

The Redemption and Divinization of Human Sexuality through the Sacrament of Marriage: A Thomistic Approach

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WE CAN easily picture the scene. An engaged couple approaches a parish priest and asks to be married in the Church. If asked why they would like this, they would probably be hard pressed to say much beyond the simple fact (a mere sociological one) that one or both are Catholic and that they would like a “church wedding.” Chances are quite good they are cohabitating and contracepting and that neither attends Mass regularly, if at all. Yet chances are also quite good that the marriage preparation program they are about to undergo will do little to address their objectively grave moral situation, or, conversely, to explain how the objective good, the true flourishing, of their relationship can only be attained by living chastely. Chances are even better that said program will do little to present clearly the theological meaning and purpose of the sacrament of marriage, if only because the presenters of the program do not know this theology themselves. And so the couple proceeds to the altar with little understanding of the truly “great mystery” (μυστήριον μέγας), to quote St. Paul’s reference to marriage in Ephesians 5:32, that marks the sacrament in which they are about to partake. A most unfortunate omission, since the opportunity to explain this “great mystery,” particularly along the lines of how their human love as man and woman shall be likened unto the divine and of how they shall be offered the guarantee of a happy, successful marriage—no mean news in a world where the institution of marriage is under aggressive assault—will have been missed.

Yet, that is the theological reality of this sacrament. In the interests, therefore, of explicating this reality, this essay shall offer a modest reflection on the theology of the sacrament of marriage. To this end, I shall heed the repeated recommendation of the Church's Magisterium to follow St. Thomas as teacher, as he helps us "best to shed light on the mysteries of salvation," to quote Vatican Council II's Decree on Priestly Formation, *Optatum Totius*, §16.¹ Complementing my previous essays in this same journal, then, on the procreative-unitive meaning of human sexuality and on the natural law ordering of our sexuality to (heterosexual) marriage, I would like to present, here, a Thomistic-inspired appraisal of the divinization (or redemption) of our sexuality that occurs in the sacrament of marriage.² Specifically, I shall offer a brief overview of Aquinas's general sacramental theology, wherein we see how the fruits of Christ's redemption, accomplished in his assumed (sexed) nature, are extended and applied across time. This overview will be followed by

¹ Repeating this injunction, the 1983 Code of Canon Law stipulates that students of theology should "learn to penetrate more intimately the mysteries of salvation, especially with St. Thomas as teacher" (canon 252, §3). Chrysostom Baer ("Translator's Introduction," in Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2006], xi–xiv, at xi–xii), with the requisite documentation, shows how "[t]here is no doctor of the Church upon whom the accolades of papal approbation have been heaped more than St. Thomas Aquinas." Such "papal approbation" would include Pope Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus* (Nov. 18, 1893), Pope Pius X's *Motu Proprio Doctoris Angelici* (June 29, 1914 [AAS 6 (1914)]), Pope Benedict XV's Letter to Fr. Hugon (May 5, 1916 [AAS 8 (1916), 174]), Pope Pius XI's *Studiorum Duce* (June 29, 1923 [AAS 15 (1923), 314]), Pope Pius XII's Address to Seminarians (June 24, 1939 [AAS 31 (1939), 247]), and Pope Paul VI's Address in the Gregorian University (March 12, 1964 [AAS 56 (1964), 365]). Additionally, it is worth noting that since the days of penning *The Acting Person* in the late 1960s (which was an edited form of his 1953 dissertation), Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła) persistently attempted to integrate and synthesize St. Thomas's thought with his own; see in particular his appeal to Aquinas as the model of joining faith and reason in his encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*, §43. For a comprehensive overview of the role of Thomas's thought in Catholic tradition, cf. Jude P. Dougherty, "Thomism," in *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, vol. 4 (New York: Academic Press, 1998), 365–72. Cf. as well Romanus Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), xvi–xviii; and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1998).

² See my "The 'Inseparable Connection' between Procreation and Unitive Love (*Humanae Vitae*, §12) and Thomistic Hylemorphic Anthropology," *Nova et Vetera*, Eng 6 (2008): 731–64; and "The Natural Law Ordering of Human Sexuality to (Heterosexual) Marriage: Towards a Thomistic Philosophy of the Body," *Nova et Vetera* 8 (2010): 553–92.

consideration of the sacrament of marriage in light of this general theology, bearing in mind its concrete implications. (As most know, the mature Aquinas, having abandoned the project of the *Summa theologiae* in the midst of his treatment of the sacraments, namely, before getting to matrimony, penned no actual treatise on this sacrament.)³

Oriented toward the Person of Christ

Those familiar with St. Thomas's thought will recognize that the move from the metaphysical-natural law meaning of our sexuality to its Christocentric theological meaning follows the overall structured design (*ordo disciplinae*) of the *Summa* itself. For, it is in order to locate his moral teaching within a larger picture of saving doctrine that Aquinas orients, both conceptually and architectonically, his entire treatment of human morality (inclusive of the natural law and thus of our sexual comportment) ultimately to Christ, namely, by his completing the *Summa's* moral section, the *secunda pars*, with this work's Christological section, the *tertia pars*. One can say more: the Person of Christ is already present in the moral section of the *Summa*, the *secunda pars*, and sits at its very heart. Whenever this previous moral section employs its key terms like grace, New Law, beatitude, gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, gifts of prophecy and miracles, infused moral virtue, theological virtue, or evangelical state of life, it implies and anticipates, or begs for, the Person of Christ and his saving work.⁴

³ As Angela McKay ("Aquinas on the End of Marriage," in *Human Fertility: Where Faith and Science Meet*, ed. Richard J. Fehring and Theresa Notare [Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2008], 53–70, at 60) points out, Aquinas's most developed treatments of marriage come in his *Commentary on the Sentences* (his first written work, and hereafter cited as *In Sent.*) and in his slightly later *Summa contra Gentiles* (hereafter cited as *ScG*). While McKay has in mind Thomas's philosophical (natural law) teaching on marriage, her point holds for his treatment of the sacrament of marriage as well: for the earlier work, this treatment comes in *In IV Sent.*, dd. 26–42 (subsequently reinserted in *Summa theologiae* [hereafter cited as *ST*] Suppl., qq. 41–68); for the later work, this treatment is reduced to one chapter only, namely, *ScG* IV, ch. 78 (though the study of marriage as a natural institution is covered in *ScG* III, chs. 122–26). We should also note that Aquinas's remarks on the creation of the first man and woman in *ST* I, q. 92, aa. 2–3, make significant appeals to the sacramental nature of marriage.

⁴ I have argued elsewhere for the implied presence of Christ in the *secunda pars*, and thus of the coherence between this part of the *Summa* and its *tertia pars*, against those who think Aquinas completes his comprehensive work of theology in the *secunda pars*, thereby relegating the *tertia pars* to the role of unnecessary appendage to the *Summa*; cf. my "Christ's Place in the Overall Design of the *Summa*: Response to Sarah Coakley," *Providence: Studies in Western Civilization* 8, 1 (2003): 70–76. Here I follow Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas. The Person and His*

In this respect, Aquinas shows how his theology is so thoroughly scriptural, and more particularly Pauline. For, the Christian moral life, on St. Paul's account, has at its center of gravity not a moral theory as such, nor a set of ideas, but a person—the Person of Jesus Christ, that is, God's incarnate Son—and our relationship with him. This Person is the “new source” of moral action that St. Paul first recognized when pondering the difference between his moral teaching and both Jewish moral teaching, which places the emphasis on justice through obedience to God's law, and Greek moral teaching, which claims to possess natural wisdom.⁵ The Person of Jesus Christ changes the compass of the moral life since, in redeeming our nature, he raises this nature, our humanity, to the level of the divine.

Dynamic Actions of the Person of Christ

If the whole of our lives, including our sexuality, is to share in the economy of salvation, then our lives must be put squarely in relation to the Person of Christ. We obtain salvation only by attaching ourselves, inclusive of our (sexed) bodies, to the Person of Christ. This the sacraments accomplish. And for the joining of our sexuality to the Person of Christ, we have one sacrament in particular, the sacrament of marriage. To be sure, Catholic doctrine, following St. Thomas, professes that we best understand the sacraments, marriage included, if we see them as nothing other than dynamic actions of the Person of Christ himself.

Aquinas was hardly alone, though, in recognizing the essential and inseparable connection between the sacraments and the Person of Christ.

Work, vol. 1, trans. R. Royal (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 150–56; and M.-V. Leroy, review of Albert Patfoort's *Thomas d'Aquin, les clés d'une théologie* (Paris: FAC, 1983), *Revue thomiste* 84 (1984), 298–303; cf. as well Romanus Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology*, xiii. Perhaps the best known proponent of what one might call the “appendage” theory of the place of the *tertia pars* in the *Summa* is Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, trans. A.-M. Landry and D. Hughes (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1964), 314; here Chenu makes the contentious claim that the *Summa* “presents a fully developed theology before Christ appears on the scene. Redemptive Incarnation appears to have been added *post factum* to the whole.” As regards the key terms of the *secunda pars*, which imply and beg for Christ, Thomas offers treatises for all of them in this moral part of the *Summa*: for the Beatitudes and the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, I–II, qq. 68–70; for infused (moral) virtue, I–II, q. 63; for grace and the New Law, I–II, qq. 106–14; for the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, II–II, qq. 1–45; for the gifts of prophecy and miracles, II–II, qq. 171–78; for the evangelical states of life, II–II, qq. 179–89.

⁵ The moralist Servais Pinckaers stresses this very point in *Morality: The Catholic View*, trans. Michael Sherwin (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 16.

Already in the middle of the fifth century, Pope St. Leo the Great had famously proclaimed: "What was visible in Christ has passed over into the sacraments of the Church."⁶ This teaching, in fact, echoes the common patristic notion whereby the sacraments, and in particular baptism and the Eucharist, are seen to flow from the side of Christ when it was opened by the soldier's lance while he hung upon the Cross (cf. Jn 19:34).⁷ Later in the High Middle Ages we see this same recognition of the Christological dimension of the sacraments exhibited in the magnificent bas-relief sculpture of Christ on the central portal of the famous Romanesque church in Vézelay, France: "There [on the portal]," explains the French Thomist scholar Jean-Pierre Torrell, "the sacraments are depicted as rays that come forth from Christ, meeting the world of men at his feet, his hands meeting us through time and space."⁸

In short, the sacraments of the Church extend the humanity of Christ in time. They mark the historical continuation of the Incarnation, the prolongation of God's embodied presence among us.

Still, though it be the common teaching of the Church to see the sacraments first and last as dynamic actions of the Person of Christ, few theologians have amplified this teaching more than St. Thomas Aquinas. At the immediate outset of the treatise on the sacraments in the *Summa* (III, q. 60), a treatise that follows upon this work's comprehensive treatment of the mystery of Christ (III, qq. 1–59), he makes this doctrine unequivocal: "the sacraments of the Church derive their efficacy from the Incarnate Word himself." Qualifying this same teaching, he writes a bit later: "the sacraments of the Church derive their power from Christ's Passion."⁹

The sacraments of the Church represent the historical extension not simply of the Incarnation, then, but more precisely of Christ's Passion, death, and resurrection. To quote another succinct line of Aquinas's, wherein he has in mind the need for persons living after the fact to share existentially in the fruits of Christ's death and resurrection: "Christ's Passion is, so to speak, applied to man through the sacraments."¹⁰ The sacraments derive their efficacy from Christ's death and resurrection, from his divinity joined to his suffering humanity.

⁶ Leo the Great, *Sermon* 74, 2 (PL 54, 398), cited in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 45.

⁷ Thomas appeals to this patristic teaching in *ST* III, q. 64, a. 2 ad 3.

⁸ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Aquinas's Summa: Background, Structure, and Reception*, trans. Benedict M. Guevin (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 59.

⁹ *ST* III, q. 62, a. 5.

¹⁰ *ST* III, q. 61, a. 1 ad 3. Similarly in q. 64, a. 3, he asserts: "the merit and power of Christ's Passion operates in the sacraments."

If the sacraments in general give us a share in Christ's redemption, then, the sacrament of matrimony in particular gives our marriages, or more generally our sexuality, a share in this redemption. The fruits of Christ's death and resurrection are applied to husband and wife through the sacrament of marriage. The sacrament of matrimony allows man and woman to join themselves, in their very spousal union, not simply to the Person of Christ, but specifically to the Person of Christ *on the Cross*.

"Instrumental" Actions of Christ

Where Aquinas's general sacramental theology especially distinguishes itself is in the way he turns to the Aristotelian notion of efficient causality, and more specifically the notions of principal causality and instrumental causality as types of efficient causes, in order to flesh out this teaching and thereby make it intelligible and appealing to human reason.¹¹ (This provides us, Jean-Pierre Torrell promptly observes, with an example of how "the Master of Aquino . . . boldly transpose[s] a principle he gets from Aristotle to put it at the service of a reality that the Greek could never have imagined.")¹² Further, this philosophical notion of efficient causality allows St. Thomas to avoid the tendency, seen especially at the time of the Reformation, to reduce the work of our salvation to an "either/or" proposition, namely, either to God's producing justifying grace (the grace that saves) in us or to the sacraments doing this. ("The Spirit Saves, Not the Waters of Baptism," is how the title of a Protestant tract that I recently saw puts it.) If the latter, then one must affirm that something earthly and material produces something divine and spiritual, which on the face of it would affirm the patently absurd and idolatrous.

Armed with the principal/instrumental efficient cause distinction, Aquinas succeeds in affirming that *both* God *and* the sacraments produce justifying grace in us, *but in different respects*: God by way of principal efficient cause (the One who is proportioned to the effect or to the production of justifying grace as such, the cause which operates by the power of its own form) and the sacraments by way of instrumental efficient cause (God's chosen channels or mediums through which he produces sanctifying grace, and which thus play a necessary role in the production of said

¹¹ The key texts are found in *ST* III, q. 62, aa. 1 and 4. For more on the philosophical solidity of this teaching, see Steven Long, "The Efficacy of God's Sacramental Presence," *Nova et Vetera* 7 (2009): 869–76.

¹² Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 140 (with my own slight modification of Royal's translation).

grace). Since the principal cause and the instrumental cause operate at two different levels, each causes the action completely, not partly and partly. As St. Thomas explains in a key passage from the *Summa contra Gentiles*:

When the same effect is attributed to a natural cause and to the divine power, it is not as though the effect were produced partly by God and partly by the natural agent: but the whole effect is produced by both, though in different ways, as the same effect is attributed wholly to the instrument, and wholly also to the principal agent.¹³

Without contradiction, then, we can and must affirm that justifying grace is produced both one hundred percent by God and one hundred percent by the sacraments, just as Michelangelo's *David* is produced both one hundred percent by Michelangelo, as principal cause, and one hundred percent by his chisel, as instrumental cause. Indeed, as Torrell points out, it is the constant teaching of Aquinas that an instrumental cause always leaves its mark, it truly modifies the action of the principal efficient cause (as the type of chisel used by Michelangelo would have played a role in the quality and style of his carving).¹⁴

Wishing to highlight the inseparable link uniting the sacraments with the Person of Christ, Aquinas drives the notion of instrumental causality further. He observes that an instrument can be either *conjoined* (like the hand of the painter) or *separated* (like the paint brush). In the sacraments, God in the Person of the Son acts as the principal efficient cause of our justification, but *through* his assumed humanity ("Christ's divinity working through his humanity," is how St. Thomas suggestively puts it) as through a conjoined instrumental cause and through the sacraments as separated instrumental causes.¹⁵ Working not independently of Christ's Passion, the sacraments work by way of *extension of* or *participation in* Christ's Passion.

Holding in mind, then, this grand organic "chain" of efficient (principal and instrumental) causes, Thomas explains for us how the sacraments operate as dynamic actions of the Person of Christ. Christ *on the Cross* is

¹³ ScG III, ch. 70 (translation: *Saint Thomas Aquinas. Summa Contra Gentiles*, 5 vols. [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955–57], 237). For the same idea as it pertains to the Bible's being authored both by God and by human beings, see Charles Morerod, *The Church and the Human Quest for Truth* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2008), 33–37.

¹⁴ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, 128–31, esp. 130. For texts in Aquinas (provided by Torrell), cf. ST III, q. 62, a. 1 ad 2, but also I, q. 45, a. 5; and especially ScG IV, ch. 41.

¹⁵ ST III, q. 62, a. 5; see as well q. 64, a. 3.

the one who is active in the sacraments through his humanity as through a conjoined instrumental cause and through the words and material signs of the sacraments as through separated instrumental causes. As instruments in the hands of our Savior, the material earthly realities of water, oil, bread, wine, words *truly produce* our salvation. The sacraments are dynamic actions of the Person of Christ in his Passion at the same time that they retain their own integrity, and thus nobility, of being veritable instruments of Christ; they are not mere *occasions* of Christ's dynamic justifying activity, they do not simply point to or *accompany* Christ's saving actions, but are true *causes* of Christ's sanctifying activity ("not only as signs, but also as causes," is how Aquinas puts it).¹⁶

The Source of the Redemption of Human Sexuality: The Sexuality of Christ

That the sacraments derive their power from Christ's death and resurrection, that they apply the fruits of Christ's Passion to us, has direct bearing on our sexuality. For, the body that hung upon the Cross and which rose from the dead was (is) a *sexed* body, that is, a *male* body. Sex marks an essential property of the human nature wedded to the Godhead in the Incarnation. This incarnational reality, as a consequence, raises our own sexuality to a culminating share in the economy of salvation. Unparalleled in his esteem for the full humanity of Christ and for the objective goodness of God's entire created order, St. Thomas is unambiguous on this point at the very outset of his writing career:

Christ came to restore [or redeem] human nature by his very assumption; and for this reason it was necessary that he assume everything following upon human nature, namely, all the properties and parts of human nature, among which is sex; and therefore it was proper for him to assume a particular sex. . . . He assumed a sex not in order to use it but for the perfection of nature.¹⁷

¹⁶ *ST* III, q. 62, a. 1 ad 1.

¹⁷ *In III Sent.*, d. 12, q. 3, a. 1, qc. 1, sol. 1, *corpus* and ad 2. This comes in response to the query of "whether Christ had to assume any particular sex at all" (*utrum Christus debuerit sexum aliquem accipere*), a query that Aquinas himself adds to the Sentence commentary tradition. While Thomas does not pick up the matter again in the *Summa*, we know from this passage in his *Commentary on the Sentences* that he does clearly imply Christ's sexed humanity when he asserts, for instance, in *ST* III, q. 9, a. 4, that "nothing implanted in our nature by God was lacking in the human nature assumed by the Word of God." For more on this, see my own "The Truth of Christ's Human Nature 'In All Its Singular Parts': The Case of Christ's Male Sexuality," in my *The Passions of Christ's Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas*

If Aquinas stood alone in making such a claim, he yet did not do so without drawing upon the much celebrated patristic tenet known as the “soteriological principle,” which echoes unmistakably in the opening sentence, “Christ came to restore human nature by his very assumption.” As the traditional formulation of this principle goes, what was not assumed by Christ was not healed by him.¹⁸ For the whole of human nature to be healed or redeemed, then, Christ had to take on the whole of our human nature. That the whole of our nature includes our sexuality St. Thomas takes as self-evident, given his view that it represents an essential property of our animal-like bodies, that is, of our concrete materiality or animality.¹⁹ (Aquinas sees sex as so integral to our nature, in fact, that he insists we shall retain it even in the resurrected state.)²⁰ If we wish to affirm the concrete realism of Christ’s humanity, then, we cannot abstract Jesus’s male sex from it. Otherwise we compromise his full humanity.

In addition to this, Thomas was committed to the view, also going back to certain venerable Church Fathers, which holds that Christ in his very incarnate being, and not simply at the moment of his death and resurrection, already represents redeemed humanity—a view that remains

Aquinas (Münster: Aschendorff, 2002; reprinted, Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2009), 145–50. John Grabowski (*Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics* [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003], xi) notes that any genuine renewal in moral theology must ground its view of the human person in the doctrine that man is fully revealed in the light of Christ. Along these lines, cf. John Paul II’s call for a renewal in moral theology, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§6–8; and Livio Melina, *Sharing Christ’s Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of ‘Veritatis Splendor,’* trans. William May (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

¹⁸ See, e.g., *ST* III, q. 5, a. 4. Those Fathers who employ the soteriological principle include Origen, Irenaeus, Athanasius, Basil the Great, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Leo the Great, and John Damascene. (Aquinas usually cites Damascene’s formulation of the principle.)

¹⁹ This is covered in detail in my previous essay, “The ‘Inseparable Connection’ between Procreation and Unitive Love,” 738–42.

²⁰ “The diversity [of sex] is becoming to the perfection of [our human] species. . . . Wherefore . . . (human beings) shall rise again of different sex. And though there be difference of sex, there will be no shame in seeing one another, since there will be no lust to invite them to shameful deeds which are the cause of shame.” *ST* Suppl., q. 81, a. 3 (this is pulled from *In IV Sent.*, d. 44, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 1). Thomas offers this same argument on sex “belong[ing] to the perfection of nature” as the reason for its inclusion in our glorified risen bodies in *ScG* IV, ch. 88: “(The risen) will, therefore, have all the members of this sort [i.e., sexual members], even though there will be no use for them, to re-establish the integrity of the natural body.”

liturgically alive to this day in the western Church's practice of bowing during the Creed when the line "and became man" is recited.²¹

For these reasons, then, Aquinas is unabashed in his recognition of what the tradition has otherwise been loathe to acknowledge, save at the time of the Renaissance (whose artistic representations, inspired by what one scholar terms an "incarnational theology," draw deliberate attention to Christ's male sexuality): Christ was a male individual in the fullest sexed sense of the term!²² Long a champion of "no more docetism" before this slogan became fashionable in twentieth-century theology (from the Greek *δοκέω*, "to seem," docetism alleges that Christ only *appeared* to have come in the flesh, and thereby denies Christ's full humanity), St. Thomas refuses to leave the doctrine of God-made-man in the abstract.²³ He knows that Jesus is no generality, he is not "humanity,"

²¹ The theological position claiming that "the being of Christ already represents redeemed man," to quote Aloys Grillmeier (*Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, vol. 1, trans. J. Bowden [2nd ed., Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975], 531), and which is sometimes called the mystic doctrine of redemption, goes back to Irenaeus, Athanasius, and especially Leo the Great. For more on the mystic doctrine of redemption, cf. J.-P. Jossua, *Le salut, incarnation ou mystère pascal, chez les Pères de l'Église de saint Irenée à saint Léon le Grand* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968); and Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Le Christ en ses mystères: La vie et l'oeuvre de Jésus selon saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 2 vols. (Paris: Desclée, 1999), 91–92.

²² We have Leo Steinberg's *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (2nd revised and expanded edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) to thank for bringing to light the "incarnational theology"—to use John O'Malley's term in his "Postscript" to this work (213–16, at 213)—that inspired much of Renaissance art. With ample evidence, Steinberg shows that many Renaissance paintings of the infant Christ and of the dead Christ depict a veritable *ostentatio genitalium*, that is, a deliberate viewing of Christ's genitals (as when the infant Christ's clothes are deliberately removed to reveal his genitals), with the goal of making manifest his full humanity. Steinberg writes: "In many hundreds of pious, religious works, from before 1400 to past the mid-16th century, the ostensive unveiling of the Child's sex, or the touching, protecting or presentation of it, is the main action [there follow two images]. And the emphasis recurs in images of the dead Christ, or of the mystical Man of Sorrows [there follows an image]" (3). Though seemingly unaware of the patristic "mystic" doctrine of redemption (see preceding note), O'Malley ("Postscript," 214) implies that such a doctrine stands behind the Renaissance's "incarnational theology" when he suggests: "Humanity [according to Renaissance thought] was saved, redeemed, at least inchoately, at the moment the Godhead assumed human flesh." The connection between the Renaissance regard for Christ's male sexuality and Aquinas's theological regard is not accidental, as Steinberg observes that Aquinas was held in honor by Renaissance Rome "beyond any medieval figure" (55).

²³ Docetism has ravaged Christianity since its very inception in various, sometimes diluted or masked forms. Already in the Johannine and Pauline writings of the

as is no human being. Whether affirming the reality of Christ's maleness, or of Christ's assumption of a "carnal and earthly" body, or whether giving unparalleled attention to Christ's emotions or affectivity, Aquinas at all points seeks to uphold Christ's full human consubstantiality.²⁴ But we should not wonder at this element of Aquinas's teaching, given his proclamation, in what almost certainly amounts to a profession of profound spiritual attachment to the Person of Christ, that there is "nothing more wonderful (*nihil enim mirabilius*) for us to consider than the divine achievement of true God, the Son of God, becoming true man."²⁵

Christ's Male Sex and the "Scandal of Particularity"

We cannot overemphasize the redemptive significance that God's assumed male sex bears on our own sexuality, given the evident confusion that persists today, at least in some circles, on this point. Some contemporary theologians, for instance, scandalized by the "naïve physicalism" of giving weight to the particularity of Jesus's maleness, are fearful that such focus "collapses the totality of the Christ into the human man Jesus," and so wish that discussion on this topic would simply "fade away."²⁶ These theologians, in other words, want to warn us that if we accentuate Christ's

New Testament, one can see clear anti-docetic retorts: 2 Jn 7, for instance, warns that "many deceivers . . . will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh," while Jn 1:14 and Col 2:9 announce, respectively, that "the Word became flesh" and that "in Christ the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily." For its part, Heb 2:14–16 attests that Christ "partook of the same nature" as "the children of flesh and blood" and as "the stock of Abraham." For more on Aquinas's anti-docetic adherence to Christ's full humanity, see my own "The Humanity of Christ, the Incarnate Word," in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. J. Wawrykow and R. van Nieuwenhove (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 252–76; and "Anti-Docetism in Aquinas's *Super Ioannem*: St. Thomas as Defender of the Full Humanity of Christ," in *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology*, ed. M. Dauphinais and M. Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 254–76.

²⁴ Jean-Pierre Torrell (*Le Christ en ses mystères*, 188) does not hesitate to assert that Aquinas affirms "wherever possible that Christ is a man fully subject to the laws of humanity." For a brief sampling of passages confirming this, cf. *In Ioan.* (*Commentary on John's Gospel*), ch. 1, lect. 7 (n. 168) ; ch. 4, lect. 1 (n. 563); ch. 11, lect. 5 (n. 1535); *ST* III, q. 5, aa. 1–2 and 4; q. 14, aa. 1–4; q. 15, aa. 1–10; q. 19, a. 2. For an exhaustive treatment of Aquinas's theology of Christ's human affectivity, cf. my own *The Passions of Christ's Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*.

²⁵ *ScG* IV, ch. 27. Aquinas offers almost the identical phrase in *In Ioan.*, ch. 2, lect. 3: "There is nothing more wonderful than that God should become man."

²⁶ Thus, the charge of the feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson, "The Maleness of Christ," in *The Special Nature of Women? Concilium* 6 (1991): 108–15, at 113 and 115. Eleonore Stump repeated this same charge during the discussion portion of

maleness, we do so at the theological peril of women, as this will obscure the way Christ's redemptive accomplishments extend to all without distinction: male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free man, "for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

Such concerns, while not entirely without merit, arise from a mindset that is wont to pit the particular against the universal. More generally, this is the mindset that is troubled by the "scandal of particularity," as it is sometimes called, which is part and parcel of the larger Christian story of salvation. The scandal of particularity refers to the irony that a salvation of universal import should be bound up in, because accomplished through, not only a particular history of a particular people, namely, the Jewish people, but especially a particular member of this Jewish people: Jesus of Nazareth, who is himself God "particularized," embodied, in a human individual.²⁷ To many it seems scandalous that the God of all peoples should bind himself to one particular people, the Jews, thereby raising them above all other peoples, and should unite himself substantially to one particular human individual, to a man, to the male Jesus, thereby granting him "the name which is above every name," to quote St. Paul (Phil 2:9).

However, if we but reflect upon the full meaning of the Incarnation, particularly along the lines of the doctrine of the hypostatic union, we can easily overcome the perceived divide between the universal and the particular, and thereby sidestep the fear that focusing on Jesus's male sex will lead to an implosion of the "totality of Christ." In truth, the Incarnation *unites* the particular with the universal. How so? The concrete reality of Christ's humanity is joined to a divine hypostasis, the one divine Person of the Son. Put more directly, the particulars of the Incarnation (Jesus's maleness, his Jewishness, his body and soul, etc.) subsist in a divine Person who, as God, transcends all particulars and all limits of time and place. The whole of God and the whole of his infinite power, a power that cannot be quantified or temporally constrained in any way, are at work in every existential particularity of the life of Jesus.

a paper I presented on Aquinas's thought at a conference at Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford, in March 2006.

²⁷ The scandal of particularity is touched upon by many authors. For instance, C. S. Lewis broaches the notion in *Mere Christianity*. Normally, it is used in reference to God's becoming a member of the Jewish race, as when Karl Barth (*Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, §59 [ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 166–67]) stresses how the universality of the Son of God is revealed in the particularity of the Son's assumption of Jewish flesh (Barth bemoans the "all too generalised views of the man Jesus" which lose sight of "the simple truth that Jesus Christ was a born Jew"), or when William N. Ewer whimsically pens in a rhyme: "How odd of God, / to choose the Jews."

The reality of God's accomplishing our redemption through his assumed manhood presses us to say more. If the universal (namely, salvation of the human race) does not occur through the particular (that is, through the man Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph of Nazareth whose historical male body was put to death on a cross in Palestine nearly two thousand years ago only to come to life again three days later), it does not occur at all: "Christ gives life to the world through the mysteries that he accomplished in his flesh," writes Aquinas, for whom "flesh" always signifies the particular.²⁸ We must ever be on our guard against recycled forms not only of docetism, the heresy denying Christ's full humanity, but also of gnosticism, that other ancient heresy which proposes universal (spiritual) salvation with no necessary, immediate link to historical particularity.

The Jewishness of Jesus, a favorite topic of current biblical scholarship, provides a fine illustration of universal salvation being linked to the historical particularities of Jesus's humanity. If we stress the fact that Jewishness is inseparable from the historical reality of the Incarnation, it does not follow from this that we are slighting non-Jews and calling into question St. Paul's claim in Galatians 3:28 that there is "neither Jew nor gentile" in Christ. In the same way, laying stress on Jesus's maleness does not of itself undercut the place of women in the "totality of Christ." If God became human, then he *had* to become one of us in all the existential particulars that being genuinely human requires.

Indeed, it is the same St. Paul who, through his use of the term *kenosis* when discussing the Incarnation in his celebrated "Hymn to the Philippians" (Phil 2:6–11), exalts the soteriological import of the existential particulars of the God-man. *Kenosis*, on the Apostle's account, signifies the fact that the Son of God freely emptied himself of his divine condition in order to embrace our human condition in all its particulars. *Kenosis* in the Pauline sense, in other words, implies God's self-emptying embrace of a true flesh-and-blood embodiment, and thus of such things as subordination to human parents and to the Mosaic Law, or subjection to the penal

²⁸ *In Ioan.*, ch. 6, lect. 4 (n. 914); English translation: *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* by St. Thomas Aquinas, trans. J. A. Weisheipl and Fabian Larcher, Part I (Albany: Magi Books, 1980), 364 (Part II published by St. Bede's, Petersham, MA). Similarly, in ch. 5, lect. 5 (n. 791), Aquinas writes: "through the mysteries Christ accomplished in his flesh we are restored not only to an incorruptible life in our bodies, but also to a spiritual life in our souls." More generally, Aquinas likes to say it is the humanity of Christ that leads us to God, as in the prologue to the entire *Summa theologiae* itself (I, q. 2, Prol.): "Christ, who, as man, is our way to God," or again in *In Ioan.*, ch. 7, lect. 4 (n. 1074), "the humanity of Christ is the way that leads us to God." Cf. as well *ST* III, q. 9, a. 2.

demands of Roman law as regards the execution of criminals. *Kenosis* implies God's becoming a Jew, a Nazarene, a man "in all the singular parts" of being a man, to use Aquinas's phrase.²⁹

It is, then, a great paradox of the faith: the universal is realized through the particular. Universal reconciliation of humanity with God is achieved only because God became the individual man Jesus of Nazareth. To aver the existential particulars of the Incarnate Christ, including his male sex, is to affirm the indispensable means through which we arrive at the doctrine where "there is neither male nor female" (Gal 3:28). As Jesus is no generality, so neither is the means of our redemption a mere generality.

Regarding our sexuality proper, it is *because* the Son of God took on a particular sex, the male sex, that the redemption of our sexuality, universally considered, is made possible. To call this "naïve physicalism" is to misconstrue fundamentally the realism of the Incarnation and instead veer towards a semi-docetic Christology, towards an abstract Christ, as well as towards a Cartesian bias against the body.

The Power to Justify Marriage

Through the offering of his (male) body to the Father, then, Christ redeemed our sexed human bodies, he redeemed our male *and* female bodies. Christ thus redeems not only our souls but also our bodies (with their desires) as well. And this returns us to the sacrament of marriage, since Christ chose the natural institution of marriage, to which our sexuality is ordered as its normative proportionate good, as fit for inclusion in the sacramental economy. Through this sacrament Christ redeems and divinizes our sexuality in its nuptial signification, that is, in its ordering to the joint goods of procreation and unitive love (marriage). Celibates, too, we should note, have a share in this redemption, for the celibate state of life is "spousal," in that it is ordered to "spiritual" procreation, as Aquinas says.³⁰ Making this clearer, Pope John Paul II points out that celibacy involves the supreme gift of self not to another human person "in the flesh," but to all of God's people "in the spirit," and this "constitutes the

²⁹ *De veritate*, q. 26, a. 10.

³⁰ In *ST* II-II, q. 152, a. 2, corpus and ad 1, St. Thomas explains how God's command in Gn 1:28 to "be fruitful and multiply" entails both physical *and* spiritual fecundity, for human nature tends to sexual generation as well as to knowledge of the truth: "Whereas the command to be fruitful concerns humanity as a whole, it nonetheless requires not only bodily generation but spiritual growth as well." To this latter type of fecundity celibates devote themselves: "holy virginity [celibacy] refrains from all sexual pleasure in order more freely to have leisure for divine contemplation [and to share the fruits of this contemplation with others]."

very meaning of human sexuality,” to quote the Pontifical Council for the Family.³¹

Because it participates in God’s taking on of our sexed, embodied nature for the purpose of its redemption, the sacrament of marriage in its turn redeems our sexuality. We cite again Pope John Paul II, who well underscores this very point:

The fact that *theology also includes the body* should not astonish or surprise anyone who is conscious of the mystery and reality of the Incarnation. Through the fact that the Word of God became flesh, the body entered theology . . . I would say, through the main door. The Incarnation—and the redemption that flows from it—has also become the definitive source of the sacramentality of marriage.³²

Holding in mind, then, Aquinas’s tri-partite formula, or three distinct moments, of the sacraments—namely, *sacramentum tantum* (the external rite, or the outward sign of the sacrament), *res et sacramentum* (the symbolizing reality, or the intermediate cause and effect of the sacrament), and *res tantum* (the grace conferred, or the ultimate effect of the sacrament)—we can say the following.³³ In the sacrament of marriage, husband and wife attach themselves, in faith, to the Person of Christ, that is, to the Person of Christ in his very redemptive act. Just as the sacrament of baptism has us undergo symbolically, though really, Christ’s own death and resurrection, with water as the sign or symbol (the *sacramentum tantum*) of it (see Rm 6:3–4), so does the sacrament of matrimony place the love between husband and wife symbolically, though really, on the Cross with Christ, with the vows acting as the sign or symbol (*sacramentum tantum*) of it.³⁴

³¹ The Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books, 1996), 34; this statement is undoubtedly drawing upon John Paul II’s thought. For John Paul II’s remarks on the “spousal” meaning of celibacy, see his *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston, MA: Pauline Books, 2006), 190, and 440–43; General audiences of Jan. 16, 1980, and May 5, 1982.

³² John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, General audience of April 2, 1980 (ed. Waldstein, 221); emphasis his.

³³ I am grateful to Rev. Paul J. Keller, O.P., for providing me with his (unpublished), “Tri-Partite Formula (Three Moments of the Sacraments: *Sacramentum Tantum*, *Res et Sacramentum*, *Res Tantum*),” the insights of which have proved invaluable to me.

³⁴ For a textual analysis of the notion of marriage vows in Aquinas, cf. Mary Catherine Sommers, “Marriage Vows and ‘Taking Up a New State,’” *Nova et Vetera* 7 (2009): 679–95.

So what happens to marriage, as an institution, by its participating in the redemptive offering of the Son of God? Here we take our cue from the fact that marriage as a natural institution remains normative for sacramental marriage. What the grace of matrimony perfects is precisely what natural marriage is ordered to: children and unitive love. The sacrament of marriage redeems and divinizes marriage as a procreative-unitive institution. (This renders nonsensical, we should not fail to point out, any talk of same-sex partners enjoying a “sacramental marriage.”) How does this redemption of marriage occur? Through the configuring of the natural and indissoluble loving bond of husband and wife unto the supernatural and perfectly indissoluble loving bond of Christ and the Church (the *res et sacramentum*). The *res et sacramentum* of matrimony, in other words, gives husbands a share in Christ’s perfect self-emptying love and wives a share in the Church’s perfect reciprocal love: “(Marriage) is a great mystery,” St. Paul again asserts in Ephesians 5:32, “and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church.” The graced effect (*res tantum*) of this sacrament, because it draws upon Christ’s power over sin, confers upon husband and wife this very power over sin, especially over sin’s assault on marriage (let us call it power over “marital” sin). To be sure, each sacrament confers its power to justify or its power to redeem in view of the particular human need Christ intends it to meet. This includes “over and above [sanctifying] grace,” affirms St. Thomas, a special divine assistance which targets the precise aim of that sacrament.³⁵

In Need of Particular Divine Assistance

That the institution of marriage stands in particular need of divine assistance no one would deny, certainly not today. Facing obstacles particular to the married state, all spouses would admit it is not easy being married. To be sure, the challenges that come with marriage are only too easy to enumerate. These challenges would include: riding through the inevitable dissipation of romantic feelings, which come and go of their very nature, and the subsequent temptation to reduce one’s marital love to a mere “feeling”; learning to live in intimate communion with another person who remains subject to inevitable “mood swings” and who retains his/her shortcomings and personality quirks, not to mention his/her distinctive male/female “hardwiring” (and the tension that results); handling the strain and stress that result from financial straits and from the countless sacrifices of time and desire demanded of spouses each day, especially

³⁵ “[S]acramental grace confers, over and above [sanctifying] grace commonly so called, a certain divine assistance in obtaining the end of the sacrament.” *ST* III, q. 62, a. 2.

when raising young children; learning to resolve the disagreements that inevitably arise, even between spouses who are committed to growing in holiness, and which are often exacerbated by the human tendency to dig in one's heels when in a dispute, no matter the objective truth of the matter; bearing the annoyances and personal grievances, often quite minor, that commonly occur in marriage and which often gnaw at each others' hearts, especially as these pull towards hurtful arguing; learning to forgive each other for and to bury in the past, even when they do not "feel" like it, those unavoidable hurts that spouses inflict upon each other on account of human shortcoming; learning to deal with and to overcome that ubiquitous albatross on all human relationships, especially marriage, namely, misunderstanding and miscommunication; and the list goes on, to say nothing of the more grievous harms, such as divorce or marital infidelity (including "virtual" or "cyber" infidelity, such as where the husband falls, often quite regularly, to the allure of internet pornography, or, worse yet, to chat-room sex or "cybersex," often with the inability to break himself of said allure, though he might desire it, and no matter the documented deleterious effects pornography exacts on marriage and family).³⁶

These challenges make it clear that there must be more than just the spouses' own wills, however well intentioned, to fall back on in order to make their marriages work. Indeed, it would hardly be surprising if many couples getting married today, bearing in mind the plague on marriage marked by the near fifty-percent divorce rate, the rising tide of cohabitation and out-of-wedlock sex, or the growing legal recognition of gay marriage, were to approach the institution of marriage with a cynical attitude. More than ever, married couples today need divine assistance.

While it would be silly to deny this need, many yet remain unwilling to acknowledge their personal inadequacies, both moral and spiritual, relative to their relationships, or to renounce the propensity to resort to one's own will power and to "go it alone" without God's help, as it were, in marriage. Pelagianism, that ancient of heresies encouraging us to think we

³⁶ In his "Pornography—and Marriage" (*The Catholic Thing* online [nfpfproofs.com]; Jan. 29, 2010; a duplicate of "The Effects of Pornography on Individuals, Marriage, Family and Community," from the Family Research Council website [frc.org]; Dec. 2, 2009), the psychologist and researcher Patrick F. Fagan enumerates some of the "documented effects [of pornography] on family life," including: infidelity and divorce; a loss of interest and satisfaction in sexual intercourse with one's spouse; emotional distancing from and general dissatisfaction in one's spouse; the perception of infidelity by the other spouse (usually the wife), resulting in a sense of "betrayal, loss, mistrust, devastation, and anger," as well as of sexual inadequacy, if not in outright depression; a strong tendency by men who engage in voyeurism to view women as "commodities or as 'sex objects'"; etc.

are capable *on our own* of always making the right choices, remains an ever persistent temptation to overcome.³⁷ Particularly insidious to marriage, the Pelagian trap induces us, foolishly, to think that we possess the inherent ability, the right judgment and the strength of will whenever we call upon them, to make our marriages work and be happy: “Whatever happens, we’re never going to get divorced,” is how one journalist, sounding a distinct Pelagian-like ring, describes her mindset when she got married, determined as she, along with much of Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1980), were not to inflict the pain and anguish of divorce upon their children, and yet who later got divorced themselves.³⁸

Contra the Pelagian mindset, Christian revelation makes clear the fact that every human individual possesses a fallen condition, that we all, without exception, are born into original sin. It is this—sin—that accounts in large measure for the struggles that all married persons face. Moral shortcoming, sin, remains a fact of life—of *everyone’s* life—and thus of married life, no matter how good the spouses’ characters. All our relationships, but especially marriage, bear witness to the brokenness within all of us and of how we carry that brokenness into our relationships.

Divine Grace Needed Even for Natural Virtue

Catholic tradition proclaims that God, who is the Author of our sexed nature with its teleological ordering to marriage, wishes that couples might attain the happy, fulfilling marriages they desire. Indeed, he wants happiness

³⁷ Specifically, “Pelagianism is the heresy which holds that man can take the initial and fundamental steps towards salvation by his own efforts, apart from Divine Grace.” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1058. The *Dictionary of Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Pietro Parente et al., trans. E. Doronzo (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing, 1951), 211, adds as one of Pelagianism’s “basic principles” the view that “[m]an, with his natural forces and his free will, can avoid all sin and win the beatific vision.”

³⁸ Susan Gregory Thomas, “The Divorce Generation,” *The Wall Street Journal*, “The Saturday Essay,” July 9, 2011 (online.wsj.com). Continuing in a Pelagian-like strain, Gregory Thomas, who writes as one such member of Generation X, elaborates: “No marital scenario, I told myself, could become so bleak or hopeless as to compel me to embed my children in the torture of a split family. . . . Call us helicopter parents, call us neurotically attached, but those of us who survived the wreckage of split families were determined never to inflict such wounds on our children. We knew better. We were doing everything differently, and the fundamental premise was simple: ‘Kids come first’ meant that we would not divorce.” Yet as all Pelagianism in the end comes to naught, so too Gregory Thomas’s determination to avoid divorce through her (and her spouse’s) sheer will power: “And yet divorce came. In spite of everything.”

in marriage for us more than we even want it ourselves. And so, in view of this and aware of the particular struggles against sin that the institution of marriage wages, Christ the Lord wished that married couples might share in the power which he alone, in virtue of his Passion, death, and resurrection, possesses over sin. Christ wishes to place himself squarely in the center of our marriages.

Concretely, this divine assistance, of which Christ alone, because of his redemptive accomplishment, is the source, again takes the form of justifying (or sanctifying) grace.³⁹ The only real antidote to sin, Christ's justifying grace alone can heal us of our brokenness, of our fallen condition. It is this grace that gives the sacraments, employed by Christ as "separated" instrumental mediums, the power to justify, the power to redeem. This power to justify, the ultimate effect of the sacraments, is precisely what the term *res tantum* signifies in Aquinas's sacramental theology.

Is it possible to obtain happiness in marriage without this grace? Since the corrosion of sin does not succeed in completely eradicating the human ability to do good—"human nature is not altogether corrupted by sin, so as to be shorn of every natural good," insists St. Thomas⁴⁰—it would seem that we should, in principle, respond in the affirmative.

However, without Christ's healing, justifying grace, the natural good we can do on our own, like being honest or just, or a self-giving spouse, will never amount to much. Wishing to underscore this very point, Aquinas gives rather paltry, almost laughable, examples of "good works" (and the context implies that he is speaking of good *moral* works), that we can perform without grace: "build dwellings, plant vineyards, and the like."⁴¹

Thomas does not put forward such examples trivially. He knows that virtue denotes a stable disposition for doing good (as signified by the term *habitus*), which implies the unity of all the virtues. The virtuous individual, in other words, loves the good and does the good in all areas of his life, not just in *some* areas. If, say, one finds a man committing adultery, one cannot speak of his being virtuous, even if he otherwise appears generous and just in his dealings with others. At most, one can say he performs *good external acts*, or attains an external approximation of virtue, but not virtue strictly speaking. And so it is for anyone without grace. As Aquinas makes clear, our sinful condition leaves us with a diminished ability for purely

³⁹ For Christ as the source of all grace, see *ST* III, q. 7, a. 9.

⁴⁰ *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Later, in a. 5, showing that he follows Augustine on this point, 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."

natural virtue.⁴² For this reason, to excel even at purely natural virtue, that is, to attain to the habit (*habitus*) of natural virtue, one must have more than the acquired moral virtues, as these virtues result from our own, very limited efforts. Owning a fallen condition, we can perform nothing more on our own than good external acts, or imperfect virtuous acts; we cannot attain to the true (natural) habit of virtue. To attain to this, we must have benefit of the (natural) habit of virtue consequent upon the healing effects of divine grace, namely, the infused moral virtues.⁴³

Divine grace is therefore necessary to excel even at the natural love of man and woman, to excel even at doing the moral good that is natural (or proportionate) to us. Only sanctifying grace, God's supernatural assistance, can give husband and wife the power to overcome their selfish tendencies and moral shortcomings. Indeed, lest our desires to have happy marriages, which most newlyweds deep down yearn for, all in accordance with God's design, be left frustrated on account of sin, God *must*, in a sense, offer us the help necessary to attain happy, fulfilling marriages.

Divine Marital Assistance Given *Ex Opere Operato*

Scholastic theology employs the phrase *ex opere operato*, famously canonized at the Council of Trent (1545–63), to stress that this divine assistance is necessarily given in the sacrament of matrimony, as it is given in all the sacraments whenever they are validly celebrated.⁴⁴ To put it in Aquinas's equivalent phrasing, the sacraments necessarily "effect what they signify."⁴⁵ Though much maligned, especially in Reformation theology, which sometimes speaks pejoratively of the sacraments as autonomous

⁴² ST I–II, q. 85, a. 1. Later in a significant passage in q. 109, a. 3, Thomas adds: "unless is it cured by God's grace, the appetite of man's rational will follows its private good, on account of the corruption of nature. . . . [I]n the state of corrupt nature [then], man needs the help of grace to heal his nature."

⁴³ On this point, I am indebted to Steven A. Long, "The Gifts of the Holy Spirit and Their Indispensability for the Christian Moral Life: Grace as *Motus*," given at the annual conference of the Academy of Catholic Theology, May 26, 2011, Washington, DC. On the practical benefits of infused moral virtue, Long writes: "Reason is fortified and elevated [by infused moral virtue] so as to be able to discern the practical implications of the Christian life, and to remediate the wounded natural inclinations so that action is befitting both to the proportionate natural and to the ultimate supernatural end."

⁴⁴ The phrase *ex opere operato* comes in Canon 8 of the Council of Trent's decree on the sacraments (Session 7, March 3, 1547): "If anyone says that grace is not conferred by the sacraments of the New Law *ex opere operato* . . . let him be anathema." *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman Tanner, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 685.

⁴⁵ ST III, q. 62, a. 1 ad 1.

“magical” rites, the phrase *ex opere operato* remains yet much misunderstood. At bottom, it signifies the fact that the sacraments are, indeed, dynamic actions of the Person of Christ, that in the sacraments we are *guaranteed* to encounter Christ on the Cross, receiving from him his power over sin: “The efficacy attributed to the sacrament is subordinated to the efficacy attributed to Christ as Mediator of salvation,” writes the sacramental theologian Colman O’Neill.⁴⁶ The sacraments own an objective integrity, whereby the Person of Christ, as principal efficient cause of justifying grace, promises to be present in the sacraments conferring the grace he intends to give.

For married persons this means they are *guaranteed* to share in Christ’s power to break them from the grip which sin holds on their conjugal life; they are guaranteed a divine assistance whose aim is to heal marital brokenness and to bolster and perfect spousal love. Giving our marriages a share in Christ’s redemptive victory over sin, a share in Christ’s power to justify, the sacrament of marriage has the power to redeem human sexuality in its inherently nuptial meaning, and so promises spouses a happy, successful marriage! Does this mean spouses will be spared the hardships mentioned above, spared the manifold ways that sin assails the institution of marriage? By no means! The grace of the sacrament of marriage does not erase the effects of our fallen condition. But it *does* mean Christian marriage will not succumb to these hardships, that Christian marriage is guaranteed *not to fail*, since husband and wife are guaranteed the divine assistance to overcome their marital struggles. What a treasure the Church possesses and offers freely in the sacrament of marriage!

The Duty of Cooperating *Opus Operans* with the Grace of the Sacrament

At this point, calling to mind St. Paul’s assertion in Romans 3:22 that “the righteousness of God [is] through faith in Jesus Christ,” we must stress the requisite role of *faith* in reaping the fruits of the grace offered *ex opere operato* in the sacraments, as Aquinas himself insists.⁴⁷ Colman O’Neill explains what a mistake it is to separate the act of faith, and more

⁴⁶ Colman O’Neill, *Sacramental Realism: A General Theory of the Sacraments* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter, 1998), 16. Just before this, O’Neill observes how sacramental personalism, i.e., seeing the sacraments as dynamic actions of the Person of Christ, helps “clear up misunderstandings about what the Council of Trent was trying to say when it attributed to the sacraments efficacy *ex opere operato*.” See as well O’Neill’s extended discussion on *ex opere operato* in his *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments* (rev. ed., revised by Romanus Cessario; New York: Society of St. Paul, 1991), 119–26.

⁴⁷ ST III, q. 68, a. 8 (here Thomas is speaking of baptism proper).

precisely faith acting through charity, from the objective action of Christ *ex opere operato* in the sacraments.⁴⁸ Faith and ritual sacrament are two essential heads of the same coin. Properly understood, in other words, and in order to avoid being reduced to a static, purely formalized and impersonal reality, the doctrine of *ex opere operato* demands as its necessary counterpart what O'Neill terms the *opus operans* of the sacrament, by which he means:

[the believer's] personal dedication of himself to God, [which] is the effect of God's loving action within him, [and the corresponding] obligation [that] lies on the recipient to exercise his liturgical [i.e., sacramental] function with full deliberation and whole-heartedly; this applies not only to the period of preparation for the sacrament and the actual moment of reception but also to the time afterwards . . . [T]he sacraments . . . are seen in a false light if they are thought of as sudden inputs of spiritual energy having no relation to what goes before or afterwards.⁴⁹

"What goes before or afterwards." We can appreciate the practical demands this places on couples, not only in their preparation for their wedding, but throughout the whole of their married lives. At the very least, it demands faith—faith on both partners' parts, since marriage is indeed a partnership—that Christ can and does effect what he intends to effect in this sacrament. It demands faith in the supernatural quality of their marriage. In their preparation for marriage, couples should at the very least seek to inform themselves adequately of the Church's teaching on the sacrament of matrimony and, more generally, of the Church's vision of the meaning and purpose of human sexuality and of marriage's role in it. (This places no small duty to articulate this teaching faithfully and clearly on those responsible for marriage preparation, whether through the Pre-Cana program or its equivalent, as some dioceses in the United States seem well to understand.)⁵⁰ Strict lifelong fidelity to each other and openness to children are, in this regard, the *sine qua non* starting point. Full deliberate and wholehearted participation in their sacramental function also means bride and bridegroom must ensure that the primary focus—and for them the prayerful focus—is placed squarely on

⁴⁸ Colman O'Neill, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, 38.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 126–27.

⁵⁰ For instance, the Diocese of Phoenix, Arizona, has recently inaugurated a nine-month marriage preparation course "in an effort to reverse a trend to marital breakdown," as reported by Catholic World News (catholicculture.org; Jan. 27, 2010). This course includes "instruction in natural family planning, the theology of Christian marriage, and common problems that face young married couples."

the wedding ceremony and on the exchange of vows. (How often do we find the wedding reception afterwards, rightfully a joyous occasion, yet to be the highlight of the wedding day?)

Then there are the sometimes “thorny” moral issues that a life of faith united to charity must resolve according to the mind and heart of the Church. The principal point to stress here is that the only sure road to follow in properly disposing oneself for faithful reception of the sacrament of marriage, beyond the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation (which the Church’s common tradition invites engaged couples to receive just prior to the wedding ceremony), is to live in strict fidelity to the Church’s moral teaching. This necessitates living chastely and avoiding all occasions of pre-marital sexual intimacy, including, obviously, cohabitation. Ideally, couples should follow this path with a view not so much to observing Church “rules” per se, as to the true good of the marriage and to the “new beginning” in the relationship that living in accordance with the Church’s moral teaching promises (most couples, even those cohabitating, deep down hope their wedding day will mark a new beginning). It is no mere coincidence that those married couples who live in accordance with Church teaching enjoy much happier marriages and an exceedingly lower divorce rate.

Extending throughout the whole of their married lives, this moral duty of cooperating with the grace of the sacrament through fidelity to the Church’s moral teaching implies, among other things, avoidance of all use of artificial contraceptives, even in those circumstances where responsible parenthood might for the moment mitigate against having children (in which case, the natural method of birth control can be observed). It also includes, if we consider the opposite dilemma relative to procreation, the resolve not to resort to artificial methods of reproduction (IVF) when encountering difficulty in achieving pregnancy. Artificial methods either of contraception or of reproduction contravene the objective moral law (natural law), since they constitute intrinsically disordered actions (*malum in se*), as the Church’s teaching makes clear.

Not meant to stand in isolation from the other sacraments, sacramental marriage also requires the spouses’ full participation in the sacramental life of the Church (regular Mass attendance, frequent reception of the sacrament of reconciliation, etc.). And since grace perfects nature, to quote a familiar Thomist adage, the grace of marriage presupposes a certain kind of natural human compatibility between the partners, as well as the disciplined effort of observing the practical duties which growing and sustaining marital love and friendship require (such as the regular communication that friendship normally demands, confessing guilt and

expressing contrition when having wronged each other, granting forgiveness whenever such guilt and contrition are expressed and then letting the issue rest, and the like). Hence, the duty to marry the right person, namely, the person of living faith and of sound moral character who has proved his/her commitment to living virtuously and to handling relationship issues maturely—and to turning to God for help.

It is imperative to realize that Christ's guarantee of a happy marriage does not release married couples from their duty to *work* diligently at their marriages; indeed, it *requires* it! In particular, it requires couples continually to call upon and exercise that most necessary and useful of virtues for the conjugal life: prudence, the aim of which is right judgment in all our practical decisions. Prudence, as one Thomist scholar puts it, "involves doing the right thing, for the right reason, with the right choices and emotions, at the right time."⁵¹ In a word, as grace perfects nature so does the grace of this sacrament perfect the partners' own natural efforts at cooperating with this grace by doing their best to make their marriages work. The Thomist authors Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais sum up well the grace-perfecting-nature dynamic of Christian marriage when they write:

[T]he natural life and the supernatural life do not exist as two separate planes of existence. Instead, they interpenetrate each other. The supernatural life reaches down to heal and to elevate the natural life without destroying its integrity. For example, Christ has elevated marriage into a sacrament of his grace. Christian marriage, nevertheless, has many aspects belonging simply to the natural order of marriage: earning a living, sexual intercourse, having and raising children, and so on. Yet in Christian marriage each of these natural elements now participates in the power of Christ's cross and resurrection.⁵²

The *opus operans* of marriage implies, then, all the (natural) practical demands enumerated above, and only by observing all these demands can married couples hope to share in Christ's guarantee of a happy and successful marriage delivered through the Church's sacrament of matri-

⁵¹ Craig Steven Titus, "Reasonable Acts," in *Philosophical Virtue and Psychological Strength: Building the Bridge*, ed. Romanus Cessario, Craig Steven Titus, Paul C. Vitz (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming). For an enlightening study on the role of "right reason" in the moral life, cf. Laurent Sentis, "La lumière dont nous faisons usage. La règle de la raison et la loi divine selon Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 79 (1995): 49–69.

⁵² Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, *Knowing the Love of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 50.

mony. Otherwise this sacrament would indeed simply amount to an empty “magical” rite.

The Divinized Love between Husband and Wife

Let us return to the *res tantum* of marriage, the ultimate effect of this sacrament, to see how there is still more, much more to the redemptive or sanctifying work of the sacrament of marriage. St. Thomas cues us into this deeper reality when he observes that the sacraments (each of them) offer us *not merely* a remedy for sin, but *also* a supernaturalizing principle. In brief, Christ’s justifying grace offered in the sacraments has a twofold aim: first, to heal us of our corrupted nature by restoring us to our natural abilities; and, second, to elevate us, proportion us, to our supernatural good, whereby we are ordered to acting in a genuinely supernatural, divine-like way.⁵³ Wishing to give full weight and veracity to the supernaturalizing power of Christ’s justifying grace, and following the lead of both Scripture (2 Peter 1:4 refers to grace as a “participation in the divine nature”) and the Greek Fathers, Aquinas does not hesitate to use the bold terms “deify” (*deificare*) and “deiform” or “divinization” (*deiformitas*) in reference to the *res tantum* of sanctifying grace.⁵⁴ In one famous passage, Thomas insists that by grace we gain a participated likeness of the divine goodness after the manner of “whiteness mak[ing] a thing white.”⁵⁵

While distinct, then, the two aspects of the *res tantum* of the sacraments, namely, healing medicine and divinizing power, must not be seen as separable realities, as if the one were simply “stacked” on top of the other, but instead as deeply interpenetrating principles. To be precise, as grace perfects nature, so the deifying element implies and subsumes the

⁵³ “[T]he sacraments of the New Law are ordained, first, as a remedy against sin and, second, for the perfecting of the soul in things pertaining to the divine worship” *ST* III, q. 63, a. 1. This is even clearer in I–II, q. 109, aa. 2 and 5: “in the state of corrupt nature, [man needs a gratuitous strength added to natural strength, i.e., he needs sanctifying grace] in order to be healed, and in order to do and wish supernatural good [and thus] to carry out works of supernatural virtue . . . [Indeed, since] everlasting life is an end exceeding the proportion of human nature . . . a higher force is needed, namely, the force of grace.”

⁵⁴ *ST* I–II, q. 112, a. 1. For more on “deification” or “divinization” in Aquinas’s theology of created grace, including references to ample texts and to the patristic heritage, cf. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, 126–28; Torrell notes in particular that “grace is a deiform structure . . . [and] Thomas uses the terms ‘deify’ and ‘deiform’ so often as to leave no doubt on the subject.” For even more extended discussion on this, cf. Jean-Hervé Nicolas, *Les profondeurs de la grâce* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1969), 56–76; cf. as well Luc-Thomas Somme, *Thomas d’Aquin, La divinisation dans le Christ* (Geneva: Ad Solem, 1998).

⁵⁵ *ST* I–II, q. 110, a. 2 ad 1.

healing one. And so in divinizing the purely human love of husband and wife by likening it unto the indissoluble love between Christ and the Church, by likening it unto the God who is himself love, the *res tantum* of marriage implies also the healing of marital sin.

Much more than a mere safeguarding against the manifold ways sin assails the institution of marriage, then, the sacrament of matrimony, through its deifying work, elevates the natural human love of man and woman, of husband and wife, to the level of the divine, making it attain to the very love that is proper to God himself! As the economy of salvation, of which the sacraments are expressive, makes clear, God never intended marriage to remain a purely natural institution; he never intended the love between man and woman to remain a purely natural phenomenon, satisfying nothing more than natural, proportionate needs. Christ, in his sacramental (instrumental) action, takes the institution of marriage, common to all human societies as owing to the natural law, and divinizes the human love (*eros*) between husband and wife and orders it immediately to the supernatural love of God (*agape*).⁵⁶ For when bride and bridegroom pronounce their vows before an ordained Church minister, their natural love *becomes*, truly, albeit symbolically (symbolized, that is, by the consent or exchange of vows), Christ's own perfect, indissoluble (or unfailing) love for his Bride, the Church, and the Church's own perfect, indissoluble love for her Bridegroom, Christ.⁵⁷

We are now in a position to appreciate the full import of the scholastic adage that the sacraments necessarily effect what they signify, at least as it applies to the particular case of the sacrament of marriage. In Christ we see what kind of lover God is, namely, a lover who takes on our lowly body and soul not for his benefit but for ours, and who offers himself completely, to the point of undergoing the worst imaginable—not to mention undeserved—suffering, utterly for our sake. What the sacrament

⁵⁶ "Matrimony as ordained to natural life is a function of nature. But in so far as it has something spiritual it is a sacrament." *ST* III, q. 65, a. 2 ad 1. While not addressing the sacrament of marriage per se, the first part of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est* makes this very argument, that *eros*, if it is not to degenerate into a dehumanizing love, needs to be taken up into and finalized by *agape*.

⁵⁷ "Since there is in the human species a natural exigency for the union of male and female to be one and indivisible, such unity and indissolubility must needs be ordained by human law. To that ordinance the divine law adds a supernatural reason, derived from the fact that marriage signifies the inseparable union of Christ with His Church (*ex significatione inseparabilis coniunctionis Christi et Ecclesiae*), which is one as He is one." *ScG* III, ch. 123. For similar wording, see Thomas's commentary on Romans, *Super Romanos*, ch. 7, lect. 1 (cited in Mary Catherine Sommers, "Marriage Vows," 693).

of marriage proclaims is that God, desiring that we enjoy truly happy, fulfilling marriages, wants husband and wife, man and woman, to be *this kind of lover* to each other as well, and guarantees to communicate to them the divine grace (or help) that alone can bring it about. Without the sacrament of marriage, the love between husband and wife would never become the kind of love God intends it to be; with the sacrament of matrimony, it is *guaranteed* to become this kind of love.

We know that the best husband, the best father, is the one who serves 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 best wife and mother is the one who loves as the Church loves. And so it is that in the sacrament of marriage, 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 Ephesians 5:25, just after telling wives to be subject to their husbands, "just as the Church is subject to Christ." And because, as Aquinas tells us, the union of Christ and the Church is "one to be held forever," in that "there is one Church" and that "Christ will never be separated from his Church," it follows that the sacrament of marriage "is a union of one man to one woman to be held indivisibly [or indissolubly]." ⁵⁸ Too rarely do those who partake in this sacrament understand or appreciate the "great mystery" that marks Christian marriage, a mystery that the ancient Christian author Tertullian (†c. 220) grasped and sought movingly to describe in a treatise addressed to his own wife:

Both [Christian spouses] are brethren, both fellow servants, no difference of spirit or flesh; nay, they are truly "two in one flesh" (Gen 2:24). Where the flesh is one, one is the spirit too. Together they pray, together prostrate themselves, together perform their fasts; mutually teaching, mutually exhorting, mutually sustaining. Equally are they both found in the Church of God; equally at the banquet of God . . . ⁵⁹

⁵⁸ ScG IV, ch. 78. Previous to this Thomas writes: "Because the sacraments effect what they signify, 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."

⁵⁹ From "To His Wife," trans. S. Thelwall, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 4, *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994 [1885]), 39–49, at 48; quoted in *On Marriage and Family: Classic and Contemporary Texts*, ed. Matthew Levering (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 26.

A Ministry of Body and Soul

When looking for a term that denotes the heart of this sacrament, Aquinas opts for a term that occurs to few, if any, of us when thinking of marriage: ministry. Christian spouses, St. Thomas tells us, “are those who propagate and safeguard the spiritual life by administering to both body and soul . . . [since] husband and wife are joined together in order to beget children and to bring them up in the fear of the Lord.”⁶⁰ On this score, the ancient Christian author Clement of Alexandria (†c. 215) puts it nicely when he interprets the passage in Matthew 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered in my name,” to signify the Christian family of father, mother, and child praying together.⁶¹

Behind this recognition of marriage as a type of ministry stands Aquinas’s teaching, unique to him, that the sacramental life (or the Christian spiritual life) parallels the dynamic growth and development of bodily life (this provides another example of how retaining a robust view of nature with all its ontological density pays dividends in the perfecting, supernatural order).⁶² And it owes to the nature of our embodied life to live in society (that is, to live in community with other embodied persons), for which marriage is essential, inasmuch as its fecundity makes human society possible.⁶³ Since marriage not only unites in love a man

⁶⁰ ScG IV, ch. 58.

⁶¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 3.10.68.1, quoted in Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 135.

⁶² ST III, q. 65, a. 1. While there is the foundation for this teaching on the sacramental life paralleling bodily life in *In IV Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 2, its first explicit appearance comes in the just-cited ScG IV, ch. 58, as Jean-Pierre Torrell (*Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, 295, n. 60) points out. On the uniqueness of this teaching, Torrell continues:

[W]hile the theologians of Thomas’s time sought to justify the number of seven sacraments by a correspondence with the seven deadly sins (Albertus Magnus) or by the three theological virtues completed with the four cardinal virtues (Bonaventure), Thomas seems to be the only one to develop this parallel between corporeal and spiritual life, simultaneously more natural and fecund. Virtues or vices, good works or sins, the expressions of the spiritual life do not appear in him as more or less artificially tacked on to the Christian life, but rather as manifestations of a living organism, one which can certainly be affected by illnesses and recover its health or even die, but whose growth is the usual rule and which can also, through regular exercise, firm up and consolidate itself.

⁶³ This view can also be found in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VIII, ch. 12 (1162a17–19); for Thomas’s commentary, *In Ethic.*, Bk. VIII, lect. 12 (nn. 1719–23); trans. *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, by C. I. Litzinger

and a woman, but also and especially brings human individuals into existence, all of whom (spouses as well as children) own a supernatural destiny, or all of whom God wills to deify, marriage entails profound spiritual and bodily needs. It is in order to meet these needs that Christ elevates the natural institution of marriage to the level of a sacrament.⁶⁴ More specifically, because marriage, as a natural institution, comprises a unity of proximate goods or ends, in particular, procreation and unitive love, the healing and divinizing efficacy of the *res tantum* of marriage perfects these same joint goods. It bears repeating: the whole of married life, encompassing both spousal *and* parental goods and duties, is sanctified, that is, healed and deified, in this sacrament.⁶⁵

Thus, when husband and wife administer to their own and their children's physical and spiritual needs, they perform a ministry of body and soul. Summing up these physical and spiritual needs, at least as regards the rearing of children, Thomas writes in one passage: "the young need not only bodily nutrition, as animals do, but also the training of the soul."⁶⁶ That marriage demands a "training of the soul" (*instructione quantum ad animam*)—a splendid phrase for parental undertaking that points to the "personalist" strain of Thomas's views on marriage against those who

(Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1993). For its part, Vatican Council II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, §12, affirms that marriage is the bedrock of all social institutions. In his "Children as the Common Good of Marriage," *Nova et Vetera* 7 (2009): 697–709, Michael Waldstein points out that while marriage puts us squarely in relation to the common good of human society, this notion is largely ignored in current discussions on marriage and human sexuality. The ill fruits of this are especially apparent in the same-sex marriage debate.

⁶⁴ "The spiritual life has a certain conformity to the life of the body, just as other corporeal things have a certain likeness to things spiritual. Now a man attains perfection in the corporeal life in two ways: first, in regard to his own person; secondly, in regard to the whole community of the society in which he lives, for man is by nature a social animal. . . . In regard, then, to the whole community, man is perfected . . . by natural propagation. This is accomplished by Matrimony both in the corporal and in the spiritual life, since it is not only a sacrament but also a function of nature." *ST* III, q. 65, a. 1. Although Thomas, as was common among medieval authors, gives exclusive attention to the procreative ordering of marriage, his argument holds for the unitive ordering as well.

⁶⁵ In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, §11, the Second Vatican Council implies this when it proclaims: "Christian spouses, in virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony, whereby they signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and His Church, help each other to attain to holiness in their married life and in the rearing and education of their children."

⁶⁶ *ScG* III, ch. 122.

criticize him for being overly “physicalist” in his excessive emphasis on procreation—we should interpret broadly, inasmuch as it covers a whole gamut of needs (emotional, moral, and spiritual), and not only in the children but also in the spouses.⁶⁷ Each member of the family is made to know and love the good, each is called to holiness, and so husband and wife must administer both to their children and to each other. To this administration the sacrament of marriage is ordered.

In short, this administration, or this ministry of body and soul, follows upon the procreative and unitive orderings of marriage. As I have argued in this essay, marriage as a procreative-unitive institution suffers mightily on account of human sin, for which reason it seeks a share in Christ’s redemption. Granting it this share, the sacrament of matrimony confers a grace, or a divine power, that is both healing and deifying, and that targets, specifically, the procreative and unitive dimensions of marriage. (Aquinas in one passage affirms that this grace helps spouses attend to “fleshly” and “earthly” matters “in such a way that these are not disconnected from Christ and the Church.”)⁶⁸ Through their partaking in the sacrament of matrimony, then, Catholic married couples find themselves *healed, strengthened, fortified, perfected, divinized* in their very spousal (unitive) and parental (procreative) roles, that is, in the natural teleology of their conjugal union.

Conclusion

In a world where the institution of marriage labors under an unprecedented assault, whether from widespread marital infidelity (including the invasive allure of internet pornography and “cybersex”) or the near 50 percent divorce rate, or whether from rampant cohabitation or the push to redefine this institution to cover same-sex unions, the Church, in its

⁶⁷ For a sustained argument on Aquinas’s recognition of what today we call the “personalist” dimension of marriage, see Angela McKay’s essay “Aquinas on the End of Marriage.” Further, Charles J. Reid (*Power over the Body, Equality in the Family: Rights and Domestic Relations in Medieval Canon Law* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004], 87) notes that this teaching on parental responsibility by St. Thomas marks a significant theological development. Indeed, Reid explains that by appealing to 2 Cor 12:13–15 in expressing his view on the matter in *ST Suppl.*, q. 49, a. 2 ad 1 (which opens with the assertion “offspring signifies not merely the begetting of children, but also their rearing”), Aquinas suggests that “sacrificial giving should characterize the parents’ relationship with the child.” Indeed, the moralists John C. Ford and Gerald Kelly (*Contemporary Moral Theology. Vol. 2: Marriage Questions* [Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1963], 49) quite rightly point out that “one should not make the mistake of imagining that procreation and the rearing of children are not personalist values, too, or that the so-called personalist values do not contribute to the biological or social ends.”

⁶⁸ ScG IV, ch. 78.

sacrament of marriage, acts as a true beacon of hope. Dynamic acts of the Person of Jesus Christ and fitted to seven particular human needs, the sacraments have as their aim the ongoing application of the fruits of Christ's salvation. By electing marriage as fit for elevation to the level of a sacrament, Christ has willed to include this natural institution within his economy of salvation. The sacrament of marriage joins our sexuality in its nuptial ordering to the Person of Christ, thereby redeeming it.

If on the outside, then, it seems that those who are sacramentally married are no different from any other married couple, including those who have contracted a purely civil marriage, the reality is quite different: Christian marriage inhabits another world, so to speak, it is of a whole other order. For, deep within Christian marriage flows, as from a well-spring, divine sanctifying or justifying grace, whereby husband and wife gain a share in Christ's redemption; they become sacramentally joined to the Person of Christ in his very redemptive act, namely, in his Passion, death, and resurrection. Carrying with it both the power to heal the wounds of marital sin and the power to divinize or deify our sexuality, the grace of this sacrament (*res tantum*) targets marriage as a procreative-unitive institution, that is, it heals and divinizes marriage in its very procreative-unitive ordering. Thus, those who, with a living faith, cooperate *opus operans* with this grace are guaranteed to attain happy, successful marriages *ex opere operato*, since the signifying reality (*res et sacramentum*) of Christian marriage, which causes or disposes one for the *res tantum*, is nothing other than the indissoluble love between Christ and the Church. Indeed, without the sacrament of marriage, the love between husband and wife would never become the kind of love God intends it to be, namely, the love between Christ and the Church. But with this sacrament, it is *assured* of becoming this kind of love. Would that every marriage-preparation program build its core message on this marvelous truth. N.V