

The Vocation to Marriage and Related Observations on Christian Discernment

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ONE MAY BE SURPRISED TO LEARN that the term “vocation” as the Magisterium of the Catholic Church has applied it to marriage is of relatively recent origin. It was not until the mid-1960s, when the Council Fathers of Vatican II addressed the matter in three documents, that the most common, permanent state of life was referred to as a vocation.¹ Marriage had always been understood as a natural path to human flourishing but not a personal calling in its own right.² Given the amount of ink spilled on this vocation in the last fifty years, not to mention the public lectures and online dating sites devoted to helping one find one’s spouse, it is notable that the Magisterium has had little to say about a

¹ See the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964) §35, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (November 18, 1965) §2f, and Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965) §47–49, 52.

² That there is a “natural vocation to marriage,” as I have termed it, or the desire written in the human heart to unite with a person of the opposite sex in the bond of marriage, is not our lead consideration here, but rather the personal call in the Christian dispensation to be espoused sacramentally. That being said, the natural vocation to marriage will concern us here as well insofar as it countenances something of the Christian vocation to love. See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) §1603: “The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator.”

vocation to marriage.³ Certainly there is a vocation to holiness for those

³ There are five instances in John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981) where the former pope explicitly refers to a vocation to marriage: "The Church once again feels the pressing need to proclaim the Gospel, that is the 'good news,' to all people without exception, in particular to those who are called to marriage and are preparing for it" §3; "the acceptance of purely civil marriage in contradiction to the vocation of the baptized to 'be married in the Lord'" §7; "[Engaged couples] come to recognize and freely accept their vocation to follow Christ and to serve the Kingdom of God in the married state" §51; "God, who called the couple to marriage, continues to call them in marriage" §51; "Also necessary, especially for Christians, is solid spiritual and catechetical formation that will show that marriage is a true vocation and mission, without excluding the possibility of the total gift of self to God in the vocation to the priestly or religious life" §66. These texts are cited in David Crawford, *Marriage and the Sequela Christi: A Study on Marriage as a State of Perfection in Light of Henri de Lubac's Theology of Nature and Grace* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2004), 79. Aside from these references from the same exhortation, however, the magisterial discourse on the subject is almost nonexistent. Interestingly, Ramon Garcia de Haro asserts that *Gaudium et Spes* speaks of a "'vocation to marriage,' an expression repeatedly adopted in the following numbers (49 to 52)." *Marriage and Family in the Documents of the Magisterium*, trans. William E. May (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 216. In fact, the expression appears only once in *Gaudium et Spes* and this in reference to Christian widows retaining their "call to marriage" (*in continuitate vocationis coniugalis*), which refers to the vocation they had been in, not necessarily what they had originally been called to (see §48). Another instance of a putative magisterial call to marriage is recorded by John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the International Youth Year *Delecti Amici* (March 31, 1985) §10: "When Christ says 'Follow me,' his call can mean: 'I call you to still another love'; but very often it means: 'Follow me,' follow me who am the Bridegroom of the Church who is my bride; come, you too become the bridegroom of your bride, you too become the bride of your spouse. Both of you become sharers in that mystery, that Sacrament, which the Letter to the Ephesians says is something great: great 'in reference to Christ and the Church'" (cf. Eph 5:32). Notice that the marital vocation is not clearly regarded as a call to the state of marriage in this letter, for the quotation implies that the bridegroom and bride already have a bride and spouse, respectively. These matters being considered, Karol Wojtyła's personal writings and less authoritative allocutions as pope convey, as does *Familiaris Consortio*, that he believed there to be a divine vocation to marriage. See Karol Wojtyła's, *Love and Responsibility*, 2nd ed., trans. H. T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 256; John Paul II's General Audience on April 21, 1982; his Homily (December 15, 1994); and, above all, his Address to the Members of the Schönstatt Family Association (April 17, 1998), which I reference later in this essay. See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1986, 2006), 190, 453 for additional references. Benedict XVI's clearest statements on the matter appear to come from his Message to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the 22nd World Youth Day (January 27, 2007): "Do not hesitate to respond generously to the

seeking marriage and those already in the nuptial state, but the notion that certain people are called to the state of Christian matrimony stands in need of critical development.⁴ Does Jesus call certain people to marry, just as he calls others to the priesthood and religious life?⁵ Yes, I want to say, there is truly a specifically Christian vocation *to* marriage.

Relying heavily on the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar and St. John Paul II, I would like to explore the vocation-to-marriage theme within the framework of a developed understanding of the call of Christian

Lord's call, for Christian matrimony is truly and wholly a vocation in the Church," and his Message on the Occasion of the 25th World Youth Day (March 28, 2010): "I also invite those who feel called to marriage to embrace this vocation with faith, working to lay a solid foundation for a love that is great, faithful and receptive to the gift of life. This vocation is a treasure and grace for society and for the Church." Pope Francis contributes to the theme in the following manner: "What is matrimony? It is *a true and proper vocation*, as are the priesthood and religious life. Two Christians who marry have recognized in their history of love the call of the Lord, the vocation of two, male and female, to become only one flesh, only one life. And the Sacrament of Matrimony envelops this love with the grace of God. . . . The family is the vocation that God has written in man's and woman's nature, but there is another vocation that is complementary to marriage: the *call to celibacy and to virginity for the Kingdom of Heaven*." Francis's Address to Young People in Assisi, October 7, 2013, <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/francis-address-to-young-people-in-assisi>. By this last statement, is Francis suggesting that the marital vocation is *simply* natural and common to all? This would not appear to be the case when considering his most recent remarks on the matter: "Marriage responds to a specific vocation and must be considered as a consecration (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 48; *Familiaris consortio*, 56)." General Audience on the Sacrament of Marriage, April 2, 2014, <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/on-the-sacrament-of-marriage>. Apart from these examples, however, there is a noticeable dearth in magisterial discourse on the subject. Among John Paul II's messages on the world day of prayer for vocations given each year from 1979 to 2005, only two mention marriage, and both in reference to the vocation spouses are already in rather than to that which they might be called. Benedict XVI, for his part, did not allude to marriage in his yearly messages concerning vocations, while Francis has taken a general tack thus far, concentrating on the vocation to love for all persons.

⁴ One of the few texts that examines this question in detail is Joseph Bolin's *Paths to Love: The Discernment of Vocation According to the Teaching of Aquinas, Ignatius, and Pope John Paul II* (Seattle: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2008). I am indebted to Bolin for many of the references given in this essay. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, trans. Sr. Mary Francis McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), which will be cited amply herein.

⁵ Still others are called to profess the vows of consecrated life while remaining in the world. See Pius XII's Apostolic Constitution on Secular Institutes *Provida Mater Ecclesia* (February 2, 1947).

discipleship. There are many points worth considering when discerning how to better follow Jesus on the way of love, but perhaps those which this essay addresses have not been sufficiently considered together. It is my claim that none of the matters of vocational discernment presented here, including the formal primacy of consecration, the notion that baptism represents a kind of betrothal stage for persons, and the call to “come” to the evangelical counsels or “go” to marriage, can be adequately understood apart from the others. To see their integration and regard them well is to have a better knowledge base not only for one’s personal discernment, but also for all those one might influence, such as one’s parish, one’s friends, or one’s children.

This essay is presented in two related parts: (1) the call of Christian discipleship and (2) the vocation *to* marriage. The first part, as one might imagine, is considerably longer and more varied. Here I treat both the spirit of the evangelical counsels and spousal love as integrating elements of all Christian vocations. I examine where these elements come from in baptism, what they entail, and by implication what they mean for discerning a particular state in life as one’s divine calling.⁶ It is my hope that the contextual components of this first part will help to indicate my central thesis: Jesus does indeed invite persons in a particular, specialized way to marry in the Church, not unlike he calls others to some form of consecrated celibacy.

The Call of Christian Discipleship

A Truth of Baptism

Let us begin by examining an essential truth of baptism. In this foundational sacrament something happens to the very being of the initiate that transforms all that is natural and personal within him: he dies to himself and rises again with new life in Christ (see Rom 6:3–11).⁷

⁶ An appendix at the end of this essay sketches various models for Christian discernment posed by von Balthasar, John Paul II, and me. It may be helpful to turn to it at different junctures of the argument.

⁷ All Scripture references are taken from the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition. “Having become a member of the Church, the person baptized belongs no longer to himself, but to him who died and rose for us.” CCC §1269. For ease of use

The new Christian has made a complete offering of himself by sharing in Christ's death and thereby becoming, in principle, completely disposable to whatever our Lord may desire of him. Simply by virtue of the sacrament and its promises, Christian discipleship involves renouncing the threefold concupiscence transmitted in original sin—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (cf. 1 Jn 2:16)⁸—and with it, I will argue, any prerogatives one might have in life, such as the right to marry or remain single.⁹ For the Christian as Christian, as a follower

while still connoting the truth that we are all united in “man” (*adam* in Hebrew), masculine pronouns will often be used in this essay to denote both sexes. The implications of baptism are of course the same for females.

⁸ This is not to say that concupiscence does not remain in the Christian, even in the most holy of us, but only that baptism signifies a death to all inordinate desires. “We know that our old self was crucified with him [in baptism] so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom 6:6; cf. Eph 4:22–24 et al). John Paul II indicates a most apt remedy for the threefold concupiscence in the profession of the evangelical counsels: “If, in accordance with Tradition, the profession of the evangelical counsels is *centered on the three points of chastity, poverty and obedience*, this usage seems to emphasize sufficiently clearly their importance as key elements and in a certain sense as a ‘summing up’ of the entire economy of salvation. . . . ‘The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life’ are present deep within man as the *inheritance of original sin*, as a result of which the relationship with the world, created by God and given to man to be ruled by him (cf. Gen 1:28), was disfigured in man’s heart in many ways. In the economy of the Redemption the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience constitute the most efficacious means for transforming in man’s heart this relationship with “the world. . . . In the context of these words taken from the *first letter of St. John*, it is easy to see the extreme importance of the three evangelical counsels in the whole economy of Redemption. For *evangelical chastity* helps us to transform in our interior life everything that arises from the lust of the flesh; *evangelical poverty*, everything that is born from the lust of the eyes; and *evangelical obedience* enables us wholly to reform that which in the human heart proceeds from the pride of life.” Apostolic Exhortation to Men and Women Religious on the Their Consecration in Light of the Mystery of Redemption *Redemptionis Donum* (March 25, 1984) §9. Original emphases.

⁹ This interpretation aligns well with Peter J. Elliot’s remarks in *What God Has Joined . . . The Sacramentality of Marriage* (New York: Alba House, 1990), 67: “The baptized still enjoy the ‘natural right to marry,’ but their baptismal consent makes their matrimonial consent the consent of Christ and his Church, an ecclesial consent—hence subject to the higher morality of the Kingdom and the archetype for that new life of selfless *agape*, the ‘great mystery.’” Cf. Leo XIII, Encyclical on Capital and Labor *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891) §12, on the natural right to marry. While one may not then wish to accede fully to the following claims of St. Alphonsus Liguori, getting married when called to consecrated celibacy is surely not a response of Christian discipleship. “To enter into any state of life the divine

of Christ, all that one possesses and endeavors to do or become has been laid at the feet of Jesus to be given back *or not* as a transformed element of one's personal mission. The quintessential model of Christian discipleship, the Blessed Virgin Mary, reminds us of this truth when responding to the Archangel Gabriel at the annunciation of the Lord: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38) and also when mediating the first miracle of Jesus: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5).¹⁰ The call of Christian discipleship in its root meaning involves entering into the metaphysical reality of baptism in a moral way, in a way like Mary, so as to be entirely ready to do whatever the Lord may ask.

The reader may object by claiming that baptism involves death to sin (Rom 6:10–11), not death to one's prerogatives. The natural inclination to marry is a good thing! What kind of God would want his followers, all of them, to die to a desire that he has written within us at creation? Some immediate distinctions are necessary here. Death to one's prerogatives in life as a necessary step of Christian discipleship does not involve death to the natural desire to commune with a person of the opposite sex nor, indeed, "the natural vocation to marriage" so defined as the only morally legitimate expression of this inclination. Rather baptism involves renouncing one's will as a preemptive disposition for doing the Lord's bidding in his time and in his way. Baptism is a complete immersion. It is a true crucifixion of the old self (Rom 6:6).¹¹ If we have died to our old ways, we should be ready to live according to Christ's call in whatever fashion he should choose. *The Christian call given in baptism is divine*, but not for all that alienating to human nature. Human nature becomes transformed by the grace of baptism, ready to be realized in unexpected ways according to the divine call within. What happens to the natural vocation to marriage then? As with the natural desire for sex, it remains for all persons; but the prerogative to choose this path (or any

vocation is necessary. For without this, if it is not impossible, it is at least most difficult to satisfy the obligations of that state and to be saved. . . . Our eternal salvation depends principally on the choice of our state." *Selva de materie predicabili*, Ch. 10, *Opera di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, vol. 3 (Torino: Marietti, 1880), 78, as cited in Bolin, *Paths of Love*, 54.

¹⁰ Similar statements of loving submission can be found throughout sacred Scripture.

¹¹ In only nine brief verses on baptism, St. Paul mentions death, burial, or crucifixion a total of fifteen times, clearly emphasizing the totality of the deed done. See Rom 6:3–11.

path) precisely as one's vocation in life has been de facto surrendered, to be taken up again (or not) at the Lord's bidding.¹² In short, we have become new creatures in Christ and are expected to act according to his will (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Eph 2:15, 4:14; Col 3:10).¹³

The Spirit of the Counsels

Another manner of expressing the radicalness of the call of discipleship or, we could just as easily say, the radicalness of the *call to love* incumbent upon all Christians (see Jn 13:34–35, 15:12–17),¹⁴ is to indicate its inextricable link to the spirit of consecrated life. It is in the evangelical counsels—poverty, chastity, and obedience—as the Church's tradition has frequently conveyed, that one best responds to Christ's summons to “be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).¹⁵ This is because living the counsels implies holding nothing back for oneself in order to share more deeply in Christ's own self-offering for others. It means making a spiritual holocaust of all that might stand in the path of accomplishing God's will, in God's time, and in God's way. While the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience are determined, as Balthasar tells us, by a “qualitative, special, differentiated call” to certain individu-

¹² As I understand it, this is an ontological implication of baptism. If true, it remains for the Christian to morally appropriate his vocation in life in accord with this grace. The question here then is not whether Christians commonly surrender their prerogatives to God, but whether they should be encouraged to do so.

¹³ It is not as if one called to consecrated life has two vocations, a natural one to marriage and a supernatural one to the evangelical counsels. The natural vocation to commune with a person of the opposite sex has been renounced by the celibate in its common physical form as copulation, but not in its purified form as giving oneself away in loving communion. Analogously, the person called to Christian marriage does not possess two different calls to marriage, one divine and one human. The human vocation has been assumed into one Christian vocation through grace without eradicating any of its natural *eros*.

¹⁴ Because everyone is meant to follow Christ, the call to love extends to all persons. See John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* §11: “Love is . . . the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.”

¹⁵ Beginning with the following statement of Jesus himself—“If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor . . . and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21)—Catholic theologians have often described the vowed life of poverty, chastity, and obedience as “the state of perfection.” For a rather thorough summary of this teaching, see Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 258.

als,¹⁶ clearly the *spirit* of the counsels is meant for everyone.¹⁷ Balthasar makes the connection between the vocation of every Christian to the “perfection of love”¹⁸ and the spirit of the counsels when he observes,¹⁹ “The ‘spirit’ of the evangelical counsels is quite simply the spirit of the Church; the one who lives with the mind of the Church lives with the mind of agape.”²⁰

It is logical that the spirit of the counsels should permeate the entire life of the Church, rising up from the roots; even when Christians have possessions, determine themselves, marry, they must do so in the spirit of self-renouncing love: they must possess as if they had no possessions, dispose as if only God were disposing, be married as though they were not married (1 Cor 7:29–31).²¹

¹⁶ Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 148.

¹⁷ As John Paul II writes, “the call to perfection belongs to the very essence of the *Christian vocation*.” *Redemptionis Donum*, 4.

¹⁸ Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 9–10 et al. Cf. *Lumen Gentium* §39–40 and John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and the World *Vita Consecrata* (March 25, 1996) §30, inter alia.

¹⁹ Perhaps more than anyone in the history of the Church to date, Balthasar examines the evangelical counsels as they pertain to the call to perfect love. For an exhaustive list of his original works on the counsels, see *The Laity and the Life of the Counsels: The Church's Mission in the World*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V., with D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 285–88.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 242. The Swiss priest is aided in his argument by the Gospel account of the rich young man who comes to Jesus bearing the claim that he follows the commandments given during Moses's time. Jesus says to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21). If this is what it means to be perfect, then love requires the disponibility enlisted in the evangelical counsels. Such is why the state of living the counsels is commonly referred to as “the state of perfection.” But if we are all called to “be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48), then in some way each of us is called to live the counsels as integral to the perfection of love. For arguments to this effect, see in particular David S. Crawford's work on the states of life: “Christian Community and the States of Life: A Reflection on the Anthropological Significance of Virginity and Marriage,” *Communio* 29 (2002): 344; “Love, Action, and Vows as ‘Inner Form’ of the Moral Life,” *Communio* 32 (2005): 295–312; *Marriage and the Sequela Christi*; and “Of Spouses, the Real World, and the ‘Where’ of Christian Marriage,” *Communio* 33 (2006): 100–116.

In his apostolic exhortation on the consecrated life, *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II affirms Balthasar's understanding of the counsels in his own way:

In the Church's tradition religious profession is considered to be *a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration received in Baptism*, inasmuch as it is the means by which the close union with Christ already begun in Baptism develops in the gift of a fuller, more explicit and authentic configuration to him through the profession of the evangelical counsels. This further consecration, however, differs in a special way from baptismal consecration, of which it is not a necessary consequence. In fact, all those reborn in Christ are called to live out, with the strength which is the Spirit's gift, the chastity appropriate to their state of life, obedience to God and to the Church, and a reasonable detachment from material possessions: for all are called to holiness, which consists in the perfection of love.²²

In the initial point of departure for the Christian, the sacrament of baptism, the former pope finds both the *spirit* of the counsels, which are advantageous for all persons because all are called to be holy, as well as the basis for another consecration to take hold, that is, the *state* of the counsels as such. This latter consecration requires its own specific call.

Both of these points, the universal efficacy of the *spirit* of the counsels and the personal call to the *state* of the counsels, are important to understand for our analysis of the vocation to marriage because they shed light on the "default position" for people discerning their calling in life. Beginning with baptism, all Christians are called to imbibe the *spirit* of the counsels to such a degree that they will be entirely ready to do the Lord's bidding and advance in the perfection of love, as Balthasar and John Paul have conveyed. The first stage of vocational discernment therefore involves living the spirit of consecrated life according to whatever familial, social, and professional path one finds oneself.²³ If it is lived

²² John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* §30. Original emphasis. Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical on the Splendor of Truth *Veritatis Splendor* (August 6, 1993) §16–21.

²³ On a still more individual level, the "path one finds oneself in" should also be a response to a call. Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw call this the "personal vocation" as distinguishable from the vocation to Christian discipleship and the vocation to a

well, it follows that one will be increasingly receptive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and, in turn, increasingly receptive to the possibility of being led to a “further consecration,” the *state* of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The possibility of being called to consecrated life, to “a fuller, more explicit and authentic configuration” to Christ, logically implies two additional directives: (1) not all Christians are called to this state and (2) whatever path a person finds himself in will be informed by the “fuller” state to the extent that it is lived as an authentic expression of the basic Christian call.²⁴

Spousal Love

Earlier in *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul describes the inclusion of the counsels in the Christian way of life in a slightly different but equally significant way: “*the consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church* as a decisive element for her mission, because it ‘manifests the inner nature of the Christian calling’ and the striving of the whole Church as Bride toward union with her one Spouse.”²⁵ Notice that John Paul resists the idea of confining consecrated life to a personal discipline or work of mortification, even though he does not deny this dimension. Instead, he highlights the fact that the counsels are at the root of the call of Christian discipleship to *spousal love*. In a word, consecration is meant to be lived *for another*. This manner of describing consecrated life within the auspice of spousal love was proposed earlier by the pope in a message he gave during his Wednesday audiences on the theology of the body:

state in life. *Personal Vocation: God Calls Everyone by Name* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor), 2003. A review of the book has been written by Nicholas C. Lund-Molfese in *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* 27 (2004), <http://lundmolfese.com/nicholas/texts/personalvocationreview.html>. Cf. Nicholas C. Lund-Molfese, “The Christian Duty of Discerning, Accepting and Faithfully Living a Personal Vocation,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 46 (2001), <http://www.lundmolfese.com/nicholas/texts/grisezonvocation.html>.

²⁴ “The profession of the evangelical counsels . . . appears as a sign which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation.” *Lumen Gentium* §44. Such is the basis for the formal primacy of consecrated life to be considered at the end of this first part.

²⁵ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* §3. Original emphasis.

Continence “for the kingdom of heaven” . . . has become in the experience of the disciples and followers of Christ an act of *particular response to the love* of the Divine Bridegroom, and therefore *acquired the meaning of an act of spousal love*, that is, of a spousal gift of self with the end of answering in a particular way the Redeemer’s spousal love; a gift of self understood as a *renunciation*, but realized above all *out of love*.²⁶

Rather than vanquishing the natural desire (*eros*) to commune with a person of the opposite sex, John Paul implies that baptism and the spirit of the counsels it engenders serve as the foundation for remedying any disorders latent in *eros* by transforming them in Christian love (*agape*).²⁷ If he is correct, then persons discerning a particular state of life are called to be completely ready to do whatever the Lord may ask of them, live in a spirit of poverty, chastity, and obedience so as to remain united to Christ and deepen their own loving responsiveness to the Spirit within, and give of themselves in a manner consistent with “the Redeemer’s spousal love.”

What defines such spousal love?

The analogy of the love of spouses (or spousal love) seems to *emphasize* above all *the aspect of God’s gift of himself* to man who is chosen “from ages” in Christ (literally, his gift of self to “Israel,” to the “Church”); a gift that in its essential character, or as gift, total (or, rather, “radical”) and irrevocable. . . . In this way the analogy

²⁶ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 437. Original emphases. John Paul II advances the theme of virginity’s inner ordination to spousal love throughout *Vita Consecrata*, in *Redemptionis Donum* §11, and in his Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women *Mulieris Dignitatem* (August 15, 1988) §20–21, *inter alia*. “One cannot correctly understand virginity—a woman’s consecration in virginity—without referring to spousal love. It is through this kind of love that a person becomes a gift for the other. Moreover, a man’s consecration in priestly celibacy or in the religious state is to be understood analogously.” *Mulieris Dignitatem* §20. Original emphases.

²⁷ This transformation of *eros* by *agape* does not abolish the former love, but rather orients it to its proper fulfillment within and under, so to speak, specifically Christian love. See Benedict XVI, Encyclical on Christian Love *Deus Caritas Est* (December 25, 2005) §7–17.

of spousal love indicates the “radical” character of grace: of the whole order of created grace.²⁸

By understanding spousal love as the complete giving of oneself over to another in love and applicable to “the whole order of created grace,” John Paul illustrates that whatever vocation the Christian is called to will necessitate a “total . . . and irrevocable gift” of oneself. To love someone *completely* and *forever* is evidently what it means to live the perfection of love, the vocation proper to all persons.

Two Specific Ways to Realize the Vocation of Love

Granting that all persons are called, in the Christian dispensation, to give of themselves in the manner noted above, are there any states of life besides consecration that habituate this love? In perhaps his most famous teaching on the states of life, John Paul testifies that

Christian revelation recognizes two specific ways of realizing the vocation of the human person, in its entirety, to love: marriage and virginity or celibacy. Either one is, in its own proper form, an actuation of the truth of man, of his being “created in the image of God.”²⁹

The pope suggests that if one wishes to follow the call of Christian discipleship and live in the perfection of love, he has essentially two paths to discern: sacramental marriage or consecrated celibacy. It is only in the complete gift-of-self in spousal love to Christ directly, or to Christ through one’s spouse, that one can become spent in the manner of love made complete, as Christ to his Heavenly Father or Christ to the Church (to extend the analogies), because only here do the ways themselves express one’s holding nothing back for oneself.³⁰ The single life, on the other

²⁸ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 501. Original emphases.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* §11; cf. §16: “Marriage and virginity or celibacy are two ways of expressing and living the one mystery of the covenant of God with His people.”

³⁰ This is not to say, of course, that either marriage or celibacy relinquishes its direct object of love, which for a married person is his or her spouse and for a consecrated celibate is Jesus. Rather, consecrated and married persons each participate in the Redeemer’s

hand, is “on the way” toward a full gift of self in either of the “two specific ways.”³¹ Of course, a single person who has yet to be incarnated in his particular chosen state can be just as holy as another in marriage or consecrated celibacy. The point here, however, is that the baptismal state of single people is not per se characterized by the *advanced* spousal love to which all Christians are called.³² The reason for this distinction is that marriage and celibacy alone are recognizable for their *exclusive* and *irrevocable* love. By being covenanted to one’s spouse in the sacrament of matrimony or by being vowed to direct union with Christ in holy virginity or celibacy,³³ persons are elevated to states objectively characterized by the special, communal love of God. While the single life of the baptized shares in the same reality of the particular states, it cannot be said to meet the characteristic marks of perfect love to the same degree.³⁴

spousal love in different ways owing to the intelligibility of their respective states.

³¹ Balthasar avers: “No one would think of setting up, in addition to the married state and the state of election, a separate *third state* [as destiny] for those men who remain single in the world. Because of the multitude of human destinies, particularly after the Fall and its consequences, there will, of course, always be destinies that cannot be subsumed under the usual, more general, forms: There will be those who because of some illness of soul or body are not suited for marriage and thus find themselves compelled to live unmarried in the world; perhaps also those who want to remain true to a love for another person that cannot be realized on this earth; or those who belong in the state of election but for some exterior reason—such as the care of someone close to them—cannot enter it. But no teaching about the states of life can be constructed on the basis of these exceptions, which, given the limitless variety and contingencies of human destinies, cannot fail to exist.” *Christian State of Life*, 236–37.

³² That baptism already signifies one’s spousal love of Christ is not in dispute. As stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “The entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already Baptism, the entry into the People of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath which precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist. Christian marriage in its turn becomes an efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church. Since it signifies and communicates grace, marriage between baptized persons is a true sacrament of the New Covenant.” CCC §1617. But John Paul II is indicating that the universal call to perfect love summons us to seek a still deeper intimation of spousal love in one of the “two specific ways.”

³³ Perhaps it is more apt to consider priests (and all other consecrated men) acting *in persona Christi* and therefore espoused to the feminine Church rather than Christ. See Eph 5:23–32 and Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Women Priests? A Marian Church in a Fatherless and Motherless Culture,” *Communio* 22 (1995): 164–70.

³⁴ Certainly this is a difficult teaching for many who have entered the twilight of their lives without discerning a particular calling in life. More likely, such persons have thought they were called to marriage or the consecrated life as John Paul has taught,

We can furthermore see how the internal orders of virginity and marriage are related ontologically insofar as the states proceed from the sacrament of baptism and are inclusive of the spirit of the counsels and spousal love, as noted above. This means that married persons can look to the consecrated state as a model for the life of the counsels, and consecrated persons can regard the married state to better recognize their own calling to spousal love.³⁵ By delineating “two specific ways” to perfect love, John Paul is securing the notion that marriage and celibacy are both structurally disposed to orient persons to total self-giving in view of and in participation with “the Redeemer’s spousal love.”³⁶

Balthasar would surely agree with this line of reasoning because he thinks the new commandment of Christ to love as he has loved us

is the canon for every Christian love, including marital love and fidelity. Indeed, it is only because Christ bestowed anew from above upon the mystery of physical fecundity the infinitely deeper mystery of the *spiritual fecundity of faith, hope and*

but the means for living in one of these states has escaped them. Those in such a (albeit painful) quandary might consider living a consecrated life in the world, that is, making some combination of the public vows in their own habitat. The larger point, however, is that the *state* and not the *person* of the baptized is lacking in the perfection of love. Christians who, through no fault of their own, have not entered a permanent state of life have committed no sin; they are surely capable of living saintly lives by the grace of baptism.

³⁵ “This is also the basis of a specific *convergence between the virginity* of the unmarried woman and *the motherhood* of the married woman. This convergence moves not only from motherhood towards virginity, as emphasized above; it also moves from virginity towards marriage, the form of woman’s vocation in which she becomes a mother by giving birth to her children. The starting point of this second analogy is *the meaning of marriage*. A woman is ‘married’ either through the sacrament of marriage or spiritually through marriage to Christ. *In both cases marriage* signifies the ‘sincere gift of the person’ of the bride to the groom. In this way, one can say that the profile of marriage is found spiritually in virginity. And does not physical motherhood also have to be a spiritual motherhood, in order to respond to the whole truth about the human being who is a unity of body and spirit? Thus there exist many reasons for discerning in these two different paths—the two different vocations of women—a profound complementarity, and even a profound union within a person’s being.” John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* §21. See *ibid.* §17–22. Cf. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* §16. David Crawford considers virginity and marriage “mutually disclosing and interiorly related.” *Marriage and the Sequela Christi*, 296.

³⁶ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 437.

love and, with it, the spirit of poverty, chastity and obedience that marriage can be raised within the Christian Church to the dignity of a sacrament. It can be so only by sharing in the spirit of Christ on the Cross.³⁷

The Swiss priest draws a compelling conclusion:

Hence Christian marriage cannot be understood if it is regarded primarily as a natural institution with a particular form of natural love that was later “raised” by the sacrament in the state of grace. It must be interpreted a priori from above, in terms of the Christian act that established it as marriage—the act of living Christian faith that always includes love and hope and in which marriage vows are exchanged.³⁸

Perhaps this last quotation will cause the reader some consternation. Does not the Church’s definition of the sacrament of marriage as recorded in canon law and confirmed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* depict marriage as a “covenant between baptized persons [which] has been *raised* by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament”?³⁹ While true, it is important to recognize the difference between this statement and Balthasar’s depiction above. Balthasar is intimating that Christian marriage, which is made possible only by the irrevocable consent of *baptized* persons, is not reducible to the natural institution of marriage; nor should it be considered this way. Because baptism raises persons to divine Sonship by grace and faith, those contracting marriage within the basic Christian state already live “from above,” upon the mountain of the Lord as it were. While the sacrament of marriage “has been raised” and, as such, is an elevated state, this does not mean that Christians

³⁷ Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 244. Original emphasis.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 229. The origin and purpose of Christian marriage is supernatural, he writes.

³⁹ Emphasis added. “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.” *Code of Canon Law* (1983), can. 1055; CCC §1601; see also Leo XIII, Encyclical on Christian Marriage *Arcanum* (February 10, 1880) §9 and *Gaudium et Spes* §48.

consent to this sacrament from a place marked only by nature or by a nature yet transformed by grace. The bond they are consenting to is an elevated one firstly because it is formed by the consent of two *Christians*. Although the sacrament of matrimony brings an additional grace, an additional elevation, to the individual state of baptized persons, this added grace emboldens an already graced state, not a mere natural love. To follow the metaphor, the sacrament of marriage does not raise two persons from the wilderness to the Lord's mountain;⁴⁰ it raises two persons who are already upon the mountain, further up the ascent.⁴¹

Balthasar is here providing a critical insight for interpreting the difference Christ makes in vocational discernment. It is imperative to see that the natural yearning for marriage as pronounced at the dawn of creation: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28; cf. Gen 2:24) is not a sufficient criterion for discerning a state of life in the Christian dispensation. As St. Augustine of Hippo recognized, the command to "Be fruitful and multiply" was also given to the fish and birds (Gen 1:22), and presumably all other animals without the cognitive faculty, which is to say the command corresponds in the most literal sense to an inclination inscribed in the nature of living things to propagate their own species.⁴² This desire in its most basic sense remains even for those in consecrated life and those in heaven.⁴³ In fact, it cannot be separated from one's humanity any more than the natural desire to safeguard one's life or eat or sleep. The natural vocation to marriage, because it pertains to everyone, cannot therefore be the deciding factor in discerning a *specifically Christian* vocation in life. We must consider instead how baptized persons should discern their vocation from their elevated state, from their state of Marian disponibility informed by the spirit of the evangelical counsels and oriented to the complete and forever giving (and receiving) of "the

⁴⁰ This is what baptism does.

⁴¹ "The baptized man and woman who enter Marriage are agents of Christ, already raised to the supernatural order and empowered to act for a supernatural end." Elliot, *What God Has Joined*, 66.

⁴² St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John Hammond Taylor, S.J. (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 89. On the natural inclinations, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ST) I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

⁴³ Especially in heaven, the natural desire for sex is completely transformed by *agape*. Even still, the desire is reordered, not obliterated.

Redeemer's spousal love."⁴⁴ While the natural vocation to marriage has not been nullified by the basic Christian call to love as Christ has loved us (Jn 13:34; Eph 5:2), nor does it exist apart from or in opposition to this call on a kind of parallel track. The natural vocation to marriage, properly understood, is either assumed into the call of Christian matrimony or reordered to spiritual communion in the call to consecrated celibacy. In neither case, after one dies to self in baptism and becomes willing to let Jesus make demands on one's life, does the natural vocation to marriage have "pride of place" in Christian discernment.

*Baptism as an Analogue of Betrothal*⁴⁵

How then might we better identify this basic Christian state of discernment relative to the "two specific ways"? In light of our observations thus far on the call of Christian discipleship taking shape in either the sacrament of matrimony or consecrated celibacy, both of which assimilate the spirit of the counsels and spousal love in different ways, it is evident that the baptized state of single people is a kind of betrothal stage for such persons. It is a form of betrothal insofar as it comprises a waiting period marked by continence, and poverty and obedience at least spiritually, while also being ordered to spousal love. As such, the basic Christian state of life includes the spirit of both "specific ways" in itself, while not being either state materially. Consecration and the sacrament of marriage proceed from this "already-not yet" state as from a third way that is *formally inclusive of them*. Of course this third way is not a destiny

⁴⁴ While the full exposition of this consideration will take the better part of this essay, at this point the reader should have a sense of the different form discernment takes for one who has given his life over to Christ as distinct from one who relies simply on his natural resources. For the Christian as Christian, Marian disponibilty—recognizable in the vowed life of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and oriented to the complete and forever giving (and receiving) of spousal love—is the determinative attitude of vocational discernment.

⁴⁵ By proposing baptism as an analogue of betrothal or a kind of betrothal, I do not mean to suggest that the fundamental sacrament of grace bears all of the characteristic marks of ancient Israelite betrothal or an engagement period today. Rather, I am suggesting that the logic that is inclusive of the ethea of consecration and spousal love is consistent in all kinds of betrothal, the state of the baptized single person being one such instance.

in itself; it is a state of initiation and preparation, not completion.⁴⁶ It is also not a path to which some persons are called and others not. It is not a “qualitative, special, differentiated call” as Balthasar identifies the consecrated life. Rather, all persons are called to baptism—the fundamental state of disponible, ready love.

Identifying the baptismal state as a kind of betrothal to God and others in him is fitting also in light of Mary and Joseph’s marriage, which is characterized not only by spousal love, but also by poverty and chastity, and even obedience in the specific sense considering their responses to God’s messengers (see Lk 1:35–38; Mt 1:20–24, 2:13–14). Mary was in fact *betrothed* when she conceived the Son of God (Mt 1:18; Lk 1:27).⁴⁷ Because the Holy Family represents the “icon and model of every human family,”⁴⁸ Mary and Joseph’s chaste yet fruitful love is programmatic in some sense for all people.⁴⁹ Again, their state was one of marriage and family life, but it was also inclusive of the evangelical counsels in such a way as to enfold both “specific ways” in itself.⁵⁰ Their relationship thus

⁴⁶ The claim here (at least initially) is rather academic—the way or state itself of baptism-betrothal is not a state of completion. Pastorally and in practice, many find it difficult to enter either of the specific ways of perfection for one reason or another. My argument does not dispute this reality. It does, however, give evidence to the fact that the universal call to perfect love entails the sincere attempt to give oneself over in love totally and forever, meaning that a person in the so-called “betrothal period” of Christian discipleship should be on the lookout for a way to consecrate him or herself to the Lord, directly in celibacy or indirectly in Christian marriage.

⁴⁷ It should be noted that betrothal (*’aras*) in ancient Israel was the first stage of marriage, not simply a promise to marry. Contractually, Mary and Joseph’s betrothal included all of the elements of marriage save for cohabitation-consummation. See the Jewish Encyclopedia Website, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3229-betrothal>, with relevant citations. Cf. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 32–34.

⁴⁸ John Paul II, Letter to Families *Gratissimam Sane* (February 2, 1994) §23.

⁴⁹ Marc Cardinal Ouellet is convinced that Mary and Joseph’s relationship “lacked none of the requisites for a true marriage.” Citing St. Augustine of Hippo, he writes, “In these parents of Christ all of the goods of marriage were realized: offspring (*proles*), faithfulness (*fides*) and the bond (*sacramentum*).” Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* I.13.11 in PL 44.421, as cited in Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 118.

⁵⁰ “This mutual spousal love, to be completely ‘fairest love,’ requires that [Joseph] should take Mary and her Son into his own house in Nazareth. Joseph obeys the divine message and does all that he had been commanded (cf. Mt 1:24). And so, thanks also to Joseph, *the mystery of the Incarnation* and, together with it, the mystery of the Holy Family, *come to be profoundly inscribed in the spousal love of husband*

appears as analogous to the betrothal form of baptism; in fact, their relationship bears divine fruit precisely when it is identified as *betrothal*.⁵¹ Of course, Mary and Joseph's marriage was not a waiting period, like the baptismal state, for another more particular state, but the fact that their relationship was neither typical of marriage nor celibacy in the Christian dispensation and yet was inclusive of both of these paths suggests they lived their life in an analogous form of betrothal.⁵²

The evidence for the basic Christian state as a form of betrothal receives another commendation in view of heaven where an analogous instance of the triune logic of consecration-betrothal-marriage is apparent. In heaven, persons "neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Mk 12:25), nor are they poor or subject to a religious superior. This does not mean that the spirit of poverty and obedience, as marks of the perfection of love, are not manifested in God's immediate presence in exemplary fashion. That is just the point though—neither spousal love

and wife and, in an indirect way, in the genealogy of every human family. What Saint Paul will call the 'great mystery' found its most lofty expression in the Holy Family. Thus the *family* truly takes its place *at the very heart of the New Covenant*." John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane* §20. Original emphases.

⁵¹ While I have identified a so-called "third state" in the Christian dispensation, like Balthasar, I do not think we should confuse this state with one of the *specific ways* Christians are called to as destiny, because the perfection of love to which all are called is characterized by the complete and irrevocable marks of spousal love. "Care must be exercised that these borderline forms [of *potentially* belonging to the state of election or marriage for reasons beyond one's control or prudential means] . . . do not lead to the belief that a *kind of 'third state'* between the married state and the state of election is normal and even to be striven for. If such a 'third state' were actually recognized as valid, it would seriously endanger the Christian radicalism of both the Christian married state and the Christian state of election." Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 237–38. Original emphasis.

⁵² To anticipate a possible response—"But they were married!"—I reply: "But they were consecrated celibates!" *Both are true*—which is why we can recognize the betrothal quality of their state. Betrothal must not be placed in opposition to marriage or celibacy, but rather seen as a form of life integral to both. On the "small t" tradition that Joseph and Mary were consecrated to the Lord prior to their betrothal and marriage, see such works as Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 1996), in particular the Gospel of James (A.D. 120), Maraia Cecilia Baij, O.S.B., *The Life of St. Joseph*, trans. Hubert J. Mark (No city given: Mr. Hubert Joseph Mark, 1996), and Maria Valtorta, *The Poem of the Man-God*, vol. 1, trans. Nicandro Piccozi (Isola del Liri Frosinone, Italy: Centro Editoriale Valtortiano, 1986). As something of an aficionado of narrative private revelation, I can testify that I have not encountered the contrary position.

nor consecration is lived in the eschaton as we know it, and yet they are surely present and endemic to the lives of the saints. Even the religious vow of chastity would seem to be present yet different in heaven insofar as the spousal relationship with Christ, which specifies it would be opened up in the best possible manner to include his mystical body.⁵³ Because we are not then speaking of marriage or consecration in heaven in the fashion lived now, but rather a state that includes the ethos of both, it may be helpful to consider eternal betrothal as an expression of the heavenly state. Something of this is captured by the prophet Hosea when writing of God's relationship with his people: "And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord (Hos 2:19–20)."⁵⁴

It would of course be presumptuous and eisegetical to draw from this passage the conclusion that the saints must therefore be betrothed to Christ and others in heaven, and yet, in light of the fact that the saints are no longer bound in matrimony or religious life, it certainly seems credible to postulate (eternal) betrothal as an apt analogue of their state. This explanation also seems fitting in view of baptism and the relationship between Mary and Joseph, as previously described. In each case—the basic Christian state, the exemplary Christian state, and the eschatological Christian state—the formal interrelation of celibacy and marriage is apparent in a third way typical of betrothal. Indeed, if the triune logic of consecration, betrothal, and marriage is apparent in even one of the states just noted, must it not also hold for all three states considering the inalterable character of human nature?

In point of fact, the analogue of betrothal as a third state inclusive of consecration and marriage is descriptive also of the prelapsarian relationship of Adam and Eve, which suggests it is *naturally archetypical*. Adam and Eve were married in the Garden of Eden, as expressed

⁵³ "Spousal love—with its maternal potential hidden in the heart of the woman as a virginal bride—when joined to Christ, the Redeemer of each and every person, is also predisposed to being open to each and every person." John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* §21.

⁵⁴ See also St. Paul's depiction of the relationship of the Corinthians to Jesus: "I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband" (2 Cor 11:2).

in Adam's nuptial soliloquy and the preceding command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28, 2:23–24). This has been confirmed by the Magisterium.⁵⁵ Balthasar is also of this position.⁵⁶ Still, as many Fathers of the Church argued, our first parent's relationship in "Paradise," was marked by virginal detachment, perhaps even lacking consummation.⁵⁷ Balthasar surmises this position:

Since man's disposition in this [original] state was one of perfect obedience, perfect virginity and perfect poverty, we may conclude that, as an inner disposition, the three counsels express the highest perfection of love to which man can attain by grace. But since, in man's original state, God had not yet expressed a preference for one of the various states of life, the inner disposition that finds expression in the vows was identical with their outer fulfillment.⁵⁸

Adam and Eve, before the fall, were evidently both fecund and virginal, in one manner or another; hence their state was uniquely inclusive of spousal love and consecration, as is betrothal.

To summarize, in the basic Christian call of discipleship, which begins by the infusion of grace and faith in baptism, persons are called to the ready and available love of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is a love that simultaneously incorporates the spirit of the evangelical counsels and spousal love without being either consecrated life or marriage in the conventional sense. In fact, because there are only "two specific ways," that is, two states that of themselves embody the complete and forever qualities of the perfection of love to which all persons are called, *the baptismal state of single persons is best understood as a period of waiting like betrothal*. This analogous betrothal period, I have argued, and not the natural desire or

⁵⁵ See Council of Trent, Session XXIV, Doctrine Concerning the Sacrament of Matrimony (November 11, 1563) §969, Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* §12, and Pius XI, Encyclical on Christian Marriage *Casti Connubii* (December 31, 1930) §8.

⁵⁶ See Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 93.

⁵⁷ See *ibid.*, 83–129. To mention this latter interpretation is not to confirm it. John Paul II, for his part, speaks of the "man's original virginal value" while describing the rediscovery of the mystery of creation in the conjugal act. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 167.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

right to marry, is the “default position” for Christian vocational discernment.⁵⁹ It should be evident that this waiting stage is not bereft of intelligibility in such fashion as to leave those discerning in a state of bewilderment (what do I do now?), as clearly it is meant to be lived with poverty, chastity, and obedience *for others*, that is, according to “the Redeemer’s spousal love.” Still, at least one further consideration is in order before we examine directly the vocation to sacramental marriage.

The Formal Primacy of Consecration

As was mentioned when discussing how living perfect love requires living the spirit of the evangelical counsels, the consecrated life has traditionally been understood as the Christian “state of perfection.”⁶⁰ This is because the state of living poverty, chastity, and obedience in the most concrete sense is the state lived by Jesus of Nazareth. It is a state defined by disponible love for whatever God wills one to do, in God’s time, and in God’s way. It is characterized by an exclusive and permanent spousal love for God in Christ that signifies the complete self-offering of the consecrated person to the life of perfection.⁶¹ Marriage, on the other hand, represents an indirect path to the perfection of love fraught with dangers not typically encountered in consecrated life. “The married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his

⁵⁹ We will continue to examine this point in the following discussion. The basic contention here is that the natural end of the desire to bind oneself physically to a person of the opposite sex as one’s destiny for life *is renounced* in baptism in an ontological way, according to the character of the sacrament. This reality no doubt assists baptized persons to remain completely disponible to the Lord’s manifest will in a moral way, even as—we surely wish to hold—the formal qualities indicative of the natural desire for sexual relations remain in perpetuity. They can be seen in each of the states just mentioned that mirror betrothal. If one is later called by God to enter sacramental marriage, such a personalized divine calling, which is often revealed in tandem with specific yearnings of nature (cf. 1 Cor 7:9), should work in complete harmony with the desire for sexual relations, which God originally implanted on the human heart.

⁶⁰ For St. Thomas’s position on the matter, see especially *ST II-II*, q. 184.

⁶¹ Marriage may also be understood as a state of perfection insofar as Jesus calls *everyone* to “be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48) while clearly offering marriage as a state to live out the perfection of love. This is yet another signification that marriage incorporates the “spirit” of consecration within it. For arguments to this effect, see Crawford’s work as noted above.

interests are divided” (1 Cor 7:33–34). In light of such observations, it is understandable why the Fathers of the Council of Trent proclaimed, “If anyone says that the married state is to be preferred to (*anteponendum*) the state of virginity or celibacy, and that it is not better and happier to remain in virginity or celibacy than to be united in matrimony [cf. Mt 19:11f.; 1 Cor 7:25f., 28:40]: let him be anathema.”⁶² This is of course no outdated stipulation. The “Christian tradition has always spoken of the *objective superiority of the consecrated life*,” writes John Paul II.⁶³ He comments further:

The Gospel puts forward *the ideal of the consecration of the person*, that is, the person’s exclusive dedication to God by virtue of the evangelical counsels: in particular, chastity, poverty and obedience. Their perfect incarnation is Jesus Christ himself. Whoever wishes to follow him in a radical way chooses to live according to these counsels. They are distinct from the commandments and show the Christian the radical way of the Gospel.⁶⁴

What concerns me here is how this superiority—a *formal* primacy because the form or spirit of consecration imbues every Christian path⁶⁵—

⁶² Council of Trent, Session XXIV §969–82. “Of course, it is not Our intention to deny that Catholic spouses, because of the example of their Christian life, can, wherever they live and whatever be their circumstances, produce rich and salutary fruits as a witness to their virtue. Yet whoever for this reason argues that it is preferable to live in matrimony than to consecrate oneself completely to God, without doubt perverts the right order.” Pius XII, Encyclical on Consecrated Virginity *Sacra Virginitas* (March 25, 1954) §42. See also *Sacra Virginitas* more generally; *ST* II-II, q. 152, a. 3–4; John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* §16; and John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* §32, *inter alia*.

⁶³ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* §18. Original emphasis. It is noteworthy that the pope who has written more on marriage than all other pontiffs combined esteems consecrated life just as highly as the tradition he inherited. It bespeaks the realization that consecration and marriage are interrelated in the spirit of the counsels and spousal love—to properly value one is to value the other; to discredit one is to defame the other.

⁶⁴ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* §20. Original emphasis.

⁶⁵ Balthasar writes: “the state of election is *forma sui et totius* (the form of itself and of the whole),” meaning it governs also “the state of the commandments” or the “second state” relative to it. “The second state of life within the Church is not an end in itself, but is ordered to the first just as everything higher in the Church is higher only because it renders or may render and is ready to render greater service.” *Christian State of Life*, 205. Marriage falls within the second state, according to Balthasar.

makes a difference for vocational discernment. It is my position that each Christian should give *pride of place* to discerning the consecrated life as his or her personal call to love. It is already clear that this is the way of Jesus himself, that a preponderance of saints lived this state, that it is “objectively superior” from God’s point of view if one takes Church teaching seriously, and that it has been known to bear the most fruit in spreading the Gospel (cf. 1 Cor 7:32), all other matters being equal.⁶⁶ What is more, the Magisterium, not to mention the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, has frequently encouraged religious and priestly vocations above all others.⁶⁷ One cannot find similar statements regarding marriage, for all of the

⁶⁶ Balthasar agrees: “The more closely human love resembles God’s love, the more it forgets and surrenders itself in order to assume the inner form of poverty, chastity and obedience, the more divine will be its fruit: a fruit that surpasses all human fecundity or expectation.” *Christian State of Life*, 248. “Indifference and self-annihilation in the Eucharist, as in religious life, are both functions of the one love and the source of Christian fruitfulness.” *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, trans. Donald Nichols, Anne Englund Nash, and Dennis Martin (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 167. “The true principle of Christian fruitfulness [is]: a burning readiness to be used and consumed for the salvation and redemption of the world. This is a readiness that will necessarily be expressed as a personal oblation [cf. vow], as the prayer of surrender.” “Beyond Action and Contemplation,” in *Spirit and Institution*, vol. 4, *Explorations of Theology*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 306.

⁶⁷ The best example of this is the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, which for fifty years now has given the presiding pope the opportunity to promote religious and priestly vocations like no other. On the 48th occasion, Benedict XVI cited two texts from Vatican II that set this emphasis in clear relief: “The duty of fostering [priestly] vocations pertains to the whole Christian community, which should exercise it above all by a fully Christian life.” Decree on Priestly Training *Optatum Totius* (October 28, 1965) §2. Bishops should “foster priestly and religious vocations as much as possible.” Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church *Christus Dominus* (October 28, 1965) §15. Another text from the Council reads: “Christian husbands and wives . . . prudently help [their children] in the choice of their vocation and carefully promote any sacred vocation which they may discern in them.” Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (November 18, 1965) §11. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* §52, inter alia. John Paul II affirms: “An integral part of Christian family life is the inculcation in its members of an appreciation of the priesthood and religious life in relation to the whole Body of the Church. Our common pastoral experience confirms the fact that there is a very special need in the Church today to promote vocations to the priesthood and to religious life. It also confirms the fact that generous and persevering efforts made in inviting young people to respond to these vocations have been rewarded. I know that in your deliberations you will discuss appropriate ways that this can be ever more effectively accomplished. . . . The Church’s earnestness in promoting vocations to the priesthood and religious life is explained

reasons previously noted. It stands to reason, then, that persons should give pride of place to consecrated celibacy and, indeed, consecrated poverty and obedience, in their vocational discernment.⁶⁸

This brings us back to the point of considering, in summary fashion, what the “default position” for Christian discernment really looks like. If the newly baptized (or converted) considered themselves *betrothed*—that is, on the way toward either consecrated life or sacramental marriage, disponible to whatever the Lord should ask of them, committed to the spirit of the counsels and spousal love, and especially attentive to the primacy of the consecrated state—surely they would be in the best possible position to do the Lord’s will and bear fruit in Christian discipleship. They would not be left in a void of uncertainty, but rather an ordered state intelligibly formed by the elements just noted.

The Vocation to Marriage

The “State of Election” and the “State of the Commandments”

Given my proposal that the “default position” for Christian discernment is not simply marriage, then, but rather a period of waiting akin to betrothal, we are in a better position now to assess what I take to be a shortcoming in Balthasar’s position on Christian discernment.⁶⁹ The Swiss priest approaches the question of choosing a path in life by delineating,

by her desire *to be faithful to God’s will* to maintain both the hierarchical structure of his Church and the state of religious life. The Church extols and promotes the special consecration proper to both of these vocations even if a certain number of functions exercised by priests and religious are increasingly shared by the laity.” *Letter to the Bishops of the United States of America* (May 14, 1986). Original emphases.

⁶⁸ This could take the form, following personal conversion to Jesus and the Church, of visiting dioceses and/or religious communities and/or secular institutes, entering minor seminary or a house of formation for a period of discernment, going on a prolonged Ignatian retreat, or otherwise making a significant pause in one’s life to prayerfully discern consecrated life before assuming that marriage is one’s vocation. Undoubtedly such behavior would increase the number of disciples entering the consecrated state and, just as important, it would make of all disciples a better-formed lot. We would be better formed in the spirit of the evangelical counsels and the radicalness of the call to love, whatever vocation we should eventually choose.

⁶⁹ Balthasar appears to offer two contrasting models of Christian discernment that I have attempted to illustrate in the appendix to this article. Here we describe his “second” model.

as John Paul II does, essentially two options for the discerning Christian. For Balthasar, however, these options are not celibacy or marriage, but rather, following his spiritual mentor St. Ignatius of Loyola, the “state of election” or the “state of the commandments.” Christian marriage falls within “the state of commandments,” according to this reading, and the consecrated life within “the state of election.”⁷⁰ Simply by application of the divergent nomenclature, “election” and “commandments,” persons are left without the opportunity to identify marriage as a state that certain persons are *elected to*, *chosen for*, or otherwise *called*. Sacramental marriage gets cast, intentionally or not, as an ordinary path and nothing “special.” Balthasar writes, “The call to the state of election is a qualitative, special, differentiated call. There is no similarly qualitative call to the secular state, which is characterized by the absence of any such call.”⁷¹ “Only two possibilities open themselves up to [the Christian] and he awaits the moment when either a special call will summon him to the state of election or the absence of such a call will indicate that he is to remain in the secular state.”⁷²

But is marriage really absent of a special, personalized call? Let us consider six points:

1. The baptismal state is not simply a “secular” state. Even though one can be forgiven for applying this language to distinguish those called to consecrated life from those who remain in the world, identifying the basic Christian state as “the secular state” can easily lead one to postulate theories about it that pay insufficient attention to the fact that this state is informed by grace and faith. It is crucial to make clear the distinction between the state of the baptized and the state of the unbaptized. In my judgment, conflating the two into one “secular” state is not helpful for Christian discernment. Again, the baptized state is also a specifically Christian state marked by the spirit of the evangelical counsels. It is not merely “a form of natural love” because it exists “a priori

⁷⁰ The diocesan priesthood is also considered a state of election, according to Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 279ff. But because diocesan priests only take a vow of celibacy and obedience to their bishop and not a vow of poverty, their office spans both the evangelical and lay states. *Ibid.*, 364ff.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 203.

from above,” as Balthasar elsewhere contends.⁷³ To remain in this state, I am suggesting, is to remain in a period of waiting for a personal call to make one’s consecration to Christ complete in either of “two specific ways”: consecrated virginity or sacramental marriage.⁷⁴

2. Note that the second option, as I read John Paul II, is specifically *marriage* and not the more general “secular” state. John Paul suggests that the newly baptized or converted are being called by God to move beyond the initiatory state of the baptized unless they are already married.⁷⁵ They are being led to a yet more specific path of spousal love in which they can give of themselves fully and irrevocably.

3. It seems clear that the “general” call to marriage placed on the heart of every human person does not become, in the Christian dispensation, a “general” call to sacramental marriage, precisely because not every Christian is called to sacramental marriage. Sacramental marriage as a way of life represents the only other option besides consecrated celibacy for the realization of perfect love.⁷⁶ But a specific option that not all persons are called to cannot be at the same time a general option. This means that if a person were to judge in prayerful discernment that he (or she) was not called to consecrated celibacy, that specific confluence of discernment in dialogue with God would necessarily represent a “special, qualified call” to sacramental marriage.⁷⁷

⁷³ Ibid., 244. See above for two direct quotes from Balthasar on this matter. Together with similar observations from Balthasar’s corpus, this can only lead me to conclude that his general theology of the Christian states of life runs counter to implying that marriage should be characterized by the absence of a special, qualitative call.

⁷⁴ See John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* §11, 16.

⁷⁵ In which case their natural bond of love would be elevated to the grace of the marital sacrament as soon as both parties are baptized. See *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1055.

⁷⁶ Again I want to emphasize the distinction between a specific way of life and personal devotion. One could presumably achieve perfect devotional or moral love in the absence of a specific consecration (direct or indirect) so long as he was doing everything in his power to give of himself fully and irrevocably to the Lord. However, such a person is not advantaged by a state that is ontologically structured for perfect love unless and until he becomes a consecrated celibate or is married sacramentally.

⁷⁷ We must be careful not to understand the natural “vocation” to marriage and the Christian “vocation” to marriage univocally, but rather analogically. The natural vocation is a formal desire to bind oneself to a person of the opposite sex in a physical, sexual way. It can be legitimately renounced in its concrete manifestation, as every consecrated celibate does. The Christian vocation to marriage, which is only applicable to certain and not all Christians, is binding on the Christian conscience also in

4. On the other hand, if a person were to marry without first prayerfully discerning this state as that to which the Lord was leading him, then what would be one of the most significant choices of his life, something that would color all of his ethical choices henceforth and bear upon his eternal salvation—the choosing of a particular spouse—would be little more than a matter of preference-based consumerism. To explain, no one can know if he is not called to consecrated life on the basis of his natural resources alone, so choosing to marry at any one point without prayerful discernment would mean acting without the divine initiative. Such an act would not be receptive; it would not require listening to God. It would be principally active and so preference based and consumerist. In this most meaningful instance of life, the choice to marry, God need not be *personally* involved, according to the logic of this position; one can be left on his own to decide for himself.⁷⁸

This line of reasoning could be contrasted with Pope Benedict XVI's fitting description of the basic Christian response:

By contemplating the pierced side of Christ (cf. Jn 19:37), we can understand the starting-point of this Encyclical Letter: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. *In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must live.*⁷⁹

One's path is meant to be *discovered*, Benedict contends, because it is not simply obvious in the absence of a personal call. It rather comes only *through* a call as perceived in contemplation of Christ's own way of love and in Christian indifference to whatever path the Lord might wish one to take.⁸⁰ The Marian disponibility of the Christian ethos leaves the Christian open, not simply to choose for himself the definitive and thus critical state in which he is meant to reach perfect love, but for the

its concrete manifestation. See St. Alphonsus Liguori's remarks in note 9 above.

⁷⁸ As the saying goes, "Good luck!"

⁷⁹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* §13. Emphasis added.

⁸⁰ The call in the case of marriage is, of course, typically moved by a specific someone, namely one's future spouse, or, even before that, any number of persons, persuasions, or circumstances.

Lord's call to govern his choosing, to govern his response in love.⁸¹ In this way the form of the evangelical counsels, indeed the a priori form of the basic Christian call itself, never leaves those blessed with the "lofty calling" of marriage.⁸²

Nicholas Lund-Molfese makes a similar point in reference to Germain Grisez's work on personal vocation:

The nature of coming to know one's vocation is best characterized as that of a "discovery," and not an invention. Persons come to know the specific providential plan God intended when he created them, with their concrete talents, in a given place and time. We come to know this aspect of God's will, which God desires to reveal to us, through the normal developmental processes of self-discovery and exploration just mentioned. Other aids to making this discovery include scripture, the teachings of the Church, prayer, and spiritual direction.⁸³

Even St. Ignatius of Loyola, from whom Balthasar draws his understand-

⁸¹ The movement of responsive Christian love is well encapsulated in the degrees of love that St. Bernard of Clairvaux specifies. The fourth and highest degree of love *to which all are called as the standard of perfection* is described as man loving himself and/or other creatures for the sake of God. After first renouncing all other loves save for the love of God alone, the Christian is ready to love only that which God wants him to love and in the way God wants him to love. See St. Bernard, *On Loving God*, trans. Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., and Henri Rochais (Rome: Cistercian, 1973), 29–31.

⁸² *Gaudium et Spes* §47; cf. §48.

⁸³ Lund-Molfese, "Christian Duty of Discerning." "If therefore at the point of making such a commitment one is not confident it should be made, one should not make it. The process of discernment needs to be continued until every alternative to making the commitment—ordination, final vows, marriage to this person—loses its appeal and making it appears clearly to be God's call, recognized as such with a sense of light, joy, and peace." Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 2, *Living a Christian Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, c1993), 122, as cited by Lund-Molfese (no page given). Lund is cited in fn 23 above. Lund-Molfese states further: "Knowledge of one's personal vocation is mediated by God's providence through secondary causes. A complete program of lay formation would focus a person's attention on self-knowledge (one's gifts, talents, pre-existing duties, Christian feelings, parental advice, etc.); the needs of the world (in particular the poor); the counsels of perfection; Scripture; the teachings of the Church; prayer; and the receiving of spiritual direction." Ibid. Cf. Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 1, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 673–77, as noted by Lund-Molfese.

ing of Christian discernment, proposes, in so many words, a “qualified, special, differentiated call” to marriage.

Without doubt, it requires more obvious signs to determine that God’s will would have us remain in a state of life [such as marriage] that demands only the observance of the commandments than that it would have us enter upon the way of the counsels; for the Lord clearly exhorts us to the keeping of the counsels, whereas of the other state of life he says only that it is fraught with great dangers.⁸⁴

If Ignatius is correct, how could one not rightly consider marriage to be a vocation marked by “obvious signs”? And if one should claim that this call is not to marriage per se, but to the commandments, our response must refer back to John Paul II’s determination that the only vocation within the state of the commandments is, in fact, marriage.⁸⁵ Ignatius’s understanding here is in keeping with our previous reflections on the betrothal period begun in the grace of baptism. If one is already living a life of continence handed over to the Lord in loving self-abandonment, the choice for marriage appears (or should appear) befuddling however common it is. Why would anyone in good conscience choose marriage if holy virginity (or celibacy) is an objectively superior state and the Church so desperately needs vocations to the consecrated life? Only, it would seem, if the choice to marry were preceded by “more obvious signs,” which is to say, *a more pronounced call*, than the call to the consecrated state. In any case, marriage too must be a “qualified, special, differentiated call.”

⁸⁴ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, ch. 23, 4, as cited by Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 10n2. The translator, Sr. Mary Francis McCarthy, not Balthasar, cites this statement from St. Ignatius.

⁸⁵ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* §11, 16. “The word ‘vocation’ indicates that there exists for every person a proper direction of his development through the commitment of his entire life in the service of certain values. . . . And therefore a vocation always means some principal direction of love of a particular man. . . . The process of self-giving remains most intimately united with spousal love. A person then gives himself to the other person. Therefore, both virginity and marriage understood in a deep personalistic way, are vocations.” Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 256; cf. John Paul II, General Audience (August 18, 1982).

5. Considering that marriage involves another specific person to whom one is presumably attracted, holding that marriage is not a differentiated vocation suggests that God does not work through the all-encompassing beauty of another to elicit one's desire and self-giving in spousal love.⁸⁶ We have here an insufficient claim on the personal desire (*eros*) and transformative love (*agape*) that a prospective spouse can engender in his or her future mate as a representative of God's beauty and love. In this way the position that Christian marriage is not a specialized vocation is in measures both dualistic and moralistic. It is dualistic insofar as it brackets the fact that God evokes calls also through nature, that is, through specific desires of the heart.⁸⁷ It is moralistic insofar as it casts the eventual choice to marry someone as simply a more fitting way to be a Christian in this life, irrespective of any personal desire evoked by the other. After all, many married persons claim they have been called to marry their specific spouse, and one cannot be called to marry someone without being called to marriage.

The reader will note my insistence that a Christian call—either to consecrated life or sacramental marriage—could never simply be “top-down” or “bottom-up.” While a Christian call is to be distinguished from a so-called “natural call” on the basis of its specifically divine element, nature is never left out of the equation.⁸⁸ Natural desires remain at least formally, even when the possibility of their concrete realization is renounced. Likewise, no one is suggesting that the personal call to consecrated life and the personal call to sacramental marriage occur in exactly the same way. The calls are analogous. It is reasonable to propose that the (now transformed by grace) desires for sexual relations and fel-

⁸⁶ That is, *if* this call is to marriage. Surely, Balthasar would grant that the call to spousal love in consecrated life can occur through another.

⁸⁷ Precisely *when* the call to the state of marriage is perceived, whether before or simultaneous to the call to a specific someone, should be irrelevant to the question of whether there is a calling to marriage in its own right. That a person can be called to marriage prior to being called to a specific someone is commonly known. Clearly a calling to the priesthood or religious life often occurs before one discovers the specific diocese or community to which he should belong. The same is true for marriage.

⁸⁸ By “divine element” I mean actual grace. The calling of nature can also be seen as a divine call in an analogous sense, because God works through nature. Grace is not reducible to nature, however, so neither is the call to sacramental marriage reducible to the call to natural marriage.

low feeling are more at play in the choice for sacramental marriage than they are in the choice for celibacy, but if the first choice were to truly represent a response to God, a “listening,” then the possibility of realizing these desires in marriage would have first been laid aside to be taken up again at God’s initiative.

6. Finally, the position that persons are not personally called to Christian marriage does not appear to sufficiently regard the mission to perfect love to which all persons are commanded. John Paul II clarifies this point in an address given to the Schönstatt Family Association:

According to God’s will, the family has been established as “an intimate partnership of life and love” (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 48). It has been sent to become more and more what it is, that is, a partnership of life and love. Thus, a person’s life decision for marriage and the family is a response to a personal call from God. It is a genuine vocation, which includes a mission.⁸⁹

Ironically, in a different section of *The Christian State of Life*, Balthasar appears to present a dissimilar perspective on Christian discernment than he does when describing its ends as “the state of election” and “the state of the commandments.” Here he considers the Christian call to love in three distinct stages:

These three stages of the call—to a general state within the Church, to a particular state within the Church, and, finally, to a concrete situation within the particular state—are, in some way, analogous to the call by which the Christian is first summoned out of the world to be a Christian and then translated,

⁸⁹ Address to the Members of the Schönstatt Family Association, 3. There are many points in Balthasar’s overall corpus that stand in contrast with the implication that marriage does not represent a differentiated call. One such point is the consistency by which he identifies the human person with his mission in life. See Balthasar, “On the Concept of Person,” *Communio* 13 (1986): 25, *inter alia*. Again, I believe the principal reason for this discrepancy in the Swiss theologian’s thought may be accounted for by the dichotomy of the nomenclature of “election” and “commandments,” which he assumes when adopting this language for matters of Christian discernment. If marriage is within the state of commandments, how could anybody be elected to it?

by a unique second and later call, to a particular state so that, in this state, there may be bestowed upon him, through the concrete call that is spoken at this moment and every moment, a Christian life that endures.⁹⁰

In the absence of the linguistic dichotomy between “election” and “commandments,” Balthasar lends credence to the reality of a special vocation to marriage. He recognizes a “second and later call, to a particular state” after baptism, and from there a “concrete call” within this particular state of life. If the particular state is marriage or, even should it be termed “the commandments,” clearly the call within this call must be to a particular spouse. There is simply no other vocation within “the state of the commandments” that corresponds to the full and irrevocable perfection of a love to which all are summoned.

The Call to “Come” to the Counsels or “Go” to Marriage

Balthasar helps us see the positive basis for the Christian vocation to marriage in still another way. He makes the case, rightly in my opinion, that when Jesus goes up a mountain to a qualitatively higher region and calls the apostles to him, there symbolized is the calling of certain persons to a higher state of life.

The force of the symbolism is impressive: The Lord ascends the mountain alone; there calls the Twelve to come to him “that they might be with him” (Mk 3:14); and afterwards descends to the remaining disciples and the people who press upon him.⁹¹

How should this be understood relative to Balthasar’s notion that Christian marriage begins “a priori from above”?⁹² Balthasar explains that even for or-

⁹⁰ Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 392–93.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 244. Although Balthasar does not make the case here, one could postulate that the symbolic mountain of the Lord (cf. Mt. Zion, Mt. Sinai, Mt. Olivet, etc.) has different levels owing to the different degrees of perfection attainable upon its heights. This is a recurrent theme in the work of St. Ephrem the Syrian, who describes Paradise as a mountain: “When the just ascend its various levels to receive their inheritance, with justice He raises up each one to the degree that accords with

dinary (read: “uncalled”) disciples of Christ there is some preliminary and informative stage of being with the Lord before they are sent on their way.

Once his grace has been given and they [the ordinary disciples in need of healing] stand in his light, he sends them back among the people. He restores them, transformed into new men, to the ordinary framework of their daily lives. There is scarcely a miraculous healing of the Lord that does not conclude with the constantly repeated *vade*—“go now.”⁹³

The Swiss theologian goes on to cite a series of examples in the Gospel where Christ says “come” to his apostles (“come and see”; “come follow me”) and “go” to the other disciples not meant to continue with him.⁹⁴ Notice that for those called to the “state of election,” Christ gives a consciously perceivable message: “come.” For those sent to the “state of the commandments” or, indeed, marriage, Christ also gives a consciously perceivable message: “go.”⁹⁵ Does not this *vocative* command to “go” also

his labors; each is stopped at the level whereof he is worthy, there being sufficient levels in Paradise for everyone.” *Hymns on Paradise*, ed. and trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), II.11; cf. I.4.10, II.10, III.1, IX.22. Cf. also Ephrem’s “Commentary on Genesis,” in *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, ed. Kathleen McVey, trans. Edward J. Matthews Jr. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), II.6.4; “Hymns on Virginity,” in *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, trans. Kathleen McVey (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), XXVI.13. Finally, see *ST II-II*, q. 184, aa. 3–4, on the degrees of perfection relative to the evangelical counsels and the commandments, as well as Balthasar himself for a discussion of this theme in *Christian State of Life*, 179.

⁹³ Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 145.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 146. “Thus the *movements* of the two groups of Jesus’ followers are *diametrically opposed*.” Original emphases. The quotes in the body of the text are on page 145; the quote in the fn is on page 146.

⁹⁵ John Paul II affirms: “When I think of you, dear young people, I realize that each of you is preparing not only to complete your studies, but to found your own family. A man and a woman leave their father and mother and cleave to their own husband or wife to begin a new family (cf. Gn 2:24). The Book of Genesis presents this vocation of the human creature in the simplest but very indicative words. At a certain moment in life, the young person, male or female, becomes conscious of this call and takes account of it. Of course, it is a different call from a priestly or religious vocation, for which a special invitation by Christ, a personal call to follow him is decisive: ‘Follow me’ (Mt 4:19). Nevertheless, awareness of the way that leads to founding a family is a vocation which requires clear discernment. It must be accepted knowingly, and to this end, it should be the subject of deep prayer. . . . All this emphasizes an

represent a “qualitative, special, differentiated call”? It seems clear to me that it does. Having spent time standing in Christ’s light and acquiring the form of radical disponibility, that is, the spirit of the evangelical counsels, certain persons are called to go to a different kind of consecration to the Lord in the sacrament of marriage.⁹⁶

Conclusion

On the basis of the argument presented here, the promises of baptism suggest that all laudable human action proceeds on the basis of one being led in some way, on the basis of one first being called. The argument implies that the entire ethical makeup of a person should follow from a period of waiting on the Lord to do or become whatever he may ask, in his time, and in his way. This does not, however, mean that persons ought to abandon ordinary reasonable means of discernment. As the reader surely knows, the element of faith, while formally implicit to reason in every matter of the Christian walk, does not often come to the fore in discernment unless the matter is of significant importance—such as when a person chooses a state in life or, further, a particular community or spouse to give oneself wholly and irrevocably.

One will also notice that the central argument of this essay that there truly is a specific vocation to Christian marriage does nothing to mitigate the “objective superiority” of the vowed life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. On the contrary, this radical form of self-giving love, the deepest articulation of the self-abandonment of baptism, has been shown to spiritually form the entire Christian life, including sacramental marriage. As such, the Christian rightly gives the state of consecra-

expectation which is above all awaiting someone: him or her; but also it anticipates love. Indeed, only love can truly make two young people understand that they are called to walk through life together.” Homily (December 15, 1994).

⁹⁶ Interestingly, John Paul II describes the vocation to marriage in much the same way as consecration, that is, as a personal “come follow me” from Jesus. “When Christ says ‘Follow me,’ his call can mean: ‘I call you to still another love’; but very often it means: ‘Follow me,’ follow me who am the Bridegroom of the Church who is my bride; come, you too become the bridegroom of your bride, you too become the bride of your spouse. Both of you become sharers in that mystery, that Sacrament, which the Letter to the Ephesians says is something great: great ‘in reference to Christ and the Church.’” *Delecti Amici* §10.

tion pride of place in his discernment. Even should he then be called to marriage, he will be all the better formed in Christian living.

All of this is to say that the call to perfect love in Christ is comprehensive of all redeeming virtue and intrinsic to any further articulation of the Christian way of life. In Balthasar's words, "the question of one's state of life is utterly secondary" to the will to "order everything—truly everything—to perfect Christian love."⁹⁷ To meet the standard of Christian perfection, not only must one first renounce his claim on sensual pleasures before receiving only what the Lord has prepared for him ("seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these [lesser] things shall be yours as well," Mt 7:33; cf. Mk 10:29–30; Lk 18:29–30), he must also renounce all preferences of living, such as the state of the counsels or marriage.⁹⁸ This in turn leaves the Christian open and in preparation for a form of spousal love, a complete and irrevocable life choice, which will include a deepening in the spirit of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Whether this calling is to a specific form of consecration or sacramental marriage, every Christian must discern.

What about my suggestion that the state of the baptized single person is akin to a "betrothal" period? I have proposed this terminology to convey essentially two points: (1) the baptismal state is inclusive of both the spirit of the evangelical counsels and spousal love without being concrete manifestations of either of these states. Betrothal seems to me an apt analogue for expressing this reality; and (2) betrothal often suggests a period of preparation and waiting for some further consecration to take place. This would be the case for the Christian following baptism as he readies himself for consecrated celibacy or sacramental marriage.

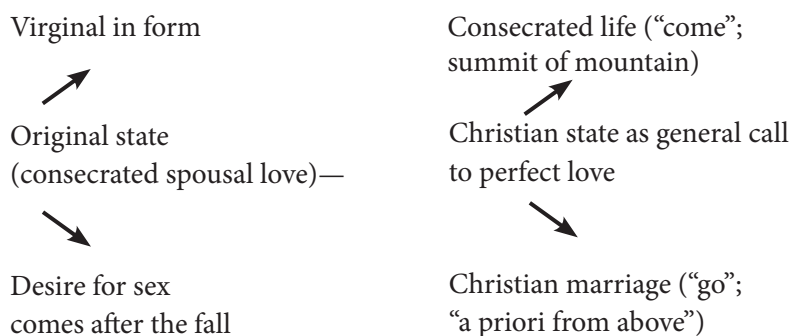
How my specific understanding of Christian discernment might relate to Balthasar's and John Paul II's respective understandings can be seen now in the diagrams to follow. Here the reader will see what I take to be two distinct (and contrasting) models of discernment in Balthasar's thought, the first with which I agree, as well as John Paul II's illuminating presentation and my own. Not all of the information provided in these illustrations has been accounted for in this essay due to our particular focus on the specific vocation to Christian marriage,

⁹⁷ Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 187.

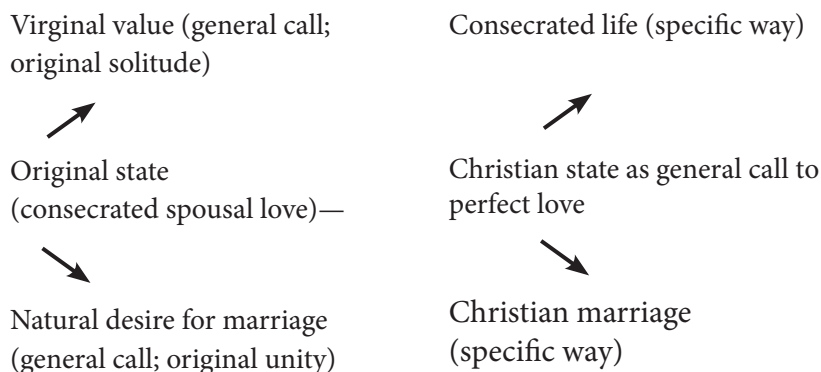
⁹⁸ Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 187–88.

and surely those matters that are presented are not exhaustive of the positions represented herein. Still, these diagrams should prove helpful for the inquiring mind.

Von Balthasar's First Model

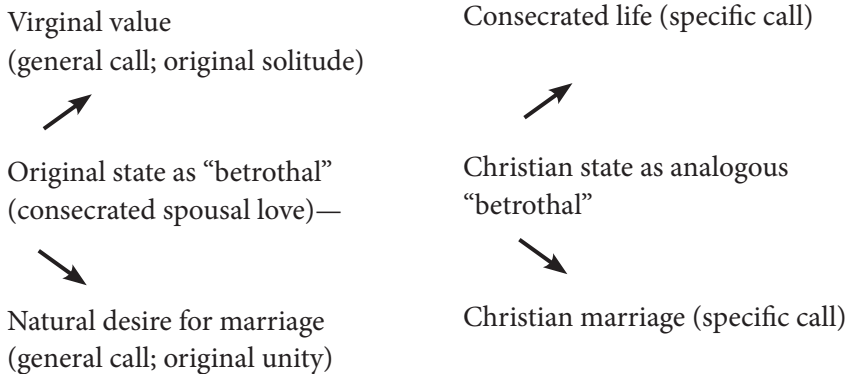


John Paul II's Model



*Although there are differences in Balthasar's and John Paul II's accounts of the original state, they both agree on the integration of some form of virginity and marriage here. Their respective understandings of the Christian state, at least according to Balthasar's first model, are wholly compatible.

My Model



*I have made two slight additions (and no subtractions) to John Paul II's model, both of which I presume he would accept: (1) calling a state that integrates the values of virginity and marriage "betrothal," and (2) describing the two specific ways of perfect love as specific Christian calls.

Von Balthasar's Second Model

State of election (specific call)—Consecrated life

Original state—Christian state—State of commandments (general call)—Christian marriage (general call)

*As the reader can see, what I have called Balthasar's second model of Christian discernment is forced by his adoption of the nomenclature of "election" and "commandments." It also suffers from a certain inconsistency in logic with his conception of the original state (see his first model) and other remarks of his on Christian discernment covered in this article. For such reasons and his putative statement that, after reading John Paul II's work, he would now have to "change everything" in his book *The Christian State of Life*,⁹⁹ it is quite possible that Balthasar would accept John Paul II's model and my own if pressed on the matter.

⁹⁹ Nicholas J. Healy III mentioned this account to me anecdotally.

As visuals, the models are my own invention and are not meant to be exhaustive of the positions represented.



