

which is something to do with re-creation, with “renewing the face of the earth” and giving birth to the “people” (the Church or *Ecclesia*) that is also the Body of Christ. It is the mystery of divine Wisdom, of creation and re-creation. This wisdom unfolds in the relationship between Mother and Child. It is this wisdom the King seeks in his private devotions before the Wilton Diptych, a wisdom that we too seek in our meditations here, with this booklet: in prayer, poetry, and theology.

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NOTES

[1] Sebastian Brock (trans), *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem* (Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, 1983), pp. 34-5.

[2] G.K. Chesterton, “Litany of Loreto”, in *Queen of Seven Swords* (Sheed & Ward, 1926).

[3] G.K. Chesterton, “The Black Virgin”, in *Queen of Seven Swords*.

[4] Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (Princeton University press, 1981), p. 183.

[5] Cited from *Letter to Our Friends*, the newsletter of the American Brothers and Sisters of St John, April 2000, p. 17.



The Orthodox East has a very beautiful devotion known as the Akathist Hymn (meaning that it is to be said or sung standing). The final section reads as follows.

While singing to Thine Offspring, we all praise Thee as a living temple, O Theotokos; for the Lord Who holdeth all things in His hand dwelt in Thy womb, and He sanctified and glorified Thee, and taught all to cry to Thee:

Rejoice, tabernacle of God the Word:

Rejoice, saint greater than the saints!

Rejoice, ark gilded by the Spirit:

Rejoice, inexhaustible treasury of life!

Rejoice, precious diadem of pious kings:

Rejoice, venerable boast of reverent priests!

Rejoice, unshakable fortress of the Church:

Rejoice, inviolable wall of the kingdom!

Rejoice, Thou through whom victories are obtained:

Rejoice, Thou through whom foes fall prostrate!

Rejoice, healing of my flesh:

Rejoice, salvation of my soul!

Rejoice, O Bride Unwedded!

ON THE IDEAL BASIS AND FRUITION OF MARRIAGE

PETER A. KWASNIEWSKI

According to St Thomas Aquinas, “Spiritual goods are more communicable than bodily goods.” Drawing upon this axiom as well as similar insights in Plotinus’s *Enneads*, I want to make an argument that the ideal basis of marriage is the union of minds or spirits through goods that are truly common, communicable, and inexhaustible. “Ideal” here refers to the Platonic sense of an essential, definitive identity that invests a particular instantiation with its recognizable character. The union of marriage will be contrasted to one that attempts to base itself on material goods, which are inherently private (sharable only by predication), divisible, exhaustible, and potentially divisive. It will become apparent that, when marriage is founded on the former goods, it has the potential for a continual innergrowth and fruition that is limited, humanly speaking, only by the death of a spouse.

If the thesis is true, it follows that the very possibility of an indissoluble commitment in marriage—the possibility of a life-long relationship that remains free, alive, and life-giving—is based on the conscious pur-

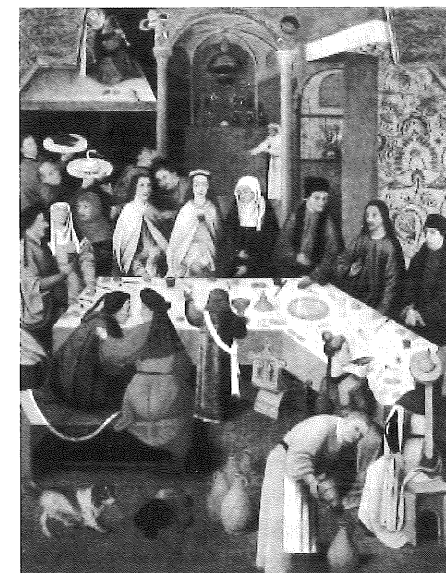
suit of spiritual goods and a continual effort to place material goods at their service. This conclusion flies in the face of contemporary Western culture, preoccupied as it is with amassing and enjoying material goods, laboring under a social contract mentality, and vainly seeking in physical beauty, health, and pleasure not only a sense of personal worth but even salvation from nauseating boredom and meaninglessness.

Spiritual Union Contrasted with Bodily Union

The intellect, an immaterial power neither rooted in nor bounded by the body or any bodily organ, is the ultimate source of all properly human activity. St Thomas teaches

that man’s final happiness, his beatitude, consists in the perfect operation of the intellect. From this, of course, loving is in no way excluded, for whatever reason apprehends as good, the will is naturally apt to love; and thus, the greater the good perceived, the stronger is the will in tending toward it or resting in it.

The union of bodies is not the chief model or earthly end of mar-



Marriage Feast at Cana, by Hieronymus Bosch

riage. Passing beyond the earthly goods that naturally pertain to matrimony, the union of spouses is meant to culminate in a union of *minds*, a union of intellects in the true, and of wills in the lovable. As the ultimate unifying reality, the point of convergence, is in God. Thus to the extent that the spouses know and love God, they will be drawing nearer to perfect union with each other. How otherwise can Scripture be understood? Eve is called the “helper,” one who helps in such a profound way that Adam acknowledges her as the completion of his very self, the one who makes him no longer alone in his humanity (Gen 2:18–25); and St Paul teaches that spouses are to imitate the union of Christ and the Church, an eternal spiritual union (Eph 5:21–33). The union of souls is the higher and proper end of matrimony.

By definition bodies are such that they exclude one another’s co-presence. This, in fact, is the experiential origin of the principle of non-contradiction. The reason we know that *y* cannot be both *x* and not-*x* at the same time in the same respect, or that *y* cannot be not-*y*, is that two bodies cannot both be in the same place at the same time in the same respect. This is true even of the union of spouses in the nuptial act. This, although it is a wonder of creation and a taste of the

profoundest union, is an experience more of *psychological* than of *spiritual* unification. The subjective apprehension of total unity is made possible by the cessation during the act of discursive thought, whose work is to distinguish and separate. The *phenomenological* reality is of psychical unity and physical interpresence, while the *ontological* reality is the contact of bodies that interpenetrate but remain separate. In its very bodiliness, the nuptial act is fleeting and returns its participants to a state of felt separation that corresponds to their ineluctable bodily identity. It cannot be the summit of spousal union, for bodiliness is not what is highest in man; the body is not the purest expression of a person’s spiritual uniqueness.

The union of spouses is complete and perfect only when their incorporeal souls, acting in and through the body, have learned how to be in the very same mental place by thinking and willing the same truths and goods, grounded in the same ultimate Truth and Good.

If we look to the nature of mind, however, we shall see that a perfect union of minds is really possible: two minds *can* be “in the same place,” apprehending one and the same undivided truth, without contradiction. The same is true of the will with respect to spiritual goods. Because the intellect is never *somewhere*, properly speaking, it is capable of being everywhere within the range of its created possibilities. And because the presence of mind is not extended or dense in the way matter is, and therefore not subject to the strictures of bodily exclusivity, two intellects can be wholly “within” the same truth, and two wills can be wholly

within or “toward” the same good. Therefore, the union of spouses is complete and perfect only when their incorporeal souls, acting in and through the body, have learned how to be in the very same mental place by *thinking* and *willing* the same truths and goods, grounded in the same ultimate Truth and Good. This is a necessary condition for the possibility of their “interanimation,” as the poet John Donne calls it.

A stirring passage from Plotinus describes the relationship of liberated soul to Intellect in words exactly capturing what I wish to say about husband and wife:

When it is in that region [of the intelligible], it must come to unity with Intellect, by the fact that it has turned to it, for when it is turned, it has nothing between, but comes to intellect and accords itself to it, and by that accord is united to it without being destroyed, but both of them are one and also two. When therefore it is in this state it could not change but would be unalterably disposed to intelligence while at the same time having a concurrent awareness of itself, as having become one and the same thing with its intelligible object.”

In context, Plotinus is speaking of the higher soul rising up to the realm of Pure Intellect, inferior coming to superior; I do not give the text with that aspect in mind, but simply for its beautiful description of



Nativity, by Albrecht Dürer

perfect union on the level of intellect—that is, on the level of spirit. This union I believe to be the highest form of togetherness attainable by spouses: *total unity-in-duality*, where even one’s substantial individuality is meaningful only as referred to the beloved’s.

The experience of rapture is found in such a union of mind and heart, despite the fact that our closeness to body as wayfarers in time makes the phe-

nomenal union of the nuptial act more evident as a form of togetherness. It feels much more intense *to us*, although is not more intense *in itself*. We must learn to use it as a rung of the ladder stretching up to the divine unity and the unity of all souls in God, especially those privileged souls (I refer to faithful spouses) who have laboured together in the common enterprise of co-redemption.

Bodily Goods Image Forth and Yield to Spiritual Goods

Five truths flow from this principle that spiritual goods are more communicable than bodily goods.

First, in the divine plan, bodily goods have the purpose of introducing us to, or schooling us in, spiritual goods. As we have seen, the nuptial privilege of copulation is ordered by its very nature to a union of what is metaphysically nobler than and prior to body—namely, the part of each spouse that

is capable of being *communicated without contradiction* to the other by a mode of participation in the things of the spirit. As Plotinus keenly observes:

For bodies are hindered from communion with each other by bodies, but incorporeal things are not kept apart by bodies; nor are they separated in place, but by otherness and difference; when therefore there is no otherness, the things which are not other are present to each other.

The body cannot without contradiction be communicated to another or made to be

in another, for there is always a residuum of privately-possessed organic space from which we cannot step out or which we cannot translate into a common intelligible language—we cannot divest ourselves of our body and give it to another *in lieu of* that other's body. But something very much akin to this translation and communication *can* be done on the level of spirit or intellectual soul. The spouses give each other the privilege of being with one another bodily in a very intimate way, but they cannot, except imperfectly (and perhaps metaphorically), be *within* each other's bodies in a way that would bring about the full interpenetration called for by love's mutual indwelling and ecstasy. Man and woman, *qua* animals distinct in space and time, cannot ultimately overcome their independence or separateness, even through marriage. The very attempt to resolve this *aporia* at a sensual level is doomed to end in frustration.

The body is exclusive because its first "accident" (speaking of the Aristotelian categories rather than in terms of everyday life) is quantity in the sense of extension, each part being outside of other parts. In contrast, their rational nature beckons the spouses to give to each other the privilege of *suneinai*: of existing together in the very same intellectual and volitional space or sphere of reality. Because spirit is not *extensive*, spread out in a spatial sense, but rather *intensive*, or wholly self-contained as an immaterial activity, the wife's spirit can co-intend what the husband's spirit



Auschwitz's Hope, by James Olsen

intends, and vice versa; their sphere can be totally one, because truth and goodness are perfectly and integrally sharable without diminishment of their unicity. Plotinus sketches out this oneness in paradoxical language:

So then the seer does not see and does not distinguish and does not imagine two, but it is as if he had become someone else and he is not himself and does not count as his own there, but has come to belong to that and so is one, having joined, as it were, centre to centre.

For here too when the centres have come together they are one, but there is duality when they are separate. This also is how we now speak of 'another.' For this reason the vision is hard to put into words. For how could one announce that as another when he did not see, there when he had the vision, another, but one with himself?

Truth is not a private good in such a way that your taking a part deprives me of a part. It is a common good in the strict sense of being infinitely partakable by mind: every mind, according to its degree, can encompass all truth.

We can unfold this proposition in another way. Where there is unity in a thing that is not entirely simple, there must be a cause of that unity. A whole is not merely the sum of its parts, but *qua* whole brings something *to* the parts which they would not otherwise have or be. The parts are parts

in virtue of belonging to some whole that encompasses them, and which establishes them in a certain order. This is no less true of the "whole" (the "one flesh") constituted by spouses. There must be a cause of their unity, a holistic principle greater than either,

which accounts for their being ordered to each other and encompassed by each other. In order to cause the *unity* of the *whole*, this principle must be immaterial, for the corporeal as such is incapable of acting as a common ground between two materially distinct individuals.

Matter makes human things separate and private, whereas the

life-giving form of man, the rational soul, tends toward unification and communication. Thus, intellect and will are again seen to be the essential principle of unity in human love in its highest form, inasmuch as the mind and heart of both spouses are focused on the same truth, concentrated on the same good, enamoured of the same beauty, aspiring to the same nobility.

A corollary follows. Husband and wife can inhabit each other's sphere of truth and goodness—their centers of being can coincide—because spiritual reality emanates from the selfsame divine infinity. Thus husband and wife are capable of rising to a perfect union, of which the bodily union is a shadow, foretaste, and promise. It is tragic when the opportunity to attain this glorious unification of the highest part of each spouse's being—their spiritual communion, which is more real than their

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sensual tangency—is ignored, denied, or undermined by distortions or perversions of the nuptial act. As Plotinus again observes: “We are concerned with its [the body’s] pains and pleasures, more in proportion as we are weaker and do not separate ourselves, but consider the body the most honorable part of ourselves and the real man, and, so to speak, sink ourselves in it.”

All human relationships seem to have some share in the spiritual dimension. How could it be otherwise, if human beings are incapable of becoming *essentially* irrational, and so always act within the scope of the inclinations of will and the reach of intellect, even if particular acts or habits be vicious? Properly human love has an intrinsic orientation toward the divine, although man can neglect to cultivate that orientation or even attempt to destroy it.

Marriage Vows are Spiritual in Essence

Second, we must look to the spiritual plane for the ultimate fulfillment of the marriage vows, wherein each spouse declares that he or she belongs to the other. The only way this total self-giving and ego-dissolution can take place is through intellection and volition, which are, taken in themselves, unconfined to place and time.

Speaking of time, Plotinus writes: “It is preserved, up to a point, by eternity... but destroyed if it passes altogether into temporal dispersion.” Complete temporality (dispersion) would be equivalent to non-being. Thus to immerse oneself in time or matter is to tend increasingly toward non-being. This folly is the opposite of the wisdom loved by the philosopher, who strives, in a way, to rise above time and matter, reaching for the divine ideas

in their primal source. A similar “dialectic of ascension” would apply, naturally, to the lifelong convergence of spouses toward each other and up to their first beginning and last end, the Good from whence their love streams forth. This simultaneously horizontal (husband-wife) and vertical (man-God) convergence is a rising above time and matter so as to rest, forever united, in the beatific vision of the Triune God.

Self-giving and ego-dissolution cannot be finally achieved by bodily contact. While the body is truly (part of) myself and expresses who I am, still it is not communicable, it cannot be *given* except symbolically or iconically, as a symbol of a greater and nobler giving. St Thomas, however, in contrast to many of his contemporaries, insists that matrimony is more than a mere *symbol* of the union of Christ and the Church; it is a grace-conferring *reality* through which the power of that prior mystical union emanates into the laity and the world they shape. For Aquinas, the sacrament of marriage originates and (when no resistance is offered) perfects a profound union of hearts and minds patterned after the union of Christ and the Church. In its own proper way, this graced human relationship is capable of bearing fruit that will last for eternity.

St Thomas is aware of the importance of granting the sacramental reality its legitimate due. Often medieval thinkers did not adequately ponder the implications of the grace present in and merited by the union of man and woman in the state of charity. St Thomas does not waver on the primacy of the spiritual even in that most “worldly” of vocations, the vocation to conjoin two separate earthly lives and make, by God’s power, one heart and mind out of two indi-

viduals. Hence Thomas vigorously defends marriage against Manichaean objections while at the same time emphasizing that the essence of marriage does not consist in carnal relations, nor, for that matter, in the begetting of children *as such*. Both of these things are implicit in marriage as effects in their cause, but that does not make the cause reducible to the effects. No, the effects must be precontained more eminently or more perfectly in the cause, if it is to be a cause in the fullest sense.

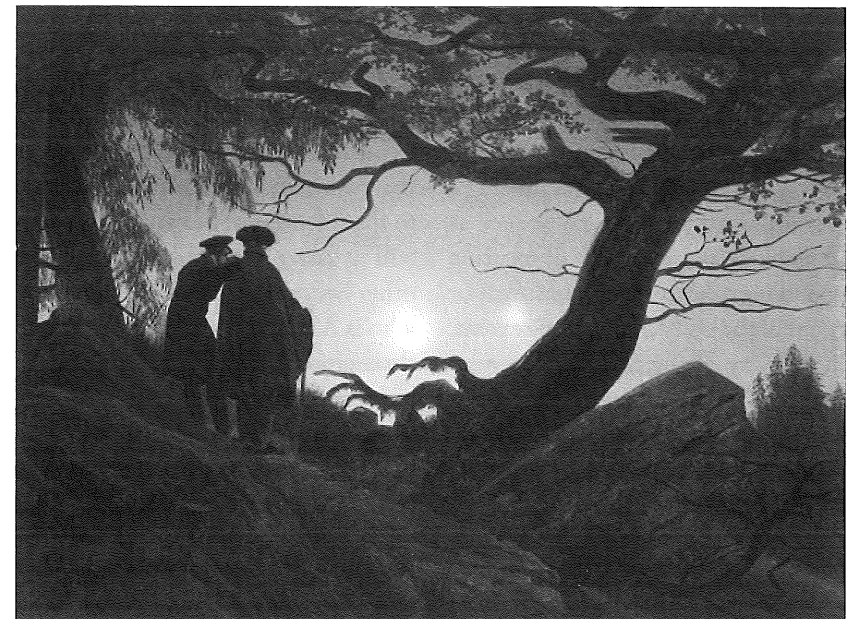
Hence St Thomas can defend virginity for the kingdom of God as well as the practice of continence within marriage, precisely because there is a certain union of spouses higher than the cooperation that takes place on the physical or procreative level. This “higher union” of will and intellect constitutes the essence of the love and the life vowed by the spouses to each other; it generates their duties and privileges,

vouchsafes their fidelity and friendship, furthers their salvation, and gains eternal merit for them.

St Thomas is speaking about spiritual goods that are communicable in the highest degree; and from these highest goods, all lower goods naturally flow to their proper places, participating in the purity and worthiness of the best mutual activity. The hierarchy of marriage goods is brought into being by the emanation of all aspects of spousal life from this first principle, *the sacred vow*, by which the married soul is disposed to receive the rich graces of God in all that it does for and with the other, in whom and by whom it has constituted itself in the nuptial state of existence.

The Primacy of the Spiritual Dignifies Old Age

Third, the principle expressed by Aquinas makes it possible to see in old



Two men looking at the moon, by Caspar Friedrich

age the fruition of the marriage vows—a thing impossible to see within a narrowly physical, that is, procreational and sensual, model of marriage. If one were to hypothesize that the nuptial act is constitutive of marriage, what could we say about spouses when they legitimately lose interest in the sexual expression of their love, or lose their bodily power to enact it? Or of the barren, in whom the act, while guiltless, does not seem to justify itself? Or of spouses who choose to abstain from sexual intercourse for valid spiritual reasons? What shall we say about a woman's loss of beauty over time, or a man's loss of fitness?

If one adopts in full the spiritual vision of marriage, the process of aging not only fits into the vocation without inconsistency (inasmuch as the mind and heart will, in the best circumstances, grow better and wiser with the passage of time, permitting a richer communion) but also can be seen as *desirable* from the point of view of securing a deeper and more lasting unity of soul. For the passions of the body can, to some extent, stand in the way of the full development and sharing of the interior man, whereas the gradual recession of the physical appetites of the spouses opens the way for a purgative, illuminative, and unitive experience of each other at the level of what is most inward and unique in the person—what is most precious in this man and this woman.

Love and knowledge of the other can



*Sculpture of Madonna and Child (detail),
by Joe DeVito*

and ought to become more perfect over time, not in spite of but precisely as a natural result of aging together, with the crosses and graces it offers. No other understanding of marriage can explain how aging, physical decline, and loss of sensuality fit, by the Creator's design, into the organic unfolding of the inner meaning of the nuptial sacrament, and how the loss of one privilege leads to the gaining of a more sublime privilege that re-creates at a higher level what the earlier had accomplished at a lower level.

If we see the intrinsic tendency of matrimony to be an ascension toward spiritual communion, then, far from fearing old age or death, the spouses will receive these gifts with humility and hope. They will trust that Christ, if we remain faithful to him, can turn us into little children the older we grow, and that he who conquered death can raise us up to the splendor of beatitude, where spouses will at last perfectly know and love each other because they are united with the one who is All-in-All, and who sustained them throughout the life they wrought together.

A consequence of the prevalent if not always conscious view that physical affection is the central feature of human love in its youthful stage is the sad fact that *when* marriages last (as too many sadly do not), the spouses are forced to adjust uncomfortably to the later stages of life inaugurated by children, middle age, and finally, old age. All

of these subsequent stages, to one degree or another, lack the supposed *raison d'être* of love between a man and a woman. The Catholic, on the other hand, sees the mutual attraction of man and woman as a precursor to the state of marriage in which the full expression of love, in its physical dimension, properly and rightfully belongs, and at the same time sees marriage as ordered to the rearing of a family. The richer and fuller Catholic teaching, implied in St Thomas and developed by the Church, reveals the continuous lifelong character of matrimony, from honeymoon to old age and death.

By emphasizing the Augustinian blessings of faith (*fides*), sacrament (*sacramentum*), and offspring (*proles*) received and educated in the faith, the Church gives priority to the lasting goods of intellect and will, and exhorts her children to strive for the better things that purify, intensify, and sanctify the lesser goods, putting every aspect of husband and wife at the service of the communion of persons

with each other and with God. Thus, instead of experiencing damaging tectonic shifts between youth and middle-age, middle-age and old age, the natural continuum of a common life as it is channeled through the grace of the sacraments and perfected in a union of mind and heart—which is the Catholic ideal of holy matrimony—can be welcomed and savored for the divine

blessings it carries with it from beginning to end.

In secular (i.e., non-sacramental) marriages, and even more so in cases of cohabitation, there is an element of undignified guesswork and makeshift bandaging in the co-adaptation of the partners to each other and the gradual process of trying to make one life out of two. If the guessing falters or the bandages run out, the relationship comes to a stop and bleeds to death. The very opposite is true in a Christian marriage worthily entered into, and nobly lived out from day to day: there is a higher purpose and ever-deeper roots, there is salvific truth and growing constancy.

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The Good of Children is Amplified

Fourth, if we understand Aquinas's axiom rightly, the bearing and rearing of children glows with a new urgency and dignity of meaning. The children of a marriage are not a by-product, desirable or undesirable, of some unrelated

contract entered into between two adults; they are the most perfect *worldly* mirroring and blossoming of the creative fidelity pledged in the vows of marriage. They are the choice fruit produced by the physico-spiritual fecundity of love.

Love, like its object, the good, seeks to communicate itself to others (*bonum est diffusivum sui*). There is nothing it desires more

than to spread out, multiply, consolidate, establish lasting works that bear witness to the truth of the vows by which man and woman agree to make themselves one. But the begetting of children is as nothing compared with their upbringing and education, for nearly anyone can do the former, indeed without even intending to do so, while the latter requires a panoply of virtues, patient dedication, unwavering commitment. St Thomas observes that one of the motives for the nuptial act is the virtue of religion: the spouses desire to rear disciples of God, they desire to extend the kingdom of God over more souls by consecrating the fruit of their love to him who is Love in Person.

The spiritual health of the child, his maturation in knowledge and faith, is a function of the spiritual communion of his parents; he is predisposed to know and to believe what they themselves exemplify in their shared life. Agreement is the nurse of persuasion; concordance ("soundingtogether") in the highest things forms a child who is concordant with his family, his vocation, and his destiny. For children to be worthily begotten and reared, they must be offspring of a *mutual spiritual labour*, in which is discerned the very same intellectual and volitional unification spoken of earlier.

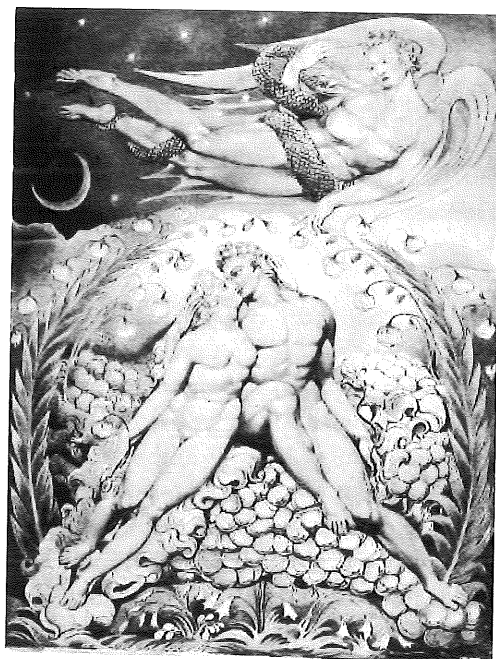
Note the suggestive parallelism

or symbiosis between the children of the flesh, which are the offspring of the nuptial act, and children of the spirit. The phrase "children of the spirit" can be meant in two ways: (a) the consonance of ideas and the beauty of communal life as a work of art; (b) the result of a spiritual paternity and spiritual maternity that husband and wife exercise through catechizing and consecrating their bodily offspring to Christ and the Church. The children, catechized and consecrated, are the ultimate flower of the nuptial vows and of the life of fidelity and striving-toward-oneness built upon them.

This relationship of physical to spiritual parenthood is directly analogous to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy: the child of flesh stands to the child of spirit as feeding the hungry to instructing the ignorant. The spiritual illuminates and perfects the corporal, and the corporal, by its very nature, leads to the spiritual, whenever man places no impediment in the way of this providential path.

The Mysticism of Marriage

Fifth and finally, it begins to be evident from what we have seen so far that there is a mystical or "revelational" way of looking at the relationship of the exterior to the interior, the bodily to the intellectual, the sensual to the spiritual, the particular to the universal, the



exemplate to the exemplar. In other words, the principle enunciated by Aquinas suggests an abundant harvest of moral and metaphysical insight about human relationships in all their complexity and subtlety, as regards both how they fail and how they flourish.

Parts of animals, e.g., bone and muscle, grow in unison. As the healthy organism develops, each of its parts increases or matures in right proportion to all other parts. This is a good metaphor for the mutual growing-together of husband and wife. In a healthy marriage, the elements of one person—his character, his thoughts, his feelings, his desires and needs, his gifts, his spiritual life—grow or evolve alongside those of the other, in harmony with and in proportion to her character, her thoughts, her feelings, her desires and needs, her gifts, her spiritual life. They are "growing together" in both senses of the phrase: the spouses grow or mature alongside each other and their very growth is a unification, a growing-to-be-one. We see both the maximal development of the person and the maximal communion of two persons, with, as the family grows, the welcome addition of more persons who are able to participate in that communion. As John Paul II declares in one of the general audiences on the theology of the body:

Love not only unites the two subjects, but allows them to interpenetrate each other, belonging spiritually to one another, to the point that the author of the letter [to the Ephesians] can affirm, 'The one who loves his wife loves himself' (Eph 5:28). The 'I' becomes in some way the 'you,' and the 'you' the 'I' (in the moral sense, of course).

In this ideal we can see the reality that Plotinus calls a "one-many," a multiplicity rooted in and ordered to unity. A community is by definition a "one-many": for there to be a con-unity, there must be individuals who are distinct and at the same time "at one," in unison, intermingling, in those things that are more important, more lasting, more beautiful than anything each possesses by itself. Spiritual goods are indeed more communicable than bodily goods—a truth of immense profundity that underlies John Paul II's theology of the body, and which must animate all the valuable efforts that are being made to utilize his programmatic catechesis for evangelizing contemporary men and women.

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