

St. Thomas on the Grandeur and Limitations of Marriage^{*}

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THE ATTENTIVE reader of St. Thomas Aquinas is struck by a conundrum in his doctrine of marriage. On the one hand, he says that from a certain vantage the sacrament of marriage stands *first* among the sacraments: “As regards what is signified . . . marriage is the noblest, because it signifies the conjunction of the two natures in the person of Christ”¹ and “the perpetual conjoining of Christ to the Church.”² On the other hand, he says: “As having something spiritual in terms of sign and effect, in that way it is a sacrament—and because it has the least of spirituality (*minimum habet de spiritualitate*), therefore it is put *last* among the sacraments.”³ How is it both the first and the last? In a fascinating

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¹ *In IV Sent.*, d. 7, q. 1, a. 1, qa. 3. In this text, St. Thomas relegates marriage to last place among the seven sacraments because, while it has the greatest signification (*habet maximam significationem*), it *works* a lesser effect as regards the spiritual life than the other six sacraments do. See also *ST III*, q. 65, a. 3.

² *In IV Sent.*, d. 27, q. 1, a. 3, qa. 2, arg. 1; cf. *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 2, ad 7.

³ *In IV Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, ad 1; cf. *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, exp. textus. In the *ST* he gives the same reply to the same objection, in almost identical words (see *ST III*, q. 65, a. 2, arg. 1; ad 1).

way, we will find, as we examine St. Thomas's theology of marriage, that "the last shall be first, and the first shall be last."

St. Thomas did not have a chance to pen his definitive account of holy matrimony in the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, in which he had reached the fourth sacrament, Penance, before ceasing his literary labors in December 1273. Nevertheless, we have in the *Scriptum super Sententiis*, the *Summa contra Gentiles*, and numerous other works relevant and often detailed discussions that permit us to ascertain Thomas's "mind." Since his views on marriage and family remain substantially the same throughout his career, there is no reasonable objection to citing side by side texts from a broad variety of works and periods, at least in a theoretical inquiry such as this. If there was any "development of doctrine" in this area of Aquinas's thinking, it was extremely subtle, having to do with shades of emphasis or vocabulary, but not with doctrine as such.

On matters matrimonial, St. Thomas is not famed as a towering giant; there is little that is "original" in his writings on this topic except—and this is quite enough to merit our attention—the way in which he masterfully analyzes and synthesizes traditional data.⁴ Nevertheless, there is much for us to learn (or relearn) from St. Thomas, particularly when it comes to truths we may be in danger of losing sight of, with our laudable desire to defend the dignity of marriage in the face of countless attacks against it. Aquinas had a balanced view that combines a healthy approval of everything God deems "good" (cf. Gn 1:31; 2:18) with a robust preference for that which God deems "better" (cf. Mt 19:10–12; 1 Cor 7:38). The first part of this article will illustrate the "grandeur" of the sacrament; the second and more speculative part will speak about its "limitations."

I. The Grandeur of Marriage

There are, to begin with, countless anti-Manichaean swordthrusts in the works of Aquinas, who defends, at times pugnaciously, the metaphysical goodness of bodiliness, sexuality, marriage, and procreation, as well as their moral goodness when right use is made of them. All that comes from the infinitely good God, the Creator of heaven and earth, is itself good.⁵

⁴ Can it be said that much in Aquinas is purely and simply "original"? He, with Augustine, would have said that originality is another name for the sin of the devil, who strives to produce "of himself" and is therefore a liar and a murderer. See Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* §17; Augustine, *Confessions* 12.25.

⁵ Good, of course, by participation, and therefore finitely good. This is the reason why God alone can satisfy the human person made to his image: man is *capax Dei*, and thus every created good leaves unsatisfied his longing for absolute truth and perfect love. See Michael Augros, "In Defense of God's Power to Satisfy the Human Heart," *The Aquinas Review* 16 (2009): 37–73.

Marriage was intended by the Creator for man and woman, and so it is *natural* to them, and pleasing to God when used according to his plan.⁶ Unlike many of his contemporaries, Aquinas confidently argues that the marital embrace, duly motivated, is sinless or blameless,⁷ in accord with right reason,⁸ honorable,⁹ valuable for the human community,¹⁰ meritorious for spouses on their pilgrimage to God,¹¹ and holy (*sanctus*).¹²

It is worthwhile to hear his own language on these points. He says, for example, that marriage was ordained against guilt “by preventing it from occurring” and by cleansing the soul “from the cause of guilt, which is concupiscence—and thus, marriage, which restrains and orders it, has a cleansing power”;¹³ that “marriage offers a remedy by repressing concupiscence at its root, through the grace that is given in it”;¹⁴ more generally, that “the goods of marriage pertain to grace or virtue.”¹⁵ Whenever the motive for the marital act is either children or sacramental fidelity, “spouses . . . are totally excused from sin.”¹⁶ Even a pagan husband “commits no sin in knowing his wife, if he renders the debt either for the good of children or from the fidelity with which he is bound to his wife, since this is an act of justice or temperance.”¹⁷ On Hebrews 13:4, “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled,” St. Thomas comments:

This [verse] shows that the marital act can exist without sin; which is against certain heretics: “If a virgin marries, she does not sin” (1 Cor. 7:28).

⁶ See *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 1 and ScG III, chs. 122–26 for extended argumentation in favor of the naturalness of monogamous, indissoluble marriage. Cf. *Super Matt.* 19, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., n. 1551).

⁷ See *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 3, and the citations in the next several notes.

⁸ See ScG III, ch. 126; *ST* II–II, q. 153, a. 2; *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 2, a. 1, ad 3; *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 3, ad 6; *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 4, ad 4; *ST* II–II, q. 153, a. 2, ad 2.

⁹ See *Super Hebr.* 13, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., n. 732); *Super Ioan.* 2, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., n. 341); *In IV Sent.*, d. 30, q. 2, a. 1, qa. 2, sc 2.

¹⁰ See ScG III, ch. 136, solutio ad tertium.

¹¹ *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 4.

¹² See *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 2, a. 1: “by the goodness of the sacrament . . . an act is called not only good, but also holy (*sanctus*); and the marital act has this goodness from the indivisibility of the conjoining, by which it signifies the conjoining of Christ to the Church”; *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 1: marriage is a “remedy of holiness for man against sin, *remedium sanctitatis homini contra peccatum*.”

¹³ *In IV Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 2.

¹⁴ *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 3.

¹⁵ *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 2, a. 2, arg. 1.

¹⁶ *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 2, a. 2.

¹⁷ *In IV Sent.*, d. 39, q. 1, a. 2, ad 5.

Hence, the Lord, in order to show that the marital act is good, worked His first sign during a wedding and ennobled marriage by His bodily presence [there], and [moreover] willed to be born of a married woman.¹⁸

It is of tremendous importance to understand that, for St. Thomas, the conjugal act does not belong to marriage's essence but is rather its natural consequence. As he explains with customary rigor: "Fleshly commingling is a certain activity or use of marriage, through which a faculty is given for this [use]; hence fleshly commingling will be of the second integrity of marriage, and not of the first."¹⁹ He cites approvingly a statement of St. John Chrysostom: "it is not sex but free will that makes a marriage" (*matrimonium non facit coitus, sed voluntas*).²⁰ Thomas distinguishes marriage's "first perfection," its very *form*, described as "an indivisible conjoining of souls, by which one of the spouses is bound to keep faith indivisibly with the other,"²¹ from its "second perfection," the activity by which it attains its end, which is "the begetting and upbringing of children" through "conjugal intercourse . . . and the other works of husband and wife by which they mutually serve each other (*sibi invicem obsequuntur*) in rearing their children."²² This distinction is at the heart of his defense of a true marriage between Mary and Joseph.²³ The curious

¹⁸ *Super Hebr.* 13, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., n. 732).

¹⁹ *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 4.

²⁰ *In IV Sent.*, d. 27, q. 1, a. 2, sc 1.

²¹ *ST III*, q. 29, a. 2.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ According to St. Thomas, Mary and Joseph "consented to the conjugal uniting, but not expressly to the fleshly uniting save on condition that it should please God" (*ST III*, q. 29, a. 2); hence their marriage really came into existence. Thomas concludes his discussion with a quotation from St. Augustine: "All the goods of marriage are fulfilled in these parents of Christ: offspring, fidelity, and sacrament. The offspring we know to have been the Lord Jesus himself; fidelity, because there was no adultery; sacrament, because there was no divorce. Only marital intercourse was not present there" (*ibid.*, citing *On Marriage and Concupiscence I*). A modern reader is tempted to say: "Only? If this is lacking, how can the rest of it be a true marriage?" Indeed, Aquinas himself raises the same objection in this context: "Where the final consummation is lacking, there is no true completion" (*In IV Sent.*, d. 30, q. 2, a. 2, arg. 3). St. Thomas argues as he does because, in his view, the consent to marriage is not a consent to carnal intercourse, but a consent to the marital *consortium* or *societas* that implies such intercourse, or put differently, a consent to the mutual power of the spouses over each other's bodies that is explicated in the *commixtio carnalis* (see *In IV Sent.*, d. 28, q. 1, a. 4; *In IV Sent.*, d. 34, q. 1, a. 2, ad 1). Thus Aquinas maintains it was not inconsistent for Mary and Joseph to *know* that God wanted them to remain virgins, and yet for them to keep their hearts so open to the divine will that they

fact that a marriage can be true but yet to be consummated will be useful further on in our investigation.

This fact suggests its contrary: a relationship can be consummated but not true, that is, not marital. At one point St. Thomas brings up an argument that sexual intercourse ought to be construed as sufficient consent to marriage, because, says the objector, “there can be no greater construal of consent (*interpretatio consensus*)” than this act.²⁴ But he rejects this idea, since the sexual act in and of itself is ambiguous, and need not mean commitment to lifelong marriage; even a favorable construal “does not change the truth of the matter.”²⁵ The reason is that this act becomes marital through marital consent and in no other way. As Thomas wryly puts it: “What that [unmarried] man who mingles carnally consents to, is, in truth, carnal intercourse—but from this fact alone he does not consent to marriage.”²⁶ What one sees here and elsewhere is a rudimentary awareness of a theology of the body that recognizes how our physical acts are a language that we speak to one another, presupposing a hermeneutical context. My thinking and willing affect the very *meaning* of what I am doing with my body. If I lie with a woman who truly loves me but I intend no permanence in the relationship, I am lying to her, because she will “construe it as consent” to permanence—as Thomas remarks: “consent to someone for a period of time (*ad tempus*) does not make a marriage.”²⁷ The same thing is true when it comes to procreation:

did not insist on maintaining this virginity “at all costs”: “She planned on virginity, unless the Lord should arrange otherwise; hence she entrusted herself to the divine arrangement. To the idea that she consented to fleshly intercourse, one should say that she did not; she consented to marriage directly, but to fleshly intercourse implicitly, so to speak, if God should will it” (*Super Matt.* 1, lec. 4 [Marietti ed., n. 93]; cf. *In IV Sent.*, d. 30, q. 2, a. 1, qa. 1). Hence Mary and Joseph, fully consenting to be each other’s spouses, thereby *became* spouses, but because it was the Lord’s will that they not unite sexually, they remained “in suspension” as regards the bodily exchange that normally follows upon this consent (*In IV Sent.*, d. 30, q. 2, a. 1, qa. 1, ad 1–3). In fact, if Mary had not, in wedding Joseph, willed to remain open to the procreation of children by him if God wanted this, then their marriage would have been invalidated through her rejection of one of the essential goods of marriage, the *bonum prolis* (*In IV Sent.*, d. 30, q. 2, a. 1, qa. 2, ad 2). It may be noted that this curious state of being “in suspension” with regard to legitimate earthly goods typifies the entire eschatological orientation of the Christian condition. For this reason, the marriage of Mary and Joseph is, paradoxically, an exemplar of religious life no less than it is of married life.

²⁴ *In IV Sent.*, d. 28, q. 1, a. 2, arg. 2

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ad 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, ad 1.

²⁷ *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 3, ad 4.

there would seem to be no greater consent to children than the generative act, yet if the possibility of offspring is obstructed, the act is a contradiction in terms, a lie.

That the marital act is meritorious and holy for spouses in a state of grace, a view that strikes us now as obvious, was routinely denied in the Middle Ages. In the *Scriptum super Sententiis* Thomas frequently rehearses arguments that express a crass contempt for marriage and sexuality²⁸ and refutes them with crystal-clear logic.²⁹ Probably the worst is an opinion he reports before trampling on it: "To seek out pleasure in this act would be mortal sin; to accept the pleasure offered would be venial sin; but to hate it would be a thing of perfection."³⁰ To this Thomas replies, *in modo aristoteliano*: "the pleasure connected with a good activity is good, with an evil, evil."³¹ From the perspective of sacred doctrine he is able to go further: "by the goodness of the sacrament [of marriage] . . . an act is called not only good, but also holy (*sanctus*); and the marital act has this goodness from the indivisibility of the conjoining, by which it signifies the conjoining of Christ to the Church."³² Elsewhere he calls marriage a "remedy of holiness for man against sin (*remedium sanctitatis homini contra peccatum*)."³³

About properly sacramental marriage, St. Thomas has still better things to say. Considered as a sacrament of the New Law, marriage between the faithful is a genuine cause of grace, indeed a continual cause.³⁴ Although

²⁸ See, e.g., *In IV Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, arg. 1; *In IV Sent.*, d. 42, a. 1, arg. 3; *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 3, arg. 3 and arg. 6; *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 2, a. 1, arg. 3.

²⁹ It should not embarrass Catholic theologians to admit that the medieval period, notwithstanding its incomparable achievements, bequeathed to succeeding ages certain erroneous habits of thought and omissions that have taken centuries to redress. The contemporary crisis of marital morality in the Church cannot be unrelated to the frequent lack of sound teaching and wholesome piety for married couples. That Catholics so easily fell prey to the lies of the sexual revolution points to an utter paucity of intellectual and moral preparation. Could a Baconian-Cartesian-Enlightenment conception of sexual freedom and mastery over nature have triumphed if a robust culture of the intrinsic nobility of the marital vocation and the sacredness of sexuality in service of the gift of life had been firmly in place? At the same time, we should guard against oversimplifications regarding the highly complex thought and practice of medieval Catholics regarding the sacrament of marriage. For a positive assessment, see F. Stan Parmisano, O.P., "Spousal Love in the Medieval Rite of Marriage," *Nova et Vetera* 3 (2005): 785–806.

³⁰ *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 2, a. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 2, a. 1.

³³ *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 1.

³⁴ *In IV Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 1, qa. 2; the same point is made more extensively in *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 3 and *ST III*, q. 65, a. 1. Cf. *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 3, sc.

marriage does not confer a sacramental character,³⁵ it establishes something *like* a character, namely, a permanent spiritual *nexus* between spouses, which “operates dispositively to bring grace by the power of divine institution.”³⁶ This *nexus* is an ever-flowing source of actual graces for spouses who remain in the state of grace. Moreover, “from the fact that Christ represented it in his passion,” marriage has power to *sanctify* the spouses, even as His passion sanctifies the Church.³⁷ It joins spouses not only in body but, more importantly, in soul, in spirit;³⁸ it empowers them to live their common life in the friendship of charity. Along these lines, Aquinas answers a slightly humorous objection with a noble reply. The article is on whether marriage is a sacrament, and an argument against it goes like this: “The sacraments have their efficacy from the passion of Christ. But the human being is not conformed to the passion of Christ, which was penal, through marriage, since the latter has pleasure attached to it. Therefore it is not a sacrament.”³⁹ The reply: “Although marriage does not conform [a spouse] to the passion of Christ as regards punishment, it nevertheless conforms one to it as regards the charity through which he suffered for the conjoining of the Church to himself as [his] Bride.”⁴⁰ Agreeing with Aristotle, moreover, Aquinas writes that “the friendship that is between husband and wife is natural and comprises in itself the noble, the useful, and the pleasant.”⁴¹ He pursues this point in the *Summa contra Gentiles*:

The greater the friendship the more stable and lasting is it. Now, between a man and his wife there seems to be the greatest friendship;

³⁵ *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 3, ad 5. Formally speaking, marriage confers a specific power “for bodily acts,” namely those ordered to the suitable and dignified procreation of children, which includes the power to bring them up well. This is why marriage does not confer a character, which is always ordered to “spiritual acts” (see *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 3, ad 5), as can be seen in the sacraments that do confer it—baptism, confirmation, and holy orders. Put differently, since character is a metaphysical participation in the high priesthood of Jesus Christ, only those sacraments confer a character that confer the ability to share in the very activity of Christ; and marriage equips earthly spouses to do something other than what Christ Himself actually does (although obviously not anything inherently incompatible with what he does). Some Thomists speak of a “quasi-character” conferred by Christian matrimony.

³⁶ See *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 3, ad 2.

³⁷ See *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1.

³⁸ *In IV Sent.*, d. 42, a. 1, sc 2; *ibid.*, ad 3. *In IV Sent.*, d. 27, q. 1, a. 1, qa. 2, ad 3.

³⁹ *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 1, arg. 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, ad 3.

⁴¹ *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 1, arg. 2.

for they are made one not only in the act of fleshly intercourse, which even among beasts causes an agreeable fellowship, but also as partners in the whole of domestic life (*ad totius domesticae conversationis consortium*).⁴²

Indeed, Thomas's insistence that there must be a "generous and intense friendship" (*liberalis amicitia, amicitia intensa*) between husband and wife is one of his main arguments against the practice of polygamy, which, given the resurgence of radical Islam, is no mere speculative question.⁴³

Finally, marriage supplies new members for the Church, the *populum fidelium* or *fidelium collectio*, even as it replenishes and expands the human race.⁴⁴ The sacrament obliges and equips husband and wife to bring back to God, through Christ and his Church, the gift of children they receive from God. "The uppermost good of marriage is offspring brought up for the worship of God (*proles ad cultum Dei educanda*)."⁴⁵ The married, in a way properly theirs, help build up the human race into the body of Christ, the true goal of humanity. When treating of the sacraments of the New Law, St. Thomas makes a distinction between agents and recipients in "hierarchical actions," and notes the obvious but still wonderful truth that without suitable *recipients*, there could be no *giving* of sacraments by their agents.⁴⁶ We tend to pass over too quickly the enormous privilege granted to Christian men and women of, as the saint puts it, "bringing

⁴² ScG III, ch. 123, Amplius.

⁴³ See ScG III, ch. 124; cf. *In IV Sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 1, where it is said that polygamy "greatly impedes the second end" (*fides*) and "completely destroys the third end" (*sacramentum*). Although a discussion of Thomas's views on marital friendship exceeds the purpose of this article, it deserves mention that modern commentators tend to be blinded by a preoccupation with his purported sexism and thereby fail to see the nobility of his conception of spousal love, which is apparent only when one adopts a properly *theological* hermeneutic. For an example of the reductionist treatment, see Colleen McCluskey, "An Unequal Relationship of Equals: Thomas Aquinas on Marriage," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 24 (2007): 1–18.

⁴⁴ On the natural plane marriage is given "as a remedy . . . against the decrease in numbers that results from death"; on the supernatural plane, it has the privilege of "bringing into being the recipients who approach the sacraments" (*ST* III, q. 65, a. 1, corp. and ad 3). ScG IV, ch. 78, Quamvis: "Since the people of the faithful (*populum fidelium*) were to be perpetuated even to the end of the world, it was necessary that this be done by generation, through which also the human race is perpetuated. . . . Now human generation is ordered to several ends: the continuation of the species; the securing of some political good, such as the preservation of the people in some civic body; it is, moreover, ordered to the perpetuity of the Church, which consists in the assembly of the faithful (*fidelium collectione*)."

⁴⁵ *In IV Sent.*, d. 39, q. 1, a. 1.

⁴⁶ See *ST* III, q. 65, a. 1, ad 3.

into being the recipients who approach the sacraments,”⁴⁷ and so, assisting Christ in providing spiritual nourishment for His people. Upbringing, says Thomas, has to take into account the bodily nourishment of one’s children, of course, but it has much more to do with “nourishment of the soul (*nutrimentum animae*).”⁴⁸

Accordingly, there is a strong link between marriage and the common good, *bonum commune*.⁴⁹ In the *Scriptum*, when treating of the proper order in which to enumerate the sacraments, Thomas voices the argument that marriage and holy orders have a certain precedence over the other five because they directly serve the common good, which is more divine than the good of the person⁵⁰—and rather than simply disagreeing, he twice observes that individuals must be perfected before a community can be perfected, since the latter is constituted out of the former.⁵¹ This seems to grant a qualified primacy to that which perfects a community as such. In fact, Thomas holds that “among natural acts, generation alone is ordered to the common good.”⁵² He underlines the excellence of the good in question: “Just as the preservation of the bodily nature of one individual is a true good (*vere bonum*), so, too, is the preservation of the nature of the human species a very great good (*quoddam bonum excellens*).”⁵³ In one of many lists of the results of marriage, Aquinas enumerates “the good of children, the restraining of concupiscence, and the multiplication of friendship.”⁵⁴ Two out of three are social goods, diffusions of the good.

The uppermost reality at work in and displayed by the passion and death of Jesus Christ is, for St. Thomas, the burning charity of His Heart.⁵⁵ This being so, the statement that “the conjoining of Christ to the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ In *Super I Cor.* 7, lec. 1. See *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1; *In IV Sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 2, ad 5; *In IV Sent.*, d. 39, q. 1, a. 2; *ScG* III, ch. 122; *ScG* IV, ch. 58.

⁴⁹ For the definitive treatment of this central concept in the theological vision of St. Thomas, see Charles De Koninck, *The Primacy of the Common Good*, in *The Writings of Charles De Koninck, Volume 2*, ed. Ralph McInerny (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009). For discussions that have many points of contact with the present inquiry, see Michael Waldstein, “The Common Good in St. Thomas and John Paul II,” *Nova et Vetera* 3 (2005): 569–78, and idem, “Children as the Common Good of Marriage,” *Nova et Vetera* 7 (2009): 697–709.

⁵⁰ *In IV Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, arg. 3; cf. *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 2, arg. 3; *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 1, arg. 1.

⁵¹ *In IV Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, corp.; ad 3.

⁵² *ScG* III, ch. 123, *Uterius*.

⁵³ *ST* II–II, q. 153, a. 2.

⁵⁴ *In IV Sent.*, d. 40, a. 4, arg. 5.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., *ST* III, q. 47, a. 2, ad 1 & ad 3; q. 48, aa. 2–3.

Church, which marriage signifies, is perfected by charity”⁵⁶ amounts to saying that this state of life, if lived as St. Paul instructs in Ephesians 5, both objectively assimilates the spouses to that supreme mystery of redemptive love *and* subjectively fills them with it. This, it would seem, is implied in Thomas’s statement that grace is the reality contained by the sacrament (its *res contenta*).⁵⁷ Unfortunately for us, he did not explicate this truth as much as he might have done; still greater mysteries commanded his attention, the sovereign mystery of the Eucharist most of all. And with good reason: the Eucharist, says Thomas again and again, really contains the very One who suffered for us, and thus brings to the communicant the very source and goal of charity.⁵⁸ What Christian marriage *symbolizes* is truly *present in* the Eucharist; it is this sacrament that brings about, and ever deepens, the “spiritual marriage”⁵⁹ (as Thomas

⁵⁶ *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 2, arg. 2.

⁵⁷ *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 3; for further references, see notes 34–37 and the surrounding discussion.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., *ST* III, q. 65, a. 3, arg. 1: “Marriage is ordained to the common good, in a bodily way. But the common spiritual good of the entire Church is contained substantially in the sacrament itself of the Eucharist.” *ST* III, q. 73, q. 3, ad 3: “the Eucharist is the sacrament of the Passion of Christ inasmuch as man is perfected in union with the Christ who suffered (*in unione ad Christum passum*). . . . Thus the Eucharist is called the sacrament of charity, which is the bond of perfection.” *In IV Sent.*, d. 8, q. 2, a. 2, qa. 3, ad 5: “The Eucharist is called the sacrament of charity—expressive of Christ’s, and effective of ours (*sacramentum caritatis Christi expressivum, et nostrae factivum*).” For similarly rich texts and discussion of their far-reaching implications, see Peter Kwasniewski, “Aquinas on Eucharistic Ecstasy: From Self-Alienation to Gift of Self,” *Nova et Vetera* 6 (2008): 157–204.

⁵⁹ Aquinas appeals many times, directly or indirectly, to the idea of *matrimonium spirituale*. Usually he is speaking of the soul’s spiritual union with God, or the Church’s union with Christ. Typical examples would be: “in the state of the Church militant, a spiritual marriage is contracted with Christ by faith” (*In IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 4, a. 1, arg. 4); “in the justification of sinners man contracts a kind of spiritual marriage with God, as is written in Hosea 2:19: ‘I will espouse thee to me in righteousness’” (*De veritate*, q. 28, a. 3, sc 4); “through charity, the soul is united to God as a spouse according to a kind of spiritual marriage” (*De caritate*, a. 12, arg. 24); “in its mystical meaning, the mother of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin, is present in spiritual marriages as the one who arranges the marriage, because it is through her intercession that one is joined to Christ through grace” (*Super Ioan.* 2, lec. 1 [Marietti ed., n. 343]); “Christ espoused the Church by His Incarnation and Passion: wherefore this is foreshadowed in the words ‘A bridegroom of blood thou art to me’ (Ex. 4:25)” (*In IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 4, a. 4, sc 2). He also uses such language when speaking about the relationship of a bishop, or the pope, or even a parochial priest, to his local church. The most impressive of these texts is from the *Contra impugnantes*: “the Spouse of the Church is Christ . . . He, by His

expressly calls it) in which eternal life consists: the indissoluble unity of the Bride and the Bridegroom, of the members with their Head. While the sacrament of marriage *signifies* the highest mystery, it does not, unlike the other sacraments, *effect* precisely what it signifies.⁶⁰ That is, it does not actually bring about the union of Christ and the Church; rather, it is derived from that preexistent union and points to it as the reality signified but not contained (the *res significata non contenta*).

This point deserves a closer look. All the sacraments signify grace as the *res tantum*, but in order to do so, they must first signify some determinate effect as the *res et sacramentum*, which then serves as the sign of that grace. The external visible sign that we experience, the *sacramentum tantum*, is constituted by the conjunction of the sacrament's matter and form. These technical terms point to three inseparable aspects of a sacrament: the *sacramentum tantum* is the immediate sensible sign; the *res et sacramentum* is the reality given to us under that sign, which is itself the sign of a further reality; the *res tantum* is the ultimate reality to which the sacrament grants access. The *sacramentum tantum* of the Eucharist, that is, the words of consecration spoken over the bread and wine, signifies and brings about the real Body of Christ, which in turn signifies and brings about the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ; the *sacramentum tantum* of baptism, that is, the baptismal formula spoken while immersing the candidate in water or pouring water over his head, signifies and brings about the washing away of sin and the Christian's spiritual death and resurrection; the *sacramentum tantum* of penance, that is, the words of absolution spoken "over" the penitent's self-accusation, signifies and brings about absolution from sin, etc.—whereas the *sacramentum tantum* of marriage signifies but does not bring about the union of Christ and the Church as such; rather, it brings about an indissoluble bond or *nexus*

Church, begets children to bear His name. Others who are called spouses are [in reality] servants of the Bridegroom who co-operate with him exteriorly in this work of spiritual generation . . . [T]hey are termed spouses, because they take the place of the true Spouse. Hence, the Pope, who is the vicegerent of Christ for the whole Church, is called the spouse of the universal Church; in like manner a bishop is termed the spouse of his diocese, and a priest of his parish. . . . Thus, Christ, the Pope, the bishops, and the priests are but the one spouse of the Church" (Part II, ch. 3, ad 22).

⁶⁰ See *In IV Sent.*, d., 26, q. 2, arg. 4 ("marriage does not effect the union of Christ and the Church that it signifies") and ad 4. In contrast, for example, the pouring of water in baptism accompanied by the words symbolizes washing from sin and dying and rising in Christ—and it *does* wash from sin and make one die to sin and rise spiritually with Christ (see *In IV Sent.*, d. 27, q. 1, a. 2, qa. 1). At *In IV Sent.*, d. 27, q. 1, a. 2, qa. 2; cf. *ibid.*, qa. 4, Aquinas states: "The expression of words [in giving consent] stands to marriage as the exterior washing stands to baptism."

that is *like* that union, but not identical to it. Among other things, the union of Christ and the Church is eternal, whereas that of human spouses is temporal and temporary, and however spouses are united in heaven, it is *not* a connection such as they had on earth, as the response of Jesus to the Sadducees proves.⁶¹ André-Charles Gigon maintains that the mutual in-the-present consent of a marriageable man and woman is the *sacramentum tantum*, the indissoluble bond between *them* is the *res et sacramentum*, and the matrimonial grace for living their state in holiness is the *res tantum*.⁶² Therefore, marriage *does* effect what it signifies, if the effect be understood as the grace to live the spousal union in holiness—which is itself a sign of something further, Christ’s union with the Church. This Aquinas openly says in the *Summa contra Gentiles*:

Because the sacraments effect what they symbolize, we must believe that this sacrament confers upon the bridal pair the grace by which they may reach/relate to/pertain to (*pertineant*) the union of Christ and the Church, which is most necessary for them, so that they may seek fleshly and earthly things in such a way as not to be disjoined from Christ and the Church.⁶³

Matthias Scheeben maintains that marriage does build up the union of Christ and the Church by multiplying the latter’s members, in order that Christ might be united to more souls.⁶⁴ In a sense, then, marriage *augments* that union mediately and indirectly; in itself, however, the sacrament is perfected prior to that augmentation occurring, and the addition of members to the Mystical Body makes us part of the preexisting Church of the blessed united to its Head, even as our prayers do not move God to new divine action but rather make us receptive to that which the unchanging God is prepared to bestow on those who ask, seek, and knock.

What is most special about Christian marriage, then, is its unique and proper *signification*: “since wedlock (*conjugium*) is a sacrament, it is a sacred sign, and of a sacred thing,”⁶⁵ namely, “the mystery of the conjoining of Christ and the Church,”⁶⁶ “which is made in the freedom of love (*secun-*

⁶¹ See Matthew 22:23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–39.

⁶² See André-Charles Gigon, O.P., *De Sacramentis in communi* (Fribourg: Typographia Canisiana, 1945).

⁶³ ScG IV, ch. 78.

⁶⁴ See Matthias Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J. (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1946), ch. 21, “Christian Matrimony.”

⁶⁵ *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, prologue. It is a distinct sacrament because it uniquely signifies a determinate sacred thing (*In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 3, ad 2).

⁶⁶ *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 2, one among a hundred such texts.

dum libertatem amoris).⁶⁷ So important is marriage's sign-value that Thomas can say: "In every way, 'sacrament' is the foremost of the three goods of marriage, for it pertains to marriage insofar as it is a sacrament of grace, whereas the other two [goods, viz., offspring and fidelity] pertain to it insofar as it is an office of nature—and the perfection of grace is nobler than the perfection of nature."⁶⁸

Indeed, it is this "marriage" of God and man that captivates St. Thomas even more than the human marriage that signifies it. In company with nearly all theological writers of the Eastern and Western traditions who preceded him, Thomas often utilizes marriage as a metaphor or image of God's dealings with His people in covenant history, of Christ's one-flesh relationship with the Church, His Body, and of the individual soul's intimate union with the Lord.⁶⁹ In these respects he and they are willing exponents of the mystery revealed in Sacred Scripture: the "good news" of God's love for us and of our being caught up in that love, a "mutual indwelling" (*mutua inhaesio*)⁷⁰ that is likened in many revealed texts to the relationship of husband and wife—above all in the Song of Songs, Psalm 45,⁷¹ the prophets Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the Letter to

⁶⁷ The full statement: "marriage signifies the conjoining of Christ to the Church, which is made in the freedom of love. Therefore it cannot happen by coerced consent" (*In IV Sent.*, d. 29, a. 3, qa. 1, sc 2).

⁶⁸ *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 3. *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 3, sc 2. As Marc Ouellet reminds us (*Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006], 125–26), Thomas sees the sacramentality of marriage as a perfection that God introduces from without, so to speak, rather than something that wells up immanently from human nature, the way offspring and fidelity do. Thus, to the question "What is most essential to marriage?" there must be two answers: one from the vantage of its natural function, namely to promote the human race by "increasing and multiplying," and the other from the vantage of its supernatural function, which emanates from and concerns itself with the nuptial union of Christ and the Church. Of course, Thomas always says that if by offspring or fidelity one means not the thing itself but the *intention* thereof, then either of these is *more* essential to marriage than sacramentality, inasmuch as the nature of a thing precedes its elevation by grace. If there is no man, there is no saint; so too, if there is no permanent sexual relationship ordered to offspring, there is no indissoluble grace-giving bond (see *In IV Sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 1). At *In IV Sent.*, d. 30, q. 1, a. 3 Thomas says: "the [final] cause of marriage *per se* is that to which marriage is of itself ordered, namely, the procreation of children, and the avoidance of fornication"; *ibid.*, ad 1: "that which has one end *per se* and principally can [also] have many *per se* secondary ends, as well as an infinity of *per accidens* ends."

⁶⁹ See note 59 on *matrimonium spirituale*.

⁷⁰ See *ST I–II*, q. 28, a. 2.

⁷¹ *Super Ps.* 45[44] is one of Aquinas's most ample treatments of the marriage between Christ and the Church. He says at the start of his remarks: "The content

Ephesians, and the Book of Revelation.⁷² Such texts on “spiritual marriage” are regularly cited by Thomas, not as mere ornamentation but as authoritative premises and as doorways that lead the reader or listener back into the inspired word, where he may nourish himself in *lectio divina*, for the personal appropriation of revealed truth.⁷³

After all, it was not a frivolous decision when Aquinas, in his magnificent *divisio textus* of Scripture,⁷⁴ declared the point of arrival for the whole inspired word to be our spiritual marriage with the Lord, and doubly so: in the Old Testament the peak is the Song of Songs (which treats of “the virtues of the cleansed soul, whereby a man, with worldly cares altogether behind him, delights in the contemplation of wisdom alone”),⁷⁵ while in the New Testament it is the Book of Revelation: after learning of the beginning and the progress of the Church, we come to “the culmination of the Church, with which the Apocalypse concludes the contents of the whole of Scripture—until which time the Bride is in the bridal chamber of Jesus Christ awaiting her participation in the life of glory; to which may Jesus Christ himself lead us, who is blessed forever.”⁷⁶

of this psalm and that of the book called the Song of Songs is the very same (*eadem est materia hujus Psalmi et libri qui dicitur Cantica Canticorum*).”

⁷² For an excellent example of a text in which Thomas expressly refers to a number of these texts to refute a view of some of his contemporaries on why having had more than one wife invalidates a man for holy orders, see *In IV Sent.*, d. 27, q. 3, a. 1, qa. 3.

⁷³ One who researches St. Thomas’s citations of the Song of Songs will see the extent to which the traditional allegorical/mystical exegesis influences his interpretation and applications. There is enough material in the master’s writings to permit a speculative reconstruction of a Thomistic Song commentary, or at least an ample prologue to such a commentary.

⁷⁴ The *De partitione sacrae scripturae* of the second *Principium*, on the text “Hic est liber mandatorum Dei.” The two *Principia* or inaugural lectures are printed (albeit in reverse order) in the *Opuscula theologica*, vol. I, ed. R. A. Verardo (Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1953), 435–43; see nn. 1203–8 for the *divisio textus* of Scripture. On the importance of this *divisio*, see Peter Kwasniewski, “Golden Straw: St. Thomas and the Ecstatic Practice of Theology,” *Nova et Vetera* 2 (2004): 88–89, with references in n. 89 (see also 74 with n. 39).

⁷⁵ That middle phrase (taken from the *De partitione sacrae scripturae*, n. 1207 in the Marietti ed.) is difficult to translate: *In tertio gradu sunt virtutes purgati animi, quibus homo, saeculi curis penitus calcatis, in sola sapientiae contemplatione delectatur; et quantum ad hoc sunt Cantica*. The description is that of the highest peak of holiness according to ST I–II, q. 61, a. 5, where the state is also called “a perpetual covenant with the Divine Mind.”

⁷⁶ *Tertio ecclesiae terminum; in quo totius Sacrae Scripturae continentiam Apocalypsis concludit, quousque Sponsa in thalamum Iesu Christi ad vitam gloriosam participandam; ad quam*

II. In Praise of Spiritual Marriage

It is at this point, the climax of Thomas's appreciation of marriage, that we begin to understand his relativization of the sacrament of marriage. We have to remember that a certain imperfection attaches to *all* the sacraments, precisely because they are veiled and transitional. Recall the closing stanza of the *Adoro Te*:

Ihesu, quem uelatum nunc aspicio,	Jesus, whom veiled I now behold,
quando fiet illud quod tam sicio?	When will it come to pass—what I so thirst for?
Vt te reuelata cernens facie,	That, looking intently upon your then-revealed face,
uisu sim beatus tue glorie. ⁷⁷	I may be blessed with the sight of your glory.

The sacraments begin in us a work that is complete only in the life to come, when they shall have fallen away as means no longer necessary, however urgently needed they are in this present life. As Thomas states: “Conjoining to the [ultimate] end . . . according to the *full* participation thereof . . . is not accomplished by any sacrament, but the sacraments *dispose* [their recipient] to it.”⁷⁸ Or as he puts it in the *Summa*:

The state of the New Law is between the state of the Old Law, whose figures are fulfilled in the New, and the state of glory, in which all truth will be openly and perfectly revealed—wherefore *then* there will be no sacraments. But *now*, so long as we know “through a glass darkly” (1 Cor.

nos perducat ipse Iesus Christus, benedictus in saecula saeculorum (from the *De partitione sacrae scripturae*, n. 1208 in the Marietti ed.).

⁷⁷ From the critical text established by R. Wielockx, available in his article “Poetry and Theology in the *Adoro te deuote*: Thomas Aquinas on the Eucharist and Christ’s Uniqueness,” in K. Emery and J. Wawrykow, eds., *Christ Among the Medieval Dominicans* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998); translation mine.

⁷⁸ *In IV Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, ad 4: “Conjoining to the [ultimate] end is twofold. In one way, according to the *full* participation thereof; and that conjoining is not accomplished by any sacrament, but the sacraments dispose [their recipient] to it, and among them, extreme unction does that most nearly; and thus it is placed last among the sacraments ordered to the remedy of one person. In another way, according to an imperfect [participation thereof], and such is the enjoyment [of God] in the wayfaring state; and to this the Eucharist is ordered. And so there is no need to place it last simply, but last in *making progress* towards the good.” See also ScG IV, ch. 70.

13:12), we need sensible signs in order to reach spiritual things; and this is the province of the sacraments.⁷⁹

St. Thomas even stresses that our beatitude resides not in Christ's humanity as such, which is created, but solely in the uncreated divinity, which is the source of the beatitude of Christ's own soul and remains an incomprehensible and beatifying Mystery to His human mind.⁸⁰ Even the Eucharist, the sacrament of sacraments, is the bread of wayfarers, the *viaticum*, the instrument of our healing and elevating communion with Christ in this life, not the destination or definitive union. Thus we would have a greater cause for alarm if Thomas had a *higher* esteem for the sacrament of marriage than he already has; it would be all out of proportion with the transiency, non-ultimacy, and "utility" (in Augustine's sense) of everything here below, on our pilgrimage—everything that is not God.

Why is it so very difficult for us moderns to come to terms with the seeming indifference towards or "contempt" of genuine earthly goods that we find expressed in countless classic texts of the Christian tradition, such as the *Imitation of Christ*? There may be many reasons, but the root cause must surely be the eclipse of heaven as the object of our most passionate longing.⁸¹ With this eclipse of heaven comes also the loss of a vivid awareness of and delight in the presence of God in the here and now—the proper gift of the contemplative soul, as was the Angelic Doctor, whom his contemporaries described as *miro modo contemplativus*. In regard to marriage in particular, we find an ambivalence in Aquinas that is somehow disturbing to us, as when he says: "Marriage is conceded as an indulgence/forbearance to the state of weakness, as is evident from 1 Corinthians 7. Therefore it is necessary for it to be excused by certain goods,"⁸² or again, "the choice of such a [nuptial] conjoining cannot be ordered [i.e., reasonable] except through the recompense of certain things by which the said conjoining is dignified; and these are the goods that excuse marriage and render it honorable."⁸³ The evidence indicates that St. Thomas values marriage more as a symbol of something else than as a thing in its own right, a Christian state of life; he values more the reality signified than the thing signifying it.

⁷⁹ *ST* III, q. 61, a. 4, ad 1.

⁸⁰ See, inter alia, *ScG* IV, ch. 96; *ST* III, q. 9, a. 2, ad 1–3, and especially q. 10, a. 1.

⁸¹ See A. J. Conyers, *Eclipse of Heaven: The Loss of Transcendence and Its Effect on Modern Life* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999). This is a major theme in the homilies and addresses of Pope Benedict XVI.

⁸² *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 1, sc 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, response; see *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 2, a. 1, arg. 1.

A sign of the “impact” of this preoccupation with marriage’s sign-value in reference to the definitive “wedding of the Lamb” is the reduction, in practice, of most of Thomas’s actual writing on the sacrament to canonical details of validity: who may be licitly married to whom; when and how and before whom; what prevents or invalidates a contract; what spouses must do to live up to their contract; and so on. Now, most people who read this sort of treatise think: “Here is a theologian who has no appreciation for *love*, for what makes marriage *real* in the lives of those who are married; he is dealing with it in terms that are purely abstract, impersonal, and cold; where is the warmth of eros? Where is the personality of the spouses? They are stick figures.”

But this is the wrong way to interpret the matter. St. Thomas is focusing on those basic constitutive elements by which the natural love of man and woman can become, in reality, a grace-filled sign of the union of Christ and the Church. Because he is thinking and writing *as a theologian*, not as a philosopher, psychiatrist, sociologist, spiritual director, or poet, he is concerned about the insertion of the baptized man and baptized woman into the overarching and grace-giving mystery of Christ’s spousal union with the Church.⁸⁴ Without this insertion, it does not matter how much passion they have, or how “sincerely” they love; how colorful they are, like Heloise and Abelard; how rich their personal histories. Lacking vital contact with the mystery of Christ’s marriage, all these human resources are, in some fundamental sense, isolated and infertile, as far as supernatural life and eternal life are concerned. The only way for the love of man and woman to attain the grandeur of eternity and the fruitfulness of Trinitarian love is by its dying and rising in Christ, as an expression of *his* passion for the Church, a realization of *his* mastery of nature and matter—the only true mastery, since it is founded in self-gift to the pouring out of his own blood (not in the exploitation of the other, spilling the other’s blood). If this analysis is correct, then Thomas in his treatise on marriage is looking exactly where he ought to be looking, and leaving other legitimate concerns aside—concerns that perhaps never occurred to him to pursue. He is focused on the one thing needful: sacramental assimilation to the mystery of communion, the gift of at-onement, accomplished and manifested on the Cross.

So, on this hypothesis, we would expect to find that St. Thomas, if he does praise human marriage or the love of man and woman, will praise it for its likeness to the union of Christ and the Church that endows all

⁸⁴ There is also the simple fact that Thomas, by temperament and vocation, well deserved Cajetan’s axiom: *semper formaliter loquitur*.

human loves with their durability and spiritual fecundity. And that, as a matter of fact, is what we do find.

A corollary is that, far from evaporating the density and value of marriage in itself, St. Thomas shows that it can only *have* goodness, meaning, and value as long as it is seen within a larger cosmological and Christological context. Take that context away, and one actually disembowels the living organism of marriage, one freezes it in its immanence. Marriage does not gain in dignity or depth of reality by being detached from its present anchor and future-leaning symbolism; rather, it loses its dignity altogether and crumbles into incoherence. Can we really find any other explanation for what is happening around us in the modern world, with the ever-accelerating destruction of marriage, atomization of the family, and contempt for human life? Is it not because there is no longer any meaning to something that is “purely” or “merely” human? Its meaning comes to it from above, always from above, and (to borrow a phrase from Proclus) its health consists in “upward tensions,”⁸⁵ its being actively united to its transcendent source and goal. “That is the theology behind the story of the Garden of Eden,” writes Herbert McCabe. “There was no way that human beings could be simply human. They had to be either superhuman or inhuman.”⁸⁶ The formulation is exaggerated, of course, and may evoke Henri de Lubac’s erroneous position on nature and grace; but undoubtedly there is great truth in this Chestertonian saying, and much of St. Thomas’s own mind.

An excessive exaltation of the married state, such as we have seen in some postconciliar theology, in fact obscures or even begins to undermine its sign-function, its transparency as a state announcing an ultimate intimacy of love, total, all-fulfilling, perpetual, lacking in nothing, that is actually impossible between two mortal human beings, however great their own *eros* and *agape* may be or become. The paradoxical truth is this: Christian marriage at its best leads us to long all the more for a perfection essentially and altogether *beyond* the state of human marriage, even with all of its blessings intact. It accomplishes this task not at the expense of these goods but through the faithful use of them. Marriage is not man’s fulfillment but it is an image of that fulfillment, and in its sacramental perfection it is already a certain promise and foretaste of it.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, trans. E. R. Dodds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), prop. 23.

⁸⁶ Herbert McCabe, O.P., *God, Christ, and Us*, ed. Brian Davies, O.P. (London: Continuum, 2006), 65.

⁸⁷ See the suggestive comparison between vowed religious life and vowed marital life in Mary Catherine Sommers, “Marriage Vows and ‘Taking Up a New State,’” *Nova et Vetera* 7 (2009): 679–95.

St. Thomas is very insistent on one point: essential to the definition of marriage is that the spouses-to-be consent to give to each other power over each other's body, so that through the resulting marital intimacy they may be fruitful and multiply, for the benefit of the Church.⁸⁸ Because marriage is inherently ordered to procreation of offspring, one can say more generally that marriage, of its essence, is immersed in the transient order of *this* world, it is bound up with "the generation that is passing away" and the generation that is coming to be.⁸⁹ Simultaneously, at the level of the good of *sacramentum*, marriage stands in a direct relationship to that union of uttermost intimacy and perpetuity, namely the union of Christ with His beloved Bride, the Church. Even if human marriage does not actively bring about this mystical reality,⁹⁰ it does possess a special capacity to represent it in a way that surpasses all other earthly forms of communion, as far as the anthropological totality of the union is concerned. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* explains it thus:

When Christ our Lord wished to give a sign of the intimate union that exists between Him and His Church and of His immense love for us, He chose especially the sacred union of man and wife. That this sign was a most appropriate one will readily appear from the fact that of all human relations there is none that binds so closely as the marriage-tie, and from the fact that husband and wife are bound to one another by the bonds of the greatest affection and love. Hence it is that Holy Scripture so frequently represents to us the divine union of Christ and the Church under the figure of marriage.⁹¹

This combination of temporal lowliness and symbolic sovereignty points to a paradox. In his book *Eros and Allegory*, Denys Turner argues that what makes marriage the most suitable *image* of the relationship of Christ and the Church, God and the soul, is what makes virginity the most suitable *way of life* for the one who wishes to internalize and embody this relationship. Hence we find it is often the very same theologians who have a lofty doctrine of mystical marriage and a relatively mean or meager appreciation of earthly marriage inasmuch as it involves sexual union, sensual pleasure, and in general worldly cares. It is the very intensity, unanimity, and fecundity of covenanted sexual love that makes it both the superior

⁸⁸ On the relationship between spousal consent and the conjugal act, see note 23.

⁸⁹ In *IV Sent.*, d. 32, a. 3, arg. 4: "Marriage is chiefly ordered to the conjugal act."

⁹⁰ See In *IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 2, a. 1, ad 4 and the discussion above of the *res significata non contenta*.

⁹¹ The *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, trans. J. McHugh and C. Callan (Rockford, IL: TAN, 1983), 345.

model and the inferior reality.⁹² What we are saying is that marriage is a sign of the consummated union of Christ and the Church at the end of days, the ultimate intimacy between God and man that is our destiny, whereas the consecrated state is a proleptic participation in that new life to come, when none will marry or be given in marriage, but will be as the angels in heaven (Mk 12:25).⁹³ While both married and celibate share in the true marriage of Christ to his Church, those who willingly practice perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom have begun to pass over into that *consummated* union of which marriage is the sign. Thus, marriage is *in sign* what celibacy or consecrated virginity is *in reality*.⁹⁴ As Aquinas says: “The spiritual marriage is signified by the fleshly marriage”; indeed, “spiritual marriage is more blissful than fleshly marriage.”⁹⁵ The temporary nature of marriage is built into its very sacramentality: when the end comes, the sign will pass away. But the consecrated state is forever. In heaven we are all, if you will, consecrated religious: we are “brought

⁹² Superior, as compared with other types of relationships (fraternal bonds; non-sexual friendship; “colleagues engaged in a common adventure”; parent-child; master-disciple; ruler-subject; and any other candidates there might be); inferior, as compared with the more perfect attainment or realization of the supernatural union of love it so successfully models. For further thoughts along these lines, see Peter Kwasniewski, “The Ecstasy of Love in *Aquinas’s Commentary on the Sentences*,” *Angelicum* 83 (2006): 87–93.

⁹³ Commenting on Matthew 22:1 (“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son”), St. Thomas writes: “It can be said that this bridegroom is the Word incarnate; the bride, the Church; hence the Apostle [says]: ‘This is a great mystery, and I speak of Christ and the Church’ (Eph. 5:32). Likewise, [the marriage] of the Word himself to our soul. For the soul becomes a partaker of God’s glory through faith, and in this way our marriage [with him] comes about: ‘I will espouse you in faith’ (Hos. 2:20). Likewise, there will be a marriage in the common resurrection, of which resurrection Christ is the way: ‘I am the way’ (John 14:6). There will be a [heavenly] marriage at that time, when our mortal [body] is swallowed up by life, as is said in 2 Corinthians 5:4” (*Super Matt.* 22, lec. 1).

⁹⁴ I am speaking here, of course, of the finality or trajectory of the consecrated state, of its potential for facilitating total surrender to Christ and the practice of the contemplation of the life to come. I think it is not unfair to say that the Church’s traditional teaching is that this total surrender and this summit of contemplation is made more difficult in numerous ways by the life that is, so to speak, “natural” to man—to be married, with children; to own and dispose of property; to be self-governing and independent in mind and manner. I do not speak here of the subjective experience of any one particular religious or priest struggling (or not struggling) to actualize the spiritual potential of his or her state in life or place in the Church.

⁹⁵ *In IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 4, a. 1, sc 1 and sc 2.

over into the home of the heavenly spouse, in the manner of a spouse";⁹⁶ and "in spiritual marriage there are no burdens, especially in the state of the Church triumphant."⁹⁷ It is a theme about which St. Thomas writes in many places, such as the following:

The dowry is usually settled on the bride not when she is espoused, but when she is taken to the bridegroom's dwelling, so as to be in the presence of the bridegroom, since "while we are in the body we are absent from the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:6). Hence the gifts bestowed on the saints in this life are not called a dowry, but rather those which are bestowed on them when they are received into glory, where the Bridegroom delights them with His presence.⁹⁸

And what will heaven be like? Thomas spells it out in a memorable phrase: "Perfect vision, full embracing, and the clinging of consummated love."⁹⁹

Marriage is at its best, so to speak, when pointing beyond itself, to a spousal intimacy, a union of love, infinitely greater and more fulfilling and more fruitful. This paradoxical situation—the earth-boundedness, transiency, immersion in mortal materiality, that is inseparable from the exercise of sexuality,¹⁰⁰ yet at the same time the capacity, under the influence of grace, for insertion into and representation of the paschal mystery—explains, on the one hand, Aquinas's occasionally lackluster treatment of human marriage, and on the other hand, his profound and moving thoughts on the spousal union of Christ and the Church, where marital imagery becomes a central element of mystical theology at its peak. When

⁹⁶ The dowry is given "*ei qui traducitur in domum caelestis sponsi per modum sponsae*" (*In II Sent.*, d. 19, q. 1, a. 5, arg. 3).

⁹⁷ *In IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 4, a. 1, arg. 3. In the reply he adds: "although there are no burdens in the spiritual marriage, there is nevertheless the greatest gladness; and that this gladness may be perfected the bride is dowered with gifts, so that by their means she may be happily united with the bridegroom."

⁹⁸ *In IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 4, a. 1, ad 4.

⁹⁹ *In I Sent.*, d. 1, a. 1, arg. 10: *perfecta visio, plena comprehensio, et inhaesio amoris consummati*.

¹⁰⁰ The husband or wife who engages in the marital act "renders him-/herself unfit for spiritual things, because in that act a human being is made to be entirely flesh (*homo efficitur totus caro*)" (*In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 2, a. 3, ad 4); "though free from guilt, the marital act, because it suppresses reason due to fleshly pleasure, renders man unfit for spiritual things. Therefore, in the days [of the Church year] on which one should especially give oneself to spiritual things, it is not permitted to request the debt" (*In IV Sent.*, d. 32, a. 5). Cf. *In IV Sent.*, d. 37, q. 1, a. 1; *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 3, ad 2, where Aquinas asserts that while the marital act in no way impedes the habit of grace, it does impede the activity of contemplation and God-directed love.

Aquinas treats of marriage as such, marriage between man and woman, he sees in it both its lowliness and its loftiness, the one insofar as it pertains to a world that is passing away,¹⁰¹ the other insofar as it symbolizes, and permits access into, the time- and space-transcending spousal covenant that was consummated on the Cross, confirmed in the resurrection, proclaimed to the human race after Pentecost—the definitive marriage that will be celebrated forever in the wedding feast of eternal life. **N V**

¹⁰¹ *In IV Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3: “Marriage, according to Augustine, is a good of mortals; hence in the resurrection there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage, as is said in Matthew 22; and hence the bond of marriage does not extend beyond the life in which it was contracted; and thus it is called ‘inseparable’ because it cannot be dissolved *in this life*—but by death it can be dissolved, either by bodily death after fleshly conjoining, or by spiritual death [through entrance into religious life] after a merely spiritual conjoining.”