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# Obedience, Love and Marriage

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## Introduction

Marx's emphasis on the social aspect of man's freedom, Nietzsche's claim that modern culture has killed God and Freud's thesis that social-economic structures repress man have produced a cleavage between man and his social environment. The result is that modern man lives a life disengaged from normative institutions and engaged, instead, in an endless search for meaning, understood as the life of pleasure-gratification. He defines himself in terms of transiency, utility, situations and disobedience. He understands freedom as unlimited and undirected physical pleasures with a minimum of institutional restrictions. If institutions, so the argument goes, determine, repress and estrange man from himself and society, then they ought to be restructured. For man's freedom, as Skinner says, lies beyond certain values of the established social order.

Consequently, today man loves the life of group identification, mass entertainment, visual learning and ecumenical religiosity and calls this life authentic. His soul is in the collectivity of the group, defined as mere bodies in motion. "We are all children of God," religious-minded people cry from every street corner and every pulpit. What is needed is for man to return to the Bible as interpreted by TV personalities, sport stars, unreflective priests, nuns, ministers, and countless new prophets. Idealized images become the center around which modern man lives his freedom.

To believe this is to surrender freedom to Satan. Freedom is rooted in a historical reality and not in a mystical fantasy such as that portrayed in *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *Equus*. Freedom emptied of an existential ground is idolatry, estrangement and slavery. Man does not need a conversion; society does not need to be restructured. What is needed, I think, is for man to re-engage himself in communion with his own concrete reality as constituted by a few selected relationships — friends, a family, a community, a church, God. Few, but permanent, relationships give meaning to man's existence.

The reflections that follow will focus on this theme. They will concentrate on the concept of love in the philosophy of John the Evangelist, in the actualization of such a love in marriage and in parenthood as the living experience of obedience, love and marriage.

### A. The Concept of Love in the Theology of John

The significance of the words "In the beginning," can hardly be overestimated. Chosen to recall a time when darkness, waste and void ruled over the universe, they also announce a new beginning. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God" (Prologue).<sup>\*</sup> Creation has turned into darkness and man's eyes have become closed to the reality of God. "And the light shines in the darkness; and the darkness grasped it not" (Prologue). Consequently, since man has been excluded from eating the fruit of the Tree of Life, restoration of creation is necessary.

As symbol of a new Tree of Life, the Word unveils a new modality of love, one whose texture is expressed in an intricate network of symbols — light, darkness, flesh, life, water, bread, seed and cross. Light represents absolute reality or hiddenness or eternity. Darkness is a symbol of concrete reality, the sphere of shadows, the realm of the senses. Together they express a relationship between the absolute to the particular, the hidden to the phenomenon, the imperishable to the corruptible, faith to wisdom. As a new center, the Word is cosmic power, the common ground from which creation takes its being. "All things were made through him, and without him was made nothing that has been made" (Prologue). The Word, then, means bearing within itself a power limited between creation or being and its negation or nonbeing. "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was I am" (John 8:58). The Word is Abraham whom it negates because of its pre-existence to him. "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me" (John 5:46). Abraham and Moses are shadows of the Word whose life is in the will of the Father and in obedience to it. "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my

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<sup>\*</sup> Quotations are from *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version* (New York: Nelson & Sons, 1952).

own will, but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). Abraham did indeed build a nation. Moses did give the Torah of which manna is the symbol of spiritual food. Abraham's community and Moses's manna, when seen in the light of the Word, are nothing but corruptible realities. "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, He gave the bread from heaven to eat" (John 6:31). Yet, Abraham and Moses did die. Instead, "He who eats this bread shall live forever" (John 6:58). He shall live forever because, unlike the manna, the Word is a historical and psychic reality: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (Prologue).

The dwelling of the Word among us and in us depends on the Spirit, "even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you" (John 14:17). Yet, in its hiddenness, the Spirit reveals the mutual relationship which exists between God and the Word, the Word and man. "If you love me keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to dwell with you forever, the Spirit of truth" (John 14:15-17). The Spirit, then, is man's communion with himself in the incarnate Word which is the Spirit of God. Engaged in this dialogue, man is freed from limitations or darkness, whether they be of law, nature or society. But man's insertion in the communion with the eternal is not possible until the Word is sacrificed in death. "Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). Thus the Word which desires to reveal, perfect and obey the will of the Father must also desire to lay down his life and submit himself to an imperfect glorification in order to restore creation and man to their original goodness. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). In death, the Word renews and purifies creation thus becoming the new Tree of Life. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine dresser. . . . I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. . . . This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15: 1, 5, 12).

Love, then, understood as a structure of obedience in a mutual relationship of two beings in one perfect Being, returns creation to God. "Living water," or love is the gift of the Word to the world, a gift fructified in the Spirit which reunites the separated Word to God. ". . . but the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). Man is capable of perfecting himself only with the understanding that such a love is rooted in the divine relationship which he has, by virtue of the incarnate Word, with God. This means that love requires a certain sight, or understanding of

the person who is loved. "But I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). In friendship with the Word made flesh, man will come to the love of God as a member of the Mystical Body of Christ which is the Church. "Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (John 14:19-20).

Man's spiritualization, or love, in fact, entails a sense of separatedness between his unique "I" and the eternal "Thou." The latter is present to the "I" as a historical being through the Word; the "Thou" is made real in the "I" in the incarnate Word; the "I-Thou" relationship is maintained and perfected in the Spirit, hence, the inevitable association of gift and sacrifice in the act of love. "Father, save me from this hour. No, for this purpose I have come to this hour" (John 12:27). The hour of the "Thou" is the death of the "I"; in death, the particular "I" participates, or reunites himself with the universal "Thou" without ever leaving, however, his historical self. "We know that we are of God. . . . And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true, and we are in him who is true" (1 John 5:19-20).

### Relationship Leads to Communion

Properly understood, then, this mutual relationship between the "I" and the "Thou" of love leads man to a deeper communion with himself, the world around him and God. I say properly understood because unless the "I" sees himself as a concrete being, he may lose himself either in the sphere of particulars without a possibility of the eternal, or in the universal without a real identity or form. "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God; every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is of God" (1 John 4:1-2). False prophets remove themselves from concrete reality; their love is more illusory than real. "Truly, truly I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of loaves" (John 6:26).

The unity of the particular with the universal is discerned by Christ in His incarnation, death and resurrection. Hence, the Eucharist becomes the reality of the "covenant" which God made with Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David. The fulfillment of the promise which, throughout the Old Testament, seems to be at hand ("For all the land which you see I will give to you and your descendants forever. . . . Arise, walk through the length . . . of the land, for I will give it to you" [Gen. 13:15, 17]), is never made real until the Word is made

flesh. The six cities of asylum which God promised to the Israelites did not become a historical reality until there was a new beginning. "On the third day there was a marriage at Cana of Galilee. . . . Now six stone jars were standing there, for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons" (John 2:1, 6). The marriage of Cana thus becomes the symbol and the reality of the new covenant, because when the time comes for the incarnate Word to go to the Father, creation once again returns to God from Whom all created things have their births. Christ will transform the empty jars, symbols of Israel's sterility, into a fruitful presence of God. The Eucharist, then, marks the point of convergence between the unfulfilled promise of old and the new promise in Christ. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up"; for unless "one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 2:19, 3:5). The revelation at Sinai, the giving of the Torah, the conquest of the promised land, the experience in the wilderness, the creation of a world order have thus been placed under God's will through the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Word. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).

Thus today, for instance, the claim that we are all Christians, or that we must be socially aware, or that we must be reborn must be seriously examined in the light of John's concept of love. If, in fact, this claim amounts to a justification of the secular city, to a support of a mere organization, to a movement of false prophets who betray man, then Christianity, as the historization of the Word in the *corpus mysticum ecclesiae*, must be severely criticized. Fidelity to the Word demands not a collaboration with false shepherds. It does not attempt to empty the Church of certain "mysteries." It does not place man in the sphere of the secular alone, or the psychological. It does not destroy the harmony which exists between the universal and the particular. Love demands that the individual be strengthened anew from within permanent structures. Marriage is that institution capable of actualizing the "I-Thou" of love in the Mystical Body of Christ which is the Church.

## B. Marriage: Man's Insertion in the Universal

The purpose of the first section has been a brief explanation of the concept of love in John's theology. We are ready to consider marriage as that form capable of actualizing the "I-Thou" of love. Of importance here is the fact that being alone, man is closed to a communion with the universal; alone he is incapable of inserting himself on the path to eternal life, so that the process of passing from a life lived alone to one engaged in relation to woman is identical with the process of passing from a natural life to a participation in the divine



life. "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18). The shared likeness of man and woman stands in the relationship as Christ to man. "... and appearing in the form of man ... he humbled himself, became obedient to death, even to death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7-8). Just as Christ is the point of contact between man, as a fallen being and man, as a sharer in the Spirit of God, woman must be seen as that saving link between man, as a being alone and man, as capable of participating in the Mystical Body of Christ. It is because of this that "a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). In becoming one flesh, man and woman are capable of self-transformation in that each holds the possibility for future perfection. "No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12). From this moment, the life of husband and wife is moved by an inner dynamic process; it is directed by the spirit of obedience. "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church, and gave himself up for her. . . . However, let each one of you love his wife as himself and let the wife see that she respects her husband" (Eph. 5:25, 33). This order of obedience is maintained within a dialectical tension of imitation and respect. The husband must love himself because his natural existence is in similitude to the incarnate Word. He is called to perfect his love in the engagement he makes with life, death and resurrection of the Word. In turn, such a love is worthy of respect and appreciation. Thus obedience leads to friendship which intensifies the mutual process of the human "one flesh" with the flesh of the incarnate Word until husband and wife are brought by the Spirit under God's love. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). "Therefore, when a man makes a vow to a woman, he makes it to God in Christ and he shall not violate his word, but must fulfill exactly the promise he has uttered" (Num. 30:3). When the question of breaking the promise came up with His disciples, Christ said to them: "Not all men receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given" (Matt. 19:11).

Covenant or insertion into an order is that teaching which, although many may not accept it, allows the "one flesh" of husband and wife to grow in a vertical dimension. Placed within this hierarchical order, husband and wife are transformed into a spiritual being in flesh and soul. "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Th. 5:23). Thus the preservation of the "one flesh" depends on whether the body and soul serve God, or whether the spirit and soul are subservient to natural desires. "For you were called to freedom... only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another" (Gal. 5:13). Husband and wife stand between two possible

destinies, with the possibility to choose between them and in choosing, to determine whether their life will be obedient to God's will or in servitude to the will of the senses. ". . . By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit" (Rom. 8:3-4). Led by the Spirit, husband and wife are freed from all laws, both external and internal restraints, ascending to higher perfection until they are brought back to obedience to God. "But the scriptures consigned all things to sin, that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (Gal. 3:22).

Still the promise of participating in the divine life depends on death, or sacrifice. Husband and wife, in their mutual relationship, must empty themselves for the other and totally. "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb. 5:8-9). Emptying oneself for the other is nothing but an inner attitude, a peaceful longing not to be separated from the other, a hope to be placed within God's divine plan. Hence, on the side of sacrifice and on the side of unity or completeness lies eternal love. For man separated from woman constitutes a state of nakedness. "Here indeed, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling . . . so, that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee" (2 Cor. 5:2, 4-5). Moreover, husband separated from wife amounts to a sinful life, or to a life of disobedience. The Spirit of truth overcomes this twofold separation by reuniting likeness with likeness, or by the reconciliation of the human flesh with the incarnate Word in the Spirit of God and through the sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction. "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh. To set the mind on the flesh is death; but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" (Rom. 8:5-6).

To experience peace is the end for which the sacrament of matrimony is instituted, and the more man estranges himself from woman, or the more dissolved marriage becomes, the more man alienates himself from the Paschal Mystery of Christ which is the Church. In unity with the Church and through a participation in the Eucharist, man and woman, husband and wife insert themselves into the universal process of the "I-Thou" of divine love. Participation in the Paschal Mystery means access to the inner freedom of the Spirit. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2). Through the Eucharist, man and woman are restored to their unity of male-female who coexist in being a man or a woman. Bread and wine, water and blood become the realities of that unity, so that just as Christ returns creation to the beginning, husband and wife, in unity with the Paschal Mystery, return each other to God



from whom their united life acquires sanctity. "She now is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for from man she has been taken" (Gen. 2:23).

Hence, the sacrament of matrimony, if its meaning is to remain alive today, must again be restored to its original and true intent. For marriage, if listened to in the depth of one's own solitude, one's own pains, speaks joyfully of that eternal covenant which is the ground and hope of human happiness. "According to his purpose which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9-10). And, for this reason, Paul insists, "...there was given this grace...to enlighten all men as to what is the dispensation of the mystery which has been hidden from eternity in God...in order that through the Church there be made known...the wisdom of God according to the eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:8-11). The Church, then, could not demand obedience if it were not authorized by Christ and, at the same time, outside the Church marriage has no higher claim, for the Church holds Christ's place in the world, making known as well as concealing, God's eternal will. Consequently, as the bride of Christ, the Church makes visible the hidden love and marriage as Christ's teachings in the gospels whose authority depends on the Church herself, so that the Mass represents the center out of which happiness, joy, freedom and hope blossom forth, disclosing the mystery of love in obedience to the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Word. "Father, the hour has come. Glorify thy Son, that thy Son may glorify thee... Father, I will desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am to behold my glory... I made known to them thy name... that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:1, 24, 26). This love is the revelation for husband and wife of the hidden dimension of the sacrament of matrimony which is the Eucharist.

### C. Parenthood as the Experience of Marriage

It is only fitting at this point to deal with the question of how husband and wife experience the living of the eternal. From this perspective the answer is simple: parenthood. Starting from the natural or biological order, parenthood is incarnated in procreation, however, reproduction acts as a unifying force only when it is centered around the universal reality of husband-wife relationship. This means that the sacramental character of sexuality lies in the fact that parents are successors of an eternal historical process which has particularized itself in the act of procreation. But this is not enough. Reproduction also contributes to the further development of the human race so that, consubstantial with parenthood, there is a historical continuum which

gives husband and wife access to the divine acts of creation, incarnation, revelation and salvation.

Parenthood, then, is defined within this milieu. Procreation reveals the power of creation. In fact, it uncovers the texture of parenthood, for parents see themselves both as incarnate beings and as beings participating in the creative act of God. It is precisely because the family belongs to this universal process of gestation that it may be considered an analogue to the Trinity. The child is the abiding presence of the creative gift of love. He constantly returns parents to the promise of obedience and fidelity before God in Christ, the Son. And parents must see the child as a being in whom they are well pleased, that is, they must appreciate him as a gift in the service of eternal life. Appreciation, gift, respect, service and obedience form the essential bonds around which each member of the family is united to the other in the Mystical Body of Christ which is the Church.

What exactly this means is that parenthood goes beyond the biological, the psychological and social needs; it strikes at the heart of freedom. Procreation is a liberating act in that it is a dynamic relationship between concrete creation and the universality of life, and, the more liberating procreation is, the more it transforms itself into a creative act corresponding to the gift of God in the service of the incarnate Word. In fact, it is because woman conceives under obedience, humility and love that she partakes of motherhood. And it is only when man recognizes the child as a gift of fidelity that he engages himself in fatherhood, assuming responsibility for his life. Thus parents must be attentive to the process of gestation because in listening to it they become attentive to the sanctity of life which is the life of obedience and fidelity to God the Father.

If procreation, however, is not considered sacred today, it is because marriage has cut itself off from the bond with the eternal. Parenthood presently has no roots other than those which are biological, psychological, economic and social in nature. As a result, there is a falsification of family, centering around the bonds of utility, convenience and individualism. From this center, obedience is seen as a disintegrating, repressive element and fidelity as letting each member of the family do whatever he desires, so that family individualism wears the mask of love when, in fact, it is the essence of egotism, understood as a satisfaction of one's own interests without a respect for other members. This falsification of the transcendental center of the family is nothing but a deterioration of a hierarchical distribution of authority emanating from and leading back to God, the Father through Christ, the Son, and in the Spirit Who, in their unity, form the Church. Where this ordering of obedience is leveled off, parenthood is dissolved, revealing itself in the abuse of the child by the parents, in the ingratitude of the child toward his parents, in the short duration of marriages, in jealousy of one member for the other, in the boredom associated

with family life, in disobedience, in sexual abuses, and in marriage encounter techniques.

It is as though parenthood is becoming more and more associated with techniques as opposed to essence. It must be pointed out that insofar as techniques reveal the "how" of a relationship, they may be considered good. But as long as they conceal the "what," they fail. Marriage must be seen as a constant encounter on the part of one member in the concrete life of the other. Engagement demands the experience in a very deep way of husband and wife to live out fully the process of creation in each other, as Christ Himself did. This means to experience the other in his anguish, anger, estrangement, emptiness, loneliness, betrayal, trials, difficulties, temptations and crucifixion which are there as a reminder of the polarity, incarnation-resurrection of Christ in His obedience to the will of God. Here, then, lie the essence and mystery of the "what" of parenthood.

### Parenthood and Pain

Encountering parenthood, then, is anything but a technique as it is popularly held to be. It is specifically in the domain of pains that parenthood finds its consummation. In pains, the healing power of love manifests itself in the unity which is attained between concrete situations of husband and wife with the universality of their shared life. And this, I think, is beyond techniques. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that encounter techniques tend to prevent husband-wife unity on the deep level of mystery. As is often the case, most encounters do confuse ego development which is in the domain of the biological, psychological and social with spiritual direction which lies in the mystery of obedience, love and fidelity. Moreover, they tend to become more seductive than authentic in that directors often play, intentionally or unintentionally, on the desires, passions, needs and weaknesses of the participants. This seduction manifests itself as care, concern, love, understanding and unity without a real enlightenment as to the fundamental mystery of family life as experienced on the ground of finite commandments. As techniques, then, encounters tend more to desecrate than to sanctify marriage; they tend to cut marriage off from the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ as taught by the Church. Not to see authority, obedience, fidelity and pains as the matrix of a married life is to strip parenthood of universal characteristics reducing it to a mere social phenomenon.

It is then the sacred duty of parents to root their life in the mystery of procreation which is the reality of everyday living. Procreation, by not confining itself to a mere biological act, inserts husband and wife into the universal process of creation, incarnation, revelation and salvation. In other words, it is only when procreation and real exper-

iences bring husband and wife back to that eternal order of gift, obedience, love and fidelity that their shared life is lived as eternal and, therefore, as indissoluble and sacred, perpetually renewing itself with every encounter into the inner secret of procreation and ordinary experiences.

But to root parenthood within this reality demands prudence. Parents must understand that their married life, together with that of the child, must be subordinate to a higher life, the life of the rational and the life of the eternal. Prudence, then, is to see on the part of parents that abiding bond between the "flesh" or the reality of their married life with that of Christ and His Church. To see this link is to penetrate and go beyond the biological, the psychological, the economic and social bonds that tend to imprison married life. This slow penetration, however, calls for temperance which enables husband and wife, in due time, to ask confirmation of one in the other, not from the outside, but from within their unique relationship seen as a product of gift and service. In loving the other, one recognizes his or her own likenesses which are the images of God. Once this is understood, then there is a willingness on the part of husband or wife to transform his or her life into a gift for the other in the service of the incarnate Word. As Christ is a gift and a service, so too husband and wife are called to become a gift and a service to each other, that is to be obedient to the marriage promise in spite of the difficulties which exist in life.

Looked at from the effect of such a life, the answer is happiness, joy, peace and justice. Each member recognizes his duties to the other; each knows his place in the structure of obedience, love and fidelity; each seeks the ultimate good for and in the other; each enjoys the presence of the other; each comes to the side of the other in times of distress. In short, in this family there is a thread leading from the biological and social centers to that original and eternal center as constituted in the family of Adam and Eve, renewed in Mary and Joseph and consecrated in Christ and His Church.

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