

MARRIAGE’S INDISSOLUBILITY: AN UNTENABLE PROMISE?

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“Indissolubility, the incapacity of being dissolved,
is the truth of giving.”



Indissolubility is the joyous affirmation that nuptial love is not at the mercy of spouses’ moods, nor of the unforeseeable good or bad circumstances spouses may face, nor of the changing ideas or perceptions they may have of the “intimate communion of life and love” they are given to live.¹ That the spousal love of a man and a woman is indissoluble means that love can continue to grow and spouses can be faithful through all the vicissitudes of married life. The glad tidings that nuptial love does not dissolve, however, seem to be constantly contradicted by human experience. Considering the fragility of human freedom, the unforeseeability of history, and the tendency to encapsulate the meaning of love in a narrow idea that one can master and to eliminate whatever cannot be folded into this partial perception, can indissolubility really define married love? Are not, rather, the great number of divorces and the constant practice of adultery

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter *CCC*), no. 1660; *Gaudium et spes* (hereafter *GS*), 48, 1.

tacit proof that indissolubility jeopardizes the fulfillment of one's existence? Doesn't the sacrifice required by indissolubility reveal how far it is from being a romantic dream? Furthermore, if one is aware of the irreducible otherness of the spouse and the immense responsibility of conceiving and educating children, doesn't indissolubility appear to be excessive? Looking at these challenges, then, is it really honest to claim that witnessing to the "good news of the family" requires embracing an indissoluble and exclusive communion of love?² Would it not be better to simply acknowledge that the spouses' union of love and the total and personal gift of self to which they are called depend only on what lies within the capacity of their freedom? And if this is the case, would it not then be truer to grant that, no matter how painful the transition might be, sometimes nuptial love has to be lived with a different person from the one with whom one began?

The Church, far from ignoring these questions, is intimately familiar with the human reality they present for consideration. Because she is born from Christ's eucharistic and sacrificial gift of self for her, the Church knows from her own existence the difficulties and failures of human love as well as what divine love can endure and bring forth (Rom 8:32). She has seen many times that only Christ knows what is in man, and that he, through his Spirit, allows men to see the truth of love and embrace it. Her experience and her union with Christ grant her the tender courage to proclaim that marriage is a valid path of holiness, that it is a state of life in which spouses can become fully human precisely because their God-given union is indissoluble and called to be fruitful.³ Aware of their joys and difficulties, the Church can accompany spouses, educate them to the truth of marriage, and witness to them through her very existence—that of which spousal love is the living memory: Christ's love for the Church (Eph 5:32).⁴

To grasp what it means that marriage is indissoluble, we first need to become aware of a certain way of conceiving the human person as a free and conscious subject, an understanding

2. *Familiaris consortio* (hereafter *FC*), 85, 51; *Evangelii gaudium*, 66–67.

3. *Lumen gentium*, 41, 48–51.

4. *FC*, 79–85.

that has caused today's cultural disappearance of marriage and the family (section 1). This will help us see that, contrary to our common assumptions, a man and a woman can give themselves in matrimony because God first gives them to themselves and calls each to let the other be part of him or herself in a fruitful communion of life and love (sections 2–3). The sacramental participation in Christ's love for the Church, confirming the truth of nuptial love, grants spouses the grace to love each other, that is, to remain faithful over time (section 4). These anthropological and christological reflections on the meaning of indissolubility, which grants us access to the Father's mercy, will enable us to see the nature of the sacrifice entailed in married life and how the Church can accompany spouses on the path of faithfulness (section 5).

1. LEAVING THE FAMILY?

The difficulty of marriage, which many know from experience, cannot be traced solely to a failure of love on the part of individual spouses or even to the broader circumstances of their life as a couple. Rather, many of the challenges facing marriage today are bound up with a much larger shift in man's understanding of himself as a person, and this new anthropology goes hand in hand with our Western culture's evolving understanding of marriage and family. "Marriage," writes Wendell Berry, "has now taken the form of divorce: a prolonged and impassioned negotiation as to how things shall be divided. During their understandably temporary association, the 'married' couple will typically consume a large quantity of merchandise and a large portion of each other."⁵ Though seemingly paradoxical, Berry's description reveals accurately that marriage is perceived today as a type of contractual relation established by two human freedoms. Rather than giving all of one's life, as love requires, in this contract spouses give only a portion of themselves. This partial giving entails that, in their life together, each spouse cannot but try to avoid losing what he is afraid of giving away to the other, that is, himself. Yet, because he does not give all of himself, he must

5. Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002), 67.

work to keep himself; that is, he must seek to preserve or increase what he considers indispensable for his own happiness: property, pleasure, and, ultimately, power. If living thus becomes a matter of possessing instead of receiving and giving, then, as Berry indicates, spousal love does not establish any real unity. The negotiated “form” of marriage never constitutes a real whole, that is, a communion of life and love. Understood simply as a contract, marriage becomes the mutually agreed-upon juxtaposition of two existences that lasts as long as negotiations endure. Lacking an objective form greater than the spouses’ singular existences, married life is not only deprived of the grounds that enable it to weather the disintegrating forces that erode any nuptial communion; it also actively—albeit most of the time unwittingly—contributes to its own fragmentation.

The fact that such disunity under the guise of love is now the predominant form of marriage has a long history.⁶ In outline, we see how, leading up to the 1950s, romantic love—which sought a freely chosen companion with whom one could “find solace and spiritual renewal,” as well as live a passionate sexual life without undue inhibitions—became the dominant perception of love and caused the disappearance of traditional marriage.⁷ Yet, since romantic love set impossibly high standards of devotion, loyalty, and sexual intimacy, couples ended up acquiescing to what has been called “companionate marriage,” that is, a union of equals who do not expect vehement devotion to be

6. I would like to refer the reader to some works that explore this issue. See Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977); Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010); Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, “Who Wants to Marry a Soul Mate?,” in *The State of Our Unions*, National Marriage Project, 2001, accessed 21 June 2014, <http://www.stateofourunions.org/pdfs/SOOU2001.pdf>; Kay Hymowitz, Jason S. Carroll, W. Bradford Wilcox, and Kelleen Kaye, *Knot Yet: The Benefits and Costs of Delayed Marriage in America*, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, and the RELATE Institute, 2013, accessed 21 June 2014, <http://nationalmarriage-project.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/KnotYet-FinalForWeb.pdf>. These works, helpful for a sociological approach to the matter at stake, could benefit from a more robust anthropology.

7. Lasch, *Haven*, 5.

their dominant, daily mood. Ever-changing living and working conditions, as well as the separation of love, sex, and fruitfulness enabled by the contraceptive pill in the 1960s, resulted in couples perceiving marriage not as the “cornerstone” of their lives but as the “capstone” of adult life: family life is now to be embraced only after one has accomplished everything deemed necessary and possible with regard to education, career, and financial security.⁸

It is not hard to see that underneath the surface of these different expressions of marriage and family life lies what we can call a theomorphic anthropology, that is, man’s claim to be his own origin.⁹ This anthropology leads men and women to

8. For a description of these two forms of marriage see Cherlin, *Marriage-Go-Round*, 136–43. Delaying marriage, however, seems to be successful only for people who have completed a college education. For the rest—especially given that fatherhood and motherhood, while desired, are no longer linked to love, sexual activity, and family life—there seems to have been a “Great Crossover”: more and more women, especially those without college degrees, tend to have children first and get married later (Hymowitz et al., *Knot Yet*, 6). Along with this phenomenon, the legal recognition of so-called homosexual marriages—coupled with the possibility of adopting children or obtaining them through biotechnological means—is further evidence that the family has become, at least culturally, a *flatus vocis*. See, among others, Antonio López, “Homosexual Marriage and the Reversal of Birth,” *Anthropotes: Rivista di studi sulla persona e la famiglia* 29, no. 1 (2013): 29–59; Stratford Caldecott, ed., “Artificial Reproductive Technologies,” special issue, *Humanum: Issues in Family, Culture, and Science* (Summer 2012), <http://www.humanumreview.com/articles/category/summer-2012>.

9. The term “thecomorphic” therefore does not refer to the biblical conception of the human being created in the image of God (Gn 1:26) and called to receive the gift of adoptive sonship (Jn 1:12). Whereas the doctrine of the *imago Dei* rightly invites us to think of the human being in filial terms (Eph 2:10; Col 1:16), theomorphic anthropology is a philosophical account of the human being as an unoriginated principle that has in itself the reason and purpose for its own existence. Thus, the former sees man in light of the Logos and the latter in light of a monadic God who can be called “father” only secondarily. If the biblical account offers us the positive and true sense of the call to receive the grace of inheriting the “form” of God, who is a triune mystery of love, the philosophical anthropology under discussion here underscores man’s erroneous claim to be what he is not, that is, God, without God. The difference, therefore, does not reside in the becoming “like God” but in the fact that the “thecomorphic” anthropology replaces God, that is, desires to become God without him. It is also important to note here that by using the term “thecomorphic” we wish to indicate the radical perception that Western culture has of man’s very *being*. It is true that from within Anglo-Saxon positivistic liberal anthropology, this “thecomorphic anthropology” may appear exaggerated and

perceive the spouse mainly as an equal with whom to share some or most of life at whatever time one deems appropriate. This is to view the human person as a disembodied spirit whose being is reduced to consciousness. In this view, everything—particularly God and children—is subservient to the self understood as conscious freedom.¹⁰ Man, therefore, is most fundamentally an abstract self, that is, someone for whom his own body and his relations to others (parents, spouse, children, friends, God) are utterly secondary.¹¹ As a result, the questions regarding when to live with another person, when to have children and how many, what place work occupies, etc., are always determined by what the self judges best. Since what matters is that one has the capacity within oneself to establish what is good or bad, this theomorphic anthropology values power above all else. Such a bold claim to total power is rooted in the “promethean affirma-

outdated—indeed, more so than it would in any other context and differently than it does from the perspective of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European nihilism. Today, in fact, to be human is to exercise power by following what seems attractive and gives pleasure, for as long as it attracts and gives pleasure, and that in doing so, one some good things to come into existence. Yet, this perception of the human being is “innocent,” “positive,” and “constructive” only on the surface. This “cheerful” theomorphic anthropology hides under man’s impressive capacity to make the radical claim of being the origin of himself and hence the source of the meaning of all that is. The fact that, culturally speaking, this perception of the human being that sees everything as secondary to man’s power goes largely unnoticed, rather than indicating that this anthropology no longer exists, reveals further its governing and ruling presence.

10. Conscience today is perceived as an agent gathering whatever one’s freedom has determined to be good and true. See Joseph Ratzinger, *On Conscience: Two Essays by Joseph Ratzinger* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007). A crucial dimension of this reduction is the identification of being with time. Since time is understood as history, the permanence of being is broken open and replaced by constant change, which results in the ever-pressing need for novelty. Marital fidelity, in this regard, tends to be seen as a monotonous repetition of the same and hence as immobility, which is now a synonym for death. See George Grant, “Time as History,” in *Collected Works of George Grant: Volume 4, 1970–1988*, ed. Arthur Davis and Henry Roper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 3–78; Joseph Ratzinger, “Zur Theologie der Ehe,” in *Theologie der Ehe: Veröffentlichung des Ökumenischen Arbeitskreises evangelischer und katholischer Theologen*, ed. Gerhard Krems and Reinhard Mumm (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1969), 81–115; FC, 6.

11. David L. Schindler, *Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 328–49, 383–429.

tion that the human spirit creates itself by itself, which tirelessly imitates the divine in ever-different ways.”¹² In principle, no human being can claim to be endowed with God’s characteristics. To be born, after all, is never the fruit of one’s own decision. Yet the dominion over nature that technology and science advance, thereby hiding from view the very reality of nature, supports the illusion that man is the origin of himself—or at least prevents him from posing the question regarding his own origin.¹³ This conception of man is “theomorphic” precisely because one wishes to be like God, that is, to be the beginning responsible for whatever happens or exists. Since man’s idea of himself as the origin, however, cannot reach to the foundation of his being—because if it did it would remind man of his own created finitude—it can only be sheer, free activity: “In the beginning was the *Act*,” as Goethe said.¹⁴

12. Claude Bruaire, *L'être et l'esprit* (Paris: PUF, 1983), 45.

13. We need to mention an additional reason that clarifies further why contemporary man embraces this illusion. Since the individual human being cannot, by himself, adequately exercise a freedom understood as total power or order every single aspect of existence in that light, he entrusts his own freedom to groups or to society so that the desired goal, that is, complete mastery over oneself and one’s own fate, might be obtained. Ultimately, it is the state that takes human freedom upon itself—freely offered to it by men—and adopts as its first task that of protecting this freedom. Yet this absorption of power has led the state to set the Church aside and to take over both the education of individuals and the realm of the family. The outcome of this logic—according to which finite, human freedom constitutes a State whose first task is to preserve and actualize all the capacities of that freedom—is that the state absorbs and transforms everything into itself, and whatever cannot be so absorbed, it seeks to annihilate. The actively pursued goal of this logic is that the family, rather than educate free human beings, might become the privileged vehicle through which to perpetuate state totalitarianism. In fact, one cannot promote a theomorphic anthropology in which the human being conceives himself as self-determining freedom and still expect the family (or the single person) to be able to resist the state’s complete redefinition of the family in terms of genderless, orphaned, and free individuals, the meaning of whose life together is governed by the free market—however it is understood—and the culture of entertainment. See, among others, Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. LePain (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 25–26, 170–77; Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded ed., Columbia Classics in Philosophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

14. “Am Anfang war die Tat!” (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe’s*

It is this theomorphic anthropology that is responsible for the conception of marriage in terms of divorce and of the marriage bond as the exercise of two finite freedoms whose breadth and meaning reside in the active and conscious volition of the spouses. The source of the union, understood in this way, is only the power of the spouses' individual freedoms. Hence, their union is never anything more than the sum of their finite, singular freedoms and their subjective intentions. A number of well-affirmed Catholic theologians, whose views are widely shared, concur with and promote this account of the marriage union without disregarding its religious and ecclesial dimensions. They speak of the union as a "moral bond," held together not by virtue of its intrinsic goodness but because it is the fruit of the spouses' wills, that is, a product of their good actions and intentions.¹⁵ It goes without saying that, if it is understood this way, once love is no longer felt or the nuptial union no longer desired, there

Faust, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Anchor Books, 1990] part 1, verse 1237). An alternative to the modern interpretation of "beginning" expressed by Goethe is that of Hannah Arendt, who wrote, "The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin. . . . The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born" (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958], 246–47).

15. Kenneth R. Himes and James A. Coriden, "The Indissolubility of Marriage: Reasons to Reconsider," *Theological Studies* 65, no. 3 (September 2004): 453–99, at 486–88; Ladislav Órsy, *Marriage in Canon Law: Texts and Comments, Reflections and Questions* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1986); Michael G. Lawler, *What Is and What Ought to Be: The Dialectic of Experience, Theology, and Church* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Michael G. Lawler, *Marriage and the Catholic Church: Disputed Questions* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989); Michael G. Lawler, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 1995); Walter Kasper, *Theology of Christian Marriage*, trans. David Smith (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Margaret A. Farley, "Divorce, Remarriage, and Pastoral Practice," in *Marriage*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Readings in Moral Theology* 15 (New York: Paulist Press, 2009): 426–55; Richard A. McCormick, "Divorce, Remarriage and the Sacraments," in *The Critical Calling: Reflections on Moral Dilemmas Since Vatican II* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1989), 233–53.

is no reason for the spouses to continue living together. More broadly, if we unwittingly uphold a theomorphic anthropology, we will misinterpret the Catholic Church's recent Magisterium proposing marriage as an indissoluble communion of life and love in terms of gift of self.¹⁶ If we relinquish the fullness of this teaching, the communion will be understood reductively as something spouses must "do"—and divorce will be seen as a regrettable event that ought not to but may occur. Therefore, elucidating the sense in which marriage is indissoluble requires seeing how the gift of the spouses is the expression of the gift that being is. Only an anthropology informed by the gift-character of man's created and finite being can adequately account for marriage as an indissoluble union, because, as we shall now examine, it is the only anthropology that respects the greatness and limits of man's freedom.¹⁷

2. THE GIFT OF BEING HUMAN

In a society in which love has a distinct "liquid" form, as Bauman would say, the affirmation that the human being is made for an indissoluble communion and that he is capable of it may seem naïve.¹⁸ Indeed, the Church's teaching on the indissolubility of

16. GS, 48; CCC, no. 1646–47. "Being rooted in the personal and total self-giving of the couple, and being required by the good of the children, the indissolubility of marriage finds its ultimate truth in the plan that God has manifested in His revelation" (FC, 20).

17. We cannot offer here a fully developed metaphysics of gift, but to that end, see Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1982); Antonio López, *Gift and the Unity of Being* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014). What is said in this section serves to account for marriage as a sacrament of creation, or natural marriage. The fourth section presents what is needed to specify the sense in which marriage is a sacrament of redemption, or sacrament of the new covenant, understood within the entire scope of Christ's salvific and redemptive gift. The nomenclature is taken from John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 506–10.

18. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2003); *Gratissimam sane (Letter to Families)*, 6. Since "love" is an important, yet ambiguous, term, I would like to offer a brief description of its main elements so that the reader may better grasp the considerations offered here. If we look at the family as a whole, love reveals itself to be the gift of

marriage will remain unintelligible insofar as the human person is conceived as abstract freedom, that is, as an unrelated agent who believes and acts as if he is his own origin. In contrast, we can begin to see that this is not the case by pondering the abiding mystery of birth, that mystery that determines what the human being is and informs all his actions. Man *is* because he is given to himself: he is gift. The capacity to affirm and live with and for the other, which expresses the inseparable unity of truth and the good proper to love, is rooted in the mystery of the person's being given to himself. A man and a woman can give themselves to each other in marriage and promise to be faithful to each other because they are first, and always, given to themselves. After looking at the miracle of being-given that characterizes each person, we will be able to elucidate the meaning of the spouses' action of giving themselves to each other through their consent.

2.1. *Given to Be*

The human being is *totally* given to himself. This means that because the person is irreducible to either his parents or to the necessity of nature, the incarnate human spirit is gift. His substance, that which is most truly his own, consists in being gift. His subsistence, his remaining and walking in history at a level deeper than the finite length of biological existence, is the exclusion of the possibility that the gift of his being may be called back. This impossibility is what gives man the taste of eternity, what makes him hope for a final confirmation of his finite being-gift, and what, when misconstrued, he takes to mean that he is the only origin of himself. At the same time, since he is totally *given* to himself, man's own being is not at his disposal. Just as the gift of his being cannot be revoked, so he cannot give himself back as he is used to doing with things that malfunction or no longer please him. This, then, is the human paradox: one is gift

self that welcomes and affirms the other for who he or she is (*logos*), desires to be one with the other (*eros*), does not worry about the cost (*agape*), and thus allows the other to be himself or herself in being for and with the other (*koinonia, filia*). In this essay, therefore, we understand love as the unity of these four elements: *logos, eros, agape, and koinonia*. The concept of gift, as we shall see, emphasizes the dynamic unity of these four elements.

and thus given to oneself, and, precisely for this reason, one is not one's own. To be means to be given, that is, to be our own, *and* to belong to another.

Second, man's spiritual faculties—of being free, of thought, and of desire—reflect the reality of the gift of being, and their exercise will be true only if they reflect man's nature. The human being is free because he is given to himself. If he were not given *to himself*, the gift of his being would not be totally given. The ever-surprising miracle of man's being is that God, by inviting man to be, lets him be other than God himself; that is, mysteriously and truly, man is given to be at his own disposal. Yet, because he is totally *given* to himself, to be free means most fundamentally to recognize in gratitude that the mystery of Being, from which man comes, is everything, and it desires to give itself to man and be reciprocated by him. What liberates man, rather than his claim of being his own absolute source, is this recognition, since in it the human person is also given to possess his origin without reducing it. This, of course, does not mean that human freedom does not have a power of its own. It means, contrary to what our culture normally assumes, that this power is had only inasmuch as it is given. Freedom, in order not to destroy itself, needs *both* dimensions: the being-given *to itself* and the being-given. The faculty of thought comes to its genuine fruition when it is the discovery in wonder of the truth of what is, which includes recognizing that this truth always remains greater than what one is able to grasp. Whoever, for example, acknowledges that his seeing the truth of married love happens within a greater being-seen and that what he sees is given to him, enters evermore into the inexhaustible realm of truth. Otherwise, thinking is reduced to a sort of making insofar as it aims at the ordering of ideas and the application of this order to an ulterior exercise of power. Regarding the faculty of desire, because reality, being gift, is a sign of its ultimate source, its beauty makes man desire to be one with what he is not and to respect this other in its otherness. In giving himself over to what he receives, his desires are both fulfilled and heightened. While these three faculties belong to each human person, none of them is exercised by an isolated individual but always by one who, having been given to himself in and through a family, cannot but know, love, and desire

within a communion of love.¹⁹

Third, as parents soon realize when a child is given to them, the fact that each person is totally given to himself means that there is a reason for his existence and that this reason is offered from within the gift of his being. A thing that has no adequate reason for its existence cannot properly be called a “gift.” To speak of the *logos* of man’s gift-ness (what it is and why it is) is to speak of his singular destiny. The reason for man’s existence—which unfolds more concretely what it means for him to be—is not revealed to him without his participation. Here again, the destiny (*logos*) of man is given to him by another but, at the same time, does not happen without him. His very being is at stake in each one of his actions, and what happens fulfills a plan that he did not design but in which he finds his inexhaustible completion.²⁰ Thus, man’s destiny unfolds in time in the new beginning that is his birth, and one of its most expressive actions is his entering into his own state of life (in the case of our discussion, marriage).

Lastly, because the human being is totally given to himself, he is in debt. This debt of himself to another not only sets the human person in search of the one to whom he owes his gratitude but also means that each of his actions is true only to the extent that it is, most fundamentally, a reciprocation to the original giver. Indeed, because being is gift, indebtedness expresses itself as gratitude: one cannot but receive the gift of oneself and reciprocate it freely, gratuitously. We all need to be loved and to love gratuitously. Thus, rather than eliminating one’s relations with others and with God, necessarily and freely reciprocating the gift of being and of one’s concrete existence makes these relations truly dramatic and human.²¹

19. Since these faculties belong to a being who is given to himself, they are at his disposal. He can therefore use them against their own nature, that is, in order to possess and affirm himself in a way that denies the gift-ness of life, God, and the world. Claude Bruaire, *L’affirmation de Dieu: Essai sur la logique de l’existence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964).

20. *Veritatis splendor*, 65–70.

21. It is this being-in-debt that grounds the ethical possibility of the return of the gift. Moral obligation would remain extrinsic to oneself, an imposition that would be carried out only inasmuch and for as long as one wished or until one had paid back a debt, if it were not rooted in the ontological reality

If these four dimensions (being-gift, the spiritual faculties, the singularity of one's own destiny, and indebtedness) characterize what the human person always is, then the gift of self that takes place in marriage will be true only when it reflects the gift-character of man's nature. Let us then look more carefully at the gift of self that gives rise to marriage, a gift that is given when consent is declared and that is called to subsist throughout all of married life. Elucidating the nature of this self-giving will help us grasp why every marriage is an indissoluble communion of life and love.

2.2. *The Total and Personal Gift of Self*

As expressed in the liturgy of Christian matrimony, the consent spouses declare is, first, each one's reception of the other, which coincides with the entrusting of oneself to that other, and, second, the promise that this gift of self to the other will be confirmed in time.²² Hence, the reciprocal gift that originates a

of being-in-debt. Owing one's own being to another (parents, friends, and ultimately God) is perceived as diminishing or alienating only by one who rejects what the mystery of birth reveals: one's own power is an expression of the gift-character of one's own being. To disregard this mystery is tantamount to rejecting one's own finitude, and this is done by one who imagines God to be absolute, that is, a remote unicity that does not know how to give or that it gives. As Western history has proven time and again, this perception of God leads only to nihilism. Cornelio Fabro, *Introduzione all'ateismo moderno*, Opere Complete 21 (Rome: EDIVI, 2014).

22. The latest edition of the Catholic Latin rite of matrimony proposes that the spouses declare their consent as follows: "I, N., take you, N., to be my wife/husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life." To refer to the liturgy of the Latin rite of matrimony is still in keeping with our approach to marriage as natural marriage (i.e., a marriage of a man and a woman who are not baptized Christians) because this formula expresses what every human couple does when they get married. An important element to mention now, however, is that presenting the exchange of vows as a liturgical act not only helps us avoid subsuming the consent under the species of commercial exchange but also reveals that the consent is a prayer. Prayer, in this regard, is the truth of thinking and of language. Hence, what the spouses say to each other is also said to God. The theological dimension is made explicit in the liturgy of Christian matrimony by the presence of the priest, who in the Catholic Latin rite is the one who asks for the reason for their consent, receives it in the name of the Church, and declares that the one ultimately responsible

communion of persons first acknowledges that one's gift of self is the response to the preceding presence and love of the other: "I take you to be my wife." This "taking" is the spouses' grateful response to their prior having-been-given to each other, that is, to their being allowed to be and being called to marry each other. Their "taking" is thus a "letting-be" in the form of obedient willingness for this destiny to unfold. This "wanting it to be" also entails that neither the man nor the woman is the origin of their nuptial love. Because they are finite and their destiny is given to them, the initiative always rests in God, who allows two people to be born, to meet, and to give themselves to each other. They, so to say, choose to have been chosen.²³

Given our cultural context, it is important to mention that the spouses' reception of each other originates a nuptial union that is greater than the sum of its members precisely because the spouses are sexually different. Only with sexual difference is the conjugal union a union of two persons who are irreducibly other in both the spiritual and bodily aspects of their being, and it is precisely because of this irreducible difference, which truly and permanently opens one to the other, that the union can be fruitful. The communion proper to marriage, in fact, needs to be fruitful because only in this way does it preserve the nature of the gift and itself participate in giving. Without this further giving, what is effected is, rather than a union of two persons, the absorption of one into the other, as we will see in the following section. That the fruitful union preserves the personal identity of each spouse within the communion of persons does not mean, however, that this union is not transformative of the self. To receive the sexually differentiated other into oneself means accepting to become husband or wife.²⁴ Likewise, address-

for the union is God.

23. It is not secondary that the man speaks first because, as male, he is called to represent God's prerogative, not his own power. Concerning the issue of headship in marriage see, among others, Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Dignity of Women," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 5: *Man Is Created*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 166–75; Carlo L. Rossetti di Valdalbero, *Novissimus Adam: Saggi di antropologia ed escatologia biblica* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2010): 73–164.

24. The spouses' giving themselves to each other entails their carrying out a task together: fatherhood and motherhood, and working in the world

ing the other as “wife” or “husband” means accepting not to conceive of oneself outside of one’s relation to the other. One surrenders being only for oneself and accepts that being for the other is what defines him. Each spouse’s letting the other be in him or herself, therefore, not only transforms each of them but also makes them be one, since indwelling—being in the other—is the greatest degree of unity there is.²⁵ Furthermore, the simul-

within the light of their nuptial love. Karol Wojtyła, *Radiation of Fatherhood*, in *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*, trans. Bolesław Taborski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987): 333–64. Carrying out this task of fatherhood and motherhood reveals further that the total gift of self also includes the body. This bodily gift of self takes place once and for all at the moment of consent and, after the exchange of the consent, gradually. The bodily dimension of the spouses’ gift reinforces its monogamous character. If it were not monogamous, that is, exclusive of other nuptial relations, the union would not be a union of two equal persons who are reciprocally and asymmetrically affirmed for their own sakes. It would not be governed by love, by the total gift of self and total reception of the other, but by a transient sexual or political interest. This being the case, the gradual dimension of the gift does not refer to the fact that not every conjugal act is *eo ipso* fruitful, nor does it mean that many instances of sexual intimacy must take place in order for nuptial love to be consummated. Instead, it is required by the fact that the “once and for all” of the spousal union, the totally being for the other, represents the beginning of a path of growth into a spiritual union in which the wills and minds of the spouses become themselves in the communion of life and love. In this sense, it is adequate to say that the spouses need time to learn how to let the conjugal union be informed by honor and love for the other and by his or her destiny and not by instinct.

25. The term “relation” may be taken here in the strong sense of “real relation.” “Real relation,” as is known, is the term used to describe the ontological dependence of the world on God, without whom it would cease to exist. It is also used to indicate the distinction between the divine hypostases, who are relation as subsisting (Thomas Aquinas, ST 1, q. 28, a. 1 and q. 45, a. 3), and can be used in an analogous way to refer to the personal relation of the spouses. Without claiming that this relation becomes substantially distinct or constitutes a new person, we can still say that—as the child witnesses—the consent, if validly given, makes the spouses “one” in a way irreducible to the spouses (“one flesh,” Gn 2:24; Mk 10:8). “Relation” in marriage, therefore, cannot be understood as an accident in the Aristotelian sense, inhering in the substance intrinsically but relatively (Aristotle, *Categories* 6a35; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1020b26–1021b11; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 4.14). Thus, the spousal relation constitutes the persons—not in the sense of bringing them into being from nothing or in the sense that they are, like the divine persons, person *as* relation, but rather in the sense that there is nothing of the persons of the spouses that is not encompassed by and participatory in the new spousal unity generated by their mutual consent, such that the entirety of one’s substantial-personal being is formed by the union. They are *spiritual* beings

taneity of, on the one hand, being for and in the other, and, on the other hand, preserving one's singular personhood, means that the nuptial union given to and embraced by the spouses is itself other than them, although it does not exist without them.

The reception of the other in oneself is not fully true if one does not accept to be *totally for* the other. This totality entails both offering all of oneself for all of life and relinquishing the possibility of taking the gift of oneself back. Because the nature of gift requires giving up the option to recall the gift, it can only be offered once. If the gift of self is not irrevocable, it is not really given. In love one does not simply lend oneself or one's own resources: one gives *oneself*. Therefore, in light of the irrevocable nature of gift, it is the gift-ness of the persons' being and of the communion it generates—and not simply the spouses' intentions—that renders marriage vows capable of being taken only once. A personal gift of self takes place fully when the word of consent that expresses the gift affirms this unrepeatable, irrevocable uniqueness—which is the permanent source of nuptial joy. Indissolubility, the incapacity of being dissolved, is the truth of giving.²⁶

who freely and irrevocably welcome each other. Since the unity of the spouses is also that of one *flesh*, it not only expresses their actual giving and receiving (this would be the moral dimension of their life together) but also depends on their abiding bodily existence. Since "flesh" is a term that in Scripture encompasses the entire person, the "one flesh"—like the gift of self—cannot be reduced to the act of sexual union, although it also includes this act. It regards instead human reality in all of its concreteness and openness to the mystery of the triune God. Given that human beings have to pass through death, their spousal union does not endure after death, although this does not necessarily mean that their love disappears in heaven (Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 41). See Kenneth L. Schmitz, "Created Receptivity and the Philosophy of the Concrete," *The Thomist* 61, no. 3 (1997): 339–71; David S. Crawford, "Of Spouses, the Real World, and the 'Where' of Christian Marriage," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33 (Spring 2006): 100–16.

26. That the gift of self promised at the consent is irrevocable does not mean that the communion of life and love that follows is the mechanical and monotonous unfolding of the promise and hence that no real receiving and giving takes place. On the contrary, it is precisely because marriage vows are irrevocable and can be given only once that the daily life and love of the spouses can be ever new. Of course, the "newness" of the gift of self throughout the life of the spouses is not due to the fact that different things happen at different times or that what follows the consent is totally unrelated to what happened when it was given. The irrevocability of the vows makes the gift of self ever "new" precisely because it is a personal response to the nuptial love in which the spouses are given to dwell. Because their nuptial communion is

Being for another also implies a totality that encompasses the entire time the spouses live. This is why the consent not only gathers the present moment in which it is uttered and the past that has brought them to that moment but also includes the future, which is not yet known or owned. To give oneself and to receive the other for all of life, which is what every lover deeply desires, one must be able to dispose freely of one's whole existence. "It is of the very essence of man's nobility, it is a decisive mark of his similarity to God, that he can respond with a supratemporal freedom in which he disposes of his whole temporal existence," from its inception to its natural end.²⁷ The gift-character of the human person means that man is a creature who can promise, that is, one who, precisely because he is given to himself, can freely dispose of his whole existence.²⁸ The promise gathers the future and assures

historically definitive (irrevocable) and irreducible to the spouses, they are *able* to do what they, being in debt for the gift of their love, have to and want to do: say yes to each other, to their life together, and to their common task. If the consent were not definitive, the spouses would always be trying to put in place something that never actually begins. In that sense, "novelty" would only be synonymous with "changing" and "trying again"; in other words, there would be no "novelty" in their love because no (irrevocable) gift was ever given. "Newness" indicates therefore the interplay and the inseparable distinction between the spouses' bond of love and their very persons. Their gift of themselves is new first because it is a re-happening of their reciprocal love. Yet, the gift of self is not a monotonous reiteration of the consent; that is, it is new in a second sense because it is given by the persons of the spouses who, once the consent is ratified and consummated, are one. In this way, spousal love participates in the eventful character of divine triune love that, as such, is infinitely greater than the love of the spouses. For an explanation of the gratuity and eternal newness of the triune God see my *Gift and the Unity of Being*, 228–58.

27. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 300.

28. Friedrich Nietzsche contends that promises are a type of contractual relation and that they can be kept because indebtedness is burned into man's consciousness through suffering. For him, indebtedness, that is, the guilty feeling of owing something to someone—especially to the Christian God—needs to be let go so that the overman may be free as master of himself and his destiny and may determine his own values. Only the overman, for Nietzsche, has the right to promise. See his *Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 493–532. For a contrasting and balanced account of the nature of promise, see Guy Mansini, *Promising and the Good* (Ann Arbor, MI: Sapientia Press, 2005) and Robert Spaemann, *Personen: Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen 'etwas' und 'jemand'* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1998), 235–51.

that the total gift of self given in the present will be renewed “in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health”: “I will love you . . . all the days of my life.” Rather than expressing naïve and foolish romanticism, this promise acknowledges time for what it is: the gradual fulfillment of the promise contained in the gift of one’s own existence and the vocation to which one has been destined. The promise of indissoluble love, that is, the promise to be faithful over time, does not therefore rest on the possession, knowledge, and mastery of the future. It rests instead on the good of the communion of life and love and on the gift-ness of the spouses.²⁹ To put it paradoxically, the future can really be contained in the consent and thus given precisely because it is not possessed. The promise of faithfulness over time thus consists in the irrevocable decision of the spouses to live the future only together with the other person and to do so in the certainty that the original giver will fulfill the promise of their call to live a communion of life and love. The future therefore is not seen as a threat one must handle. It is, rather, joyfully and peacefully awaited as the renewal of the original gift of the spouses to themselves and the gift of the call to marriage. When, instead, one wants to take the long view; calculates and measures one’s own capacity to weather every possible circumstance successfully; or reserves for oneself other possibilities in the event that things turn out differently than expected, one interrupts time, that is, the renewal of the reception and reciprocation of the gift, and perpetrates a sort of spiritual suicide. According to the nature of the gift, however, the spouses live together accepting at every moment whatever is given whenever it is offered without trying to grasp it in advance.

29. Keeping this in mind, along with what will be said in the following section, will help us realize that describing the bond as a communion of life and love and understanding this communion in terms of “total, personal gift of self” does not entail the reduction of love to a transient emotion. “Spousal love,” writes Nicholas Healy, “involves a total gift of self that, by its very nature, founds a form and is itself a form. . . . The gift . . . becomes an objective form endowed with the equally objective properties of unity and indissolubility” (Nicholas J. Healy, Jr., “Christian Personalism and the Debate Over the Nature and Ends of Marriage,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 39 [Spring–Summer 2012]: 186–200, at 193). See also John R. Connery, “The Role of Love in Christian Marriage: A Historical Overview,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 11 (Fall 1984): 244–57; Cormac Burke, “Marriage: A Personalist or an Institutional Understanding?,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 19 (Summer 1992): 278–304.

3. A FRUITFUL, INDISSOLUBLE COMMUNION

Besides being required by the spouses' total, personal gift, indissolubility is also called for by the fruitfulness intrinsic to the marriage union.³⁰ It is difficult, however, to see why fruitfulness requires indissolubility when one stands within a culture that fosters the separation of fatherhood and motherhood from conjugal love and of these two from sexual intimacy. When "fruit" is understood in a limited way to refer only to the child, and the sexual union is either separated from the generation of the child or used as a means to that end, the intrinsic relation between indissolubility and fruitfulness is obscured.³¹ Instead, a fuller understanding of fruitfulness that sees children as arising from the spouses' mutual, personal gift will help us recognize how indissolubility, fruitfulness, and the gift of children form an integral whole proper to marriage.

If conjugal love, as we saw, is essentially a total, ever-new, and personal gift of self, then it is before all else spiritually

30. This section also aims to offer a justification for the claim found in the Church's tradition that consummation contributes to the fulfillment (*esse completionis*) of what is expressed in the consent. An ontology of gift is more adequate than a juridical approach in elucidating the relation between ratification and consummation. In the present discussion, we do not neglect the fact that what makes marriage is the consent and not the copula. See Bonaventure, *In IV Sent.*, d. 26, a. 2, q. 3, resp.

31. That Catholic teaching—*Humanae vitae* (1968), *Revised Rite of Marriage* (1969 and 1990), *FC* (1981), *The Code of Canon Law* (1983), and the *CCC* (1992)—no longer uses the traditional language of the "ends of marriage" or insists that offspring is the primary end does not mean, as some claim, that it has embraced a "personalistic" reading of love according to which "person" indicates the "abstract self" described at the beginning of this paper. In this "personalistic" view, friendship and conjugal intimacy between equal partners is the primary end of marriage. We also note, considering the tendency to confuse "end" with freely determined subjective intention, that the Church has not merely modified her language in order to avoid alienating couples while her understanding of the goods of marriage remains in reality unchanged. As Healy lucidly illustrates, "The older teaching regarding the primary and secondary ends of marriage is carried forward and deepened in terms of the inseparability of the unitive and procreative meanings of marriage. The ground of this inseparability is an anthropology of love. Created in the image of the Triune God, human beings are created through love and called to share in God's love through the sincere gift of self" (Healy, "Christian Personalism," 196). See also Alain Mattheeuws, *Union et procreation: Développements de la doctrine des fins du mariage* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1989).

fruitful: First, marriage generates the spouses themselves as persons by bringing them to live for each other and for the mission and destiny with which their nuptial love has been entrusted. Second, the marriage union is spiritually fruitful because it can participate in the creation of another spiritual being, a child.³² The spiritual fruitfulness of the spouses' union thus arises from and gives rise to total physical self-giving, but this physical gift is a "sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving" only if it "corresponds to the demands of responsible fertility."³³ Our understanding of love offers at least two reasons for this organic relation between indissolubility and fruitfulness: the fruition of the gift and the capacity to participate in the very giving that constitutes one as a person.

The spouses' fruition of their love calls for the existence of a third person with whom both can share the joy of being loved by the other. In marriage, fruitfulness is a gift that must be received by the spouses if it is granted.³⁴ Once the child arrives, he reveals and heightens the fruitfulness contained in married love by shedding new light on the mutual otherness of the spouses and the otherness of the communion in which they live together. In contrast, the willed absence of the child prevents the spouses from honoring and loving the other for his or her own sake. Without the surprising presence of the child, each of the spouses will either affirm the other and deny himself or herself or use the other to affirm himself or herself. In the former case, love is *agapic* without being *erotic*, and in the latter, it is *erotic* without being *agapic*. In either case there is no real, lived communion

32. The full meaning of spiritual fruitfulness will be revealed in the theological understanding of person. The human being, in this theological light, is seen as fundamentally called by God to respond to him and to take up a specific mission that participates in Christ's mission.

33. *FC*, 11.

34. We wish to point out here that infertile marriages are not meaningless. In this situation, the spouses' joy passes through the embrace of the great sacrifice they have been asked to carry, and God makes this accepted sacrifice fruitful. In this regard, it is worth noting that adoption and charitable service, while never capable of replacing the children a couple is not given, are real means for the fruitfulness of their nuptial union to flourish. I dealt with this issue in my "Toward an Understanding of Fruitfulness," *Nova et Vetera*, English ed. 6 (2008): 801–28. The present discussion benefits from Richard of St. Victor's trinitarian reflection in his *De Trinitate*, bk. 3.

between the spouses and no real donation of self. In fact, if, as we say, the gift of self simultaneously includes the reception of the other and the response to the other, the spouse who receives but does not give is the one who desires without loving (*eros*), just as the spouse who gives without desiring to receive (or be received) is the one who cares only for his own capacity to love (*agape*). Of course, in the communion of love, when one of these two dimensions is lost, the one that remains does so in a perverted form, that is, as power. The tie between the breakdown of communion and the refusal to welcome children becomes more apparent when we see in this way that the exercise of power manifests one's denial of what is other than oneself. When the child is welcomed, however, he enables the fruition of the indissoluble union to acquire its full depth precisely because he is both the surprising gift of his parents' love, coming from a source outside of themselves, and the one that represents their union as other. As the sign of their union, the child reminds the parents that they participate in a love that is greater than what they sometimes feel or understand. As fruit, the child is the memory that they are given to each other and therefore desire to be welcomed in each other and to serve each other. The child thus allows them to see more deeply their own finitude and the depth of their love and in this way enables them to share more fully their nuptial joy.

The second reason for the organic relation between indissolubility and fruitfulness is that it belongs to the nature of the gift to be allowed to participate in the giving. The person's being fully given to himself, we saw, enables him to give himself to his spouse and to promise complete faithfulness. It also means that the spouses, together with each other, are given to participate in the giving of new life. "Conjugal love," said John Paul II, "does not end with the couple, because it makes them capable of the greatest possible gift, the gift by which they become cooperators with God for giving life to a new human person. Thus the couple, while giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves but also the *reality* of children."³⁵ As with the first reason, here also the child does not make the indissoluble union possible; this is done by the consent. Yet, the child reveals that faithfulness contains within itself one's allowing another person to come into

35. *FC*, 14. Emphasis added.

being, a person who will also be given to himself and thus able to communicate life further.³⁶ In sum, fruitfulness and indissolubility are always found together because spiritual fruitfulness is inseparable from a total, personal gift of self—a gift that, as we saw, is by its very nature indissoluble. This spiritual fruitfulness, and so indissolubility, is also tied to physical self-giving and the surprising reality of children, openness to whom is intrinsic to the marriage union, and in whom the union itself is enabled to participate in giving.

4. MARRIED IN THE LORD

However, simply because marital ethics (i.e., the way spouses love each other) is rooted in an ontology of gift, not every marriage is, as we know, inherently faithful. Conjugal love is not the necessary and mechanical blossoming of the gift-ness of the person, nor is the decision to divorce proof that there never was a marriage in the first place. Love, and its logic of gift, contains within itself the possibility of the rejection of the gift. Although every person always has the capacity to participate in the truth of the gift of self, because man is given over to his own intrinsic weakness—that insurmountable tendency to claim to be the author of himself—he cannot, out of his own self, sustain the gift of self to his spouse over time. On his own, he cannot abide in the truth of the gift and thus cannot live without embracing either the presumption of his own measure or a desperate delusion. The dramatic intensity of the questions asking whether indissolubility is indeed a dimension of nuptial love or just an untenable romantic ideal is born from the experience of this paradox: one wants and knows oneself to be made for communion, yet one is not

36. That the child represents the organic relation between indissoluble unity and fruitfulness is documented by the fact that children of divorced parents always perceive the divorce—regardless of how “good” it seemed to be—as ontological homelessness. Parents who divorce sentence their children to live “between two worlds.” It thus becomes rather difficult for them to know why and what they are. The children of divorced parents would not undergo an identity crisis, an ontological homelessness, if the spouses’ being one flesh were secondary to the union of married love. See, among others, Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005).

capable of it. Communion must be given. The perplexing questions asked at the beginning do, therefore, have a valid aspect, yet the difficulties they indicate need to be seen from the point of view of the gift of being and the grace of matrimony, not simply from the perspective of man's capacity. Before this incapacity to remain in the truth of love, one could either turn to the state to ask it to resolve what one's own freedom cannot—which would mean that one still holds on to the illusion that one's freedom and power are radically self-originated, as we saw in the first section—or wait to receive from the original giver what one lacks the power to bring about.

In light of this weakness, some contemporary theologians—driven perhaps by the difficulties couples have in remaining faithful, and attracted by the more lenient pastoral practice of the Eastern churches³⁷—wonder whether it would be possible to revisit the magisterial understanding of marriage's indissolubility. They propose doing so in order to allow room for some exceptions without thereby jettisoning the Church's "much needed message" regarding the sacramentality and permanence of marriage or losing the "important witness" of "maintain[ing] the unity and permanence of marriage."³⁸ These suggestions stem from an understanding of marriage that considers the covenantal communion of life and love to be mainly a moral reality that, as such, is reducible to the spouses and thus may fail.³⁹ While the

37. For the Church's position on the application of the Eastern principle of *oikonomia* see *FC*, 84. It is important not to forget that for the Eastern churches, a second marriage is not considered a sacrament. The ceremony is a penitential rite performed after a time of penance and conversion.

38. Himes and Coriden, "Indissolubility of Marriage," 455.

39. The moral interpretation of the bond claims that once love has died, that is, when animosity and hate have replaced feelings of attraction and eagerness to live and share life together, there is no longer marriage and hence divorce should be allowed. One of the strongest exponents of this view is Edward Schillebeeckx, "Christian Marriage and the Reality of Complete Marital Breakdown," in *Catholic Divorce: The Deception of Annulments*, ed. Pierre Hegy and Joseph Martos (New York: Continuum, 2000), 82–107. See also Basilio Petrà, *Divorziati risposati e seconde nozze nella Chiesa: Una via di soluzione* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2012); Timothy Buckley, *What Binds Marriage?: Roman Catholic Theology in Practice*, rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2002). John Paul II confirmed the impossibility of dissolving ratified and consummated marriages in his address to the Roman Rota on 22 January 2000 (AAS 92 [2000]: 355). K. Lehmann, O. Saier, and W. Kasper reacted to *FC* 84

previous steps in our reflection sought to respond to this claim by showing how an ontology of gift grounds and requires marriage's indissolubility as the fulfillment of the spouses' free, gratuitous, and total gift of self, now, recognizing that human nature alone is not sufficient to sustain this gift, we need to elucidate the sense in which the communion of life and love is redeemed by Christ and finds in his love for the Church (Eph 5:32) its desired and unforeseeable fulfillment.

The search for an exception to Christ's rule of indissolubility is nothing new. While aware of the beauty of marriage and the task of both parenthood and work in the world given with it, Jesus' disciples were also familiar with the "hardness of heart" that made divorce a welcome option (Mt 19:8–9). This is why, even though they had already heard Jesus explain that one must forgive his brother always and how the Father will treat those who, having been forgiven, do not forgive (Mt 18:21–35), when the apostles heard Christ confirm marriage's indissolubility (Mt 19:4–9) they could not help but utter: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry" (Mt 19:10). Christ establishes what man's ontology and experience of love suggest to be the case and, at the same time, demands precisely what the human being thought simply impossible: marriage's indissolubility is absolute. In so doing Christ also reveals that a special grace, a charism, is given so that those called to marriage can receive and live it fully.⁴⁰

by asking that spouses be allowed to follow their consciences in some cases. The text of the German bishops can be found in Kevin T. Kelly, ed., *Divorce and Second Marriage: Facing the Challenge*, expanded ed. (New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1996), 90–117. The response of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to this objection is found in AAS 86 (1994): 974–79. One may rightly wonder whether the request of the German bishops for the divorced and remarried to receive Communion while the previous marriage remains valid is not, in its denial of the exclusivity required by the total gift of (the bodily) self to another, a tacit denial of marriage's indissolubility.

40. If we read Mt 19:12 together with 1 Cor 7:7, we understand that both marriage and consecrated virginity are gifts (*charisma*) that God gives to whom-ever he wishes: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it" (Mt 19:12). "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another" (1 Cor 7:7). See Marc Ouellet, *Mistero e sacramento dell'amore*:

They will thus be healed of their hardness of heart, and their mutual love will be elevated to participate in Christ's love for the Church, therein becoming finally human.⁴¹

Careful exegetical analysis, even while recognizing man's weakness and the complicated history behind the question of indissolubility, concurs in upholding the absolute nature of Christ's prohibition of divorce.⁴² Jesus confirms what God determined in the beginning for man and woman and forbids everyone to put asunder what God has joined (Mt 19:4–6). Whereas some passages express beyond doubt that marriage is without exception indissoluble,⁴³ the meaning of the exceptive phrases in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 has attracted the most attention since it seems to contradict Jesus' absolute prohibition.⁴⁴

Teologia del matrimonio e della famiglia per la nuova evangelizzazione (Siena: Cantagalli, 2007), 99–101.

41. It is wise to avoid thinking of the relation between nature and grace, between marriage as a natural reality and marriage as a sacramental reality, in a manner that sees each as the minimal state required for the spouses to, respectively, live a dignified life and obtain redemption. This dualistic view does not grasp that, created in and for Christ, man and married love find their truth in Christ's love for the Church. That married love has its truth in Christ's love for the Church means that it is permanently open to it and actively seeks it. In this christological, trinitarian, and ecclesiological depth of nuptial love, spouses find the truth of what, through their human love, they always participate in inchoately and are called to discover and embrace through the witness of the Church.

42. This is also made clear by the fact that Jesus gives a broader definition of adultery than that to which first-century Jewish people were accustomed: he condemns lust as adultery of the heart, establishes that divorce (except in the case of *porneia*) breaks the law, and determines that to marry a divorced woman is to commit adultery (Mt 5:32b). Finally, in teaching that both men and women commit adultery when they divorce a spouse and marry another (Mk 10:11), Jesus recognizes that the practice of divorce recognizes an equality between men and women (infidelity by either one is adultery, not just infidelity by the wife).

43. "To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband)—and that the husband should not divorce his wife" (1 Cor 7:10–11); "Every one who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery" (Lk 16:18); "And he said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery'" (Mk 10:11–12).

44. "But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the

Some interpret the clause “except for *porneia*” (Mt 19:9) as “except in the case of adultery,” and hence allow divorce and remarriage when adultery occurs. Yet, this translation does not explain why the apostles were so taken aback by Christ’s saying;⁴⁵ nor the immediate context of Matthew, in which Jesus speaks of unconditional forgiveness (Mt 18:21–35); nor the other synoptic Gospels in which there are no exceptive clauses. Other interpreters claim that the exceptive clause in Matthew 19:9 refers only to the repudiation of the wife for adultery but does not speak of the possibility of a new marriage.⁴⁶ Since there is no space here to rehearse a long and intricate debate, it is sufficient to indicate another interpretation that is sound and consistent with Scripture and the Church’s tradition. This account delves into the meaning of the term *porneia*.⁴⁷ The authors that sustain this position clarify that *porneia* should not be translated as “adultery” because there is already another word for adultery that is more precise than *porneia* and that is also used in Scripture: *moicheia* (Mt 15:19; Mk

ground of *porneia*, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Mt 5:32); “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for *porneia*, and marries another, commits adultery” (Mt 19:9). It was Erasmus who in 1519 proposed what later became the classical Protestant interpretation of Mt 19:9, contending that the exception clause meant that Jesus allowed divorce and remarriage by the innocent party in cases of unchastity, that is, adultery. See Gordon J. Wenham, “May Divorced Christians Remarry?,” *Churchman* 95 (1981): 150–61.

45. Divorce was allowed in Israel: “The liberal Hillelites permitted divorce for almost any reason, even bad cooking. The conservative Shammaite Pharisees restricted divorce to serious sexual misconduct. Jesus apparently rejects all divorce” (Gordon J. Wenham, “Matthew and Divorce: An Old Crux Revisited,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 7, no. 22 [1984]: 95–107, at 97).

46. This is the position of Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001). For a more balanced, and contrasting, view, see André Feuillet, “L’indissolubilité du mariage et le monde féminin d’après la doctrine évangélique et quelques autres données bibliques parallèles,” *Scripta theologica* 17, no. 2 (1985): 415–61; Louis Ligier, *Il matrimonio: Questioni teologiche e pastorali* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1988), 165–71.

47. Joseph Bonsirven, *Le divorce dans le Nouveau Testament* (Paris: Desclée, 1948); Heinrich Baltensweiler, *Die Ehe im Neuen Testament: Exegetische Untersuchungen über Ehe, Ehelosigkeit und Ehescheidung* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1967); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence,” in *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 79–111; Bruno Ognibeni, *Il matrimonio alla luce del Nuovo Testamento* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2007).

7:21; Jn 8:3). In this view, *porneia* is the equivalent of the Hebrew *zenút*, which regards illegitimate marriages (like that of Herod, Mt 14:3–4) prohibited by the Law (Lv 18:10, 20:21). *Porneia*, then, refers to a marriage that was not valid from the beginning. The exceptive clauses, therefore, rather than softening the prohibition of divorce, confirm marriage's indissolubility. This scriptural interpretation is also consistent with the reading of the Fathers of the Church, for whom Matthew 19:9 suggested the possibility of separating from one's spouse in the case of adultery but not that of marrying again.⁴⁸ This type of separation was the practice of the early Church and was defended at the Council of Trent.⁴⁹

The one teaching of both Scripture and the Church, then, is that marriage is indissoluble without exception, yet Christ does not set such a high standard for human beings and then abandon them to meet it by their own power. Rather, if in creating man, God always intended to unite him to himself in his Son (Col 1:15–20), and if, as Scripture constantly states, this union is a nuptial relation of love, then Christ's sacrificial offering of himself on the Cross for the Church provides the possibil-

48. It is true that there are some passages in the Fathers that seem to contradict this thesis: Ambrosiaster, *Ad 1 Cor 7:11* (CSEL 81/2, 75); Origen, *In Mt 14:23* (GCS 10, 430); Origen, *In Mt 14:24* (GCS 10, 435); Leo the Great, *Letter 159* (PL 54: 1136–37). Giovanni Cereti's work tries to use these texts to justify giving Communion to divorced and remarried couples. See his *Divorzio, nuove nozze e penitenza nella Chiesa primitiva* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1977). His work has been proven to be a misrepresentation of the tradition by, among others, Henri Crouzel, "Les digamoi visés par le Concile de Nicée dans son canon 8," *Augustinianum* 18 (1978): 533–46. See also his *L'Église primitive face au divorce: Du premier au cinquième siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971); Gilles Pelland, "La pratica della Chiesa antica relativa ai fedeli divorziati risposati," in *Sulla pastorale dei divorziati risposati: Documenti, commenti e studi*, ed. Congregazione per la dottrina della fede (Rome: LEV, 1998): 99–131. While in 1972 Joseph Ratzinger offered a theological suggestion stipulating that in some specific and rare instances divorced and remarried people may be allowed to receive Communion, later on, following the clarifications of John Paul II in *Familiaris consortio*, he deemed this previous suggestion untenable. Joseph Ratzinger, "Zur Frage nach der Unauflöslichkeit der Ehe: Bemerkungen zum dogmengeschichtlichen Befund und zu seiner gegenwärtigen Bedeutung," in *Ehe und Ehescheidung: Diskussion unter Christen*, ed. Franz Henrich and Volker Eid (Munich: Kösel, 1972): 35–56; Joseph Ratzinger, "Letter to the Tablet," in Kelly, *Divorce and Second Marriage*, 183–85.

49. For Trent see *DH 1797–1799, 1807*. See also *Casti connubii* (AAS 22 [1930]); *Arcanum* (AAS 12 [1879–1880]).

ity for spouses to participate in Christ's love for the Church in and through the love they have been given to have for each other.⁵⁰ The Pauline invitation to husbands to "love [their] wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25), and to wives to "be subject in everything to their husbands," just as "the Church is subject to Christ" (Eph 5:24), is, rather than a culturally biased or exhortatory speech, the proposal of a real taking-part in Christ's love.⁵¹ Spouses can be faithful to each other, abiding in the truth of their love, because they are brought to love as Christ loves: to the end, with all of oneself, gratuitously, for the Father's glory, and giving those who receive him the possibility of being his friends and hence participating in his own mission. This elevating dimension of the grace of marriage also represents the healing of that until-then-insurmountable tendency to seek happiness and salvation in self-originated power. The spouses thus participate in Christ's way of seeing (faith), loving (charity), and living in time (hope). Hence, it is not simply that Christ gives spouses the grace not to draw apart—as if indissolubility were simply resistance to the passing of time. As a sacrament of redemption in the new covenant, marriage is indissoluble because spouses are given the grace to love each other with the unconditional, gratuitous love of Christ. In this way, fulfilling marriage as a sacrament of creation, or natural sacrament, marriage as a sacrament of redemption—that is, the marriage of two baptized Christians—is a parable of the eucharistic union of Christ the Bridegroom and the Church his bride. As such, it is the memorial, actuation, and prophecy of the Paschal Mystery.⁵² In this sense, spousal love with its logic of total self-

50. This divine design justifies the assertion that marriage, as the center of the order of creation, is at the same time the center of the unity between Creation and Covenant, as both the Old and the New Testament reveal. See Ratzinger, "Zur Theologie der Ehe," 86.

51. "Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ's redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church, so that this love may lead the spouses to God with powerful effect and may aid and strengthen them in sublime office of being a father or a mother" (GS, 48). This participation means that the grace of matrimony is present within the life of the spouses and is what gives them the strength to love each other totally. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 476–77.

52. *FC*, 13.

giving is more than what it was at the beginning, that is, when it was simply a sacrament of creation.

Since the love of the Father “has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom 5:5), the full meaning of the indissoluble union of marriage revealed in Christ reaches Christian spouses from within their nuptial love through the Holy Spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit that a man and a woman are brought to know and to love each other. The Holy Spirit also gives them the hope that the one in whom they have been baptized will also fulfill the promise contained in their vocation to marriage. The Spirit gives the couple the faith they need so they can recognize Christ as the beloved Son of the Father—and hence as the *logos* and *telos* of their nuptial love—and entrust themselves to him. When the spouses speak the efficacious word of their consent in this act of loving faith, the Spirit makes it possible for Christ to assume the couple into the sacrificial offering of himself to the Father in the Spirit.⁵³ In this way, the entire person of each spouse and their mutual love are made part of Christ’s love for the Father. The Father, pleased by this offering of themselves to Christ that takes place in the liturgy of matrimony, blesses their union and sends them the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of his Son. If it is in Christ that they marry and in his love for the Church that they participate, then “the Holy Spirit is the seal of their covenant, the ever available source of their love and the strength to renew their fidelity.”⁵⁴

This pneumatological dimension of the grace of Christian matrimony allows us to see that it is through the Holy Spirit that the spouses receive Christ’s love anew and are brought to love each other as Christ loves the Church.⁵⁵ Their love, their

53. GS, 48.

54. CCC, no. 1624. See also *Casti connubii*, 41 (AAS 22 [1930]: 583); GS, 48; FC, 56.

55. That spouses receive Christ’s love anew means that the liturgical exchange of vows by means of which their nuptial union becomes sacramental is a flourishing of the unbreakable relation that Christ, the beloved Son of the Father, began with them through the Spirit at the moment of their baptism. It is this prior belonging to Christ effected in baptism that enables the spouses’ love to participate in Christ’s love for the Church. Yet, being its flourishing, marriage is also endowed with a grace specific to itself that we are elucidating here through our reflection on the christological and pneumatological dimen-

total and personal gift of self, is confirmed, redeemed, and sanctified in being made ever more Christlike. Yet, since the love of Christ the Bridegroom for his Bride, the Church, is also a communion that will not be put asunder, the Holy Spirit—besides being given as the sanctifier and giver of gifts—is also given by the Father of Christ as the Person-Gift, the Person-Communion that he is.⁵⁶ Thus, just as incorporation into Christ makes the baptized adoptive children of God, so the Holy Spirit is given to the spouses “as the communion of love of Christ and the Church.”⁵⁷ This personal gift offered to the spouses in the liturgy of matrimony is “the gift of a new communion of love that is the living and real image of that unique unity which makes of the Church the indivisible Mystical Body of the Lord Jesus.”⁵⁸ This, then, is the full meaning of the bond of Christian matrimony that both confirms and elevates, and hence offers a greater fulfillment to, the natural love of the spouses.

Since the Spirit of the Father and the Son is both the essential bond and the fruit of the love of Father and Son, that is, the person in whom they are one, he not only communicates God’s triune love from within the spouses’ existence—offering them, as we saw, the possibility that their personal love for each other be informed by faith, hope, and charity and hence enter into the obedience, trust, and virginal love of Christ.⁵⁹ He also reveals why their personal, nuptial love is other than them in being totally theirs. When it is assumed by Christ through the Holy Spirit, the love of the spouses—no matter how intense and sacrificial it may be—is elevated beyond itself and becomes part of the objective love-communion of the Holy Spirit. In history, this love takes the form of Christ’s love for the Church, since

sions of the grace of Christian matrimony.

56. *Dominum et vivificantem*, 10–11, 22–23, 41, 50.

57. CCC, no. 1624.

58. FC, 19.

59. The Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. He is also the one who makes possible the unity of the divine and human natures in Christ. He is the seal of the unity of Christ and the Church, and he is the trinitarian bond that unites the spouses in the sacramental mystery of the Church. For the role of the Spirit in marriage see Renzo Bonetti, ed., *Il matrimonio in Cristo è matrimonio nello Spirito* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1998).

Christ's love is also the Father's love given over to the Church through the Spirit. The natural indissolubility of marriage as a sacrament of creation is here confirmed, enabled, and heightened, because now it not only reflects the nature of the one God but also participates sacramentally in the love that the triune God is. This is why, in the sacrament of matrimony, the very love of the spouses becomes an objective norm for them, a form they have to obey since, participating in God's love and thus being infinitely greater than them, it has a depth and a destiny that can overabundantly fulfill their existences. The mystery, however, is that this participation is sacramental; that is, it passes in and through the actual love and shared life of the spouses. Because the sacrament exists in the day-to-day reality of married life, the spouses will always face the temptation of thinking that this life is just what they make of it. Yet, if Christian spouses are not content to remain at the surface of their life together and, instead, freely and joyfully let themselves be led by the love that allows them to be, they realize ever more deeply that in this sacramental exchange of vows their love acquires a trinitarian form: it is old, since it begins with the Father; young, since in Christ it abides in the Father's love; and one as fruitful communion, since in the Holy Spirit their love participates in the inexhaustible profundity of God's love and Christ's mission.

Participating thus in the unity of the triune God, the spouses' communion is a sign of God's mercy, which we can understand as the miracle of the undeserved restoration of the unity of men with God, each other, and the world. Through this restored unity, man's love, in Christ and through the Spirit, is made merciful like the Father's. Therefore, God's mercy, made present in history in the crucified-risen Lord Jesus Christ, remains in history also through these two forms of human love: the indissoluble and fruitful sacrament of marriage, and consecrated virginity. Rather than obduracy before the suffering of married couples or ideological and unreasonable opposition to divorce, the Church's defense of marriage's indissolubility is instead the courageous proclamation of God's mercy and the redeeming and healing power of Christ's cross and resurrection. Christ's grace is not simply the bestowal of the power to endure historical existence but also the gift of participation in Christ's love for the Church, in which nuptial love is made truer; that is, spouses are

given to enjoy a greater human intimacy, a deeper fruitfulness, and, through the concreteness of these two, a universal mission.

5. THE PATH OF FAITHFULNESS

If the gift-character of man's being, the inseparable relation between indissolubility and fruitfulness, and Christ's redemption of nuptial love reveal to and give man the capacity to live the beauty of the total, personal, and fruitful gift of self that constitutes nuptial love, why is it that marriages still fall short? Rather than superficially thinking that one can offer a positive reason for evil, or that one can capture in a few strokes all the different instantiations of marital failure, or that one can offer a more effective solution than that given by Christ—that God determines marriage to be indissoluble—I would like to conclude this reflection on marriage's indissolubility by indicating what it means for marriage to fall short. Since the concern here is also pedagogical, the best way to approach love's failings is to deal with the role sacrifice plays on the path of marital faithfulness. It is the rejection of the sacrifice integral to married love that prevents the beauty of spousal love from taking flesh.

Sacrifice does indeed appear unnatural to man. Because he is made for happiness, sacrifice seems to contradict or at least call into question this glorious destiny. The sheer quantity of sacrifices one is asked to make may prompt one to wonder whether it is not indeed the case, despite our talk of gift and redemption, that "as flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods; / they kill us for their sport."⁶⁰ Yet—and this is our claim—without sacrifice human (nuptial) relations are not true, for sacrifice is the affirmation of the whole truth. Its rejection in marriage, then, means that one affirms only part of the truth of oneself, one's spouse, and the vocation to marriage, such that this rejection coincides with a merely partial gift of self. To shun it thus prevents the spouses from dwelling in love and spurs them to seek divorce. In a sense, divorce is the outcome of this rejection, and as such it begins very early in married life, as Berry's quote suggested.

Man's weakness—that tendency to think that he is the

60. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, act 4, scene 1, lines 41–42.

origin of himself, that he understands, and that he can manage—inevitably leads him to bend the meaning of what he is, owns, and lives to fit his own ideas. It is not that he is mistaken in owning goods or making judgments about reality; rather, man's fault lies in attempting to define what things are according to his own measure, feelings, or capacity to act. Because of his incapacity to remain faithful, that is, to remain always in the position to receive truth and life, man tends to affirm an idea of his own—something he can manage and understand—as the meaning and destiny of everything. The theomorphic anthropology described in the first section enshrines this way of living as the only human way. As long as we hold on to that perception of man, sacrifice will be understood simply as an extra effort to accomplish something, to give up something one thinks is due to him, or to put up with an abuse or misfortune. Instead, if we let ourselves be guided by the anthropology of gift and by Christ's redemption of human nuptial love, we discover the true nature of sacrifice. To sacrifice is to deny the lie, that is, to not affirm what denies the truth of something and where it is destined to go.⁶¹

The sacrifice proper to married life consists in affirming one's spouse and the communion of life and love for what they are, not for what one feels or thinks they should be. It is this constant opening of oneself up to the whole truth of one's spouse and vocation to marriage that is the most difficult yet most needed sacrifice. Sacrifice, therefore, demands that one possess one's spouse and all that belongs to this shared life without trying to grasp them for oneself; that is, it demands that one obediently follow the ever-new and ever-surprising truth of nuptial love. Embracing this sacrifice, or in other words, affirming the gift of the other and of their life together in all its dimensions, is what alone allows the beauty of the vocation to marriage to be lived and seen.

Since what is at stake in marriage is the spouses' personal and common relation to God, and since the affective fulfillment and joy of each one depends on this relation, the sacrifices presented to one's freedom are rather demanding. When things are

61. Luigi Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way? An Unusual Approach to Christian Existence*, vol. 3: *Charity*, trans. John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 65–85.

going well in family life, love itself asks spouses not to settle into habits—as if things and family members were already known and their destiny already decided—but to follow the truth of nuptial love all the way to the end. Rather frequently, however, one spouse may perceive the other as a burden to carry. The weight of the other's perceptions, background, family history, quirks, limitations, likings, and temperament at times appears too much to bear. At other times, the spouse's disobedience to the truth of love scandalizes and paralyzes. To think in these junctures that love is dead is to identify the spouse with what one feels and thinks, or with what the spouse has done. This difficulty, however, reveals that the love one has is still shaped by one's own idea and not by what the other is and is called to live. When this judgment is made—a judgment that many times remains hidden since one does not want to face what love is asking one to affirm—other possibilities seem more attractive and correspondent to one's own plans for happiness and fulfillment. Underneath all these instances, however, what seems unbearable is the acceptance that the spouse remains other than oneself. It is his or her otherness—along with the fact that the spouse's response to his or her singular destiny cannot be given by oneself and does not take place in the time and manner one determines—that seems impossible to accept and makes one wonder whether the other can be allowed to be part of oneself. This otherness is the reminder that one is not the origin or destiny of things, that one is not absolute self-determining freedom, and hence that one is to wait to receive love's fulfillment.

Since one cannot sever the other from the common life one shares with him or her, it is often this life itself that seems to have flattened out, so that, at a deeper level, the claim that this life together fully defines oneself appears excessive. It is comprehensible that common life sometimes seems to oppose oneself: its sheer existence as something other than each of the spouses is the memory of God who calls and forgives. This brings one to recognize, sometimes painfully, one's own finitude and fallibility, yet seen positively, the presence of the other and a shared life are the constant reminders that one has been called to be, placed in one's freely embraced state of life, and that, in the sacrament of matrimony, spousal love is redeemed—that is, made truer because it has been allowed to participate in Christ's love for the

Church. It is the depth of this love and mercy that, though most desired, is hardest to tolerate.⁶² Mercy, and what incarnates it, is what one both needs and opposes the most. When it is rejected, one stops listening to the other, spending time and doing things with him or her, and, ultimately, seeing the other for who he or she is. Here, too, what becomes intolerable is the life together as something other than what one thinks, feels, or expects it to be; it is given to the spouses with a form of its own, and only within this form do their freedoms find fulfillment and peace. In other terms, the sacrifice asked of the spouses is that they accept that married love is greater than the two of them: it is itself a part and at the service of a greater love, namely, Christ's love for the Church.

The sacrifice required by nuptial love is therefore the denial of the lie that seeks to account for and deal with things as what they are not. As experience teaches us, when one pursues what seems more attractive, one discovers oneself alienated, separated from one's spouse, children, God, and oneself. To resist embracing this sacrifice is to give up on the gift one has received and the promise it contains. In contrast, love and life grow the more one affirms, and hence possesses without grasping, the truth of the other for what it is. Adherence to Christ's love for the Church, which is the permanent source of spousal love, passes through the embrace of many sacrifices made for the sake of the other and of Christ. It is Christ's love that makes sacrifice reasonable. It is not a matter of willing harder. Rather, one recognizes that to embrace a sacrifice is to participate in the mysterious way he saves the world and hence one's own existence.

The apex of sacrifice is forgiveness. In this sense, if the consent is the total and irrevocable giving of the spouses to each other in the embrace of the nuptial form that has chosen them for all of life, then indissolubility reemerges in history as forgiveness. To forgive is to give again, that is, for each spouse to allow the other to be part of him or herself again and hence for them to be ready and willing, in time, to continue building the work that God has entrusted to them. This forgiveness, which in itself is beyond man's power, can be given by man because it is first

62. John Paul II, Address to the Roman Rota (30 January 2003), AAS 95 (2003): 393–97.

received: the spouses participate in Christ's love for the Church, which, as redemptive, is the act of forgiveness par excellence. The forgiveness that spouses are called to receive and give to each other is thus rooted in loving faith and hopes with certainty that the crucified-risen Lord, the one who, through the Holy Spirit, put them together, will help them reconstruct what seems broken beyond repair. Prayer and participation in the sacramental life of the Church, along with the companionship of the saints with whom the spouses are given to live, will expel in time the lie that found its way into their communion. The indissoluble unity of nuptial love therefore not only elicits conversion and conflict but also contains the means to heal any clash and misunderstanding that may arise.

Indissolubility therefore is not something that the spouses make. It is not a prohibition against living freely or an unreachable ideal. Rather, if it is true that the communion of life and love is open to and lives from Christ's merciful love for the Church, indissolubility is the impossibility of the union breaking apart, or, stated positively, it is the foretaste of eternity in the time spouses are given to live. Thus, it is a gift they receive and the criterion according to which they are to judge every joy, burden, and difficulty they face. Indissolubility, therefore, is not in their power; rather, their God-given and freely embraced indissoluble love is itself the source of each one's love for the other (and their children) according to what he or she is instead of what he or she does. In this sense, indissolubility is the possibility of experiencing freedom from being at the mercy of one's own instincts, emotions, fears, or ideas. To deny marriage's indissolubility by granting exceptions to it is to deny that God can fulfill what he promises.⁶³ To affirm and live indissolubility for what it

63. This is also why the Church allows separation in certain cases. See *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1151–55, 1692–96. Separation is an expression of forgiveness because it attributes to the matrimonial bond all of its importance and accepts it to the end—even when faced with the impossibility of living together. Separation thus willingly embraces the cross to which the spouses remain bound, accepting also the pain this entails. In this way, spouses participate in the Cross of Christ, the sheer revelation of God's forgiveness, and ask him that the distance that unites them may transfigure them. In accepting this sacrifice, they also guard the good of their children, since children will see that the bond through which they came to be still remains, even in its complicated and paradoxical form. Christians should not consider separation unreasonable

is, however, is to accept being put on a pedagogical path to an ever-truer mutual surrender and an ever-greater experience of the fruitful joy of nuptial love. □

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or label its embrace, as opposed to the search for spousal union with another, with the pagan term “heroism.” Rather, aware that without a lived ecclesial communion this cross is very hard to bear, local ecclesial communities should have the courage to accompany spouses who go through these difficult moments and bear them up in the certainty that truth in charity is what man’s heart seeks. In contrast to separation, divorce is the judgment that spousal love is simply a human, transient affair. Divorce is the explicit judgment that Christ is incapable of uniting the spouses forever.