

# A Theology for Married People

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## 1. Critiquing a “theology of marriage”

It is the peculiar habit of theologians to see everything under the sun as manifesting some theological truth, even when such truth is not as patently self-evident to the rest of the world. Hence there is the tendency to preface nearly any term with the phrase “A Theology of...” and work from God through revelation to the specific topic at hand, whether it be work, the family, or the body. The implication is that through the eyes of Christian faith, it is possible to see everything as a manifestation of who God is and what God is doing, and thereby to develop a systematic account of all truth, both eternal and temporal.

A thumbnail sketch, therefore, of a “theology of marriage” would look very much like what we find, for example, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and, for that matter, in the Code of Canon Law—both being attempts to foreground the Catholic understanding of marriage against the background of the story of salvation history, from God to Israel to Christ to Church to doctrine to liturgy to spirituality to ethics. Consider the logic of the treatment of marriage (or rather “the sacrament of matrimony”) in the Catechism—article 7 of Section Two (“The Seven Sacraments of The Church”) in Part Two (“The Celebration of the Christian Mystery”):

- a. marriage is created by God (1602-1605)
- b. marriage as created by God is marred by sin (1606-1608)
- c. God has given the law in order to teach us what God intended in marriage (1609-1611)
- d. marriage in the light of Christ is transformed into a model of salvation (1612-1617)
- e. forsaking the good of marriage altogether for the sake of Christ is a great good (1618-1620)

This theology of marriage is an attempt to show how this practice is caught up in the narrative of God’s creation and redemption of the world.

Theologians are unusual people, though. In truth, most people marry because they see something good coming from being with the other in a publicly recognized, formalized relationship, and few would point to anything resembling theological reasoning as a motivating or sustaining factor. Theology, in other words, is more often useful for those who are interested in the Church than for those who are interested in getting married.

I make this initial observation in order to highlight what is a key challenge in the pastoral care of Catholics, and by extension a challenge in the way that Catholic leaders can speak broadly to people either getting married or working at staying married. The challenge is to bridge the vast, systematic, historically and legally nuanced, theologically and philosophically precise, carefully reasoned and debated superstructure of Catholic reflection on marriage, on the one hand, and the ordinary, quotidian concerns of domestic life from childhood through adulthood, mating, marrying, working, bearing and raising children, growing old, and dying, on the other. I believe that there are really two issues, one significantly more important than the other. The first issue is inviting Catholics (and their spouses, and others) to consider daily life through the lens of Christian faith; and the second issue is to do that specifically in their married lives. If we get the first issue right, the second will naturally follow. What I am interested in, then, is not so much “a theology of marriage” that is appropriate for catechisms, canon law, and documents and texts that professionals use when debating ways that marriage ought to be understood as an element in the systematic understanding of God and the cosmos; but rather a “theology for married people”—an invitation to married people to look at their daily lives as wives and husbands, as sisters and brothers, as daughters and sons, as friends, colleagues, neighbors, associates, and acquaintances, as fellow Catholics, fellow Christians, fellow human beings—which helps them to understand what roles they play in the divine order. Such a theology would have a heavy dose of themes like relationship, friendship, love, freedom and responsibility, self-donation, sexuality, creativity and fruitfulness—all relational terms that invite people to think of themselves always and everywhere not as isolated monads with isolated personal desires that have little or no impact on the social order; but rather as necessarily relational persons, whose desires are already manifestations of God’s imprint on all human living, even amidst a world tarnished by sin. And the relevance of this theology would be in the ways that it invites people to think of their married lives as the privileged places of encounter with God, the holy ground upon which God invites them to work out their salvation and the salvation of their spouses, children, extended families and communities.

## **2. Marriage in the United States today**

What we know from census data is that people are living together outside of marriage, marrying later in life, having fewer children, and frequently getting divorced. These broad brushstrokes, while inadequate to the task of helping us formulate clear pastoral imperatives among various populations, ought to help us see something of the background against which our finer conclusions must be drawn. Many people in the United States—especially young people—approach marriage with a good deal of trepidation. Moreover, significant numbers of people live much of their adult lives without children.<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, the social institution of marriage has weakened over the last several decades. No longer is it possible to speak of marriage as a natural stage of adult development, with shared cultural understanding, expectations, and

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<sup>1</sup> See the 2006 essay “Life Without Children,” from Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe’s “The State of Our Unions,” part of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University (online at <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/TEXTSOOU2006.htm>), which explores the social implications of this development [Note that all online citations are valid as of September 10, 2007.]

structures. Instead, marriage has become one option—albeit a still comparatively popular one—in U.S. society, alongside other social arrangements we broadly describe with terms like “single life,” “cohabitation,” “serial monogamy,” and others. Further, it is difficult to make the case that Catholics are markedly different in their practices around marriage than other members of U.S. society. On the whole, the story of U.S. Catholics is a story of becoming assimilated to the mores of the wider culture,<sup>2</sup> suggesting that they are not likely as a community to hold very different attitudes toward marriage.<sup>3</sup>

It is not the task of this essay to parse what we know about the attitudes of U.S. Americans toward marriage, or how attitudes of Catholics relate to those of others. Rather, my point is to suggest with these brief indicators that U.S. Catholic pastoral leaders are ill advised to assume that there is a consistent, systematic belief among their congregants that marriage is the natural course for many young lay people, or that those who are married will stay that way, or that children will be raised in Catholic households with two parents. There is a lingering assumption that the social structures that Catholics built so remarkably during the 20<sup>th</sup> century will remain in perpetuity—an effect, I assume, of the tendency to treat living memory (perhaps 80 years, give or take) as representative of how things have always been. In short, Catholic leaders are faced with a much more fundamental challenge, one which likely bears more resemblance to the challenges faced by bishops of the early medieval period than by bishops of the recent past. The challenge is this: to articulate a theology for married people that invites them to see marriage as a particular kind of invitation to a life that is holy—and by this I mean a life that is fully free precisely because it is lived in faithfulness to the will of God. And they must do this amidst a dearth of clear cultural supports for the institution.

### **3. A Church learning from its past**

I draw the parallel to the early medieval period, because it was in the centuries following the fall of the Roman Empire that Church leaders, motivated by pastoral necessity, gradually assumed a more precise juridical posture toward marriages among the baptized. The dissolution of the Empire led to competing social orders (or in some places, it seems, complete lack of any social order), and within this pluralistic context Church leaders found themselves responding to the challenges left in the wake of unstable contexts for marrying and child raising. Some men married multiple women surreptitiously, begat children out of wedlock, or abandoned spouses and children. Moreover, as the Church engaged cultures with differing practices around marriage, there arose pressing questions about how and when legal marriage contracts (especially

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, William V. D’Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge, and Katherine Meyer, *American Catholics: Gender, Generation, and Commitment* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2001), which compares different generations of U.S. Catholics, or Dean R. Hoge et al., *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), which focuses specifically on young people.

<sup>3</sup> A 2004 study by George Barna suggested that Catholics divorce at roughly the same rate as the rest of the U.S. population. The study, while critiqued by some, is one indicator of a more widely evident trend that US Catholics do not vary from the wider US population on many key issues today. (The Barna report is no longer available on its website; however a related *Dallas Morning News* story is reprinted on the adherents.com site at [http://www.adherents.com/largecom/baptist\\_divorce.html](http://www.adherents.com/largecom/baptist_divorce.html)).

between noble families or even kingdoms) were ratified.<sup>4</sup> The Church's involvement in marriage can be described as a desire to establish rules or laws that insured the fair exchange of terms to the marriage contract, while at the same time bringing certain already-established social mores around virginity, sexuality, and marrying into the life of the Christian community. The development took centuries, to be sure, but the end result is that the Church developed a rather precise legal structure around marriage, which led to an increasingly expansive theology which recognized marriage as a basic human reality, transformed by life in Christ.

The early medieval period makes for an interesting case study for those considering the Church's pastoral work in marriage in the contemporary U.S. context. Today, our situation is similar in key ways. First, in some ways what we are seeing in contemporary debates about globalization is the waning of an "empire," if it is possible to speak of the predominance of Europe as such. Just as the Church eventually had to consider marriage practices not only from Roman law, but also from such distinctive cultures as those of the Franks, Goths, and others, so too must Catholics today consider marriage practices that look very different from those that have been predominant in living memory. What makes the contemporary context distinct is that many of these practices are really not in any precise sense "cultural" practices, i.e. practices that have been developed and nurtured within generations of ethnic, religious, or linguistic kinship networks. Rather, they are more properly described as personal attitudes that have arisen amidst the milieu of American democratic liberalism, as personal commitments untethered by the boundary-setting tendencies of large communities of shared purpose. Cohabitation, to take one broad example, encompasses a cluster of practices that are very often motivated not by recognizable cultural convictions, but by individual economic necessity. The important point of convergence between the medieval and the contemporary U.S. challenges is that both have arisen because of the dual movements of breakdown and expansion—breakdown of older cultural practices and expansion of a community's cultural lens through encounter with other cultures.

Second, there is a similar dynamic in the relationship between Church and state in the twilight of the Roman Empire and in the postmodern Church. "Christian" marriage as such did not exist in the early centuries of the Church's life under the Roman empire, nor did it immediately take shape after Constantine. What we see is a gradual development of the Church's response to Roman marriage law, suggesting that in the early Church marriage was regarded as a secular matter.<sup>5</sup> Over time, Christians had their marriages blessed by clerics, but it was not until the end of the first millennium that we find anything resembling a commonly used marriage liturgy. For its first thousand years, the Church saw marriage as a concern primarily of the state. The Church's concern was not the state's laws around marriages, but rather the exhortation to the baptized to bring their practices around marriage into conformity with the faith, and to avoid those pagan celebrations (such as those involving sacrifices) which conflicted with the faith. Today,

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<sup>4</sup> See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965) ch. 1 "The Formation of Church Marriage," for a careful exploration of the many factors that impacted the Church's eventual jurisdiction of marriage. See also Theodore Mackin, *What is Marriage?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) for a thorough exploration of the Church's evolving doctrines on marriage.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the oldest definitions of marriage that found their way into the Church's theology were those taken from Roman jurists like Modestinus and Ulpian; these definitions still find resonance in contemporary Canon Law.

interestingly, the Church confronts a similar challenge: to weigh its own practices against those of the state and exhort its members to fidelity to the divine law. With the developing debates over state legislation around gay marriage, it is interesting to ask whether it is the task of the Church to impact what states decide marriage is, or rather to provide pastoral guidance for the baptized such that their practices and beliefs comport with a broader commitment to the gospel. For clearly in the first millennium of the Church's life, the latter task was the more prominent thrust of its ministry toward marriage.

Third, the implication of this breakdown and expansion is that it is impossible to speak about a univocal understanding of marriage among either the communities of the faithful or the wider societies of which they are a part. For the majority of U.S. history, Catholics could rely on a more-or-less shared understanding of marriage, due to the influence of the various European Protestant communities that shaped the landscape of early life in the colonies and United States. Because of extensive shared sexual and marital mores among Protestants and Catholics (even in spite of doctrinal and liturgical differences), Catholic practices met little resistance in U.S. society until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Today, however, the Catholic understanding of marriage is one among many, and young people in particular are unlikely to embrace this understanding freely unless they are guided deliberately by those who are themselves committed to it. The response of the Church during the early medieval period to the challenges of breakdown and expansion are illustrative here, for they show a community struggling to develop not only a catechesis around marriage as a mode of Christian living (hence Augustine's *De Bono Coniugali*), but also a liturgy and a theology that situates Christian practices around marriage firmly (albeit grudgingly) in the context of the apostolic tradition.

There was a profound development from the earliest writings on marriage, from figures like Tertullian, Augustine, Jerome, and John Chrysostom, to the high medieval writings on marriage by the likes of Peter Lombard, Gratian, and Thomas Aquinas—a development which amounted to a near turnaround on the question of whether sexuality could be seen as an integral dimension of a sacramental marriage. Further, with the growing influence of personalist philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—a philosophy which had an important impact on the writings of Pope John Paul II—we see still more development, moving Catholics to consider marriage not as a grudging permission by God to avoid sexual immorality (with St. Paul), nor as a legal contract which the Church might for good cause extend a blessing upon (with the bishops of the first few centuries CE), nor even as a solemn liturgical act in which the Church saw a type of Christ (with the scholastics). Instead, Catholics have been invited to see marriage as a religious vocation, in which partners pledge to live out their salvation and to help each other achieve Christian perfection. Today, the Church has indeed developed a “theology for married people” which is more personal and pastoral than simply the application of a more Patristic or scholastic “theology of marriage.” And yet what is perplexing is how seldom we find this theology actually informing the way Catholics in the United States

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<sup>6</sup> I am thinking here especially of the widespread availability of birth control, and later the sexual revolution of the 1960's. A case might be made that currents in U.S. society were already confronting Catholic practices around sexuality and marriage even earlier, e.g. the rise of intellectual movements such as Marxism, social Darwinism, and psychoanalysis, but I would argue that such movements challenged both Catholics and other Christian believers, and thus did not put Catholics in a unique position in U.S. society.

actually enter into marriage or live it out in the context of parish life. The remainder of this essay, therefore, will explore first the elements of this theology, and second its pastoral implications.

#### **4. Inviting people to view marriage through a theological lens**

The starting point for a contemporary pastoral theology for married people is a reflection on God's observation in Genesis: it is not good to be alone (Gen 2:18). Existential solitude does not suit the human being; and one might surmise that the Yahwist author did not consider even the contemplative relationship between God and the creature as being sufficient for God's purposes for the human being. God's creation of woman is first an answer to the need not for offspring, but rather companionship.<sup>7</sup> The primordial relationship between God and human beings is in the context of the marriage of man and woman—a position which Jesus affirms by citing the Yahwist text in his comment on marriage in both Mark's and Matthew's gospels (Mk 10: 6-9 and Mt 19:4-6).

This fundamental observation from Scripture reflects what people know through experience: a happy life depends upon friendships.<sup>8</sup> And from this general observation it is possible to move to a more specific one: human beings desire not only friendships, but also a deep, intimate relationship with another person. For only in such relationships are people capable of exploring that which is most intimate to one's own experience, and therefore most precious, most holy. Marriage is not fundamentally about sex, or childbearing, or social status, though it may include all of these things and may, in fact, be motivated by one or more of these things. It is fundamentally about seeking out a person whose solitude complements my own, because it is not good to be alone. In a word: marriage is a sacrament of communion.

My thesis is that the weight of Catholic tradition must be oriented toward the fundamental commitment to invite human beings to grow in love, and that our teaching and preaching on marriage will flow logically from this most basic commitment. Following Augustine, our invitation must be simple: love, and do what you will.

There are two corollaries to this basic thesis. The first is that solitude can be an authentic means toward the greater end of communion. Hence what we posit about chastity and celibacy ought therefore to open us up in love toward God, God's creatures, and the rest of God's creation. The second corollary is that we must consider single life carefully, because sometimes it is chosen and other times it is not. In both cases, the pastoral challenge is to help the person understand single life as no less an invitation by God into communion.

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<sup>7</sup> Here I am departing from the Augustinian trajectory, which posits the primacy of *proles*, in addition to *fides* and *sacramentum* as "ends" of marriage. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this emphasis on procreation was mitigated somewhat by changing the term "ends" to "goods" (following Dietrich von Hildebrand), suggesting that the Church understood marriage not only as a means to procreation, but also as a good *in se* for the spouses themselves (see von Hildebrand's *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love* [Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1991] as well as *Gaudium et Spes* 48).

<sup>8</sup> I agree with Bernard Cooke's assertion that friendship is the basic sacrament, a thesis which he explores in *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2004), chapter 7.

From this thesis it is possible to build a more developed theology for married people which can serve as an invitation to the shared practice of the spiritual life. For if we begin by asking people to consider that God inviting them into the Trinitarian communion by means of communion with the beloved, then by extension everything in married life—from paying bills to shopping to nights out to struggles at work to raising children to coping with sickness and even death—becomes part of the shared pilgrimage toward ever greater communion. I find the metaphor of pilgrimage particularly compelling, as it suggests the importance not only of the destination, but also the path. In the Christian life, both the destination and the path are graced—and in the context of marriage this is especially true. Marital difficulties are fundamentally life difficulties, and it is therefore possible to invite couples to a deeper understanding of those difficulties as part of the very nature of pilgrimage. The act of faith on any pilgrimage is to give energy to the work of overcoming the difficulties, when it may seem easier to give up. The promise, however, is that there is a great good to be achieved not only through the perseverance on the pilgrimage when the road is difficult, but also by deepening one's communion with God by means of the deepening of communion with the beloved. In more pedestrian language, the fundamental act of faith in marriage is to face life's problems with someone you love rather than alone.

Of course no one can enter into marriage—or any friendship, for that matter—without prior experience of other kinds of relationships. The life of the Church must be oriented around enabling people to grow in these relationships: with parents, sisters and brothers, peers, teachers and mentors, strangers and even enemies. Jesus' exhortations to love the enemy can be read as challenges to overcome the most difficult barriers to communion so that we might grow in the love of God. Indeed, the very theme that Jesus preached, especially prominent in the synoptic gospels, of “the kingdom of God” is one in which the relationships between human beings mirror the relations within the Trinity, of self-giving agapic love. When Pope John Paul II wrote about the need for remote, proximate, and immediate formation for marriage,<sup>9</sup> I believe he had this same sense in mind: namely, that the life of the Church ought to involve an integrated commitment to helping people grow in their ability to love as Jesus loved, in the context of the religious vow of marriage. What we seek as Catholics is to live a life that takes as its starting point what Jesus has taught us about God, inviting others to do the same.

## **5. Implications of this theology**

Now, because I am a theologian and therefore share the tendency to think systematically, I will pause from the line of this argument to make a few parenthetical observations, implications of this theology that centers the sacramental life on friendship and, therefore, moves marriage close to the center of the sacramental economy. First, if the fundamental invitation by God is to communion, then marriage is a particular kind of religious vow. Of course the history of the Church's reflection on sexuality betrays a slightly different approach—the Church recognized a sacramental vow to holy orders long before it recognized a sacramental vow to marriage. In my view, which for the sake of brevity I shall not develop here, the development of Patristic theologies of discipleship and vocation within the context of Neoplatonic and ascetic trajectories encouraged the

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<sup>9</sup> See *Familiaris Consortio* 66.

more rapid development of appreciation for religious (especially monastic) life. I am not challenging the development of these theologies; I am rather seeking to re-orient them within the broader context of discipleship. For while the sacramental theology of marriage developed in the Church much later, its import is such that it is necessary to reconsider the nature of the whole sacramental economy. To clarify: from the early centuries of the Church, one draws the observation that Christian perfection was seen primarily as willingness to withdraw from the sinful world in prayer, to assume a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience in radical faithfulness to God. I am suggesting, however, that this understanding of Christian perfection rests upon a more fundamental, implicit theology of grace: that God invites people to love God unconditionally, as God loves us. And I am suggesting that today it is possible to re-orient the Patristic view by inserting the further claim that God draws us into communion through the love of others, and that the fullest expression of that love means either that God calls us into marriage or God calls us into some form of single life in community with others.

The implications of this understanding of vowed life are both theological and practical. Theologically, it means that all Christians are called to perfection through whatever vocation God calls them to live. Practically, it means that most Christians will marry; many will stay single; and some will take other kinds of religious vows. The minority—those who take non-marital religious vows—are the *ministerium*, the ministers, those who serve the body of the faithful.<sup>10</sup> And some will perform this service through leadership, while others will serve in other ways. But all are called to nurture and promote the shared life of communion.

Second, we must observe that through fear, limitation, and sin, people will fail in their vocations. The development of the sacramental theology of reconciliation in the first millennium of the Christian era demonstrates how the community of faith sought to address the reality of failure in communion, from the public confessions of those who defected from the Church in the Roman era to the development of private confession among the Irish monks. Of course the development took time, and arose out of pastoral need. Today, and perhaps for the next several hundred years, our challenge as a Church will be to develop the implications of our sacramental theology of reconciliation as it applies to marriage—i.e. those who experience divorce or whose sexual and/or marital practices are not in accord with present doctrine and canon law. One might flippantly observe that since our sacramental theology around marriage is only a millennium old, it's still too early to strike the right note between marriage and reconciliation. As others have observed, however, we might with great profit learn from our brothers and sisters of the Orthodox churches.

Third, this theology, while rooted in the Biblical and magisterial traditions of the Church, foregrounds the practical meaning of marriage for married people in such a way as to move some elements of other doctrinal treatments of marriage into the background. This point becomes clear by looking briefly at how marriage is treated, for example, in the *Code of Canon Law*:

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say, however, that all ministers are to be single, a point made obvious by the number of married deacons and lay ecclesial ministers in the United States today. On the contemporary theology of ministry in the U.S. today, see the Bishops' document *Co-Workers In the Vineyard of the Lord* (November, 2005) at <http://www.usccb.org/laity/laymin/co-workers.pdf>.

The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptized. (Canon 1055, section 1)

What this theology involves is a focus on the “partnership of the whole of life,” (*consortium omnis vitae*)—an ancient phrase from the Roman jurists which only hints at the kind of pilgrimage that God invites spouses to undertake together. If, as I am suggesting, the primary fruit of marriage is communion, this means that the invitation to married life is an invitation to the hard work of seeing the world, the other, and the self in the fullness of reality; of admitting sin, undertaking reconciliation, and discovering that our most authentic desires are often buried underneath more fleeting ones.

Fourth, by foregrounding the life of communion in marriage, it becomes clear that the related fruits of the marriage vocation have to do with relationship to the rest of the Church and the rest of the world. What this means in practice is that biological children are very often (but not always) the fruit of that vocation. In every sacramental marriage, the fruit is communion; in some, the fruit is biological children; in others, the fruit is children by adoption; or fostering; or the invitation to singles or parents or others in the community. As a theologian, I understand the development of the doctrine on marriage and recognize the social and ecclesial import of its definition of marriage as being ordered toward procreation. Yet as an adoptive parent, I also want to claim that the more expansive notion of the “partnership of the whole of life” can include the complementary notions of biological and adoptive parenthood.

## **6. Implications for pastoral practice**

For the sake of brevity, I shall use this last section to make observations and suggestions about how our Church can foster greater understanding about how to invite men and women into sustained reflection on married life as a pilgrimage of communion.

- a. **Marriage formation.** A broad pastoral challenge facing all Catholics is developing communities of faith in light of changing demographics. The subcultures which nurtured generations of European Catholics have changed dramatically, meaning that sharing and handing on faith among different generations within families takes intentional decision-making regarding such challenges as education and regular religious practices and celebrations. Even among more recent immigrants, there are significant challenges in sharing family and religious mores in the midst of contemporary U.S. culture. If our role as a Church is the formation of boys and girls and men and women for lives of covenantal love, then we must give serious thought to how we foster a “mystagogy of communion”—i.e. a kind of mentoring of young people in forming and sustaining agapic relationships as children, adolescents, and young adults. How might we teach them how to love? How might we form structures that encourage loving relationships? How might their play dates, socials, dating, courtship reflect their deepening commitment to life as followers of Christ?
- b. **Marriage celebration.** Today, the wedding liturgy itself is an opportunity for evangelization, in the sense that it can manifest what the Church does in inviting people to respond to God in marriage. Fundamentally, the liturgy as a celebration of

communion. It celebrates a prophetic vision of marriage, in stark contrast to the consumerist, individualist models of weddings that prevail as a massive industry in U.S. culture. Our challenge is to ask how in our parishes we send the message that marriages affect the whole community, inviting couples to challenge the assumption that the wedding is little more than an expensive private party.

- c. Sustaining marriage. How does our Church foster a spirituality of communion in the face of all the vagaries of life today—a “domestic Church”? Rules of life developed in religious communities as early as the fourth century CE, but there really has never developed a parallel “rule” for married people or families. To be sure, one might argue that all families are different, and that a rule is more appropriate for extended communities. But the more basic question is this: what resources do we offer married people who seek to deepen their spiritual lives precisely as married people (and perhaps too as parents)?
- d. Promoting marriage. The Church’s missionary role is to be leaven in society calling people to love, and inviting them into the sacramental celebration. Fundamentally, this role is one of *diakonia* and *martyrion*, service and witness. Today, this missionary role calls for humility: the Church cannot reasonably aspire to influence legislation on marriage, but it can manifest to the rest of the world the joy of living out the pilgrimage of marriage in light of the gospel.
- e. Balancing marriage and single life. A key pastoral challenge today is that of single adults. At present, there are some structures in the Church that address the ministry to singles, though they tend to be tied to youth. There are very few resources for older adults who are single, whether through choice or lack of choice, through death or divorce of spouse. We must recognize that single life, while common for many Catholics today, is the state of life—perhaps even vocation—for which there is no corresponding sacramental celebration, as with marriage and holy orders. Accordingly, our challenge is to inquire about how to draw single adults into community while at the same time retaining a commitment to marriage and family life in parishes.