

Spousal Love in the Medieval Rite of Marriage

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NOTWITHSTANDING substantial studies to the contrary, it remains commonplace among specialists in literature, in Church history, and historical theology, as also with the more popular mind, that the patristic and medieval Church had little regard for marriage as a bond of love between husband and wife. In the theology and preachment of the early and medieval Church, as is commonly believed, romance was disdainfully ignored, the love-play of passion forbidden outside of marriage and barely tolerated within it, and the use of sex “excused” only when conjugal procreation was the intention. As St. Paul had put it, it was better to marry than to burn. All “burning” before marriage was evil, and afterward, hopefully, the marriage would by its very nature extinguish it altogether. Marriage was indeed necessary to keep one from grave sin (fornication, adultery), but it was virginity or celibacy as lived out within religious life that made for virtue and brought one close to God. So deeply rooted was this teaching, it is claimed, that it endured until the last ecumenical council when the Church finally caught up (almost) with the rest of the world and seriously acknowledged the goodness and dignity of marriage and granted that there is more to it than the begetting and rearing of children.¹

¹ Some seventy years ago, C. S. Lewis accepted and applied to the study of medieval life and literature the prevalent opinion above summarized: “The general impression left on the medieval mind by its official teachers [clergy] was that all love—at least all such passionate and exalted devotion as a courtly poet thought worthy of the name—was more or less wicked. Thus if the Church tells them that the ardent lover of his own wife is in mortal sin, they presently reply with the rule that true love is impossible in marriage.” See *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936, 1958), 17–18. Lewis here was one with a plethora of studies before and during his time pointing up the negativity of the medieval Church’s attitude

Whatever the evidence for the above may be, the medieval marriage liturgy tells a different tale. Here in its liturgy, if anywhere, we might expect to find the *Church's* teaching on marriage (*lex orandi, lex credendi*) as distinct from that of individuals or schools of theology.² In the present article I should like to single out several medieval liturgies as illustrative of the Church's regard for and praise of marriage precisely as a love bond, physical as well as spiritual, between a man and a woman. As my examples I have chosen liturgies prominent in late pre-reformation England.³

toward marriage as a bond of love, for example, H. C. Lea, *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy* (London: 1907, 1966); E. Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage* (New York: Allerton Book Company, 1922). For recent similar though variously nuanced views on the Church and spousal love see, among many others, Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Eric Fuchs, *Sexual Desire and Love: Origins and History of Sexuality and Marriage* (New York: James Clarke Company, 1983); Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality, and the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1990). For relatively early views arguing the Church's positive attitude toward spousal love, see S. Pinckaers, OP, "Ce que le Moyen Age pensait du mariage," *La Vie Spirituelle* 82 (1967): 413–40 and my *Love and Marriage in Church and Poetry: Late Medieval England* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1968); and my two articles, "Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages" (parts 1 and 2) *New Blackfriars* 50 (1969): 599–608 and 649–60. For recent studies uncovering much of the Church's positive stance on marriage specifically as love-bond in the early Fathers through St. Bernard and Hugh of St. Victor, see the essays by Glenn W. Olsen and Teresa Olsen Pierre in *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*, ed. Glenn W. Olsen (New York: Crossroad, 2001); also C. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

² "Any study of late medieval religion must begin with the liturgy, for within that great seasonal cycle of fast and festival, of ritual observance and symbolic gesture, lay Christians found the paradigms and the stories which shaped their perception of the world and their place in it" (Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993], 11). Yet in the matter of our particular concern the liturgy has not only not begun the various studies of marriage but has scarcely appeared in them. A happy exception is Glenn Olsen's chapter titled "Marriage in Barbarian Kingdom and Christian Court," in Olsen, *Christian Marriage*.

³ For the marriage liturgies I have used "Manuale et Processionale ad Usus Insignis Ecclesiae Eboracensis," ed. W. G. Henderson, from the *Publications* of the Surtees Society, 1875, vol. 63, containing the rituals of York, Salisbury, and Hereford, together with extracts of ten other marriage services from the eighth to the fifteenth century. The manuscript of the York manual (fourteenth century) referred to in my quotations is in the University Library, Cambridge. It is one of four manuscripts used by Henderson in preparing his edition. For continental liturgical

I shall be as detailed in my presentation as needed without losing sight of the whole, since liturgies like poems must be experienced *overall* in order to be understood and appreciated. I will, along the way, cite some of the preaching and theology current with the liturgies selected to suggest that indeed as the Church worshiped it also believed.

Marriage in the Liturgy of York

In “the renowned Church of York” of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the marriage rite began before the church door with the following exhortation spoken by the priest in both Latin and English (*lingua moderna*, as the directive reads):

Lo, bretheren, we are comen here before God and his angels and all his halowes, in the face and presence of our moder holy Chyrche, for to couple and to knyght these two bodyes togyder, that is to saye, of this man and of this woman, that they be from this tyme forth but one body and two soules in the fayth and lawe of God and holy Chyrche, for to deserue everlastyng lyfe, what someuer that they done here be fore.

I charge you on Goddes behalfe and holy Chirche, that if there be any of you that can say anythyng why these two may not lawfully be wedded togyder at this tyme, say it nowe outhur pryuely or appertly in helpynge of your soules and theirs bothe.

Also I charge you both and eyther be your selfe, as ye wyll answer before God at the day of dome, that yf there be any thyng done pryuely or openly between yourselfe, or that ye knowe any lawfule letting [hindrance] why that ye may nat be wedded togyder at thys tyme, say it nowe or [before] we do any more to this mater.

If there are no objections to the marriage the priest immediately puts to the bride and groom the following questions, again in Latin and English,

N., Wylt thou haue this woman to thy wyfe and loue her [and wirschipe hir—Cambridge manuscript] and keep her, in syknes and in helthe, and

rites covering a wide area of medieval Europe, see E. Martène, *De antiquis Ecclesiarum ritibus*, vol. 2 (Antwerp: 1763–4), liber I, pars ii, cap. ix, “De ritibus ad sacramentum Matrimonii pertinentibus.” For English translations of some thirty rites or parts thereof, including that of Sarum (Salisbury), see Mark Searle and Kenneth W. Stevenson, *Documents of the Marriage Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992). For an account of the formation of the liturgy of marriage in the western Church, see E. Schillebeeckx, OP, *Marriage: Secular Reality and Saving Mystery*, vol. 2 (London: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 33–149. In my citations of liturgical texts, I have adhered to Henderson’s transcriptions, though in a few instances I have updated orthography and grammar.

in all other degrese be to her as a husbunde sholde be to his wyfe, and all other forsake for her, and holde the only to her to thy lyues ende.

N., Wylt thou haue this man to thy husbunde, and be buxum [obedient] to hym [luf hym, obeye to him, and wirchipe hym—Cambridge manuscript], serue hym and kepe hym in sykenes and in helthe: and in all other degrees be unto him as a wyfe shulde be to hir husbunde, and all other to forsake for hym, and holde the only to hym to thy lyues ende.

Then each pronounces, this time only in the vernacular, the “form” which expresses his and her consent to the marriage and which, accordingly, makes the marriage:

Here I take the N. to my wedded wyfe [husbunde], to haue and to holde, at bedde and at borde, for fayer for fouler, for better for warse, in sekeness and in hele, tyl dethe us departe, and thereto I plight the me trouthe.

The ring ceremony follows, coupled with that of the giving of gold and silver, symbol of the woman’s dowry (*dos mulieris*). First the priest blesses the ring (in Latin):

Bless, Lord, this ring, which in your name we bless, that she who will wear it stand in your peace and remain in your will, and may she live and grow old in your love and be multiplied unto length of days.

Creator and preserver of human kind, giver of spiritual grace and bestower of eternal salvation, you, Lord, grant that your blessing come upon this your servant and this your handmaid, that armed with the strength of heavenly protection they may advance to eternal salvation.

The groom then takes the blessed ring, touches it to the first three fingers of the bride’s hand, saying “In the name of the Father, etc.,” and places it on the fourth finger because, as the rubric states, in that finger “is a certain vein going to the heart.” As he places the ring he repeats after the priest (*docente sacerdote*): “With this rynge I wedde the, and with this golde and siluer I honoure the, and with this gyft I dowe thee.” If the woman’s dowry is land, she is then to kneel before her husband. Otherwise she remains standing while the priest recites some verses from the psalms. He asks the congregation to pray for the couple and, in Latin, he himself prays for God’s blessing once again upon “these young ones” (*istos adolescentes*), “that they might remain in your security, live and grow old in your love, and be multiplied unto length of days.”

All now enter the church. The bride and groom prostrate themselves before the altar step (*ante gradum altaris*). The priest says some versicles and again (in Latin) prays God's blessing upon the young couple that they might be joined in true love:

All-powerful and eternal God, who by his power created Adam and Eve, sanctified them by his blessing, and joined them in community of love [*societate amoris copulavit*]; may He sanctify and bless your hearts and bodies and join them in truest love [*amorem verae dilectionis*].

Bride and groom rise and take their place in the south side of the sanctuary, the bride standing to the right of her husband, and the solemn mass of the Trinity is begun. There is an added oration, secret, and post-communion prayer for the spouses (the secret prayer speaks of the *sacra connubili lege*—the sacred law of marriage)⁴ and the epistle and gospel are special: the epistle (1 Cor 6:15–20) reminding the couple that their bodies are members of Christ, that they are two in one flesh, and therefore they are to avoid sin, especially that of fornication. They are to “glorify and carry God” in their bodies. The gospel (Jn 3:27–29) speaks of John the Baptist as the “friend of the groom” who rejoices when he hears the groom's voice. The gospel ends: “This joy of mine has been fulfilled in order that your joy be complete.”

At the breaking of the sacred bread, the spouses kneel before the altar and the *pallium* (sacred mantel) is held above them by two clerics. The priest turns and speaks over them three prayers, the middle prayer, the “sacramental blessing,” being omitted in the case of a second marriage (that is, when one or both are widowed). Here there is a long rubric explaining why second marriages are not to receive this blessing. It states that though a second (or third, etc.) marriage is a perfect sacrament (*perfectum sacramentum*), something is missing of the sacramental signification, namely, that of a single union between Christ and the Church. Besides, continues the rubric, one of the spouses will have received the blessing in a previous marriage, and so the other by becoming one flesh with the already blessed spouse will thereby share in it (*per carnem alias benedictam caro non benedicta, cum qua jungitur, benedicitur*). An exception is made for a second marriage in which the male is the widow and the bride a virgin. Here, it is argued, the full signification of the sacrament is preserved since the male represents Christ or the bishop who in a single union is wedded to many souls. In any case, the omission of the brief sacramental blessing is the sole noticeable difference in the whole wedding ceremony between

⁴ Not spelled out here, but expressed in the Hereford rite, as given below.

first and second marriages. The prayers said at this point (all in Latin) concentrate mainly upon the bride. We are reminded of the intimate and inseparable union established between man and woman from the beginning of creation, a union not abrogated either by original sin nor the Flood. Then God is asked to look kindly upon the bride, to keep her pure, chaste, innocent, wise, faithful, fruitful, of long life “and may she see her children’s children unto the third and fourth generation.”

At the conclusion of these prayers, the husband mounts the altar steps and receives the kiss of peace from the priest. He returns to his place and kisses his bride alone and she him alone, “and no one else” (*et neminem alium, nec ipse nec ipsa*). Immediately preceding the kiss of peace the priest recites the simple formula: “Hold to the bond of peace and charity, that you may be worthy of the holy mysteries of God”—apparently indicating thereby that the bride and groom are about to receive Holy Communion.⁵

The mass continues, concluding with the special nuptial postcommunion prayer: “We beseech you, almighty God, to accompany that which has been instituted by your providence for the sake of love [*pro amore*], that you may keep in lasting peace those whom you join in lawful communion [*legitima societate*].” Finally, “because of the solemnity of the sacrament” the priest is directed to give the last blessing with the chalice itself, saying:

Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God, we humbly beseech you, that you kindly deign to nourish with your blessing the union of your servants. We ask you, almighty God, that the deceits of the enemy be thwarted, and that they, who by your providence have merited to be united, might imitate the holiness of the union itself.

That night (*nocte vero sequenti*) when the bride and groom have come into the bridal chamber, the priest enters and blesses the bed, saying: “Bless, Lord, this bridal chamber and all who dwell herein, that they may endure in your peace and remain in your will; and that they may live in your love and grow old and multiply unto the length of days.” A further brief prayer is prayed asking the protection of God’s holy angel upon the

⁵ There is no specific directive as to whether or not the bride and groom are to communicate, nor is there such a directive in any of the rituals that I have consulted. However, L. Duchesne in his *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution*, 4th English ed. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1912), 429, referring to Pope Nicholas I’s description of the rites of marriage in the Latin Church, claims the bride and groom did communicate. This certainly seems likely, judging from the solemnity of the occasion and the other privileges the bride and groom received in the nuptial Mass.

couple. The bride and groom are then blessed with the simple Trinitarian formula, and the chamber and bed are incensed.⁶ This ends the ecclesiastical ceremonies.

The Rites of Sarum, Hereford, Worcestershire

The Sarum, or Salisbury, nuptial liturgy was almost identical with that of York. The chief differences are to be found not so much in the printed editions of the Sarum rite as in the earlier fifteenth-century manuscript of that rite preserved in the library of St. John's College, Oxford. Here, in the manuscript, there is the directive that the woman be given in the first place to the Church. She is likewise to kneel and kiss the groom's right foot, whether there is land in the dowry or not. Also, while in the manuscript there is the rubric that the final blessing be given with the chalice, as at York, there is no mention of this in the printed editions. Other minor differences (in the printed editions) between the two rites are:

1. In the Sarum ritual there is the directive for the priest to speak the introductory words, admonition, and the initial questions "*in lingua materna*," but whereas in the York manual the English is given, here we find only the Latin. However, the introduction and the rest are the same in content as those in the York manual.
2. The marriage *form* given in the vernacular, is slightly different for the man and woman, whereas in the York rite, it is the same for both. In the Sarum rite the woman adds: "to be bonere and buxum [good and obedient] in bedde and atte borde." And both the man and the woman add the words "if holy Churche it woll ordeyne" after "tyl dethe us departe."
3. The formula for giving the ring, the gold and the silver, is somewhat more elaborate in the Sarum rite: "With this rynge I the wed, and this gold and siluer I the geue, and with my bodi I the worshipec, and with all my worldely catel I thee endowe." The ceremony of the placing of

⁶ The same practice of blessing the newlyweds while sitting upon or lying in the marriage bed is to be found in the fourteenth-century marriage rite of the church of Paris. Here the priest is directed to incense the bridal chamber, and then the bride and groom "sitting or lying in their bed." Martène, *De antiquis Ecclesiae ritibus*, ordo x. R. Lewinsohn, in his *History of Sexual Customs* (London and New York: Harper & Bros., 1958), 183, reproduces a fifteenth-century woodcut of a bridal pair in bed receiving a blessing from a bishop. There are several others present, and a woman holds the pail for holy water. Chaucer makes use of the custom in "The Merchant's Tale": apparently January and May are under the covers "whan the bed was with the preest yblessed."

the ring is the same as at York, but with an addition in the rubrical commentary. After the words "in the fourth finger is a certain vein proceeding to the heart," there is added an explanation of the symbolism of the gold and silver: "in the sonorous sound of silver is symbolized the internal love which must always be new [*recens*] between them." It is at this point that the Sarum *manuscript* (not the printed edition) directs the bride to kneel before her husband and kiss his right foot.

4. The epistle is the same as at York, but the gospel is different—Matthew 19:2–6, in which Jesus upholds the inseparability of the marriage bond, since "they are no longer two, but one flesh."
5. In the Sarum rite, immediately after the mass bread and wine are blessed with a prayer that recalls the miracles of the multiplication of the five loaves and the changing of water into wine. Of this bread and wine the newlyweds taste *in nomine domini*.
6. The blessing of the bridal chamber and bed is different from that of York, most noticeably in that here the last blessing is given while the couple are "in bed" or "on the bed" (*in lecto*). After the brief blessing, the final directive for the priest is: "These things done, let him asperse them with blessed water, and so depart and leave them in peace" (*dimittat eos in pace*).

Still another prominent English liturgy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was that of the diocese of Hereford. Here the marriage rite, as it appears in the medieval Hereford missal, is similar to and often identical with the rites of York and Sarum. Some of its noteworthy and distinguishing features are as follows:

1. After the priest has inquired about the existence of any impediments, he is directed to announce to the bride and groom "the law of marriage . . . namely, that they shall be two in one flesh, and each obedient to the other [*uterque alteri obnoxius sit*] unto the keeping of each other in sickness or in health, and for no cause can they be separated." This is in the *manuscript* Hereford missal (University College, Oxford); it does not appear in the printed version. It should be observed that in the manuscript the whole of the service till the end of the exchange of vows is quite markedly abridged. For example, the questions put to the couple are simply: "Man, do you wish to have this woman united to you? . . . Woman, do you wish to have this man united to you?" This may suggest that a certain spontaneity or orig-

inality of expression on both the part of the priest and the marrying couple was tolerated or even encouraged as long as the essential content of the various formulas was respected, much as occurs in present-day marriage ceremonies.

2. In the printed version of the missal, after the priest has inquired as to the freedom of the couple to marry, he asks the groom (the question is printed in Latin, but surely it was asked in English): "N., Do you wish to have this woman and receive her as your legitimate wife, and, in God's fidelity and yours, keep her as a Christian man ought to keep his wife, in sickness and in health?" A like question is asked of the bride. Then, holding the bride's right hand in his, the groom repeats after the priest "in the mother tongue": "I, N., underfyng[e] [take] the N., for my wedded wife, for betere for worse, for richer for porer, yn sekenes & in helthe, tyl deth us de-parte, as holy Churche hath ordeyned, & therto y plyghth the my trowthe." The bride says the same, adding the phrase "to be buxum to the."
3. In the giving of the ring, the gold and silver, the man is directed to say either in Latin or the mother tongue: "with this ring I thee wed, and with this gold and silver I thee endow; and with my body I thee honour." The ring is placed as at York and Sarum. The rubric here contains a slightly varied explanation of the ceremony and gives the authoritative source for the explanation: "I ask why the ring is placed on the fourth finger counting the thumb, rather than on the second or third. Isidore says it is because a certain vein extends from that finger to the heart, and this gives us to understand the unity and perfection of love; xxx. quaest. v. cap. *Feminae in fine*." This last is the particular work of St. Isidore referred to.⁷
4. As at York and Sarum, there is the mass of the Trinity, with the couple in the sanctuary throughout. The epistle and gospel are as at Sarum, and all else in the mass is as in the Sarum or York rituals. There is the blessing of the bread and wine "or some other potable good" after the final blessing has been imparted with the chalice, and husband and wife share them. In the evening the bridal bed and chamber are blessed with the same simple blessings as at York and Sarum. And again the final rubric is that the priest depart and leave husband and wife "in peace."

⁷ The exact reference in Isidore is: "People first began to wear rings on the fourth finger from the thumb because from it a certain vein reaches to the heart" (*eo vena quaedam usque ad cor pertingat*). Isidore, *Etymologiarum*, lib. XIX, c. 32, P.L., 82, col. 701.

Finally, mention may be made of two prayers (in Latin) from the thirteenth-century missal of Hanley Castle, Worcestershire, which do not appear in the nuptial rites of York, Sarum, or Hereford, though the Hanley rite seems to be like the others in all other respects. The first of these prayers occurs immediately after the ring ceremony while all are still standing before the church door. It recalls God's institution and sanctification of marriage in the Old Testament, his being born of it and his blessing upon it in the New Testament; it asks God to bless and sanctify the present nuptials, to join the couple in true love (*verae dilectionis societate*), to give to them "peaceful corporal health, joy of mind and body, and the procreation of sons and daughters (*filiorum et filiarum*)."

The prayer concludes: "After the labor of your life is ended, may He lead you into the community of holy angels and archangels in Heaven." The second prayer is spoken over the bride and groom as they lay prostrate before the altar, just before the mass of the Trinity is begun. It asks that God bless the couple "that they might be joined in conjugal union with equal effect, like mind, and mutual charity [*effectu compari, mente consimili, caritate mutua*] . . . and that each may prefer the other to oneself [*invicem se praeferant sibi*]."

The Nuptial Homily

Such was the marriage ritual itself. Of a piece with it there was, of course, the homily, preached or read (perhaps from a common text) immediately after the initial greeting and admonitions and before the pronouncement of vows, as is the practice today.⁸ As with the theology, the medieval preaching in general has been found wanting in its appreciation of marriage and of woman in particular. Speaking of the harsh, negative attitude of the fourteenth-century English preachers generally, G. R. Owst, one of the pioneer students of the medieval pulpit, at one point laments: "Where alas is our merry England!"⁹ Elsewhere he indicts that same "gloom and doom" pulpit for its generous share in the English Reformation, claiming that "as its smarting children reared mainly through repression, through taunts and threats of future punishment, grew to an independent manhood and a wisdom of their own, they turned to mock, to threaten, and then to eject their own shortsighted parents."¹⁰ When Owst treats specifically of the pulpit as related to women and marriage,

⁸ For an overview of medieval preaching, cf. H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Noticeably absent from Spencer's study is any consideration of the nuptial homily.

⁹ *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), 384.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

he seems to be drawing from an inexhaustible well of medieval invective and vituperation.

However, the medieval pulpit was much more kindly toward women and marriage than Owst's chapter on "the sermon of satire and complaint" might lead us to believe. As instanced below, the sermons of Robert de Sorbon and others, together with the many moral manuals such as the *Summae* of W. Peraldus and its multiple translations, which were meant to aid the preaching, are testimony as to the esteem in which both the woman and marriage were held. With regard to the Middle English sermons he had edited for the Early English Text Society, W. O. Ross observed that "In none of these sermons are women contemned; in fact it is pointed out at least three times that though Eve brought sin into the world, Mary brought salvation. . . . 'No man,' says one of the sermons, 'shuld have woman in dispite, for it is no wisdom to dispise what God loveth.'" ¹¹

Owst himself is ambivalent. Perhaps it is because he tried to see the preaching whole that we find in his histories almost as much contradiction as we find in the preaching itself. Thus after evidencing the bleakness of the medieval English pulpit, he goes on to tell of the "rollicking humor" and laughter of that same pulpit. He speaks of "our homilist now turned play writer," and finds the preacher's accent most clearly manifest in those very passages of medieval drama "which have been supposed hitherto to exhibit the birth of a native dramatic sense, uproarious with a people's mirth, fresh, realistic, and redolent of the soil."¹² As for the pulpit's treatment of woman and marriage, he cautions that the examples he cites are confined to one specific type of sermon, that of "satire and complaint," and, though only in a footnote, concedes that a "kindlier, fairer attitude is expressed . . . in the typical marriage sermon of the day," by which he means, supposedly, that preached at the nuptial liturgy.¹³

Two such "typical" sermons appear in manuscript Gg. vi, 16, housed in the Cambridge University Library. It seems likely that they were sermons actually preached sometime during the fifteenth century, and the several glosses on one of them (*In solemnizatione matrimonii*) suggest that it likewise served as a pattern or model sermon.¹⁴ Both are brief—perhaps

¹¹ *Middle English Sermons* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), lvii, and sermon 24.

¹² *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 488.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 385. The variety in both style and content of medieval preaching is further instanced in Owst's other major study: *Preaching in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926).

¹⁴ For the fact and use of the model or closet sermon and collections thereof, see Spencer, *English Preaching*, 4, 75–76, 94.

of ten minutes speaking duration. I summarize and quote generously from each of them that not only their content but also their overall tone and spirit might be judged.¹⁵

The first—titled *De nupciis sollacio* (Gg. vi, 16, fol. 28b–31b)—begins:

Worschypull soffereyns, here we assemlyde [be] affore God, hys awngells and all hys seynts, by vertu off the blyssyd sacrament off matrimonye off too persawnes to make one, that is to been off one concente and off one wyll, the qwyche oned [unity] betwyx man and woman to be had was expressed by the sentence off God in hys ffyrst formation . . . : there shall be, seythe allmyghty God, ii dyfferent and diuerse persawnes in bodeye and in sawle the qwyche shall be made one fflesche and blode thorw the blyssyd sacrament off matrimonye. Thys seyde most blyssyd sacrament of matrimonye allmyghty God Hymselff institute and ordenyd in the blyssed and joyffull place off paradyse affore anye syn . . . and so was ncow [the beginning?] off all the todyr vi [that is, sacraments]; and so it was ordeynyd in remedye anense [against] syn and to the conffyrmatyion and nobyll encesce off morall vertues to be possessyd in manys sawle in hys pilgrimage goynge honorablye to the ryall cyte off Jerusalem clepyd [called] heven.

Our preacher speaks of the woman as being for “the relief, succor, and help” of her man, while he is “to exercise the inward beams of his love upon her, and there set his heart above all other creatures next to almighty God.” He recalls the formation of Eve from Adam’s rib. He borrows from the theology of the day (as exemplated below) in recounting its symbolism:

almighty God formed woman not of the highest part of man, that is to say of the head, not of the lowest part, that is of the foot, but of a rib of the side not far from man’s heart in token that woman should not usurp to have domination nor preeminence above man, nor man should not set woman in his conceit in vile subjugation or evil dignity of worship and reverence beneath him; but woman to be equal and fellow unto man as a true companion and mate in their steadfast love.

He quotes and elaborates upon the divine command to increase and multiply:

fill the earth with your fruit, says almighty God, man to be lord and prince, woman to be lady and princess of fishes and fowls and of all

¹⁵ The transcription of the full texts of both sermons may be found in my doctoral dissertation mentioned above (note 1). In the present article I have, after the initial quotations, altered script, grammar, and spelling in accord with modern usage.

things that are endowed with life sensitive that are moved upon earth; and I will [says God] that you and your fruit that comes of natural course and propagation be inheritors of the bliss of heaven and to attain to that joy by perfect love and humble condition of meekness, there to restore what was lost by the angels.

“Wherefore, you sovereigns,” the homily concludes,

at this time being disposed in mind and will to receive this blessed sacrament, be one by means of perfect love, ground and beginner of all virtues. [Establish yourselves] so steadfastly in love that neither word nor language, countenance nor deed make you to withdraw the beams of perfect love as long as you live together, for love is the beginning and ground of this blessed sacrament of matrimony.

Here the preacher, mindful that the nuptial mass is of the Trinity, recalls that great mystery with direct reference to spousal love:

As the Father of heaven is so perfect that the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost are iii persons and one God, so that in these iii persons resteth unity and oneness in all their works, likewise you sovereigns at this time by means of this blessed sacrament be ye perfect as long as ye shall naturally live together. As you shall be one in body, flesh, and in blood, likewise be steadfast and perfect with unity in love in your souls without discontinuance.

The second homily—*In solemnizatione matrimonii* (Gg. vi, 16, fol. 32a–33b)—begins:

Most worschipull ffrendys, we be cum hedyr at this time in the name of the Fader, Son & Holy Gost in the honerabyll presens of our moder gostly, holy Chyrche, to conjoynyn, knytt, and combyne thyse ii persawnes by the holy sacrament of matrimonye. . . . Qwyche sacrament off matrimonye is off this vertu and strengthe that thise ii persawnes qwyche be nowe too bodyes and ii sawles, durynge theyr lyvys togeder schall be butt one fflesche and too sawles.

As the preceding homilist, this one too suggests why the mass is of the Trinity:

This [that is, intimacy between husband and wife] is well figured in Genesis 1 when almighty God had formed our own fore father and mother in *agro damasceno* [the damascene country, that is, paradise] to the resemblance, similitude, and image of the blessed Trinity by his word alone.

The scriptural text “Increase and multiply” is quoted in Latin and translated, though not with the elaboration of the previous homily: “Increase, multiply, and fill the earth, be you sovereigns and lords over all the fishes of the sea, fowls, and birds of the air, and all that bears life upon earth.” The command given, “both Adam and Eve consented to this matrimony when Adam said: This bone of this woman is of my bones, and this flesh of this woman is of my flesh. So there were ii souls and one flesh.” This was how it was in the beginning, and “so it is the effect now of the sacrament of matrimony in all holy Church.”

The preacher enumerates three ways in which this knitting of man and woman is to be under “the bond and yoke of God.” The first is “under the bond of honor and worship in working, the second under the bond of true love and fidelity in living, and the third under the bond of obedience and continual abiding.” By the first bond, husband and wife are to do nothing against the sacrament or in any way displeasing to God. By the second, they are “with all their hearts effectually to love each other within by inward affection and without by good accord, delighting in peace and quiet.” Here the rubric about the placing of the wedding ring is brought forward and explicated:

And for this cause is the ring put and set by the husband upon the iiij finger of the woman, for to show that a true love and precordial affection must be between them. Wherefore, as doctors say, there is a vein coming from the heart of a woman to the iiijth finger; and therefore the ring is put on the same finger, that she should keep unity and love with him, and he with her.

The third and last bond demands that they “should support, help, and comfort one another in sickness and in health as long as they live together.”

As preachers generally, as we shall presently see, our minister now lists four reasons why this sacrament must be held in particular veneration: (1) God himself is its maker; (2) it was made in paradise; (3) it was the first sacrament that God ordained; and (4) the Church has made it to be one of the seven sacraments. “It is for these reasons that the *pallium* is held over their heads at the mass time, for the *pallium* represents the dignity of matrimony.” Thus the Church admonishes and ordains that bride and groom be reconciled to cleanness of life before receiving so great a sacrament “unto the increasing and augmenting of grace.” To this purpose all present are exhorted to offer their prayer.

Marriage as a “Religious Order”

The various nuptial rites that we have observed, with at least some of their accompanying preaching, evidence that the medieval Church, at least in England, held and preached marriage, precisely as a love bond between spouses, to be not simply a refuge from sin or a state second best to virginity, but good and holy in itself and productive of holiness in those who use it rightly.¹⁶ In this the liturgy echoed, or was echoed by, some of the best and influential of the contemporary theology and preaching on marriage within England itself and elsewhere on the continent. In his *Histoire de l'Occident* (c. 1225) Jacques de Vitry appears to have inaugurated the theme that marriage is an order similar to, and in some respects surpassing in dignity, the traditional religious orders of the Church.¹⁷ De Vitry himself seemed bent on popularizing the idea, for he used it in a sermon on the marriage feast of Cana in which he declared that while the various religious orders were founded by men, God established the order of marriage.¹⁸ Reasons for the surpassing dignity of marriage quickly multiplied, as evidenced in these enthusiastic words of a thirteenth-century Dominican preacher:

The order of marriage . . . is an order whose statutes are not of yesterday; it has existed as long as humankind. Our order [that of Dominicans] and that of the Friars Minor have been recently established; just as all other religious orders, they are of the era which begins with the Incarnation. But the order of marriage is as old as the world. I will say more: our order is the work of a simple mortal, a Spaniard, as that of the Friars Minor is the work of a Lombard; but it is God who himself instituted the order of marriage from the beginning of time. I shall say still more: at the moment of the deluge, the Lord saved by preference those who were married. Finally, the Queen of Paradise, the Blessed Virgin, was married, and God did not will to be born of her womb until she was.¹⁹

¹⁶ L. Gautier in his *La chevalerie* (Paris: Victor Palmé, 1884), 358 ff. gives a full, moment by moment description of a twelfth-century French marriage in which the grandeur and joy of the Church's ceremonies and its esteem for this particular sacrament are manifest. As his exemplum of medieval marriage rites, Gautier used that which appears in the pontifical of the monastery Lyrensis, twelfth century, as given in Martène, *De antiquis Ecclesiae ritibus*, ordo iii.

¹⁷ Cited by G. Le Bras in his treatise on the history of marriage, in *Dictionnaire de théologie Catholique*, vol. 9 (2) (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ane, 1932), col. 2180.

¹⁸ Sermones in epistolas et evangelia dominicalia (Anvers: 1575), as in Le Bras, *Dictionnaire de théologie Catholique*, ibid.

¹⁹ Quoted in A. Lecoy de la Marche, *La chaire Française au moyen age, spécialement au XIIIe siècle*, 2nd ed. (Paris: H. Laurens, 1886), 429.

With sustained enthusiasm for his subject, our preacher goes on to offer marriage, not virginity, as the model and ideal for God's people, outlining in detail its properties and duties.

The same theme was further propagated by another thirteenth-century Dominican, William Peraldus, in both his *De eruditione principum* (often attributed to St. Thomas) and his widely circulated moral manual, the *Summae virtutum ac vitiorum*. In the latter work, indirectly influential in England through the fourteenth-century English translations of its French derivative, the *Somme le Roi*, the reasons for the superlative worth of marriage have increased to twelve. Besides those mentioned above, they are: it was instituted in Paradise; it was instituted in the state of innocence whereas the other orders are *post peccatum*; it was the only order that was saved in the Flood; it is the order in which the Blessed Virgin was a member; God, his Mother, and his disciples graced it with their presence at the marriage feast of Cana; God worked a great miracle at Cana to demonstrate the power of marriage, for there God changed "vile water" into "precious wine," thus showing how "the sexual act [*opus carnale*] without marriage is something vile but within marriage is precious"; the Church blesses the newlyweds during Mass while they are near the altar in the presence of the Body of Our Lord; marriage produces children who become the adopted children of God, and it is the source of virgins; it is one of the seven sacraments; its great power is multiple: It changes what otherwise would be mortal sin into venial sin or no sin at all, it prevents such evils as sterility or abortion, which often result from sex practiced outside of marriage, it establishes peace by uniting families, and it defends man there (in his sexual appetite) where the devil's attacks seem most formidable.²⁰

This is high praise for marriage, and for marriage in its totality including the conjugal act, which is likened to the "precious wine" made by God at Cana. No contemporary of Peraldus reading this passage from his *Summae* or hearing the likes of it preached from the pulpit (or at a wedding, as instanced in *De solemnizatione matrimonii* just quoted) would have felt that marriage was at all suspect in the eyes of the Church or being offered as a poor substitute for some nobler Christian calling. The whole drift of the passage is toward establishing the superiority of marriage above the other orders; and if some special esteem is reserved for the state of virginity, Peraldus offers the reminder that it is the married who are the source of virgins.

²⁰ *Summae virtutum ac vitiorum* (Antverpiae: 1588), lib. I, par. 3, tract. 3, c. xv. Among the English derivatives of Peraldus's moral manual (presumably in and through its French translation, *Somme le Roi*): *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, *Handlyng Sin, Aynbite of Inwyrt*—all of the thirteenth and early fourteenth century.

The woman herself, in and for herself, seems to have profited through such exaltation of marriage. So A. Lecoy de la Marche in his history of the French medieval pulpit says: “the preachers render honor to the woman in gladly exalting the dignity of marriage, in presenting it not only as a sacrament, but a religious order, having its distinctive rule and its particular genre of holiness.”²¹ But this reflected glory becomes all her own as the preachers praise her in her own right. Thus a theologian and preacher of such prominence as Robert de Sorbon (1201–1274), who also preached marriage as a religious order, homilized:

note that God made woman of more beautiful material than man, because he formed woman from the bones of Adam, but Adam from the slime of the earth. Likewise, he made woman in a nobler and more beautiful place than man, because he made man upon earth, but woman in Paradise. And perhaps it is because God has given such honor to women that they honor God more than do men. The man, therefore, must love and honor his wife greatly.²²

The Soul of Marriage: Spousal Love

Also consonant with the best of the theology of the time, marriage appears in the liturgy as holy precisely as *sacramentum*: The indissoluble union itself between husband and wife as reflective of the union of Christ with the Church. When, speaking specifically of Christian marriage, St. Thomas asks the question whether *sacramentum* is principal of the three marriage goods, his answer is that though in the order of finality, progeny and fidelity are of prime importance (they are what marriage “intends”), the *sacramentum* is more noble (*dignius*) than either of the other two and, with respect to marriage as such (*secundum se*), it is more essential (*essentialius*). The first of the marriage goods, offspring, he says, “belongs to marriage insofar as man is animal, the second [fidelity or mutual service] insofar as man is human, and the third [the sacramental union of husband and wife] insofar as he is Christian.”²³ Such was the teaching of St. Thomas and, thus, of Dominicans generally in England as elsewhere in the fourteenth

²¹ Marche, *La chaire Francaise*, 429.

²² As in M. Hauréau, *Notices et extraits de quelques MSS. Lat. de la Bibl. Nat.*, vol. 1 (Paris: 1901 ff.), 188–202. In this same sermon Sorbon speaks of a married burgher who thought someone stupid for having greeted him: “Hail, monk!”—not realizing that that person was thinking of the “order of matrimony.” Sorbon then proceeds to advise the married to learn the rules of their order “as novices do in some [other] order.”

²³ *Summa theologiae*, suppl., q. 49, a. 3; suppl., q. 65, a. 1.

and fifteenth centuries. The Franciscans in the person of Duns Scotus of Oxford in the same period were of like mind:

Marriage by reason of its perpetual bond is the sacrament [symbol] signifying Christ's indissoluble union with the Church. Therefore, the sacrament, as a good of marriage, is intrinsic to marriage itself, and its first formal perfection. But what is the proper formal perfection of each thing has the greater primacy within it (*principalius in ipso*). Therefore the sacrament is chief among the goods of marriage.²⁴

Reflecting back upon the liturgies we have considered, we see the harmonization with the theology here voiced. So throughout the entire nuptial ceremony inclusive of the homily, it is the union, love union, between the spouses that is emphasized, almost to the exclusion of all else. As we have seen, the ceremony begins with such words as: "Lo, brethren, we come here before God and his angels . . . to couple and knit these two bodies together . . . that they might be from this time forth but one body and two souls" or with some statement of the "law of marriage," which (as expressed by the Hereford ritual) is that husband and wife "be two in one flesh, subject to each other, and inseparable." It is the marrying couple who are center stage throughout the entire ceremony, standing or kneeling side by side, close to the altar and apart from all others. In the marriage promises there is the vow "to love and worship" each other till death. In the giving and receiving of the ring, the gold and the silver, there is the reminder that this is a ceremony betokening a love that is rooted in the heart, an "interior love" that must remain always new (*recens*), a love that must be one and perfect (*unitatem et perfectionem amoris*). The Church prays that the woman be loving (*amabilis*) toward her man, and that God join them both "in a society of true love." Just before communion the man, after receiving the kiss of peace from the priest, kisses his bride "alone" and she him "alone." In the evening, after all the festivities are over, the bridal bed is blessed with the newlyweds apparently within or upon it. Of the traditional ends or purposes of marriage, the liturgy mentions procreation only in passing. What is dwelt upon and accentuated is the intimate union in flesh as well as spirit of the "young ones" there present and their projected mutual fidelity until death.

This is a salient point overlooked by critics of the medieval theology on marriage who, consequently, view that theology as justifying marriage only in its procreative intention. Certainly there is heavy stress placed by

²⁴ As in the Franciscan seventeenth-century redaction of Scotus's teaching, *Summa theologica*, tom V, p. III, q. XLIX, a. iii.

St. Thomas, as by others of the best of medieval theologians, on the *bonum prolis*, and it ever remains for him the chief (though not the only) *end* of marriage. But such stress does not preclude his further and heavier emphasis upon the bond itself between the spouses. Husband and wife are, first and fundamentally, for one another, though in and through their union, they must also be for their children and society at large.²⁵ As expressed in the first homily quoted above, the husband must love his wife (as she him) “above every other creature,” including, supposedly, their children.

It should be noted that the liturgy’s many declarations of the holiness of the union between husband and wife do not dehumanize marriage nor do they enfeeble it by any negative qualifications relative to the conjugal act. Once again, the liturgy is one with the best of the theology of the day, this time on the principle of nature being presupposed and perfected, not destroyed, by grace.²⁶ The very first question asked in tracts on marriage in both the Thomistic and Franciscan schools of theology was: “Is marriage natural?” The answer, of course, is a resounding *yes*.²⁷ Only after securing the naturalness of marriage do the theologians consider its supernatural dimension, leaving intact its native properties. So in the liturgy, the love that is to be between the spouses is spoken of as holy and chaste, but it is equally and repeatedly emphasized that bride and groom are to be “one in flesh,”

²⁵ Cf. Aquinas, *ST* II–II, q. 26, a. 11. Of all the love relationships under God that Thomas treats in this question *de ordine caritatis*—love between fellow-citizens, rulers and subjects, simple friends, children for parents, etc.—at the pinnacle stands conjugal love. One should love one’s parents, Thomas concedes, more than one’s spouse by “reverential love” (*maior reverentia*), but the more “intense love” must be for one’s spouse (*intensius diligitur uxor*). There is only one other relationship, not mentioned by Thomas here, that might possibly be conceived of as superior: the love of parent for child. Is it, or should it be, greater than one’s love for one’s spouse? But whatever the reason for Thomas’s silence on this point, his *explicit* teaching is clear enough. For him the greatest love of all (at least as regards “intensity”), under (and within) God, is, or should be, the mutual love of husband and wife.

²⁶ The principle of grace presupposing and perfecting nature is stated time and again by Aquinas, for example, *ST* I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 1; I–II, q. 99, a. 2, ad 1; III, q. 71, a. 1, ad 1; I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2; II–II, q. 26, a. 9, obj. 2.

²⁷ Aquinas, *ST* suppl., q. 41, a. 1; Alexander of Hales, *Summa theologiae*, tom. IV, lib. III, p. II, inq. II, q. IV, mem. III, cap. I, art. I. Alexander of Hales’s *Summa theologiae* (Florence: Quaracchi, 1924–48) was, apparently, not the work of one person alone but of many Franciscan theologians such that, as Etienne Gilson comments, it represents “the spirit of the thirteenth-century Franciscan school of theology at the University of Paris” (Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* [London: 1955], 327).

it is prayed that they be “multiplied,” and at the end of all the marriage *bed* is blessed. True, there is no detailed consideration of the specifically sexual aspects of conjugal love. But this is as we would expect in a public ceremony of this kind, the various rites manifesting a delicacy and modesty and a respect for the privacy of love. Their statements on love are general and positive; the blessing of bridal chamber and bed simple, brief, tactful. There is not a rubric suggesting what ought not to be. Only the epistle of the Mass may seem to strike a negative note with its warning against fornication; but this imposes no limitation upon the love-making between husband and wife. They are to avoid sexual love with others (fornication) since they are to have such love only for one another. It is simply a veiled expression of the *vitatio fornicationis*—marriage as a refuge not from sex but from sexual sin—which St. Paul, and theologians after him, offered as a just motive for marriage. Even here, then, as in the rest of the service, the natural bond between husband and wife is respected and indelicacy avoided. It is as though the last two words of that final rubric after the blessing of the couple in the bridal chamber were meant to express the purpose of the whole of the Church’s nuptial liturgy: “These things done, let him bless them with holy water, and so depart and leave them *in peace*.”

Spousal Equality

In its theology as in its governance the medieval Church has also been found wanting with regard to gender equality, considering woman to be naturally inferior to man and thus, in marriage, to be subject to him. Some of the nuptial liturgy seems to support the accusation. The several rites demand that the wife be obedient to her husband, acknowledge his superiority: she is to be “buxum in bed and at borde,” and in one of the liturgies she is made to kneel before her husband while in another she must also kiss his foot—in feudal token, no doubt, of his lordship. But again as in much of the theology, this obedience is not to be in response to any show of the husband’s superiority and control but rather his love and concern: If she is to obey him, it is because he loves, cherishes, and cares for her. It is also qualified by the more persistent explicit insistence on spousal *equality*. As we have seen, bride and groom are together, side by side, throughout the nuptial ceremony, and if at one or two moments the bride expresses her submission to her spouse, it is she who, as in weddings today, receives the greater honor and attention from groom and priest and therefore, presumably, from congregation. Though she expresses her obedience to her husband-to-be, in one of the rites (Hereford) it is prayed that the obedience be mutual—husband and wife are to be “subject to one another,” and in another (Worcestershire) that “each prefer

the other to oneself” and that they be united in the marriage partnership (*consortium*) “with equal effect, like mind, and mutual charity.” Both marry because they freely choose to do so, which is evidenced by the stern admonitions and questions initially put to them as to the congregation at large. They must be free to marry and must choose each other in freedom, which, as love itself, suggests equality.

Further, in the first of the nuptial homilies quoted above, we find cited the “rib theme” of Genesis used by much of the theology of the time mainly for the enforcement of spousal equality, each spouse giving to as well as receiving from the other. One of the more beautiful expressions of the theme is found in St. Bonaventure. Glossing Genesis 2:21–24, Bonaventure comments that the one sex is taken from the other in order to show the strength and exclusiveness of the bond that must exist between them (*forti vinculo et singulari*). The “operation” is performed while Adam sleeps in symbol of the peace and joy (*quietatio*) the man is meant to experience in union (*coniunctio*) with the woman, and the woman is derived from the man’s “bone” in symbol of the strength and support (*fortitudinem et sustentationem*) she is meant to draw from him. Finally, the woman is taken from her husband’s *side* in proof of the equality that must be in their life together (*equalitas mutuae societatis*).²⁸ The *Summa* of Alexander of Hales, that grand summation of the early Franciscan school of theology, accentuates still more the spousal equality revealed in the creation of Eve, and gives as its authority the prestigious Hugh of St. Victor in his own words:

Woman is made from the side of man that it might be shown that she was created for togetherness in love [*mulier . . . consortium creabatur delectionis*] lest perhaps if she had been made from the head, it might seem that she was to dominate the man, or if from the feet, she was to be subject to him in servitude. Therefore, since what was prepared for man was neither a ruler [*domina*] nor a servant [*ancilla*] but a companion [*socia*], she was created neither from the head nor the feet, but from man’s side, that he might know that she who had been taken from him was to be placed beside him [*iuxta se ponendam*].²⁹

Such exegesis in addition to qualifying the obedience of wife toward husband is also in accord with both the liturgy and the *sacramentum* theology: It allows no considerations external to the couple themselves to distract from the intimacy of their spousal love. In this first moment of

²⁸ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Sentences* (Florence: Quaracchi, 1934–), bk. 2, dist. 18, a. 1, q. 1.

²⁹ Alexander of Hales, *Summa theologiae*, cap. II.

the formation of woman, the theologians, as the liturgy, envision only the mutual relationship of the man and woman. The woman is not viewed as having been produced for the sake of procreation or for society at large or even for the Kingdom of God. Rather she is seen as being for her man, as he for her. For the liturgy, for St. Thomas, St. Bonaventure, Alexander of Hales, Hugh of St. Victor, and the many theologians and preachers influenced by them, the prime social relationship, the very first and best love under God, is evidently that between husband and wife.

Conclusion

Such was the Church's teaching on love and marriage as it was ritualized in late medieval England and often preached to the faithful therein—the countless numbers of rich and poor, nobles and peasants, learned and unlearned, scholars, poets, butchers, bakers—who, like Chaucer's wife of Bath, had been married themselves “before the church door” or had attended, perhaps frequently, the weddings of others. There is formidable indication that the same practice and preaching obtained elsewhere in the Church of that time. Not all, certainly, personally enjoyed such an elaborate affair: many marriages took place quite simply in a private home, many were still clandestine, that is, without benefit of Church or clergy. But for any who wanted to know what their *Church* thought of this particular way of life, they had only to be present at one of her nuptial liturgies—as we have only to read them to appreciate the same. Granted that during those long centuries spanning the early and medieval Church many harsh words, in genuine belief, in sport, or in spite, were spoken about marriage, and by individuals and bodies of individuals of considerable authority and influence. But a far greater authority, as revealed in the nuptial celebrations of the time together with some of the best of theology and preaching by dedicated celibates, had nothing but praise for it, precisely in its dimension of spousal love. We should search out and listen for this also. N V