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Eugenijus Danilevičius

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2807-3493>

Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

Anthropological Aspects of the Theology of Marriage and the Family in the Light of the Insights of Saint John Paul II

Abstract

The article analyses the anthropology of the theology of marriage and the family, presents the foundations of the Christian anthropology of gender, describes the concept of marital love, and introduces the foundations of the theology of indissolubility of marriage and the meaning and mission of marriage using philosophical and theological scientific literature, the writings of John Paul II, the Holy Scripture and the documents of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. The following lines of further research are anticipated: the family as a small *domestic church*, the principles of the religious education of children in the family, and the family as a place of vocational disclosure. The conclusions of this theoretical study are presented.

Keywords

Theology of Marriage and Family, Christian Anthropology of Gender, Marital Love, Meaning and Mission of Marriage.

1. Introduction

Historically, marriage has been categorized as a family. “The family, a natural society, exists prior to the State or any other community, and possesses inherent rights which are inalienable.”¹ However, the family is not merely a social construct or a product of historical development. The Catholic Church teaches that “God himself is the author of marriage. The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator. Marriage is not a purely human institution despite the many variations it may have undergone through the centuries in different cultures, social structures, and spiritual attitudes. These differences should not cause us to forget its common and permanent characteristics.”² The creation narratives of the first chapters of Genesis are not only about the creation of the universe, nor only about the creation of the human person, man and woman, but also about the creation of the institution of the family. God is the Author of both human nature and the nature of marriage, the Creator who willed to enter into a covenant of love with human beings. God is the source of sanctifying grace, which enables us to share in His divine nature, just as His Son, who became man, shares in human nature. Nature is for grace; creation is for covenant. The Old Testament prophets (Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, etc.) appropriately used the human reality of the family as a symbol of the union of love or covenant between God and His chosen people.

Christianity has given rise to the modern family, a community of love based on human nature, which Christ elevates to the supernatural level of a sacrament and makes this sacred bond a source of grace for spouses. He exalts marriage which, in itself, is sacred and has something sanctifying about it. Marriage has become one of the seven sacraments that mysteriously allow people to participate in the divine life. Sacramental marriage is meant to mark the mutual fidelity between Christ and His spouse, the Church.³ This is a mystery: “This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church. In any case, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and the wife should respect her husband.”⁴

¹ Holy See, *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, 1983, Preamble.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2003, No. 1903.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2003, No. 1621.

⁴ Eph 5, 32–33.

The mystery of God's was proclaimed anew in this text. This Marriage of Christ to the Church is, for Catholics, the strength and example of marriage.

The concept of marriage is used frequently throughout the Holy Bible: "Scripture begins with the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God and concludes with the vision of 'the wedding of the Lamb.'"⁵ Scripture speaks throughout of marriage and its "mystery", its institution and the meaning God has given it, its origin and its end."⁶

The Old Testament describes the moment when a family was established: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body."⁷ "God blessed them, saying: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it."⁸ Thus, from the beginning, before Christ, the institution of the family was natural and instituted by God, and its creation was according to the Lord God's order.⁹ Therefore, it is not in man's power to change this order either.

In the light of the New Testament, it is possible to discern how *the primordial model of the family is to be sought in God himself*, in the Trinitarian mystery of his life. "The divine 'We' is the eternal pattern of the human 'we', especially of that 'we' formed by man and woman created in the divine image and likeness. The words of the Book of Genesis contain that truth about man which is confirmed by the very experience of humanity."¹⁰

The Pontifical Council for the Family states that "Formation for true love is always the best preparation for the vocation to marriage. In the family, children and young people can learn to live human sexuality within the solid context of Christian life. They can gradually discover that a stable Christian marriage cannot be regarded as a matter of convenience or mere sexual attraction. By the fact that it is a vocation, marriage must involve a carefully considered choice, a mutual commitment before God and the constant seeking of his help in prayer."¹¹

⁵ Rev 19, 7–9.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2003, No. 1602.

⁷ Gen 2, 24.

⁸ Gen 1, 28.

⁹ Gen 2, 16–24.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Letter to Families Gratissimam sane*, 1994, No. 6.

¹¹ The Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, 2000, No. 27.

2. Gender anthropology: man and woman

John Paul II states that “only the creation of man is presented as the result of a special decision on the part of God, a deliberation to establish a particular and specific bond with the Creator: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”¹² The life which God offers to man is a gift by which God shares something of himself with his creature. Only the creation of man is portrayed as the result of a particular decision by God, a deliberate effort to unite man with his Creator in a distinctive and special relationship: “Let us make man in our image and likeness.” The life that God gives to man is a gift through which God shares himself with his creation.”¹³ John Paul II brought a new emphasis to Christian anthropology by pointing out that God did not create persons simply as persons but created them *as male and female*.

A. Maceina summarizes St. Augustine’s insights into the uniqueness of man from the moment of creation: Augustine makes another significant observation about the creation of man. He rightly sees that man was created differently from plants and animals. God did not say to man “*let it be done*”, as He did to the animals, but “*let us do*”. He did not say “let it be made after its kind” as in the case of plants and animals, but “let it be made in our image and likeness.” <...> “So this peculiarity also shows that man is a special creation.”¹⁴

As an expression of His will, God created an impersonal creation, both animate and inanimate, as if leaving it to evolution. However, He does not want to create man in the same way, because this would be contrary to man’s vocation to an interpersonal communion of love with the Creator. By creating man in His own image and likeness, the Blessed Trinity establishes the person’s unique vocation to love, their worth and dignity. Things are created by God’s command and people by His personal action. Since there is no imperfection in the very foundation of creation, God creates out of pure generosity and love; in particular, man is personally called into being by God only because he becomes the ground of his own being. This is how freedom can unfold, for if it were a means to an end, humanity would not be humane. Human existence would be less meaningful if it only had the goal of preserving the species or of a complementary

¹² Gen 1, 26.

¹³ John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Evangelium Vitae*, 1995, No. 34.

¹⁴ A. Maceina, *Writings, Volume IX. Philosophy of Womanhood*, Vilnius 2005, Margi raštai, pp. 12–13. A summary of the last chapters of Book VIII of Augustine’s Confessions.

partnership. From the moment of conception to natural death, human life ceases to be valued when society adopts the view that a person is only valuable if his or her life produces benefits. John Paul II states that “when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man, of his dignity and his life; in turn, the systematic violation of the moral law, especially in the serious matter of respect for human life and its dignity, produces a kind of progressive darkening of the capacity to discern God’s living and saving presence.”¹⁵

The Pontifical Council for the Family stresses the importance of human sexuality: “Sexuality is a fundamental component of personality, one of its modes of being, of manifestation, of communicating with others, of feeling, of expressing and of living human love.”¹⁶ Each person has his or her own vocation, depending on his or her inclinations, talents, capacities and developed abilities. But the question arises, does a person, as a man or a woman, receive his or her unique vocation?

Gender is naturally determined. In practice, specifically recognized male or female traits are subject to considerable variation, which may be culturally determined, but the primary basis for gender difference consists of fundamental physiological differences. However, “Woman is not merely a person clad in a woman’s body but is a woman to the innermost depths of her being; and man is not merely a person clad in a man’s body but is a man to the slightest vibration of the spirit.”¹⁷ The spiritual differences between the sexes are manifested in the different ways of practicing faith and in the particularities of man’s or woman’s personal relationship with God.

Gender differences are clearly visible in natural procreation. However, this aspect of gender difference has become unpopular due to the pervasiveness of a one-sided view of sexual intercourse as a source of pleasure. Historically, this can be explained by the fact that the natural result of sexual union between a man and a woman is the conception of a new life, which has been removed by the culture of death from the aggressive content of sex education programmes and replaced by a total glorification of hedonism. Most US pregnant teenagers were surprised to find themselves pregnant, some of them unaware that sexual

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Evangelium Vitae*, 1995, No. 21.

¹⁶ The Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, 2000, No. 10.

¹⁷ A. Maceina, *Writings, Volume IX. Philosophy of Womanhood*, Vilnius 2006, Margi raštai, pp. 9.

intercourse results in a child. This fact was nowhere to be found by teenagers. US teenage pregnancy statistics show that almost 448 000 teenage girls became pregnant in 2019; almost 60% of these pregnancies resulted in a birth. According to the pregnant teenagers more than 80% of these pregnancies were unintended and unexpected.¹⁸ However, the fact that the vast majority of human lives are the result of sexual relations between a man and a woman is unacceptable to the *architects of the culture of death*,¹⁹ because when two spouses living in conjugal love give birth to a new life, then they begin to participate in an exchange of self-giving that is passed down from one generation to another: On the one hand, instead of being selfish men and women, they pay the debt for the gift of life received from their parents through God's grace; on the other hand, by becoming fathers and mothers, they receive their children as a gift from their spouse and from God. John Paul II, stressing the conjugal nature of masculinity and femininity, writes: "The human body, with its sex, and its masculinity and femininity, seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and procreation, as in the whole natural order, but includes right 'from the beginning' the 'nuptial' attribute, that is, *the capacity of expressing love: that love precisely in which the man-person becomes a gift* and – by means of this gift – fulfils the very meaning of his being and existence."²⁰

3. The concept of marital love

Nowadays, most people marry not only to procreate but also because they love each other. Folklore from various ancient cultures confirms that the inclination to love is the true desire of the heart. In marriage, men and women become each other's helpers.

Married life is a workshop of humanity in which one "I" meets another person and they become "one flesh", but remain separate persons, just as the divine Persons of the Blessed Trinity, separate as they are, constitute the One. In marriage, two unique, one-of-a-kind, and inimitable persons come together

¹⁸ Joyce A. Martin et al., *Births: Final Data for 2019. National Vital Statistics Reports*, March, 2021, Volume 70, Number 2, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr70/nvsr70-02-508.pdf> (31.01.2022).

¹⁹ D. DeMarco, B. Wiker, *Architects Of The Culture Of Death*, 2004.

²⁰ The Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, 2000, No. 10.

and create a new unique story of common life, the singularity of which is as it were doubled. So, it is not uniqueness that creates marriage, but marriage creates uniqueness.

Marital love is a uniquely human emotion, arising from free will, embracing all the natural inclinations of the individual and freeing him from selfishness, and it cannot be reduced to mere passion or mere emotion. The Second Vatican Council goes on to reveal the dynamism of conjugal love: “This love God has judged worthy of special gifts, healing, perfecting and exalting gifts of grace and of charity. Such love, merging the human with the divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves, a gift providing itself by gentle affection and by deed, such love pervades the whole of their lives: indeed by its busy generosity it grows better and grows greater.”²¹ God’s grace thus perfects the nature of conjugal love, establishing marriage as a sacrament and married life as a divine vocation.²² In collaboration with the Lord, spouses are called to protect, cherish, nurture, and cultivate marital love.

Drawing on the insights of *Humanae Vitae*, John Paul II offers a comprehensive vision of conjugal love: “conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter – appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, the unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands indissolubility and faithfulness in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to fertility.”²³

The institution of the family, established by God, protects and defends the life-giving and marriage-giving conjugal love. The first act of conjugal love is the act of irrevocable personal consent, by which a man and a woman, freely giving themselves to each other as husband and wife, establish their marriage and create a community of “mutual love, by their generous fruitfulness, their solidarity and faithfulness.”²⁴ The Sacrament of Matrimony allows a husband and wife to give each other a love that is unique and proper to them, because only spouses can give a conjugal love that can give birth to new persons – children. Even if the love of the spouses were to be effectively dissolved in the event of a tragic breakdown in their life together, it remains a life-giving principle and

²¹ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, 1964, No. 49.

²² Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, 1964, No. 49.

²³ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris consortio*, 1991, No. 13.

²⁴ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, No. 48.

an indispensable requirement for the indissolubility of marriage. Husbands and wives are invited to give each other conjugal love and deepen it throughout their lives. By freely agreeing to give themselves to each other in marriage, spouses establish each other as irreplaceable persons.

Marriage, as the covenant that binds spouses to one another, is fulfilled when both “*become one flesh*.”²⁵ Covenant must be an act of free will on the part of each of the contracting parties, free from coercion or serious external fear. No human power can alter this covenant.

Marital love is essential to marriage and expresses the inner vocation of the spouses. However, this does not mean that if marital love breaks down, marriage breaks down with it. The first act of conjugal love is an act of irrevocable personal consent, by which a man and a woman unconditionally and irrevocably commit themselves to each other as husband and wife. Marital love is included in the object of their consent. In the family, marital love is vital, arising from the consent of the persons who created it. However, the subjective conclusion that marital love no longer exists often does not invalidate the marriage itself. This is because the indissolubility of marriage does not depend on a decision of the will of the spouses, although it is the result of an act of the people who create it. Therefore, nothing, not even an unjust, flagrant, and unlawful violation of the requirements of marital love, can annul a marital covenant already established. Within the sacramental family, marital love is an essential good, existing at least as a requirement in the sacramental family. Moreover, Christian spouses can be assured that the Holy Trinity, who brought them into marriage, is with them in their marriage and is always ready to help them to give to each other the marital love which is the vital principle of marriage and of the mission entrusted to them.²⁶ This love is fulfilled through the mutual celebration of the spouses. Marital love is characterized by the qualities of unity and indissolubility.

4. The theological foundations of the indissolubility of marriage

Before marriage, a man and a woman live their own individual lives. Although each of them is a unique human being, living separately or together outside

²⁵ Gen 2,24; cf. Mk 10:8; Eph 5:31.

²⁶ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, 1964, No. 49.

marriage does not make them indispensable to each other. Before they marry, they can truly love each other, experience the special human love of friendship that seeks full union, that seeks marriage and marital love. However, when they are not married, they are still free to change their decision to be together and to continue to live their lives independently of each other, because they have not yet affirmed the uniqueness and irreplaceability of their common life. However, once they have given their irrevocable personal consent to marriage, they become husband and wife and do what they cannot revoke. By their free choice, they have given themselves and each other an identity of a new quality which nothing, except the death of one of the spouses, can change. The spouses cannot dissolve a marriage that has taken place. They cannot become each other's ex-husband or wife, just as a mother who has given birth to her child cannot make herself his former mother. Whether she is a good or a bad mother, she will still be the mother of her children. Similarly, after marriage, a wife may be intolerably bad, but she will still be *de facto* a wife. In marriage, the husband irrevocably makes his wife irreplaceable in his life, and for the wife, the husband becomes irreplaceable in her life. The spouses freely choose to join their lives together before death do them part, regardless of the fortune of their life together: whether it is better or worse, whether it is tested by hardship and disease, or whether it is rewarded by wealth and health.

However, once married, husband or wife cannot be seen as semi-divided beings; despite their dependence on each other, they remain whole and independent individuals. In the communion and unity of conjugal love between two independent persons, they can joyfully realize this communion, i.e., they can experience it and achieve it in a blissful state of mutual gratitude instead of living in an unconscious union of autonomous persons. It is true that if the spouses, for various reasons, are no longer able to live together, "In such cases the Church permits the physical separation of the couple and their living apart"²⁷, without the right to form a new family with the other spouse alive, because "the spouses do not cease to be husband and wife before God."²⁸

The indissolubility of marriage has an ontological basis because it is rooted in the very being of man and woman; in the freely chosen identity of husband and wife as persons who have become irreplaceable in each other's lives. The truth that marriage, as a personal reality, is established by the free, self-determined

²⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2003, No. 1649.

²⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2003, No. 1649.

choice of a man and a woman, is clearly stated in Scripture. In the second account of the creation of man and woman and of marriage, which is found in the second chapter of the Book of Genesis, we read that Adam, the first man, on waking up from the deep sleep into which God had plunged him when he created the first woman from his ribs, exclaimed: “Finally, this is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. . . . Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and the two shall become *one flesh*.”²⁹ John Paul II, commenting on these Scriptures, offers the following insight: “The wording of verse 24 of chapter 2 of Genesis shows not only that human beings, created male and female, were created for unity, but also that the very unity by which they become ‘one flesh’ is one of a unity of choice from the beginning. If, on the one hand, a man ‘by nature’ belongs to his father and mother by procreation, on the other hand, he ‘attaches’ himself to his wife (and she to her husband) by choice.”³⁰

The indissolubility of marriage is affirmed in these words of Christ: Therefore they are no longer two, but one flesh. “What God has joined together, no human being must separate.”³¹ Scripture gives an example of the indissoluble nature of marriage: the indissoluble marriage between Christ and the Church. John Paul II affirms that, for the Catholic Church, this nature of marriage is indispensable for the well-being of the whole family: “The Master confirms it “now”, he does so in order to make clear and unmistakable to all, at the dawn of the New Covenant, the *indissoluble character* of marriage as the *basis of the common good of the family*.”³²

Marriage is based on love, because it allows husbands and wives to give each other a unique and special love – what we call conjugal or marital love – that is completely different from other kinds of human love. The other kinds of human love – love of neighbor, love of one’s children, love of one’s enemies – are all-encompassing and call for no distinction between any of them. It is a call to love all one’s neighbors, all one’s children, all one’s enemies. But the conjugal love of a husband and wife is unique and different. It is exclusive. A man cannot love any other woman as he loves his wife, and a wife cannot love any other man as she loves her husband. But conjugal love, though exclusive, is by no means imprisoned

²⁹ Pr 2, 23–24.

³⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on Genesis*, Boston, Genesis, Boston, St. Paul Editions, 1981, pp. 81–82.

³¹ Mt 19:6.

³² John Paul II, *Letter to Families Gratissimam sane*, 1994, No. 7.

in the egoism of husband and wife. On the contrary, it is precisely because of their unique and exclusive love for each other that it enables them to love other persons more fully and deeply. The uniqueness of conjugal love consists in the privilege of the spouses to give their whole selves without reservation to the other and to receive the other as a gift, the other person as a human, sexual, procreative, sexually complementary being by nature. It is only through conjugal love that, according to God's plan, spouses can cooperate with Him in the creation of new life.

5. The meaning and mission of marriage

God wanted human nature to be what it is – the nature of persons endowed with intelligence and free choice – precisely so that we could freely accept His offer of grace and enter an eternal covenant with Him. God can give us His own life because He created us to be beings who can receive Him. He can – and did – become incarnate in human flesh in the person of His only begotten Son, precisely to redeem human beings from sin and to enable them to become fully human beings: His children, His sons and daughters, members of His divine Family.

Similarly, God the Father has given the human reality of marriage the nature it has because He wants to incorporate it into His divine plan and make it an instrument of holiness and sanctification. By the death and resurrection of His Son, He raised Christian marriage to the dignity of the sacrament of the new and eternal covenant, and thus integrated the human family into His plan of human redemption, which is full of love and wisdom.

God's Son, Jesus, is the supreme prophet, the one who fully reveals to us the mystery of God's love for humanity, the one who fulfils God's new and eternal covenant of love for us. In the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed as the Bridegroom who lays down his life for his immaculate bride, the Church. Moreover, the New Testament stresses that the human reality of marriage is symbolic of the betrothal union between Christ and his Church: this is the great mystery to which marriage points.³³ The conjugal union of the spouses participates in the grace-giving, sanctifying, redeeming union of Christ and his Church. Their marriage is a sacrament of sanctifying grace.

³³ Cf. Eph 5, 23.

*The definition of the Sacrament of Matrimony*³⁴ contains two inseparable objectives:

1. To foster the mutual love and cooperation that unites the spouses (a unifying, unitive goal). Marriage is the path to holiness through sacrifice and fidelity, through mutual service to one another, through an active spiritual sacramental life. “God who created man out of love also calls him to love the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love.”³⁵ This is the first purpose of the Sacrament of Matrimony: to help each other to grow in communion and to help both spouses to enter the Kingdom of Heaven after death.
2. To participate in the creation of Love in its broadest sense (procreative purpose). The teaching of the Catholic Church explains: “The fruitfulness of conjugal love extends to the fruits of the moral, spiritual, and supernatural life.”³⁶

These purposes of the Sacrament of Matrimony are *inextricably* linked in their meaning and objective:

1. Meaning: to pass through life together in marital Love, so that at death both spouses enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The practical expression of this purpose is mutual Love, mutual understanding, mutual reinforcement, mutual fidelity, mutual service to one another.
2. Objective: to participate in creativity in its broadest sense. The practical expression of this goal: childbirth, child rearing, religious and intellectual education, good works, adoption, spiritual creation, charity, social action, etc. Parents must strive to teach their children by example how to love and to show them what Love is – God. It is the duty of parents to care for the religious education of their children and the discovery of their vocation. The crucial role of marriage and the family in the formation of the personality and the maturing of vocations is emphasized in the constitution of the Second Vatican Council: “From the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in bap-

³⁴ Catholic Church, *Code of Canon Law*. Latin – English Edition, Washington, D.C. 1984, can. No. 1056.

³⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2003, No. 1604.

³⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2003, No. 1653.

tism are made children of God, thus perpetuating the people of God through the centuries. The family is, so to speak, the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care vocation to a sacred state.”³⁷

Marriage is when a man and a woman, having renounced the possibility of marrying another person, freely give their person and life to another by an irrevocable act of personal consent. The essence of the act of marriage is the free, autonomous choice of a man and a woman, by which they give each other a new quality and a lasting identity. The man becomes the husband of the woman he chooses, and she becomes his wife, and together they become spouses. Until this irrevocable act of personal consent, the man and the woman are separate persons and replaceable in each other’s lives. Thus, marriage is “the intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one. For the good of the spouses and their off-springs as well as of society, the existence of the sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone. For, God Himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes.”³⁸

Marriage is not a legal or external restriction on the freedom of a man and a woman, or an empty formality, but, as Pope John Paul II stresses, it is “an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love, which is publicly affirmed as unique and exclusive, in order to live in complete fidelity to the plan of God, the Creator.”³⁹

The teaching of the Catholic Church advises spouses to practice the sacraments regularly, especially Penance and the Blessed Eucharist, because the actual heads of the family need divine help to live a truly Christian life and to witness their faith. The supernatural grace of the Holy Spirit perfects the natural and supernatural life of spouses. It helps them to live and develop their intrinsic goodness as spouses and to grow in spiritual perfection. In marriage, man

³⁷ Vatican Council II, *Lumen gentium*, 1964, No. 11.

³⁸ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, No. 48.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris consortio*, No. 11.

and woman always receive the divine grace to live a virtuous life, and together, through their virtuous life, they are more open to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit and to bear good fruit. These two elements – divine assistance and human cooperation – should always be reconciled in marital life and marital love. In this way, spouses living in Christ can attain the eternal happiness of being with the Triune God here on earth.

Christian marriage is therefore a sanctifying reality. It enables Christian husbands and wives to love one another with a redeeming, sanctifying love, because their human marital love has been endowed with grace by Christ Himself, and has united the divine reality with that of the human. By entering into the conjugal communion of persons, Christian husbands and wives, truly create a “*little Church*”, a *domestic Church*.⁴⁰ Therefore, the Christian family has a special and original role in the Catholic Church. Its mission is to participate in a unique way in the redemptive work of Christ. John Paul II expressed well the task of the family: to be a community of faith and evangelization, a community in communion with God, a community at the service of others, transforming the world with Christ’s redeeming love. It is a community engaged in the prophetic, priestly, and royal mission of Christ.⁴¹

By God’s will, marriage has become a sacrament of sanctifying grace, enabling Christian husbands and wives to respond to God’s call to holiness, enabling them to participate in Christ’s redemptive work in a unique and irreplaceable way. The Christian family must fulfil its mission as the domestic Church and participate in Christ’s redemptive work.

The mission of the spouses is to be witnesses of the invisible reality of the Faith by their life, their behavior, and to witness to Christ. The mission of the family as an institution is for the families of believers to become islands of Christian life in a world that is in turmoil, and to build up the Kingdom of God in cooperation with the Lord.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris consortio*, 1981, No. 49.

⁴¹ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris consortio*, 1981, No. 49.

6. Conclusions

The family, strengthened by the Sacrament of Matrimony, strengthens the love and affection between spouses. The modern Christian family is based on the graces of the Sacrament of Matrimony. The sustainability of the family therefore depends on the responsibility of the spouses to foster mutual love and their personal openness to God's action. However, from the point of view of an anthropology based on a materialist *theory of the superman*, this exaltation of sacramental grace is seen as a threat to the autonomy of the person and a devaluation of the human being as the director of his or her life. The contribution of Christian anthropology to the theology of marriage and the family, complements the materialist conception of the family with an understanding of a spiritual supernatural reality, and offers a new perspective for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of the loving communion between husband and wife.

The family is rooted in marriage, which is created by the free, irrevocable personal consent of a man and a woman. By giving up the right to marry another person *until death do them part*, they give themselves to each other and become irreplaceable persons. By receiving the Sacrament of Matrimony, a man and a woman enter an indissoluble covenant because they are already members of the Body of Christ, the Church, by being baptized; they are persons who have already become, through baptism, indissolubly united to Christ and to His Spouse, the Church. This marriage between Christ and the Church gives the character and example of its indissolubility.

An examination of the texts of Genesis has revealed that man and woman are equal persons, that God created them in His image and likeness, and that their sexuality complements each other. The sexual complementarity of spouses is closely linked to their vocation to marriage and parenthood. Each person, whether male or female, is called to recognize and accept his or her own sexual identity. The physical, moral, and spiritual difference and complementarity of the sexes is a gift for the good of marriage and the flourishing of family life. Spouses have an important vocation and a noble responsibility to cooperate with God in the transmission of human life and to provide a home for new human life where it can grow and develop safely. Even if spouses do not bear children, as individuals – men and women – they are called to express their marital love in analogous ways for procreation in spiritual fatherhood or motherhood.

The human body is the revelation of the human person; and since the human body is necessarily either male or female, it is the revelation of a male person

or a female person. It is precisely because of their sexual differences, manifested in their bodies, that the male person and the female person can give themselves bodily to each other. Moreover, since the body, male or female, is the expression of the human person, in giving their bodies to each other, man and woman give their persons to each other. The bodily gift of a man and a woman to each other is an outward sign, a sacrament, of the communion of persons that exists between them. And in turn, this sacrament is an image of the communion of persons in the Trinity. The body is thus the means and sign of the gift of the man-person to the woman-person.

The theoretical analysis of the anthropological aspects of the theology of marriage and the family presented in this article opens avenues for further research in this area: the family as a small *domestic church*; the principles of the religious education of children in the family and the family as a place of disclosure of vocation.

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