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# Self-Giving and Self-Fulfillment in Marriage and the Family

by

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If you were asked which would make you happier — to receive \$1 million, or to give \$1 million — you might stand back and reflect: “Well, if I were in a position to give a million, say, because I had fortune of \$100 million, I might be happy giving \$1 million. But as things are right now, I think I’d be happier receiving it.”

This may seem common sense, but it is not necessarily gospel sense. It may not even be true in the deepest human sense. St. Paul records Our Lord’s words: it is happier to give than to receive. This is a formula not just for getting to heaven, but also for enjoying the happiness this earth can provide.

We are not self-sufficient, we cannot make ourselves happy by turning in on ourselves. Happiness comes to us from outside; to receive it we must be open. Anyone who chooses to be a closed system will always end as a miserable failure. Hell is made up of closed systems that have failed. God is bent on opening us, and at times uses events designed to work on us as a can-opener — or perhaps as a high-explosive — in order to do so.

The whole Christian philosophy of life is there in the Gospel: don’t seek yourself or you will lose self, lose self and you will find; better to give, for then not only will you be happier but also more likely not just to receive but to *be able* to receive.

Our modern mentality is impregnated with the opposite idea. After centuries of individualism, we have reached the extreme in the “I-generation”. Seek self. Identify self. Create self. Don’t bind or commit self. Be different, even if that means being lonely. There is the philosophy and psychology which explain precisely why there is so much loneliness in the West today.

Be unique even if this means being isolated. Be yourself, even if you don’t

know what being yourself means; even if you don't know who you are or what you are becoming. Be yourself — but each day we are changing, are a bit different! Keep changing then, even if you have no idea of whether it is for better or for worse.

For the individualism of the past centuries, other people were, in the end, just means to *my* interests; or obstacles to them. Repelled by the sheer selfishness of individualism, many reacted towards a collectivism in politics or in social or economic thinking. Both outlooks degraded and depersonalized the individual. Now (especially with the present Pope), there is being articulated a new philosophy of human living called Christian Personalism. Expressed in the simplicity of the Gospel from which it draws its source, it has an appeal that reaches beyond the bounds of any religion.

The key idea to Christian Personalism is to be found in Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: "man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself" (no. 24). Man finds self by giving self: to values and to persons. The natural setting for this sort of self-fulfillment is marriage and the family.

The personalism of Vatican II is applied very particularly to marriage in *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48 which speaks of how a married couple "give and accept each other". It is in these terms — of life-long self-gift and other-acceptance — that matrimonial consent is described in the new Catechism (no. 1627) and in the 1983 Code of Canon Law (c. 1057).

"I give myself; I am yours". "I don't lend. I don't hold onto myself. I am yours". And the other gives himself or herself: "I accept; you are mine. And now that you are mine I will not reject you nor go back on my acceptance". True love wants to commit itself and to stick by that commitment. Hence flows the permanence of the bond of conjugal love.

That marriage is very specially a way of human fulfillment is brought out in those words of Scripture: "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone: I will make him a helper fit for him'" (Gen 2:18), the text which must naturally be placed at the basis of the personalist concept of marriage, and which shows one major aspect of the divine plan and purpose in the creation of the sexes.

The rule of *Gaudium et Spes* — fulfill by giving — applies to everyone. It has different concrete applications according to one's vocation. The priest, the religious, the lay person who remains celibate for God, give themselves too; their fulfillment lies in fidelity to that gift. It is to little purpose to debate whether their self-gift is in itself higher than that of a person who marries. General rules are deceptive here; and only God can judge individual cases. It is more interesting to dwell on some points that are common to the two types of self-giving, and some that are different.

### Personalism and Defects

A first common point is that, whether in marriage or in a life dedicated directly to God, the self-gift is being made by a defective person. And defective persons do



not give themselves easily; nor for that matter are they accepted easily, at least by other humans: their defects seem always to stand in the way. This immediately reveals a point of difference: the self-gift of the person remaining celibate for God is made to Someone divine and perfect whereas the self-gift of marriage is made to someone human and imperfect. Is it easier to give one's self to someone perfect despite one's personal defects? Is one more easily accepted by him? Are his demands more reasonable? Or are they perhaps more demanding and therefore the response to them more meritorious? Or are the demands of an imperfect person harder to respond to precisely because they may be less reasonable? In that case could the mutual demands of two imperfect persons, be *more* meritorious — *if responded to* — precisely because of the unreasonable character they may at times seem to possess? I do not propose to answer these questions, partly because I am not at all sure of the answers. But they seem questions worth pondering; I leave them with you.

With regard to the self-giving of marriage, which is our focus of interest, a further point needs to be stressed. The person who gives himself or herself directly to God will logically want to accept God fully; otherwise the self-gift would lack openness and perhaps authenticity. In marriage, this connection between the "giving of self" and the "acceptance of the other" is not just a matter of logic. It is absolutely constitutive, to such an extent that if both elements — self-giving; other-acceptance — are not present in marital consent, the consent can be invalid and no marriage in fact established.

Modern married personalism, especially in canon law, in reflecting on the new formula describing marital consent — a man and a woman mutually giving and accepting each other — has perhaps dwelt one-sidedly on the self-giving notion and not sufficiently on what is implied in the acceptance-of-the-other. Marriage is the union of two persons who love each other with their virtues, but who are also prepared to accept each other with their defects. If one does not grasp this, one ends with an unreal idea of marriage.

### Self-Gift and Other-Acceptance

A married person's fulfillment depends on the relation established first with his or her spouse, and then with his or her children. Let us briefly consider each of these.

It is to one's spouse that one must give; and him or her whom one must accept. Self-giving and other-acceptance through a lifetime. This is the way God has put marriage together: and what God has put together should be set asunder by no man or woman, least of all the spouses themselves, through a refusal to give any longer or a refusal to accept any longer. This is not easy especially — to repeat that important truth — because marriage is the bonding of two defective persons, neither of whom can fully satisfy the other and each of whom, even in the very best of cases, will at times disappoint or hurt the other.

Marital acceptance is the acceptance of a person with generic human defects (that is, those common to mankind: many of them and even, after the years, apparently *all* of them!), and with defects specific to him or her which may show



a particularly masculine or a particularly feminine character. Men and women are complementary, and therefore different. It is important that each learns to accept both the positive and negative aspects involved in the differences.

It is remarkable how the new Catechism says that the experience of evil we all undergo, "makes itself felt also in the relationship between man and woman. Their union has always been threatened . . . their mutual attraction [can be] changed into a relationship of domination and lust . . ." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1606-1607). To protect their love, husband and wife must take due account of the disorder in sex if their physical sexual relationship is always to be an expression of mutual love, and never just one of unilateral or shared self-gratification.

A whole series of sexually marked transitions are needed if marriage is to lead to fulfillment. The single person, with his or her sexual identity as a man or a woman basically established, must make the transition to husband or wife; and then, normally, from husband or wife to father or mother. If a man does not become a real husband, he is failing to achieve his sexual-human identity. And likewise (I leave aside the case where sterility is God's will for the couple) if he does not become a father (paternally, not just biologically) to the particular children God has planned. Similarly if a woman does not become a real wife, she fails to develop her sexual and human identity; and the same can happen if she does not become a real mother.

### **The Commitment of Marriage: Institutional or Personalist?**

There is a particularly important point to mention here. A lot of apparently personalist writing on marriage today tends to label some aspects of marriage as "personalist" (love, help, solace, compatibility) and others as "institutional" (procreation and indissolubility, in particular), and then to place them not just in contrast but in opposition. This is a most misleading error.

It is an error first of all because the personalist aspect of marriage is just as "institutional" as is the procreative. *Both* aspects are present in the accounts — the two accounts — that Genesis gives of the institution of marriage. Chapter One gives us a clearly procreational version — "God created man in his own image . . . ; male and female he created them. And God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply'" (1:27-28). Chapter Two gives us a version that is just as clearly personalist: "the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man — or woman — should be alone: I will make him a helper . . . ' Therefore a man . . . cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (2:18-24). It is significant that Jesus, in Chapter 19 of St. Matthew's gospel, referred back to the personalist text of Genesis and not to the procreative text, when he taught that the marriage bond was made indissoluble from its very institution (Mt 19:4-6).

It is an error in the second place because the aspects of procreativity and indissolubility are not just institutional, they too are *personalist*. It is no less fundamental to grasp this. One gets marriage completely wrong if one contrasts or opposes the personal fulfillment (or "the good") of the spouses to their having children, or to their being bound together, "for better or worse", until death.



So, by a closer reading of Scripture, we are helped to see the connection of institutional and personalist. The same result flows from a careful analysis of St. Augustine whose writings have been of extraordinary importance in the development of Christian thought on marriage. Augustine is of course a bugbear to many moderns. He is often represented — misrepresented — as a pessimist about sex and marriage, whereas he was an optimist; a realistic optimist. He was the first great philosopher of the dignity and goodness of marriage (defending it against the Manicheans), but also a clear sighted exponent (against the Pelagians) of the difficulties besetting sexuality as a result of man's fallen state; and of the precautions that must therefore be taken, also in marriage, if sexuality is to retain its intrinsic meaning and nobility. It is not that point however which is of interest to us here, but St. Augustine's teaching about the "bona" — the "goods" or values — of marriage.

He singled out three main aspects or values of the conjugal relationship: its exclusiveness (the union of one man and one woman), its permanence (union for lifetime), its procreativity (union open to children, the fruit of conjugal love). His genius perceived how these three highly personalized goods or values make marriage uniquely good, with its own peculiar glory. "This is the goodness of marriage, from which it takes its glory: offspring, chaste fidelity, unbreakable bond" (PL 44, 406).

Down the centuries theologians and canonists have come to regard the three "bona" and "institutional" aspects of marriage: and this is quite right. Peculiarly, quite a lot of so-called modern "personalist" writers on marriage have become hostile to the "bona", with an analysis which seems to hold that if they are institutional, then they are *not* personalist; and this is quite wrong.

A main task facing Christian theology and anthropology is to show how institutionalism and personalism are in synthesis, not only in the scriptural accounts of the creation of the sexes and marriage, but also in the Augustinian doctrine of the "bona"; how these values or goods express three fundamental longings of human love: to belong exclusively to one another for life in a fruitful union. Let us touch briefly on how this is so in relation to the "bonum prolis" (procreativity) and the "bonum sacramenti" (*indissolubility*).

### **Procreation and Fulfillment**

A particular aspect involved in conjugal acceptance is to receive and welcome the personalist sexual potential of the other, in complementary fulfillment of one's own sexual potential. Husband and wife run a grave danger of never experiencing marriage as a joint venture if they are not open to the full human and personalist potentialities of their union; and precisely to its procreative potential.

I have deliberately spoken of the *personalist* sexual potential, because we need to overcome the mindset that sees the procreative aspect of marital intercourse as a simple or casual biological trick of nature — which can be interfered with or cancelled without affecting the personal relationship of the spouses.



It was no accident, no biological peculiarity within God's design, to have made the complementarity of the sexes most striking in their capacity to have a child together. It was not for the sake of cosmic organizational convenience but to underline the creative nature of love, that God made the physical act — which is regarded as so distinctively expressive of the married relationship as to be called *the conjugal act* — an act of the interchange of the seed of life; an act by which each gives to the other, opens to the other, his or her procreative power, and accepts the complementary procreativity which the other gives.

Fulfillment in marriage, through giving/accepting, naturally connects also with having children. This is not sufficiently analyzed by saying: well, of course, bringing up children calls for a lot of self-giving and therefore matures those who have to care for them. That is true, but could also be applied to a school teacher. Nor is it enough to add: but the parent has to care for them also outside school. That is still to treat having children as a responsible mission — which it is — as something of service to society which therefore matures as does any real work of service. That leaves intact the common view which separates and contrasts the “personalist” and the “institutional” understandings of marriage, which holds that marriage, formerly seen as mainly an institution for children, is now rather considered a means to the loving union of the couple: a personalist affair. In this view, marriage can be open to having many children, if the couple see fulfillment or satisfaction in that, but it can be just as happy and even more fulfilling through the deliberate choice of family planning, if this latter is in fact what a couple prefer, as seems to be the choice of so many today.

Such an approach, according to most of those who theorize about it, marks the triumph of personalist values over those that are biological or social or institutional. In reality, however, this is not a triumph but a failure of personalism. If it makes a couple freer from children, it makes their love less open and responsive to one another and involves them in a calculating process where each inevitably gives himself or herself less to the other and accepts the other less and less.

The conjugal act is the most personalized expression of married love because in that sharing each one expresses the unique personal status of spouse which he or she confers on and receives from the other. You are unique to me; and the proof is that with you, and with you alone, I am prepared to share this God-given, life-oriented procreative power. It is also the most personalized expression of love because it tends of its nature to give rise to a new person, fruit and incarnation of the union of the spouses.

Contraception involves so many spouses in a reduction of sexuality, a rejection of marital giving and acceptance. Neither fully gives self or fully accepts the other. They are not truly united, and they fail to discover the secret and glory of their sexuality, contemplating the manifold incarnations that their love can create.

It is a great handicap for young people today when they have absorbed this mentality and bring it to their marriage, for it curtails a true and full union, frustrates the most meaningful expression of conjugal love, and weakens its growth — perhaps even its very chances of survival.

This century has come to separate and oppose married fulfillment and having



children. Marriage is looked on by many just as a tandem affair — happiness “*a deux*” — where children are regarded as a possible advantage, but also as a possible drawback and hindrance to personal fulfillment. Here the modern Western world has in fact lost its sense of the unity of God’s design for marriage, contrasting or opposing aspects that are closely interlinked and mutually dependent.

### Indissolubility and Fulfillment

The personalist content of the “*bonum sacramenti*” — the indissolubility of the marriage bond — should be easier to see; and yet many appear not to see it. For them, to bind oneself in an irrevocable choice amounts to losing one’s freedom. What sort of love is it that prefers to leave the way out always open? Many people today have become chronically incapable of freeing themselves of doubts and uncertainties and suspicions; they do not realize that the moment comes for everyone to want to break out of the tight straitjacket of self-centeredness once and for all, something that is possible only through a definitive commitment. The person truly in love is not afraid of losing his freedom, but of losing his love. It is not the freedom to pledge oneself that one should fear, but the freedom to go back on one’s pledge.

The freedom to be afraid of is the freedom to be unfaithful, which accompanies us to the end. That is why the humble lover feels the need to pray: “Lord, make me faithful”; and also why those who do back out are sad, for they have not only let down those who should be dear to them, they have let themselves down also. They have not only lost their freedom as they know deep in their hearts, but have put themselves back in the straitjacket, by quitting the way of fulfillment.

As people learn to love, and sense that, with God’s grace, the bond between them will never be broken, then they understand better St. Augustine’s words about *glorying* in this unbreakable bond.

Indissolubility and procreativity are the two great institutional values of marriage that are looked on today as negative burdens, whereas they are keys to true fulfillment and happiness. A united and happy couple are a bond, just as a united and happy family is a testimony to the blessedness of having children.

### Family Giving

So we have seen some aspects of the goodness of this mutual self-donation of a man and a woman which is marriage. Now there is no containing goodness; it naturally tends to grow. How beautifully true this is in God’s plan! The union of two normally grows into a specially united three or four or more. The covenant naturally becomes the family. Once children arrive, a marriage changes. The pattern of growth and fulfillment by giving and accepting one another is broadened and intensified, taking on totally new characteristics. By becoming a family, a marriage is more personalized, also because more persons are involved in the enriching challenge of donation-acceptance.

Now husband and wife not only have to love, help and accept each other as



co-spouse, but to do the same as co-parent. Important issues of sexual identity continue to arise. The husband has a new challenge: to learn to be a father. And the wife, to learn to be a mother. And both together, to learn to be parents from whom — together, or separately, or alternatively — flow the authority, guidance and support that children need. Now husband and wife have again to start really to learn, in this school of giving and accepting and *demanding*. Within that school of love, children — accepted unconditionally by parental love — gradually *learn* to love their parents and, more gradually still, to love each other. In his 1994 Letter to Families, the Pope says: “Love is true when *it creates the good of persons and of communities*; it creates that good and *gives* it to others . . . Love is demanding . . . Nowadays people need to rediscover this demanding love, for it is the truly firm foundation of the family” (no. 14).

Here nature gives a lot of support. It is natural for parents to love their children. One can say it is natural too for children to love their parents, but it is not quite so easy (partly because parents do not always love wisely or make themselves lovable). Perhaps that is why there is a commandment enjoining children to love parents, although the Decalog contains no similar commandment to parents to love their children.

When parents spoil their children by giving or allowing them too much, they are not only not loving them, but are generally not loved by them. You don't love a person unless you respect him. And you don't respect a person without ideals, who stands for nothing or for everything, who has no principles or is afraid to hold by them whenever necessary, despite the protests of others. Those who are afraid to exercise authority, lose it. This can happen in civil government, in the Church, and in the family.

Can one say it is natural for brother and sisters to love one another? Probably not initially, so at least some child psychologists would say. The attitude of an older sibling so often being either of possessiveness and domination, or else of jealousy.

Parents must be careful not to have favorites, or at least not to show it. Parental love should place itself beyond preferences. Each child is equally — along with his brothers and sisters — a child of his parents, and yet each is different from the others. Parental love has to be the same for all, and at the same time go out to each one in a different way at different moments. This is what Blessed Josemaria Escrivá meant when he spoke of “loving equal children unequally” — in other words, with “variable” justice (cf. *Friends of God*, no. 173).

Napoleon's mother, who had eight children, was once asked which of them was her favorite. Her answer was; whichever is in greatest need. She was not diplomatically avoiding choice; she was simply speaking as a mother. In the true order of family values, the child who needs most love, is given most (also with its demands). Parents who know their children will realize that the one in most need tends constantly to vary.

### **Fighting Families**

We are all familiar with the old slogan, so filled with truth, “the family that prays together, stays together”. May I venture to complete it with another slogan



that may seem surprising at first: "the family that fights together, stays together"!

I mean this not only in the paradoxical human sense that some family fights, just as some conjugal rows, are inevitable; and that — *if made up* — serve in the end to cement love. To make up takes humility; nothing so opens us out and liberates us from self-centeredness. But I mean this too in the sense that each Christian family today is a battle station in the struggle to bring the world to Christ, and needs to be aware of its "commando" status, its "outpost" responsibility, not just to avoid losing ground, not just to defend itself, but to advance, to gain ground — and people — for Christ who came "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (Jn 11:52).

I imagine and trust that you have often reflected on the power of something which no doubt occurs in your neighborhoods. The colossal impact on a boy or girl from a one- or two-child family when they come in contact with a family where there are four or six or ten kids. He or she learns so many things that one never really learns from manuals: that people can get on, that they can be very united without being the same, that rows are to be made up, that few people can have their own way, that not to forgive or to ask for forgiveness leaves you more and more alone.

When you explain to your children the need to *Learn* to get on in family life, don't be afraid to point out the enormous disadvantages of their friends from single-child families, who have more things, but little opportunity to learn to share life. Tell your children that in getting on, they are bringing Christ into the family and, through them, into the families of their friends.

Get your children mobilized for God, in a blessed struggle to jerk people to awakeness and awareness, and to free the world. Tell them that since they are rich in Christ, they are in a position to give a million dollars and more each day to those around them. As long as they keep enriching *themselves* in Our Lord — through prayer and the sacraments — they can relieve the poverty of their friends whose lives have little support and no ideals because they do not know Christ.

I know homes where there are regular family councils to program neighborhood evangelization. Receiving reports from the different fronts (grade school, high school), asking for initiatives, discussing mistakes, reflecting together on how, since we are just instruments of God, our mistakes do not matter, for he is very skilful in turning them to good purpose; just as he finds particularly apt instruments in those who are not afraid of making fools of themselves, of putting their foot in it; and of so acquiring "holy shamelessness". Asking each one what they think are the problems of their friends, who is the loneliest, what can be done to help him or her . . .

Yes, "the family that fights together" . . . I pray that each of your families, right there where you are located, be a source of "free-for-all", whose purpose is "freedom for all": the freedom of giving and loving. You need to sense your human and divine mission; to fill your married and family life with real vitality, with living family values that are in a head-on collision — a provocative and affectionate collision — with the lack of vitality and of values around us. Your living of these values, with the element of the Cross involved, may initially be a "scandal" to others; but the joy it gives to you — for whom it is a means of sanctification — will also show the way of fulfillment — and of more than fulfillment: of salvation — to others.