do this, a student had to appear before a committee of three masters. The character of this meeting, however, is a matter of disagreement in recent scholarship. Some argue that the student was tested; others insist that it was simply a ceremony at which he swore that he had completed the required preparation. If the latter is correct, then *the disputes themselves would have functioned as the real and final test*. This is the sort of test that any of us who would propose the Christian vision will find. The good news is: we have a model of rigor and of precision to help us.

Now, it might seem that if we really did the work of the *magister* well, entertaining myriad arguments and discerning decisively both truth and error, we would have done enough. But I want to suggest more. We are best served, I would suggest, if we consider the model not only of the *magister*, but also of the *magistra*.

To Act as *Magistra*

In suggesting the model of the *magister*, I pointed to St. Thomas and his fellow medieval masters, but here, I point to someone greater: to the blessed Mother herself, whom we might regard not only as “*Mater*,” but as “*Magistra*.” Here again, I turn to a figure especially beloved within the Dominican Order. From its earliest days, the Order saw itself as particularly close to Mary, as sheltered and blessed by her. Nowhere, perhaps, is the ongoing devotion to Mary as clear as in the life-giving practice of praying the rosary, a gift of the Dominican Order to the whole Church.

Can we think of the Blessed Mother as *magistra*, though? I am inspired here in part by the title of the *Mater et Magistra*, a papal encyclical of Pope John XXIII, promulgated in 1962. That document, of course, refers to the Church, but we know the many ways in which the Church learns her true nature in looking to Mary. In any case, the Blessed Mother, to whom the Dominican Order is so closely connected, was the first teacher to our Lord in his earthly life—and if to him, then, perhaps we might also allow, to us. But to return more specifically to our topic: as we go about our work of proposing, in what ways might we see Mary as our guide? Here, we come to a question upon whose answer we could reflect for a long time. Only as a beginning, I would like to suggest three ways.

First is an emphasis that appears in *Mater et Magistra* itself, and can be captured in a brief quotation from it: “. . . though the Church’s first care must be for souls . . . she concerns herself too with the exigencies of man’s daily life, with his livelihood and education, and his general, temporal welfare and prosperity” (§3). In this, the Blessed Mother, like the Church as a whole, is surely our guide. Hers is precisely the way of *incarnation*, of welcoming all of the concrete complexity of everyday existence. She is not a philosopher or a hermitess but a wife and mother. Indeed, one of the most profound descriptions of Mary comes when, we are told in Luke 2:19 that she “kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.” We can hear the engagement with multiplicity here, not only in the reference to “all these things,” but in the very meaning of the Greek word translated as “reflecting”—or, in other versions, as “pondering.” It is a word that means gathering up many disparate things, of attending to the diversity of things, and drawing them into a whole.

In the same way, our task of proposing a Christian vision must do so in the context of exigencies of daily life. To be clear: I don’t want to oppose “theological concerns” to “pastoral concerns” as is sometimes done. These most practical considerations do not require us to soften the truth, or to sidestep the truth. They do call us to intense attention to the specifics of a

given situation, in the form of care, in the human sense. Determinations must be made in specific situations.

Here, I think of a friend of mine, a professor at another university in New England. What not all of his friends know is that years ago, he became the father of a child, although he and the child's mother did not marry. In fact, that child was adopted. He, however, has been deeply committed—if in a very unusual way—as a father. He supported his child's mother through her pregnancy and the process of adoption, in which they worked together to choose an adoptive family. Even now, after the adoption, in fact, he has an ongoing connection with his son—and with the blessing of his son's parents. He wants to make sure this child knows of his love and support. In the end, it is clear to me that he has chosen over and over what he believes is best for this boy. Here, we have a model of fatherhood immersed in some very specific and difficult circumstances. It is remarkable because of, not in spite of, that fact. We, too, are called into a terrain that is surprising and sometimes difficult, and we must develop the nimbleness and flexibility that allows for navigating concrete situations as they arise. A Christian vision of marriage is not communicated only generally or hypothetically, but also precisely in the “exigencies of daily life.”

Second, I want to suggest that we can look to Our Lady as a model of gentleness. As I have already noted, a Christian vision can differ sharply from other proposed realities. The disagreements that Christians have with others in the public square—and, indeed sometimes inside the Church—are serious and sharp. It can sometimes feel as if we are being drawn into a full-fledged battle. But, as Christians we know that, in an ultimate sense, our enemies are not the human beings who stand before us. They are our opponents, but they are not our enemies. And we know that, in an ultimate sense, “the battle is the Lord's” (2 Chronicles 20:15).

We must remember, then, that we are not called to respond with an equal and opposite reaction. We must render our *determinatio* with gentleness, with patience, with kindness. Even, we can say, we must render our determination with a sort of sweetness, if by that word we understand the sweetness of our Lady. Here, although I do not speak of Mary without any sentiment, I do not simply speak sentimentally. We know that her gentleness is not weakness but is indeed strength.

Third, I want to suggest that we can look to a characteristic of Our Lady that may be surprising, as it is not often emphasized at the present moment, even though it is often attested in the tradition. This characteristic is her beauty. In the end, what we offer also must be beautiful. If we persuade anyone to accept, fully, the Christian vision, it will be not only because they

have found it to be logically sound or practically advantageous, but because they have seen the beauty of that vision. We can all imagine the many facets of a truly beautiful marriage or family: concord and joy; humility and forgiveness; a reality in which each lives for the other.

Luckily for us, however, beauty also appears in partial and provisional ways. Here, I think of a Catholic family I know. They always attend Mass together, although the mother and father do not sit together. In fact, this couple obtained a civil divorce some time ago. They have not remarried, and by whatever process, they have come to the decision not only that they will continue to attend Mass, but that they will continue to attend the same Mass. Despite all that is lost, these children see their mother and father every Sunday in worship, and they all share together in Holy Communion. In its own broken and fragmentary way, this fidelity displays a kind of beauty that teaches and even consoles those who see it.

And, in all this, Our Lady is our guide. I noted that the student is eventually called upon to step into the shoes of the master. In a similar way, every Dominican—and indeed, every Christian—has Mary for his or her mother. But children also are meant to imitate their mothers, to learn by watching, and to do as they do. As we come to this task concerned with the exigencies of daily life, characterized by gentleness, and by beauty, we can be like her.

Magister and Magistra Joined Together

The two models are not often considered together. We more often think of the first as “clearheaded” and the other as “soft-hearted,” as if these two were opposed to one another. For us, though, they are simply two ways of understanding, and moving toward, wisdom and holiness. To “think carefully” and “to keep and ponder,” in fact, are activities best understood as linked. Whether we are thinking of ideas, circumstances, or people, both involve ultimately a form of *care*, and both call us to attentiveness to detail and to preparedness for the challenge at hand.

The task of proposing Christian marriage in the present moment is a profoundly difficult one, some might say an overwhelming one. As we take up this task, we must consider not only what we have to say, but how we will say it. The good news is that there are powerful models to whom we can look. By God’s grace, we can fix our eyes on the *magister* and also on the *magistra*, and do well the work we are given to do. N-V

