

Tract 12: The Sacrament of Matrimony

The sacraments necessarily “effect what they signify,” writes St. Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 62, a. 1, ad 1). Put a bit differently, the sacraments, as dynamic actions of the person of Christ, always accomplish what Christ intends them to accomplish. This accomplishment spells nothing other than our justification or sanctification—the sacraments have the power to justify—whereby we are healed of sin and proportioned or elevated to God. The sacraments offer both healing medicine and deifying power.

As we consider the sacrament of matrimony and the particular human need to which it responds, or the particular way it provides healing medicine and deifying power to the married *qua* married, we must first take into account what the sacrament of matrimony signifies—its *res et sacramentum* (to advert to the classical Scholastic terminology). For marriage, the *res et sacramentum* is the indissoluble conjugal union of Christ and the Church. Given that the sacraments necessarily effect what they signify, there is considerable spiritual fruit to be reaped if we enumerate the concrete implications that this—the doctrine that marriage signifies the conjugal union of Christ and the Church—bears for married persons.

By elevating the natural institution of marriage and granting it a share in the sacramental economy, Christ the Lord reveals his desire to impart upon married couples the power that he alone, in virtue of his Passion, death, and resurrection, possesses over sin. And who would deny the reality of marital sin, or that marriage suffers in a particular way under the assault of sin? Beginning with the plague of divorce (which has reached unprecedented levels), the union of man and woman in marriage today suffers under the barrage of sin as at no other time. Many individuals—in ever increasing numbers—ensnared by today’s empty allure of libertine hedonism and sexual profligacy of every sort, currently reject marriage altogether, preferring instead alternative arrangements: mostly fornication and cohabitation,

but ever-more including same-sex couplings, polyamorous arrangements, unions that accommodate gender-fluid identities and the rejection of binary sexual difference, and the list of perverse sexual unions goes on (some heretofore unimaginable, such as agalmatophiliac arrangements that unite human beings with robotic mannequins or even holograms). The vice grip of sin threatens to squeeze the great and noble union of marriage to an inglorious death.

And this is to say nothing of how those who do embrace the union of marriage and who are committed to making their marriages happy and life-long confront the way that marital sin manifests itself in their own conjugal lives: whether as a consequence of each spouse's own sinful tendencies; or as a result of the tension that arises on account of male–female sexual difference, where male-specific tendencies can easily run up against (even if complementary to) female-specific tendencies; or in the vicissitudes and hard-pressed demands of marriage and family life; and the list continues, as any married couple can attest. Here the noblest of human efforts on its own will never overcome. Aquinas is clear that the natural good that we can do on our own without divine aid, including in our marriages, will never amount to much, whether it means being honest, or just, or a self-giving spouse.¹

The antidote (the only antidote) to marital sin is Christ—via the mediation of the sacrament of matrimony. And what an antidote it is! By this sacrament, Christ places himself squarely in the center of our marriages, granting married partners a share in his redemptive victory over sin. Not leaving married couples alone in their struggle against marital sin, God confers in this sacrament a sanctifying grace whose precise aim is to heal marital brokenness and to bolster and perfect spousal love. Indeed, Aquinas, recognizing God's superabundant action in the economic order, attests that each sacrament, over and above sanctifying grace proper, provides a “certain divine assistance” that targets the particular end of that sacrament.² In the case of the sacrament of matrimony, that divine assistance aims at the realization of a truly happy, fulfilling marriage in its procreative and unitive

¹ He intimates this unmistakably when, in offering instances of “good works” that we can perform without grace, he gives rather paltry, almost laughable examples, given that the context implies good *moral* works: “build dwellings, plant vineyards, and the like” (*ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 2). Later in a. 5, he reiterates the same view: “Without grace man . . . can perform works conducive of a good which is natural to him, as ‘to toil in the fields, to drink, to eat, or to have friends,’ and the like, as Augustine says in his third reply to the Pelagians.”

² *ST* III, q. 62, a. 2: “Sacramental grace confers, over and above [sanctifying] grace commonly so called, a certain divine assistance in obtaining the end of the sacrament.” In ad 1, he maintains that sacramental grace targets “certain special effects that are necessary in the Christian spiritual life.”

structuring. It aims at lifting marriages out of the burden and downward drag of sin and at the holiness of the spouses.

“Because the sacraments effect what they signify,” writes St. Thomas, “one must believe that in this sacrament a grace is conferred on those marrying, and that by this grace they are included in the union of Christ and the Church.”³ *They are included in the union of Christ and the Church.* This means that husbands are lifted out of the downward drag of sin by being configured to Christ *qua* Bridegroom of the Church, and wives the same by being configured to the Church *qua* Bride of Christ. We know that the best husband and father is the man who attends to the unitive and procreative structure of his marriage by serving the needs of his wife and children before his own, who gives of himself to his family completely without thought of cost to himself. The best husband and father is the one who loves as Christ loves—the Christ who offered himself completely by undergoing the worst imaginable suffering, utterly undeserved and utterly for our sake. Likewise, the best wife and mother is the one who loves as the Church loves. The sacrament of matrimony makes both become a reality, *to be these kinds of lovers*. To become a “power couple” (to invoke current parlance). And it is guaranteed for those who are of living faith, as “the sacraments effect what they signify.” Through this sacrament, Christ transforms the husband’s love into his own and the wife’s love into the Church’s: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave his life up for her,” St. Paul adds in Eph 5:25, immediately after telling wives to be subject to their husbands, “just as the Church is subject to Christ.”

Without the sacrament of marriage, the love between husband and wife would never become the kind of love that God intends for it; with this sacrament, it is *guaranteed* to become this kind of love. Only sanctifying grace and the divine assistance of the sacrament give husband and wife the power to overcome their selfish tendencies and moral shortcomings, thereby attaining the dreams and ideals with which they pronounce their vows. “Whenever a man and woman fall in love,” proclaimed Pope Francis at the World Meeting of Families on June 22, 2022, “God offers them a gift; that gift is marriage.” He continued:

It is a marvelous gift, which contains the power of God’s own love: strong, enduring, faithful, ready to start over after every failure or moment of weakness. . . . So take heart: family life is not “mission impossible!” By the grace of the sacrament, God makes it a wonderful

³ *Summa contra gentiles* IV, ch. 78.

journey, to be undertaken with him and never alone. The family is not a lofty ideal that is unattainable in reality. God solemnly promises his presence in your marriage and family, not only on the day of your wedding, but for the rest of your lives, on every day of your journey.

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