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The Spirituality of Marriage after the Second Vatican Council

Introduction

Nowadays “more and more people are coming to accept the insight that theological reflection is biographically ‘earthed.’”¹ Theological reflection on a spirituality of marriage needs “confidential conversations with those who [are] immediately affected, that is to say, with committed married couples.”² This prevents reflecting theologians from idealizing marriage as well as from being divorced from the reality of everyday marital life. The following reflections made by the author of this paper, who as a religious priest follows a celibate life, have been nourished by many conversations with married couples.³ The personal reflections of married faithful in the light of faith are a genuine *source of moral knowledge*; and supplement reflections on an abstract essence or nature. Paul VI, for example, was well aware of this.⁴ He deliberately appointed married individuals and couples to

¹ Klaus Demmer, “Sacramental Marriage: A Testimony of Faith in a Secular World”, in *Close to Our Hearts: Personal Reflections on Marriage*, ed. Aldegonde Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn and Klaus Demmer (Münster: LIT, 2013), 11.

² Ibid., 12.

³ Why should a religious priest speak about spirituality of marriage and the sacramental meaning of sexual intimacy? He surely is not an expert in this matter. The author, in his pastoral practice and in many conversations of spiritual accompaniment, has heard couples complain that they have been deprived of a positive sexual life because of the Church’s doctrine and catechetical instruction they had received in matters of sexuality and marriage life. The author is therefore convinced that the Church has the duty to offer spouses a positive view of marital life including sexual intimacy. The Second Vatican Council opened a way to this. In this article, the author would like to present the theological and spiritual basis for such an approach.

⁴ “The Church recognizes the many aspects, namely the many competences; within these excel the competence of the spouses, the one of their freedom, of their conscience, of their love,

form part of the commission which helped him formulate *Humane Vitae*, the papal statement on population and fertility. It is well known that a large majority of the members of that commission, including all its married members had proposed to the pope a different position with regard to the question of artificial contraception that we now find in *Humanae Vitae* (*HV*).⁵ There is no doubt that for Pope Paul VI, it was an agonizing and a truly genuine decision of conscience: even though he was deeply convinced that the Church had to take cognizance of the competence of those who live the reality of marriage and family, with its joyful moments and difficulties, and who witness the values of marital life in their everyday experience. In the end, the Pope did not follow the conviction of the majority, a fact that is both interesting and significant.

Brief Explanation of the Term “Spirituality”

The term “spirituality” is currently widely used, but often with a diffuse meaning. It should therefore be helpful to first define the term in the context of a Christian theological reflection.⁶ A Christian understanding of spirituality is strongly linked to the conviction that the earthly world is not divorced from the transcendent reality, but that God is present and acts in the world through the Spirit. God grants life and sustains it through the Spirit, who is adored as “*Spiritus Sanctus vivificans vita movens omnia*.”⁷ Spirituality means that a person is completely and integrally involved in the action of God’s life-granting Spirit, to be seized by God’s affection and caring. As Christians we believe that the mystery of salvation of Jesus Christ, i.e. the incarnation of God’s word, his public ministry in words and acts, his total self-donation in dying for humanity, and his resurrection, represents the highest and ultimate expression of God’s love to the world and to humanity. All these events of salvation occurred through the power of the Spirit who remains in the world as the first gift of the Risen Lord. As Christians we believe that we are filled with the Spirit. Through the Spirit we are new creatures in Jesus Christ and we live “in Christ.” This involves three important insights.

of their duty,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 56 (1964): 588.

⁵ See Martin M. Lintner, “*Humanae vitae*: eine genealogisch-historische Studie,” in *Paolo VI e la crisi postconciliare: Giornate di studio, Bressanone, 25-26 febbraio 2012* = *Paul VI und die nachkonziliare Krise: Studientage in Brixen, 25-26 Februar 2012*, ed. Jörg Ernesti, (Brescia: Istituto Paolo VI, 2013), 16-53.

⁶ See Christoph Benke, *Kleine Geschichte der christlichen Spiritualität* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2007), 9-12; Josef Weismayer, *Leben aus dem Geist Jesu: Grundzüge christlicher Spiritualität* (Kevelaer: Topos, 2007), 19-21.

⁷ Psalm antiphon for the Holy Spirit by Hildegard of Bingen.

First, Christian spirituality has always to be understood as a kind of practice, i.e. Christian faith cannot desist from concrete life, behaviour and actions. Christian spirituality is a very special form of conducting one's life. What one believes, determines and fertilizes one's life. This practice has to be reviewed, discerned, and evaluated in the light of the revelation that we find in Holy Scripture. It has to be confronted – so to speak – with an eye on God and the Lord Jesus. This means that the Bible is the source of life and spirituality⁸. The frequent reading and accurate study of the Holy Scripture as well as a strong life of prayer are essential components of Christian spiritual life.

Secondly, every earthly reality and human experience has to be seen as a possible *locus* of a true experience of God. The world is the *locus* where the kingdom of God unfolds, and God's grace is manifested in human experiences that are open to a brighter sense of life. In the light of faith, human experiences have the capacity to wonderfully transcend mere human realities, and become venues in which God irrupts and can be experienced. As Pope Francis emphasizes, while inviting all Christians to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, every place and every moment can be an occasion of encountering Christ or of being approached by Christ himself.⁹

This includes, thirdly, that there should be no earthly reality or human experience that could be completely excluded from becoming a venue of God's working presence, and from being transformed into a salvific experience. Even human abyss can be a *locus* of encounter with God. It is notable e.g. that in the genealogy of Jesus in Mt 1:1-17 we come across four women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah) who in some way or other represent an irregular, even infamous situation, with regard to infringements of social as well as religious mores, or the moral damnability of the behaviour of related persons. In today's language we would speak of typical "irregular family situations"; e.g. Tamar, who became the wife of her father-in-law; or King David, who committed adultery and saw to it that the legitimate husband of Bathsheba was killed. The genealogy of Jesus had only a very modest history, because it was not really that edifying.¹⁰ Furthermore, Jesus himself frequently gravitated towards human

⁸ Cf. Synod of Bishops, XIV Ordinary General Assembly, *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World: Lineamenta* (Vatican City, 2014), nos. 3 & 33, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141209_lineamenta-xiv-assembly_en.html.

⁹ Cf. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium"* (24 November 2013), no. 3, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

¹⁰ Cf. Joachim Gnllka, *Das Matthäusevangelium, Teil 1. Zu Kap 1:13,58*, Herders theologischer

peripheries and contacted human beings who were marginalized or excluded from social and religious life because they were considered impure due to social, religious or moral reasons. These people included the sick as well as publicly known sinners or social failures. As Jesus said “it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Mt 9:12)¹¹. In the Apostles’ Creed, the Church ultimately professes the belief that after his death and burial Jesus “descended into hell.” He thus literally strode through the most extreme abyss. Human faults and failures, even the most serious, are no situations of an absolute absence of God, nor are they obstacles to God’s salvific will and power.

Theological Aspects of a Spirituality of Matrimony in *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 48-52

The Understanding of Matrimony as Covenant

When we examine the long tradition of the theology of marriage in Catholic doctrine, we can distinguish two major currents: a more legalistic or juridical one that emphasizes the character of marriage as a contract, and a more personalistic one that highlights marital life as a lifelong covenant.

It is well known that one of the most important achievements of the Second Vatican Council concerning the doctrine of marriage is its new and profound reflection upon the character of marriage as a covenant, anchoring this doctrine in Holy Scripture, where the extraordinary beauty of human love (cf. *Song of Songs*) and the bond of marriage (cf. Hosea, Eph 5:31-32) are not only signs of God’s love and care towards humanity and Christ’s fidelity to his Church, but also concrete experiences of the reality of God’s covenant with his people. “Most importantly, in *Gaudium et Spes* (*GS*), no. 48, the traditional term ‘marital contract’ was changed to ‘marital covenant.’ Marriage as a whole, in its entirety and with all its consequences, is considered a sacrament; not just the juridical contract sanctioned during the church wedding ceremony.”¹² Human love and the bond of marriage are experiences of God’s and Christ’s own presence and actions, and a proper witness of God’s love and Christ’s fidelity.

For as God of old made Himself present to His people through a covenant of love and fidelity, so now the Saviour of men and the Spouse of the Church comes into

Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2001), 13-14.

¹¹ Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV).

¹² Günter Virt, “Moral Norms and the Forgotten Virtue of *Epikieia* in the Pastoral Care of the Divorced and Remarried,” *Melita Theologica* 63, no. 1 (2013): 31.

the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony. He abides with them thereafter so that just as He loved the Church and handed Himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-bestowal. Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ's redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church, so that this love may lead the spouses to God with powerful effect and may aid and strengthen them in sublime office of being a father or a mother. For this reason Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. (*GS*, no. 48)

Besides *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 48-52 Vatican Council II also speaks about the sacrament of matrimony in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (*LG*), saying that "Christian spouses, in virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, ... signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and His Church," (*LG*, no. 11).

Even though the perspective of the covenant in sacramental marriage is not new, it was underexposed for centuries. It may here be useful to recall the Council of Trent which adopted two decrees on the sacrament of matrimony on 11 November 1563. The better known of these decrees is the one entitled *Tametsi*,¹³ whose main substance covers the requirements of the canonical form for the validity of matrimony. At any rate, the other Tridentine decree is, however, theologically and content-wise more significant. It features the Church's teaching on marriage in an introduction and twelve canons.¹⁴ The introduction is a very dense text, which in its content stands out from juridical traditions.¹⁵ The basic message of this very concentrated preface can be summarized as follows: Marriage, in which two spouses are joined in a perpetual and indissoluble bond, is justified through creation theology and reinforced through the teaching of Christ as an expression of the salvific will of God. "In the relationship (natural love, indissoluble unity) of the spouses with one another, the same dynamic is at work as in the relationship between Christ and the Church. It is the mystery of grace, the mystery of love, which sacrifices itself for the other. In the New

¹³ See Benno Malfer, "Die Lehre vom Sakrament der Ehe vom Konzil von Trient bis zum II. Vatikanischen Konzil: Eine Überlieferungsgeschichte?" in *Patrimonium fidei: Traditionsgeschichtliches Verstehen am Ende? Festschrift für Magnus Löhrer und Pius-Ramon Tragan*, ed. Magnus Löhrer et al., Studia Anselmiana, vol. 124 (Rome: Centro Studi Sant'Anselmo, 1995), 749-758.

¹⁴ Heinrich Denzinger, *Echiridion Symbolorum*, ed. Peter Hunermann [*DH*] (Freiburg: Herder, 1997), nos. 1797-1812.

¹⁵ See Malfer, "Die Lehre vom Sakrament," 751.

Covenant (*in lege evangelica*) marriage is distinguished by this grace of Christ and is therefore a sacrament.¹⁶ Notably, the text speaks of the love and unity between husband and wife, but not of contract.

The Second Vatican Council rediscovered the dimension of the covenant in sacramental marriage and also strongly underlined the personalistic character of marital life by affirming that “the intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws, and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent.” (*GS*, no. 48).

The Sacramental Character of Matrimony

In Eph 5:22-33 St Paul speaks about the Christian spouses, and the relationship between husband and wife. He likens the relationship between the spouses to the relationship between Christ and the Church by concluding: “This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph 5:32). In the Vulgate, the term “mystery” is translated as “sacrament”. A sacrament is above all a participation in God’s mystery and in the history of salvation. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1 says that the “Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.” Here the sacrament is determined as a “sign and instrument” of the union with God and the unity of humanity. This implies two fundamental meanings. First, through true matrimony the spouses participate in the mystery of God’s relationship, i.e. the relationship between the three divine persons¹⁷ and the relationship of God with humanity. Secondly, marital life is a *locus* where God’s healing love is in operation, i.e.: God’s grace is effectively present in the heartfelt, bodily and personal relationship between the spouses and their mutual recognition. This human relationship is an efficacious and powerful sign of the real presence of God. Conjugal relationship makes God’s love present and experienceable. In the dynamic of conjugal life, i.e. in the process of marital relationship – and not only at the moment of the sacramental act of marriage – the dynamic of God’s love is in operation and leads the spouses towards the promised perfection. In experiencing mutual recognition and acceptance, the spouses have a real presentiment of the fulfilment of love and life in God.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 751-752.

¹⁷ See Gisbert Greshake, “Living Marriage and ‘Doing’ the Trinity,” in *Close to Our Hearts*, 33-42.

¹⁸ Cf. Bernhard Fraling, *Sexualethik: Ein Versuch aus christlicher Sicht* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1995), 129-132.

However, one should not confuse the human reality of marriage with the divine reality of the inner-trinitarian relationships or God's covenant with humanity, otherwise it would not only highly idealize marriage, but also the role of spouses. "Following St Thomas, '*sacramentum est in genere signi*.' So, reasoning about sacraments is also reasoning about symbols. Symbols are 'forms' (*Gestalten*) in a deep and rich sense that carry many levels of meaning, each connected and referring to the others. Symbolic reasoning is never-ending. ... It is within the logic of symbols that consequences for our life must be drawn in an analogical rather than univocal way."¹⁹ The analogy in understanding marriage as covenant must always be taken into account.²⁰ The relationship between spouses is a symmetric one, whereas the one between God and humanity or between Christ and the Church is an asymmetric one. God's love and fidelity are perfect and perpetual; the human ability to love and to be faithful is however limited and subject to the experiences of fault and sin, of brokenness, and even failure.

Three Spiritual Dimensions of the Marriage

*Communio Personarum: Living Marriage as "Doing" Trinity*²¹

As Christians we believe in God who is one and triune: the one God who is a community of the three divine persons. "God's unity is an original relationship of love that lies beyond all our understanding, a relationship in which the three Persons communicate the one divine life to each other."²² Theologians reflect on this mystery of faith in a speculative way, trying to understand the Trinity as an exchange of life and love, and to express the inner-trinitarian relationship through notions such as giving, receiving, and giving back, or loving, being loved, and loving jointly. But these speculative reflections remain abstract if they are not nourished by concrete experiences of interpersonal relationships. According to Gn 1:27 "God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." There follows, on

¹⁹ Virt, "Moral Norms and the Forgotten Virtue of *Epikeia*," 33.

²⁰ Cf. Herbert Schlögel and Kerstin Schlögl-Flierl, "Ehe - Sakrament - Versöhnung: Ein herausforderndes Dreieck," in *Ehe und Familie: Wege zum Gelingen aus katholischer Perspektive*, ed. George Augustin and Ingo Proft (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2014), 166.

²¹ Cf. Greshake, "Living Marriage and 'Doing' Trinity." On this issue, see also Claudio Laferla, "The Trinitarian Model: A Source for Marital Spirituality; Insights from the Carmelite Mystical Tradition," (S.Th.M. diss., University of Malta, 2014).

²² Cf. Greshake, "Living Marriage and 'Doing' Trinity," 33-36.

the one hand, the task “[of growing] out of our own narcissism and isolation, out of our self-centredness where everything revolves around our own self, so that we open ourselves to the other person with his specific otherness, entering into an exchange of life with him and thereby realizing a communion that is presented to us in the guiding image of the triune God.”²³ On the other hand, it signifies that a successful interpersonal relationship becomes a concrete experience of God.

According to the perspective of the theology of Creation (see Gn 1:27-28 and 2:24) the spousal relationship as well as fatherhood and motherhood are primarily and originally forms of a “communion of persons.”²⁴

In the beginning, there is the original family, when God the Creator instituted the first marriage between Adam and Eve as the solid foundation of the family. ... This union was wounded by sin and became the historical form of marriage among the People of God, for which Moses granted the possibility of issuing a bill of divorce (see Dt 24:1-4). This was the principal practice in the time of Jesus. With Christ’s coming and his reconciling a fallen world through redemption, the period begun by Moses ended. Jesus, who reconciled all things in himself, restored marriage and the family to their original form (Mk 10:1-12). Marriage and the family have been redeemed by Christ (Eph 5:21-32), restored in the image of the Holy Trinity, the mystery from which every true love flows.²⁵

Thus the spousal and family relationship has become a theological *locus* of revelation of God’s mystery.

Instead of puzzling, we are invited to enter literally into God, to “leap in,” and thus to experience that our life is borne, embraced, and fulfilled by him. ... If we correspond in this way to our vocation to realize communion in God and like God, we arrive at another form of understanding the Trinity: understand in doing! Learning by doing. This is the original form of understanding.²⁶

As conjugal life is the most intensive and original form of interpersonal exchange, “marriage is also the most original and intensive form of living the Trinity and understanding the Trinity in life.”²⁷ With this in mind it appears clearly that wife and husband should not only proclaim and witness their faith

²³ Ibid., 38.

²⁴ Cf. John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation “Familiaris Consortio”*, no. 15, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html.

²⁵ Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, nos. 14-15.

²⁶ Greshake, “Living Marriage and ‘Doing’ Trinity,” 41.

²⁷ Greshake, *Living Marriage and “Doing” Trinity*, 41.

to their children, but – first of all – to each other: they evangelize each other and become a *locus* of God’s revelation one to the other.²⁸

Conjugal Life and Love as Mutual Help for Perfection and Salvation

As God willed to reveal His love for humanity and the covenant through the experience of the beauty of human love (e.g. *Song of Songs*) and the bond of marriage (e.g. Hosea; Eph 5:22-32), there is a profound link between the Theology of Creation and the History of Salvation. “The spousal covenant, originating in creation and revealed in the history of salvation, receives its full meaning in Christ and his Church. Through his Church, Christ bestows on marriage and the family the grace necessary to witness to the love of God and to live the life of communion.”²⁹ Human love and marriage are not only theological *loci* of God’s revelation, but also of human perfection and salvation. Indeed, marriage was always understood in Church teaching as a way that leads to perfection and fulfilment.

Again, we must ensure not to idealize marital life, but to take into account the human limits as well as the inescapable reality of brokenness and fault. So the experience of God’s love through human love is only one side of an interpersonal relationship; the other side is the need for mercy and patience. “Love *and* patience: that combination is ... profoundly Christian. That combination belongs to marriage as sacrament, if only because it shows how God Father Son Spirit deals with us.”³⁰ Spouses are normally conscious of the painful experience of being hurt by one’s partner and of hurting that partner. The closer a relationship gets, the more vulnerable both partners become. One’s donation to a beloved partner is also related to one’s exposure to the other, i.e. in permitting to be vulnerable to the other. Vulnerability, however, can induce a person to protect itself and to cover its vulnerable parts, as Adam and Eve did after the original fall, when they covered themselves with fig leaves and hid from God (see Gn 3:1-13). Their withdrawal after the fall was an expression of a deep mistrust of God’s love and goodness.

If love and goodness are missing, vulnerability becomes indeed a source of repression, i.e. of injury and violation. Every relationship relates to a balance of power and must therefore be prevented from abuse of power. As God “will not break a bruised reed, and will not snuff smouldering wick out” (Is 42:3) in dealing

²⁸ Cf. Godfried Danneels, “The Christian Family as ‘Domestic Church,’” in *Close to Our Hearts*, 22.

²⁹ Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, no. 15.

³⁰ Herwi Rikhof, “Love and Patience: Sacramental Fragments,” in *Close to Our Hearts*, 64.

with us, so also in marital life, vulnerability and weakness should be a source of responsibility one for another, and not a source of abuse of power. Awareness of the vulnerability and weakness of one's partner should not induce one to put a finger on the wound, but to hold one's hand protectively over it. This requires real trust between partners and a great sense of openness and honesty. Without these attitudes a relationship can hardly thrive, because dissimulation would not permit partners to be authentically themselves. "Within the family are joys and trials, deep love and relationships which, at times, can be wounded," and because of this, "the family is truly the 'school of humanity' (*GS*, no. 52), which is much needed today."³¹

At the same time, no human relationship in which both partners are allowed to maintain each one's identity and "otherness" will be devoid of tensions and conflicts. This is simply too human, but it shows that conjugal life needs to grow and mature. The sacramental act of marriage, i.e. the mutual promise to be "faithful in good times and bad, in sickness and in health", serves as a good and strong foundation for tolerating tensions and conflicts. This promise constitutes a fundamental affirmation of the other person that is stronger than any doubt or denial. Ultimately, the marital promise includes the big promise of salvation: "Whatever might happen, I will stand by you. My 'yes' to you at the end will be stronger than any 'no'." This promise has to be realized day by day. With recourse to the biblical notion of covenant, the need to forgive and to ask for forgiveness is a participation in the history of salvation as well as an experience of the beauty of human love. The biblical history of salvation is not a straight or unblemished one. It includes human betrayal and errant ways, postulating the need of conversion and a new beginning.³² Since God does not cease to court people especially sinners, and continuously empowers human conversion and new beginnings, any interpersonal relationship that allows both partners to grow and mature in their relation through compassion, mercy, and forgiveness constitutes a theological *locus* of God's salvific presence. It is a way towards knowing and understanding God's salvific act by "doing mercy," i.e. by exercising compassion and forgiveness.

Parenthood as Participation in the Creative Love of God

Last but not least conjugal "love is fecund. It is not confined wholly to the loving interchange of husband and wife; it also contrives to go beyond this to bring new life into being. 'Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature

³¹ Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, no. 1.

³² Cf. Schlögel and Schlögl-Flierl, "Ehe - Sakrament - Versöhnung," 165-171.

ordained towards the procreation and education of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute in the highest degree to their parents' welfare' (*GS*, no. 50 & *HV*, no. 9)."³³ Regardless of the different theories about the creation of the human soul, a man and a woman's ability to conceive a child is a true expression of God's own creative love. In conceiving a child there is always a surplus, an excess of creative power that exceeds human capacity. It is a manifestation how persons participate in God's creative force and – at the same time – how God uses human action to be effectively present in the world. Every single human being can be seen as an expression of a fundamental affirmation, as fruit of a primary love, even if the act of conceiving itself may not always be such an expression of mutual love between the sexual partners or of their desire to have a child. As the proverb goes, God can write straight on crooked lines. Conjugal fertility has yet another spiritual dimension "because it is of its very essence open to the child as a 'third factor' within the community of marriage, and thus realizes in the most emphatic way the basic structure of the community, which is realized by the threefold rhythm that can be seen in the triune God too."³⁴ As the aspect of conjugal fecundity was strongly emphasized in the traditional doctrine on marriage and family, these brief reflections should be sufficient.

There is another issue that should be addressed at this point. There is an increasing number of couples who are affected by involuntary childlessness. Only too often this problem is treated on a purely medical level, at best with its psychological implications. But affected faithful spouses who fail to conceive a child may also experience a crisis of faith in God by asking themselves why they should be denied participation in God's creative love. As the Church objects to extracorporeal artificial reproduction and judges it as ethically illegitimate, it has the duty to accompany involuntary childless couples and to help them cope with their situation on a religious as well as on a spiritual level. Besides medical clarifications on the possibility of overcoming infertility, and the possibility of child adoption³⁵ as an alternative choice to artificial reproduction, existential coping with involuntary childlessness and, ultimately, its acceptance, is at stake.³⁶

³³ Cf. also John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 28.

³⁴ Greshake, "Living Marriage and 'Doing' Trinity," 38.

³⁵ "The adoption of children, orphans and the abandoned, and accepting them as one's own is a specific form of the family apostolate (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, III, 11), and has oftentimes been called for and encouraged by the Magisterium (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, III,II; *Evangelium Vitae*, IV, 93). The choice of adoption or foster parenting expresses a particular fruitfulness of married life, not simply in the case of sterility. Such a choice is a powerful sign of family love and an occasion to witness to one's faith and to restore the dignity of a son or daughter to a person who has been deprived of this dignity," Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, no. 57.

³⁶ See e.g. Angelika Walser, *Ein Kind um jeden Preis?: Unerfüllter Kinderwunsch und künstliche*

This relates first of all to the question of what could be God's message to the affected couple. Surely childlessness is not an exclusion from God's creative love; marital life remains to be fecund. The fecundity, however, cannot be reduced to the biological dimension; it does not find its only expression in conceiving a new human being. Spousal love continues to be fecund for the spouses themselves as well as for their social and ecclesiastical environment and does not lose its dignity. Therefore, as *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 50 stresses, marriage "maintains its value and indissolubility even when, despite the often intense desire of the couple, offspring are lacking." The challenge consists in how to mutually foster the fecundity one for another as well as towards other people. As the birth of a child may ensure that a couple would not enclose themselves in "loneliness in two," it is equally important for an involuntary childless couple not to remain centred on itself. "Childless fecundity" can find expression in different forms through which the spouses continue to live for each other in mutual enriching and support, injecting strength, vitality and encouragement to each other. Furthermore, the absence of a child also leads to new forms of freedom and to the availability of personal as well as financial resources. Affected spouses can therefore explore how to invest these resources in a meaningful way and towards useful good projects. As the proverb goes, when one door closes, another opens. The spiritual accompaniment of childless couples should therefore help them to overcome their focus on infertility, and lead them to consider and search for new forms of fecundity. Despite this, childlessness can remain an experience of loss and an ongoing source of suffering for affected couples. Dealing with this situation can be transformed into spiritually experiencing a "hidden" God. It reminds the faithful that God is never a possession. He is "closer to me than I am to myself" (St Augustine) and an incomprehensible mystery at the same time. As the blessedness of bringing a child into life can be the experienceable nearness of God, creator of all human beings, childlessness can become the experienceable withdrawal of God, who remains hidden to people's eyes and intellect.

Rediscovering Marital Intimacy as a Source of Spirituality

As Pope Paul VI affirms in *Humanae Vitae*, conjugal "love is above all fully human, a compound of sense and spirit" (*HV*, no. 9). What has been said until now, includes therefore also the sexual dimension of conjugal love. By overcoming a hierarchical ranking of the purposes of marriage, the Second Vatican Council allows a positive valuation of sexuality and sexual intimacy. This finds expression

in assertions like the following: “Where the intimacy of married life is broken off, its faithfulness can sometimes be imperilled and its quality of fruitfulness ruined, for then the upbringing of the children and the courage to accept new ones are both endangered. ... The sexual characteristics of man and the human faculty of reproduction wonderfully exceed the dispositions of lower forms of life,” (GS, no. 51).

Since the Church stresses that, from an ethical point of view sacramental matrimony is the one and only place for a legitimate and proper sexual intimacy, there must also be a theological and spiritual dimension of this conjugal intimacy. From a personalistic perspective, the juridical justification of sexual intimacy as exercise of the *ius in corpore* is no longer appropriate to express the anthropological as well as theological and spiritual significance of conjugal love. Precisely because the Church confines legitimate sexual love to married couples, there is a debt to be discharged to Christian spouses, i.e. to offer a spiritual understanding of sexual love and to disclose sexual intimacy as a source of spirituality. Even though this would not have been possible for many centuries, the Second Vatican Council’s doctrine on matrimony and sexuality has offered this prospect.

Biblical Sources

In the Old Testament’s *Song of Songs* the experience of erotic desire and sexual love is projected as a gateway for an encounter with God. “According to the interpretation generally held today, the poems contained in this book were originally love-songs, perhaps intended for a Jewish wedding feast and meant to exalt conjugal love.”³⁷ Regardless of whether the *Song of Songs* is interpreted in a literal or allegorical sense, it is an undisputed fact that it makes use – in an unconcerned way – of secular and religious love songs which are full of explicit and covert sexual and erotic allusions, and uses this same language to put into words God’s longing for his people and their own longing for God. Indeed, “to say that ‘God desires us’ is to make the conscious choice of selecting the language of sexual desire, of *erôs*, and applying this to God. This is a clear reversal of the ancient association of desire with sin.”³⁸ The power and the force of sexuality are not considered here primarily as a problem area that needs to be normalized and regulated, but rather as God’s gift to two lovers who enjoy each other and yearn for one another.

³⁷ Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter “Deus Caritas Est,”* no. 6, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html

³⁸ Rowan Williams, quoted in Adrian Thatcher, “Loving One’s Partner as God Loves God,” in *Close to Our Hearts*, 43.

It is this human experience that opens up two people to the presence of God in their lives, which is the only thing that can satisfy the infinite longing to love and to be loved. The sacramentality of conjugal love refers not only to the pledge of unbreakable loyalty and unconditional love but also to the experience of longing for each other, “being lovesick” after the partner, and the exhilarating joy of having each other. If sexuality is experienced and interpreted in this sense as a spiritual *locus*, then it will be freed from unfounded moral burdens and unnecessary taboos. It can be a healing experience without confusing it with healing itself, because the ultimate aim of the sexual relationship is the lustful pleasure one finds in being desired, loved and accepted by a human being. This may be possible within the sexual experience, even though it is not necessarily exclusive to the sexual relationship. Thus the beauty and intensity of a gratifying sexual encounter is not called into question. This results in a twofold opportunity: on the one hand sexuality should not be perceived in a pessimistic way, nor should it be idealized. The real challenge is to bring sexuality and spirituality together into a new relational context.

Sexual Love as a Locus of Encounter with God

Although the tradition of linking marital sexual experience with God has been very restrained,³⁹ “*Gaudium et Spes* assumes that the sexual life of spouses is an expression of the workings of the living God; that even in the sexual surrender and acceptance, the actions of the two spouses and the work of God come together. ... The sexual life of the partners is, with all of its ups and downs, an integral part of sacramental married life and of an encounter with God.”⁴⁰ “Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human

³⁹ The texts by male and female mystics in the High Middle Ages, who did not hesitate to express their experiences of God in an explicitly erotic and sexual language, represent an exception. Interestingly, the scepticism of the Inquisition concerning these mystical texts was less due to this fact and much more to the fear that Jesus Christ would be “pulled down” too much to the human level and thus his deity would be obscured. See Martin M. Lintner, *Den Eros entgiften: Plädoyer für eine tragfähige Sexualmoral und Beziehungsethik* (Brixen: Tyrolia, 2011), 56-64.

⁴⁰ Christoph Kaiser, “Die Ehe als ‘innige Gemeinschaft des Lebens und der Liebe,’” in *Die großen Metaphern des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils: Ihre Bedeutung für heute*, ed. Mariano Delgado and Michael Sievernich (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2013), 319-320.

love.”⁴¹ Based on the essential traits of the sacramentality of marriage,⁴² which are important for a Christian spirituality of marriage, the potential importance of sexual intimacy for a spirituality of marriage can also be demonstrated.

God’s Desire for Humanity

The experience of erotic desire and of longing, to love and to be loved, reflect the profound desire for community and relationship. For two partners – always within the brokenness of limited human experiences – they become the experience of God’s longing for his people. Desiring each other can strengthen the partners in their belief that they are wanted, loved and accepted by God. Erotic desire, which is an expression of love for the desired person, also recognizes the importance of loving the desired person for his/her own sake and not just for the satisfaction of one’s desire.

This same experience can help two partners in their shared and personal journey of seeking God, to search for and love God for his own sake and not just because of certain expectations or to attain something. Just as two partners love each other not in order to be satisfied in their mutual erotic desires, but find fulfilment in being able to satisfy their partner and grant pleasure or receive their own satisfaction as a gift from their partner, so does the love of God focus not on the satisfaction of one’s own spiritual and religious needs, but on God himself, from whom one may hope for the satisfaction of his/her spiritual and religious “thirst.”

Christ’s Self-Donation to Humanity

Conjugal love is an “efficacious sign, a symbol filled with meaning, a true realization, epiphany of the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.”⁴³ It signifies the unconditional and unwavering devotion of God to humanity. Jesus testified in numerous ways to the reality of salvation, to the fact “that God accepts the person in a definitive way and says yes to him.” So “the imagery of marriage between God and Israel is now realized in a way previously inconceivable: it had meant standing in God’s presence, but now it becomes union with God

⁴¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 11. “This close connection between eros and marriage in the Bible has practically no equivalent in extra-biblical literature” (ibid.); cf. also Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, no. 18.

⁴² See Walter Kasper, *Zur Theologie der christlichen Ehe* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1977), 44-45, which unfolds the essence of sacramentality of marriage: it presents marriage as a sign of Christ, as a sacrament of the Church and as an eschatological sign.

⁴³ Ibid., 45.

through sharing in Jesus' self-gift, sharing in his body and blood. The sacramental 'mysticism', grounded in God's condescension toward us, operates at a radically different level and lifts us to far greater heights than anything that any human mystical elevation could ever accomplish."⁴⁴

Jesus put this into practice through his self-gift which took place through physical affection and through the healing of physical ailments. Due to the exclusive nature of sexual love He, who lived a celibate life according to the testimony of the Scriptures of the New Testament, did not overstep the limit of sexual intimacy. In conjugal love, however, sexual encounter becomes a particular form of communication in which one does not only promise or grant one's own love to one's partner, but actually carries it out. Therefore, conjugal love also provides practical experience and the realization of the love of Christ, which is holistic and includes corporeality. As biblical anthropology does not recognize the dualistic division of man into body and mind, Jesus, in giving up his body, gives up not only his corporeal reality, but himself as a whole person. By shedding out his blood, Jesus lets women and men partake in his own life, as blood in the biblical language is an expression of one's life.

God's Closeness and Withdrawal at the Same Time

The lover desires the beloved, but does not possess her. He delights in getting to know the beloved deeper and is amazed at the same time at the fact that she always remains a secret. One of the conditions for mature love and for fulfilling sexuality is the ability to endure the tension between self-sacrifice and remaining true to oneself. Love seeks union, but not in the form of a symbiotic fusion. It overcomes loneliness and yet retains individuality. A healthy, mature distance between two lovers needs to have a degree of independence, in order not only to look for support in the partner but to find it in themselves. The personal union is characterized by an interplay between holistic devotion and respect for one's own autonomy. "In love, there is the paradox that two beings become one and still remain two."⁴⁵

The road to coming into one's own in a partnership means the (often painful) struggle with the fact that lovers always remain deprived of each other and that one's partner always remains a secret. "The unknown in the other, which can never be accessed, which leaves the spouses in all unity to always be two and separated, is all the more clearly recognized and physically felt, the deeper

⁴⁴ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 13.

⁴⁵ Erich Fromm, *Die Kunst des Liebens* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2008), 32.

confidence and familiarity of the spouse reaches.”⁴⁶ This human experience of the closeness of deepest intimacy and at the same time insurmountable loneliness can become, for believing partners, an experience of God which always remains alien and withdrawn and which humans cannot get hold of. God is never a permanent possession; faith is rather an act of trust, in which the intensity of trust is often accompanied by distress; distress concerning the fact that God always conceals himself, that there is a “side” of God that remains inaccessible to humans.

God, who is so close to us and in whom one feels safe, can also very quickly “slip away” and become alien to us. Tellingly, in the tradition of high medieval suffering mysticism, the cross is a place of an intimate union with God and at the same time the place of extreme abandonment by God. On the one hand the infinite love of Christ is revealed on the cross, so that the cross becomes the “bridal bed of love.” On the other hand, Jesus’ cry rings out from the cross, “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The awakening from a mystical immersion into an intimate union with the Crucified becomes a painful experience of separation, which even strengthens the longing for the beloved. It is like the experience of a satisfied desire that is not a satisfaction, but feeds the longing.

The Experiences of Human Brokenness

Finally, the tension remains between the infinite longing to love and to be loved on the one hand, and the limited ability to love and to be loved on the other hand. “Husband and wife are guilty in many ways also and especially in a marriage. The more the partners have surrendered and embraced, the greater and more hurtful the mutual guilt is.”⁴⁷ In the area of sexual devotion, the pure devotion to the partner, which is free from any trace of striving for personal satisfaction and is the exclusive expression of the acceptance of the beloved person, does not occur in every single act; in fact, it may even remain the exception.⁴⁸ Even when – according to previous explanations – desiring love (*amor concupiscentiae*) cannot be viewed as simply the opposite of giving love (*amor benevolentiae*),⁴⁹ a constant threat to sexual love is revealed when it becomes independent and is no longer the physical language of love to another human being.

The decisive factor is the integration of sexual love into the personal communion of love between two people. Conjugal love is for “the integration

⁴⁶ Kaiser, “Die Ehe als ‘innige Gemeinschaft des Lebens und der Liebe,’” 318.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁴⁸ With all due respect towards the theology of the body by John Paul II, this is often criticized for being too idealistic in this respect, and for setting too high an ideal for a standard.

⁴⁹ Also Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 7.

of Sexus and Eros into the overarching whole of human, social and religious connotations⁵⁰ and is in this sense a remedy for concupiscence, which should be understood only as sexual desire, but theologically it means “the inner conflict and disintegration caused by sin; sensuality, insofar as it is contrary to the overall direction of the person.”⁵¹ It remains a lifelong process of growth and maturity for couples, in which each of the partners owes much to the other. They need forgiveness in the double sense, namely, to ask for forgiveness and to forgive themselves.⁵² “To know how to forgive and to feel forgiven is a basic experience in family life. Forgiveness between husband and wife permits a couple to experience a never-ending love that does not pass away (cf. 1 Cor 13:8).”⁵³ Thus the human experience of forgiveness and reconciliation can turn into an experience of the forgiving love of God and of healing reconciliation precisely where the serious injuries have occurred. Even in the sexual area, such profound injuries can be inflicted, since sexuality opens up one of the most intensive forms of communication and concerns not only the body of a person but also always touches people’s souls.

The consideration of the experiences of human brokenness also in the area of sexual love is not only important for bringing the expectations of sexuality and of sexual intimacy to a realistic level. Sexual love can be an experience of salvation, but it is not salvation itself. Theologically speaking, there is an inherent eschatological reservation in it. Sexual love refers to the saving reality of intimate communion with God and makes it a human experience – it is not by coincidence that in the Bible the image of the wedding feast as a metaphor for eternal communion with God occurs repeatedly⁵⁴ – but it is not the fulfilment of humanity’s longing for salvation. This helps to preserve marital sexual love – by all positive regards – from mystification or idealization. Only then can it be appreciated as a *locus* of encounter with God, because it actually refers to God as being always more, bigger, deeper, farther ... than the human experience of love. No partner can be heaven on earth for his/her counterpart,⁵⁵ but their love can become an experience of heaven for them. Letting God be God and persons be

⁵⁰ Kasper, *Zur Theologie der christlichen Ehe*, 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² See Kaiser, “Die Ehe als ‘innige Gemeinschaft des Lebens und der Liebe,’” 318.

⁵³ Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, no. 43.

⁵⁴ “In fact, Jesus was born in a family; he began to manifest his signs at the wedding of Cana and he announced the meaning of marriage as the fullness of revelation that restores the original divine plan (Mt 19:3).” Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, no. 13.

⁵⁵ The Viennese pastoral theologian Paul Michael Zulehner expresses this analogously: the partners must forgive one another, so that one cannot play “God” over the other (and vice versa). See also Kasper, *Zur Theologie der christlichen Ehe*, 52-54.

persons means the glorification of God and at the same time full humanization. “The eschatological reservation is therefore a fundamental source of Christian freedom in marriage; it binds both partners to God and thus prevents them from getting enslaved by each other.”⁵⁶

Going Towards the Periphery

“Going towards the periphery” is a crucial issue in Pope Francis’ teaching and actions. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), he stresses: “Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel,” (EG, no. 20). The very special attention to people who live at the periphery is based in the behaviour and teaching of Jesus. Christian spirituality therefore has to be characterized by this attention to people who are objects not only of marginalization, but also of suffering.

The Sensitivity to Suffering: A Characteristic of Christian Spirituality

“Wherever the need for the light and the life of the Risen Christ is greatest, the Church will want to be there,” (EG, no. 30). According to the Gospel, pain and suffering have to be perceived with a special sensitivity, because Jesus himself demonstrated a particular attention towards suffering people. His healing ministry was aimed towards the integral healing of people. A very essential aspect of this ministry was the religious and social reintegration of people who were marginalized due to sin, illness or other reasons. Jesus first of all saw the pain and suffering caused by these various forms of marginalization. The primary attention of Jesus was not directed to the question of precepts or to one’s following of these rules, but to the salvation of people, because the Law was made for humans, not humans for the Law (cf. Mk 2:27). Jesus’ behaviour was characterized by a primary attention and sensitivity to people’s pain, not to their sin.⁵⁷ Sin however produces pain, because it has negative consequences for relationships with one’s self, with other people and with God. Overcoming sin means restoring anew one’s relationship with God and enabling once again interpersonal community.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁷ This is a central theme of Johann Baptist Metz, one of the most important representatives of Political Theology. See e.g. *Love’s Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, ed. John K. Downey (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

A practice which endeavours to be an authentic expression of Christian spirituality would therefore pay primary attention not to the claims of precepts or to the question of sin and fault, but to the suffering of people, and help them to overcome pain and suffering. It has rightfully been observed that, in the case of people who have contracted only a civil marriage, who are divorced and remarried, or who are simply living together, reference to their “irregular” situation is not appropriate or sufficient because it does not do justice to the very different situations, to the often complex circumstances, and to the persons involved, but accentuates only one aspect, i.e. the objective moral or ecclesiastical law. Furthermore, there is the need to bear in mind “the distinction between an objective sinful situation and extenuating circumstances, given that ‘imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors,’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1735).”⁵⁸

Especially in a special manner, the situations of divorced and remarried people are often related to suffering, because for many couples the failure of their first matrimony was a painful experience which left its mark in their life. For these faithful, exclusion from the sacraments of Holy Eucharist and Confession also is and remains a matter of pain and sorrow. Any spiritual accompaniment should first of all show sensitivity towards this aspect and help these persons to find peace and reconciliation with themselves, with their former partner, and with other involved persons such as children, other family members, common friends etc., “encouraging them [also] to participate in the life of the community.”⁵⁹ Saint John Paul II stressed the solicitous care that should be directed towards these people, “to make sure that they do not consider themselves as separated from the Church, for as baptized persons they can, and indeed must, share in her life.”⁶⁰

The Divine Pedagogy of Grace

“In considering a pastoral approach towards people who have contracted a civil marriage, who are divorced and remarried, or simply living together, the Church has the responsibility of helping them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and offering them assistance so they can reach the fullness

⁵⁸ Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, no. 51.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 84.

of God's plan for them."⁶¹ Jesus gives significant examples of this divine pedagogy of grace. For example, Zacchaeus, who was shunned by others due to his role as a dishonest tax collector, was converted not through any doctrinal or moral preaching, but simply through his experience of Jesus asking to be a guest in his house. That experience signified that Jesus had accepted him as a person and honoured him and his family by recognizing his dignity as a beloved "child of Abraham" (see Lk 19:1-10).

The Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, marginalized presumably because of her lax lifestyle – after all she had been married to five men and the one with whom she currently cohabited was not her legitimate husband – and therefore forced to take water from the well alone and under the hot midday sun, came to believe in Jesus because He was able to tell her the truth about herself with love and without condemning her (see Jn 4:1-42). Also the woman caught in adultery, exposed to the danger of being stoned to death, was not condemned by Jesus, but was led to repentance and conversion (see Jn 8:1-11). In each of these encounters of Jesus with persons who in one way or another were living at the periphery, Jesus pays very special attention to them and to their personal situations. Waiving condemnation and calling instead for repentance and conversion, Jesus puts into practice the divine pedagogy and manifests the true and elevated meaning of mercy.⁶² "Conscious that the most merciful thing is to tell the truth in love, we go beyond compassion. Merciful love, as it attracts and unites, transforms and elevates. It is an invitation to conversion. We understand the Lord's attitude in the same way; he does not condemn the adulterous woman, but asks her to sin no more (Jn 8:1-11)."⁶³

Repentance and Conversion

The call for repentance and conversion is essentially part of a Christian spirituality. This includes the willingness to confront one's life with an eye on the Lord Jesus, and to discern the ways in which one must renew one's commitment to be faithful to one's life mission, that in a Christian perspective can also be understood as a personal vocation. This demands a sensitive and accurate spiritual accompaniment, in order to enable people to interpret their experiences in the light of the Gospel. This includes a knowledge of the Gospel and a confrontation with its message. "The Word of God is the source of life and spirituality for the family. All pastoral work on behalf of the family must allow people to be

⁶¹ Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, no. 24.

⁶² Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 13.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, no. 27.

interiorly fashioned and formed as members of the domestic church through the Church's prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture."⁶⁴

The Word of God continuously claims repentance and conversion. This also requires an ongoing formation of one's conscience as an accompaniment of spiritual life, and the growth of one's moral knowledge, responsibility, and consciousness by overcoming those elements which can diminish or even nullify one's responsibility for actions. A marital partnership in which both partners trust each other and in which there is a mutual commitment of a loving and sensitive correction, helps partners in a mutual human, moral, and spiritual growth and is a lifelong school of formation and sensitization of conscience. These partners would be willing to witness to the need and the deepest human sense of reconciliation, of forgiving and of asking forgiveness, and of the possibility of repentance and recompensation.

Finally, it is not self-evident that personal sin can always be identified with an objective contradiction with the law. Real penitence needs a personal insight of what is wrong, and the confession of very personal responsibility for it. This requires a very attentive listening to people, especially those at the periphery who may not deem themselves culpable of such "sins." For example, many divorced and remarried people acknowledge their fault concerning the failure of their first sacramental marriage, and they repent this deeply, but there exists no possibility of restoring their irreparably destroyed marriage. On the other hand, they do not experience the new relationship as a "permanent sin," even though they are aware of the objective contradiction of their situation to sacramental marriage and the doctrine of the Church. A spiritual accompaniment has to take care somehow of this tension in order to enable such affected persons to undergo real conversion.

Conclusion

One of the main features of a Christian spirituality is its understanding as a concrete practice. This implies that the *fides qua* must be experienceable. At the same time, human experiences are theological *loci* of knowledge of God; this also holds good for the beauty of human love and conjugal life. The basis for this can be found in the Bible and can be developed in the perspective of the Theology of Creation as well as of the History of Salvation.

Interpersonal relationship finds its highest and most original expression in the conjugal love and life. The Church understands conjugal love as sacrament, i.e. as sign and instrument of God's relationship with humanity. Marital life is a

⁶⁴ Ibid., no. 33.

sign of God's love to humankind and of Christ's covenant with the Church, but also an original form of "doing theology," i.e. of knowing God's love and grace by witnessing it. In this sense, it is an effective instrument to make God's love and grace really present and experienceable. This concerns both the relationship between the spouses as well as their capacity to conceive and raise a child.

The Second Vatican Council strongly stresses anew the biblical understanding of marriage as covenant by overcoming a primarily juridical view and emphasizing the personal dimension of conjugal love and life. This is very meaningful for the development of the spirituality of marriage, because it allows an interpretation in the light of faith of the entire marital life as an encounter with the loving God: in its spiritual aspects as well as in the sensual dimension, in its beautiful aspects as well as in the human experiences of limits, brokenness, and fault. The marriage vows and marital faithfulness serve as an echo of God's fundamental affirmation of every human being, of Christ's fidelity towards his Church. It is like the "taste" of the promised salvation: God's "yes" at the end will be stronger than every human denial.

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