

# ***Familiaris consortio* – Impasse or Inspiration for a Contemporary Theology of Marriage and the Family?**

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Since its publication in 1981, Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio* has remained a unique teaching document issued by the Roman Catholic Church. Never before in its history has the Magisterium undertaken to treat marriage and the family so extensively and comprehensively. It appears to be the longest single document emanating from the official church on this topic, surpassing by far Leo XIII's encyclical *Arcanum divinae* of 1880 and Pius XI's 1930 encyclical *Casti connubii*. Equally unparalleled is probably that the personal philosophical and theological position of a single pope has so deeply marked the subsequent official teaching of the church on this subject. While intended as a response to the *Propositiones* that the bishops at the 1980 Synod on "The Role of the Family" presented to the pope, the document clearly bears the handwriting of Karol Wojtyła who already as a scholarly theologian had been fascinated by the mystery of the human person and had regarded sexual and marital ethics as the test case for its adequate understanding.<sup>1</sup> Much has been said and written, both affirmative and critical, in praise or rejection, about the specific type of personalism at the basis of his ethical thinking, about the essentialist approach to gender relations, about the so-called "theology of the body" and its implications for sexual ethics, and other items that have left their mark on *Familiaris consortio*.

As I am not a moral theologian, my purpose in re-reading the apostolic exhortation a quarter of a century after its appearance is a different one. My interest is rather in how we have to situate this teaching document in the broader context of a theology of marriage and the family that has begun to take shape after the Second Vatican Council's fundamental reorientation and that is presently still searching for its contours in a continuously changing socio-cultural context

1. See e.g. K. Wojtyła: *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willetts, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1994; see for an introduction R. M. Hogan/J. M. LeYoir, "The Family and Sexuality", in: C. E. Curran/R. A. McCormick (eds.): *John Paul II and Moral Theology*, (Readings in Moral Theology; 10), Paulist Press, Mahwah NJ 1998 157-183.

which puts marriage and the family to the test. The main thesis which I will try to develop in the following is that Pope John Paul II has attributed to marriage and the family a position in the mystery of salvation that is unprecedented in Church teaching and leads to a number of insights contemporary theology is challenged to come to terms with.

To fully grasp the novelty of John Paul II's theology of marriage and the family, I propose first considering Pius XI's encyclical *Casti connubii* which appeared half a century before *Familiaris consortio* and which in many regards provides an excellent introduction to and summary of how generations of theologians before had dealt with marriage and the family. As is well known, it took the Church more than a millennium before it defined marriage as one of the seven sacraments. The theological issue, however, was at that moment far from being settled and put a heavy burden on subsequent theology which we still, or should I say again, have to grapple with today. The difficult question was how a human reality bound up with the most ordinary and the most perilous components of human life could be a sign of God's grace. For all other sacraments one could refer to some specific divine intervention that regulated, re-established, or raised the human condition to a higher level, but in the case of marriage it was an essential, though suspicious part of that human condition itself that was considered to be bearer of sacred significance. Catholic theology solved the problem by referring to a two-layered model. It regarded marriage as a "state" or form of life that in a second instance was "elevated" by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament. The "marital state" into which one enters by a formal act, the marital contract, was supposed to be a divinely instituted order, fixed once and for all to regulate the relationship between husband and wife. As is the case with every state of life, it had its own characteristics and properties and imposed a set of rights and duties on those who entered into it. In some way, however, this marital state, although instituted by God in creation, was perceived as still being deficient and in need of purification. To redeem its inferiority and to raise it to a higher purpose was thus seen as the result of Christ's work of redemption. A promising path in this regard had been given already by Augustine who for the first time in the Latin tradition had called marriage a *sacramentum* in the sense of an indelible sign or a seal of irreversible commitment. Just as the soldier who irrevocably pledges himself to the military service of the Emperor, the spouses who have already received the baptismal seal (the *sacramentum* of baptism), through their marriage enter into a particular state of life which requires a new commitment before God. This pledge imposes on them an irrevocable seal which in turn binds them together in an indissoluble way.

### ***Marriage in the View of Casti connubii***

It is this two-layered model of Christian marriage which serves Pius XI as a structuring principle for his theological exposition of marriage in *Casti connubii*.<sup>2</sup> Calling upon the Scriptures and what he calls the constant tradition of the Church, the pope first repeats the firm and unchangeable doctrine according to which matrimony is a divine institution rather than a social or cultural invention by humanity. This implies that not only its very existence but also its main characteristic features emanate from God and therefore cannot be subject to human disposition or to any contrary arrangement of the spouses themselves. The human will enters into that divine institution only insofar as the spouses have to manifest free consent, which includes the free choice of the conjugal partner. Human freedom “regards only the question whether the contracting parties really wish to enter into matrimony or to marry this particular person; but the nature of matrimony is entirely independent of the free will of humans, so that if one has once contracted matrimony they are thereby subject to its divinely made laws and its essential properties” (6). In other words, marriage is an objective and pre-ordained institution into which the spouses enter in an irrevocable way:

From God comes the very institution of marriage, the ends for which it was instituted, the laws that govern it, the blessings that flow from it; while man, through generous surrender of his own person made to another for the whole span of life, becomes, with the help and cooperation of God, the author of each particular marriage, with the duties and blessings annexed thereto from divine institution (9).

The pope then goes on to explain the blessings that God has attached to the matrimonial institution and the spousal duties that follow from it. In accordance with the mainstream theological tradition, he does so by referring to Augustine’s doctrine of the three goods of marriage: offspring, conjugal faith, and sacrament.<sup>3</sup> He quotes from Augustine’s *Commentary on Genesis*:

2. The encyclical consists of three main parts; after the theological ground is laid in the first part, the pope analyses the factors that contribute to the degradation of marriage, and undertakes in the third and final part to show suitable remedies for a due restoration of marriage. References to the encyclical (abbreviated in the following as CC) are made to the consecutive numbering of the text.
3. See Augustine: *De bono coniugali*, cap. 24, n. 32.

By conjugal faith it is provided that there should be no carnal intercourse outside the marriage bond with another man or woman; with regard to offspring, that children should be begotten of love, tenderly cared for and educated in a religious atmosphere; finally, in its sacramental aspect that the marriage bond should not be broken and that a husband or wife, if separated, should not be joined to another even for the sake of offspring.<sup>4</sup>

What Augustine presents here as duties to be fulfilled by the spouses, Pius unpacks as a multifaceted reward for them, their offspring, and broader society. Thus, the marital bond provides a threefold guarantee – and “a calm sense of security”, as the pope says: that the union will endure and benefit the partners in terms of mutual aid and their Christian calling, that neither of the spouses may be preoccupied with the other’s infidelity in old age or in case of adversity, and that the children once begotten may grow up in a setting that best ensures their survival and development.<sup>5</sup> In fact, can there be a better proof of how harmoniously and conveniently God has cared for humanity when instituting the marital state of life?

Again in full harmony with the tradition, all these “blessings” are intrinsically connected with the natural institution and state of life as marriage is described here. Even the “sacramental” good is not to be understood in a specifically religious or spiritual sense but simply refers to the indissolubility of the marital bond. In Augustine’s view the *sacramentum* still had a clearly religious and spiritual connotation as it denoted the *couple’s enduring and irrevocable commitment towards God*, not primarily toward each other. Medieval theologians and canonists, however, adhering to an increasingly legalistic approach, interpreted it as the *vinculum* which binds the *partners* indissolubly together once they had exchanged spousal consent and thereby contracted marriage. Consequently, marital sacramentality in the strict theological sense had to be located elsewhere. The theological focus shifted from the marital union as a lifelong spiritual commitment and concentrated instead on the single moment in which that union was ratified canonically and liturgically – in other words, the marital contract itself became the sacrament creating an indissoluble bond, one that was hardly connected to its sacramental origin. It was only due to the intense discussion among scholastic theologians about the types of grace effected by the sacraments – a discussion that was not focussed on marriage

4. Augustine: *De genesi ad litteram*, lib. 9, cap. 7, n. 12.

5. Cf. CC 37.

in particular – that the theology of the marital sacrament did not end at the wedding ceremony, but ultimately had to offer a little bit more. Precisely this bit of reflection on the specific grace conferred by the sacrament of marriage serves later theology in its argument that the marital institution, so perfectly ordered by God from the beginning of creation, needed to be elevated to a higher dignity. Let us listen again to Pius XI in *Casti connubii*:

But considering the benefits of the Sacrament, besides the firmness and indissolubility, there are also much higher emoluments [advantages, TK] as the word “sacrament” itself very aptly indicates; for to Christians this is not a meaningless and empty name. Christ the Lord, the Institutor and “Perfecter” of the holy sacraments,[...] by raising the matrimony of His faithful to the dignity of a true sacrament of the New Law, made it a sign and source of that peculiar internal grace by which “it perfects natural love, it confirms an indissoluble union, and sanctifies both man and wife.”[...] (CC 38).<sup>6</sup>

The marital sacrament thus “perfects natural love, it confirms the indissoluble union, and sanctifies the spouses”. Quoting the famous formulation from the Council of Trent, Pius describes the effects that sacramental marriage has in addition to its blessings already contained in the order of creation, and gives the reason why Christ has raised the natural reality of marriage to its sacramental dignity. Sacramental marriage

adds particular gifts, dispositions, seeds of grace, by elevating and perfecting the natural powers. By these gifts the parties are assisted not only in understanding, but in knowing intimately, in adhering to firmly, in willing effectively, and in successfully putting into practice, those things which pertain to the marriage state, its aims and duties, giving them *in fine* right to the actual assistance of grace, whensoever they need it for fulfilling the duties of their state (40).

To sum up we could characterize the picture that Pope Pius XI, in agreement with a long-standing theological tradition, draws of marriage in the following

6. The last quote repeats the words of the Council of Trent, cf. *Conc. Trid. Sess. XXIV* (cf. DH 1799).

way: Through marriage a man and a woman enter into a given order and divine institution for life. As Christians they receive specific sacramental graces which help them to conform to the rules governing this state of life. We must add, however, that at one point *Casti connubii* opens, albeit only by a crack, this heavily institutional conception of marriage and the tradition that developed and promoted it. Commenting on the Augustinian good and duty of conjugal fidelity, the pope observes that there is something in the life of the couple itself that makes it much easier to conform to the requirement of chaste faithfulness – love between husband and wife and their mutual sharing of life.<sup>7</sup> It is well-known that Pius here took up the ideas of some contemporaries, mainly German personalist thinkers like Dietrich von Hildebrand and Heribert Doms who had written on marriage in particular. And it is equally commonplace to point out that *Casti connubii* for the first time questioned the traditional teaching on the primary and secondary ends of marriage and called the conjugal community of life and love “the chief reason and purpose of marriage”<sup>8</sup> – a project that Vatican II will pursue with more directness. Whatever the historical background and the repercussions on later teaching may have been, what is of interest for our purpose is that this minimal doctrinal opening does not substantially alter a view of marriage that subordinates the entire conjugal community to an objective institutional framework. This vision is corrected in *Familiaris consortio* to which we will turn now in greater detail.

### **“Vocation to Love” as Starting Point in Familiaris consortio**

The complaint about the degradation of marriage and family life, which is said to be exceptionally alarming at the present time, seems to be a constant and indestructible *topos* of Church teaching in every age. *Casti connubii* in its second part is entirely dedicated to summing up the widespread fallacies that menace “due order in marriage matters”. Half a century earlier, Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical

7. Cf. CC 23: “This conjugal faith, however, which is most aptly called by St. Augustine the “faith of chastity” blooms more freely, more beautifully and more nobly, when it is rooted in that more excellent soil, the love of husband and wife which pervades all the duties of married life and holds pride of place in Christian marriage.”
8. The relevant passage in CC runs as follows: “This mutual molding of husband and wife, this determined effort to perfect each other, can in a very real sense, as the Roman Catechism teaches, be said to be the chief reason and purpose of matrimony, provided matrimony be looked at not in the restricted sense as instituted for the proper conception and education of the child, but more widely as the blending of life as a whole and the mutual interchange and sharing thereof” (24).

*Arcanum divinae* had cautioned against those “who deny that marriage is holy, and who relegate it, striped [*sic!*] of all holiness, among the class of common secular things, uproot thereby the foundations of nature, not only resisting the designs of Providence, but...destroying the order that God has ordained”<sup>9</sup> At the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Familiaris consortio*<sup>10</sup> also warns that now “the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it” (FC 3). But rather than complaining about the corruption of a divinely ordered institution, John Paul II, differing from his predecessors, perceives trends that “obscure in varying degrees the truth and the dignity of the human person” (FC 4). The *human person* and her “vocation to love” is indeed the starting point of and key to John Paul’s understanding of marriage and family. The pope thereby does not abstain from referring to God’s plan for marriage and the family.<sup>11</sup> A Leuven colleague has recently observed that *Familiaris consortio* “uses the phrase ‘divine plan’ or ‘God’s design’ no less than 30 times, and on other occasions refers to the ‘will of God’ as if this is something as obvious as an architect’s plan”.<sup>12</sup> However problematic the idea of “God’s design” may indeed be from an ethical perspective, for our purposes it is important to note that such a “divine architectural plan” in any case does not provide for a pre-ordained institutional framework of marriage and the family to which the spouses and family members merely have to conform. *Familiaris consortio* shifts the perspective of former theology by placing the “divine order” no longer in the visible world of nature and of human institutions but rather in the human person herself. Having created humankind in his own image and likeness, God called the human being to existence “through love” and called it at the same time “for love”. He thereby “inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion (...). Love is therefore the

9. Cf. Leo XIII: Encyclical *Arcanum divinae*, 1880, 25.

10. References to *Familiaris consortio* (abbreviated here as “FC”) are made to the consecutive numbering of the text.

11. The entire second part of FC (11-16) is entitled: “The Plan of God for Marriage and the Family”.

12. J. A. Selling: “Twenty Five Years After *Familiaris consortio*”, in: *INTAMS review* 12/2 (2006), 157-166.

fundamental and innate vocation of every human being” (FC 11). This is the basis of a theological anthropology in which all ways of life, be it the conjugal, celibate, or single state, have their common root. Admittedly, such a vocation to love is not void of all rules but includes a clearly discernable responsibility which, in view of the conjugal union, Pope John Paul has elaborated in an almost idiosyncratic way in *Familiaris consortio* and other writings.<sup>13</sup> Yet, compared to earlier theology the basic insight is that interpersonal love is not the incidental, though ideally hoped for, effect of a divinely ordained matrimonial institution, but its primary cause and foundation. *Familiaris consortio* unconditionally endorses the celebrated re-definition of marriage as “intimate community of life and love” contained in Vatican II’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*.<sup>14</sup> In accordance with the conciliar language it regards that interpersonal communion as “willed and established by the Creator” and only subsequently “qualified by His laws”.<sup>15</sup> It is this logical precedence that one has to bear in mind when one reads in *Familiaris consortio*:

The institution of marriage is not an undue interference by society or authority, nor the extrinsic imposition of a form. Rather it is an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love which is publicly affirmed as unique and exclusive, in order to live in complete fidelity to the plan of God, the Creator(11).

In that same perspective according to which the loving union precedes and passes into the visible forms of its organizational realization, the pope also situates what he calls the family’s “identity” and its “mission” within the plan of God and coins the often quoted adage: “family, *become* what you *are*” (17). I quote from that same passage: “The role that God calls the family to perform in history derives from what the family is; its role represents the dynamic and existential development of what it is” (ibid.). And a bit further one reads:

And since in God’s plan it has been established as an ‘intimate community of live and love’ (GS 48) the family has the mission to

13. Cf. in particular his cycle of catecheses on the body and love, given from 1979-1984 (John Paul II: *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, Daughters of St. Paul, Boston 1997).
14. Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 48.
15. The Latin version of GS 48 uses the terms “condita” and “instructa” (“Intima communitas vitae et amoris coniugalís, a Creatore condita suisque legibus instructa”) and thus makes clear that the legal qualifications of the conjugal communion logically follow its establishment.

become more and more what it is, that is to say, a community of life and love, in an effort that will find fulfilment, as will everything created and redeemed, in the kingdom of God (FC 17).

The family's mission, what it can and should do, thus follows its identity; its identity in turn unfolds and develops in a number of particular tasks which *Familiaris consortio* then describes in four extensive and extremely rich chapters as "forming a community of persons", "serving life", "participating in the development of society", and "sharing in the life and mission of the Church".

Where the previous theology had located these tasks in the "order of nature" and designed a consistent institutional framework bearing witness to the expediency of God's providence, the new theological approach carefully traces them back to the human person's vocation to love. God's plan for marriage and the family is therefore revealed primarily in the human person herself. Rather than being reflected in a timelessly fixed order, it "touches men and women in the concreteness of their daily existence in specific social and cultural situations" (FC 4). It may even seem as if the pope is dismissing the Church's traditional deductive argumentation when he writes, alluding to *Gaudium et spes*, that

the Church can...be guided to a more profound understanding of the inexhaustible mystery of marriage and the family by the circumstances, the questions and the anxieties and hopes of the young people, married couples and parents of today (FC 4).

We may assume that the "inexhaustible mystery of marriage and the family" lies in the mystery of interpersonal love to which God has called humanity and which is to be lived in daily life despite its sometimes unpredictable, yet inescapable limitations and shortcomings. God's plan for marriage and the family has a human face; more precisely, it has the face of all those marriages and families that are struggling to realize mutually loving relationships. I am inclined to take John Paul at his word and to follow him in this "inductive" approach to the point at which it may become obvious that in all these human faces it is Christ's face that emerges. The pope does not go that far, at least not explicitly, and there may be a good reason for this: the way of induction in theology finds its due limits where it encounters the freely acting God. It is therefore plausible and acceptable that, when introducing the order of redemption and Christ's role in God's design for marriage, *Familiaris consortio* refers to revelation:

This revelation reaches its definitive fullness in the gift of love which the Word of God makes to humanity in assuming a human nature, and in the sacrifice which Jesus Christ makes of himself on the cross for his bride, the Church. In this sacrifice there is entirely revealed that plan which God has imprinted on the humanity of man and woman since their creation (FC 13).

Those familiar with the pope's thinking will know that he goes on from here to posit Christ's love of total self-giving as the model of and norm for conjugal love. Not only should couples continually strive to conform to Christ's unselfish way of loving but according to his view the pattern of total self-surrender of one person to another has so deeply been imprinted on the human person and more particularly on his or her body that every violation or infringement of it corrupts the dignity of the persons involved. It is well-known how this idea of the so-called "nuptial meaning of the body" has shaped the ethical stance of John Paul with regard to issues like pre-marital intercourse, contraception, and homosexuality. The main criticism addressed to his conception of marriage has been that it abstracts a metaphysical and ultimately a-historical picture of human relationships outside of concrete social, economic, and cultural conditions and that it provides too idealistic an image of the conjugal union.<sup>16</sup> Whoever knows the reality of present-day partner relationships may indeed wonder whether the ideal of total self-giving resonates with what couples experience or aspire to in their unions – even in what today may be regarded as happy marriages. But instead of dismissing the entire approach prematurely, I recommend taking stock of and retaining what is innovative and original about the pope's view before we possibly come to disagree with the turning it takes at this point.

### *God's Plan for Marriage Revealed in Christ*

What Pope John Paul II unmistakably posits in *Familiaris consortio* is that God's plan for marriage and the family is revealed in Christ's humanity. Therefore the marriage of baptized persons

16. Cf. J. Grootaers/J. Selling, *The 1980 Synod of Bishops "On the Role of the Family": An Exposition of the Event and an Analysis of its Text*, University Press-Peeters, Leuven 1983, 303-331; H.-G. Gruber: *Christliche Ehe in moderner Gesellschaft: Entwicklungen – Chancen – Perspektiven*, Herder, Freiburg: 1995, 177-212.

becomes a real symbol of that new and eternal covenant sanctioned in the blood of Christ. The Spirit which the Lord pours forth gives a new heart, and renders man and woman capable of loving one another as Christ has loved us (FC 13).

New Testament scholars have pointed out that Jesus' uncompromising prohibition of divorce (Mk 10,2-9; par Mt 19,3-9) cannot properly be understood if one reads it as a legal prescription to counter the casuistic argumentation of the Pharisees who refer to the possibility of divorce provided in Mosaic law. By retrieving God's will for the marital union "at the beginning", Jesus rather points out that with the coming of God's Kingdom in his person, husband and wife have again been newly enabled to live together and love each other in an irrevocable union.<sup>17</sup> Such empowerment that "renders man and woman capable of loving one another as Christ has loved us" is also the key principle on which the theology of marriage is grounded in *Familiaris consortio*. And as is the case in Jesus' stance, *Familiaris consortio* pays equal attention to the double movement described in it: on the one hand of sustaining and supporting that which is already present in human loving but needs assistance and encouragement ("render man and woman capable of loving one another..."), and, on the other, of suggesting the pattern from which to receive orientation and direction that is at the same time a demand on such loving ("...as Christ has loved us"). In both trajectories John Paul's exhortation differs from previous theology. Let us consider first how he describes marriage as a natural phenomenon.

*Familiaris consortio* derives from conjugal love itself what the tradition used to refer to as properties, goods, and ends of marriage and what later theology up to *Casti connubii* projected onto and enshrined in an unalterable matrimonial institution. Conjugal love contains in itself, as we have seen, the germs for its further unfolding. This permits us on the one hand to conceive of marriage as a relationship with its own inner dynamic that has to be lived out by individual couples in varying and changing cultural and social contexts. There is no reference here to a timeless essence of marriage that floats as a normative concept above concrete, lived styles of conjugal relationships. On the other hand, however, that same conjugal love is not totally unstructured or volatile either. What John Paul sums up as the "normal

17. Cf. W. Kirchschräger: *Ehe und Ehescheidung im Neuen Testament*, Herold, Wien 1987, 74ff. *et passim*.

characteristics of all natural conjugal love” (FC 13) are not externally imposed ends which conjugal love has to comply with, but its own intrinsic values. The pope’s listing includes the traditional marital goods of indissolubility, fidelity, and procreation,<sup>18</sup> but also mentions previously unheard of benefits of marital love which are said to involve

a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter – appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, the unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul (FC 13).<sup>19</sup>

Up to this point, God’s architectural plan for marriage seems to consist in having planted into the human being the desire and capacity, in short, the vocation, to form a deeply personal unity. Exclusiveness, faithfulness, indissolubility, and the openness to fertility are the ingredients of that union and inherent characteristics of conjugal love, rather than its authoritatively imposed form. Seen from the event of Christ, in which God’s plan is fully revealed, that conjugal communion is – to use the terms of *Familiaris consortio* – “taken up”, “confirmed”, “purified”, “elevated”, and “lead to perfection” through and in the sacrament of matrimony (FC 19). Consequently, the marital sacrament does not confer specific graces that help the couple to conform to the requirements of a natural institution and to live up to the norms and expectations of an abstractly defined marital state. Rather, sacramental grace aims at and takes up the spouses’ inner capacity for interpersonal loving and renders them capable of establishing and perfecting an “intimate community of life and love”. But what then about the second aspect, about Christ’s way of loving as orientation and “commandment” for conjugal love on which John Paul lays so much emphasis?<sup>20</sup>

“Elevating and perfecting the natural powers” were also the two main functions by which *Casti connubii* had characterized the marital sacrament. Marriage had been “elevated by Christ to sacramental dignity”, but the meaning of this formula

18. In later chapters the pope deals at greater length with unity (FC 19), indissolubility (FC 20), and procreation (cf. FC 28-41).

19 The pope quotes here from an address to Delegates of the *Centre de Liaison des Equipes de Recherche* which he gave in 1979.

20 John Paul II speaks of the sacrament of marriage as “at the same time a vocation and commandment for the Christian spouses” (FC 20).

remained for the most part unclear. For the effect of the sacrament consisted merely in assisting the baptized couple to better fulfil the duties dictated to them by a natural institution that was so efficiently ordered that such assistance appeared to be in fact dispensable. Earlier theology did not really find a way to overcome the extrinsicism that regarded marriage as an institution fulfilled in itself, to which the grace of the sacrament was added only in a second instance and as a pure *superadditum*.<sup>21</sup>

*Familiaris consortio* opens up a totally different perspective when it asserts that “the marriage of baptized persons... becomes a real symbol of that new and eternal covenant sanctioned in the blood of Christ” (FC 13). While previous theology had placed the matrimonial institution in the order of creation and assumed that Christ’s work of restoration must have had some effect on it, too, John Paul sees the primary place of the conjugal communion in the order of salvation itself. Conjugal love is “a living reflection of and a real sharing in God’s love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church his bride” (FC 17). This is true for sacramental marriage in a particular way, but it has its significance for all marriages. In being called to become “intimate communities of life and love” all marriages are intrinsically related to the mystery of Christ and his salvific action in which they find their master plan. The indisputable merit of this approach lies in that it gives conjugal love a central place in the mystery of salvation – a place which in turn grants such a loving community a particular sacramental dignity representing “the mystery of Christ’s incarnation and the mystery of his covenant” (FC 13).

We have reached here the keynote for the whole theology of marriage of *Familiaris consortio*. But at the same time it lays bare also the most contentious item in this theology. What is disputed is not so much the fact that it places marriage in the centre of the mystery of salvation and depicts conjugal love as a representation of Christ’s covenant with humanity. What is controversial is the straightforward manner in which Christ’s particular love of total self-giving on the Cross is superimposed here onto human love. There is undoubtedly more than a metaphorical relation between divine and spousal covenantal love which makes marriage a real symbol of Christ’s love in the double meaning of the term: as sign of and participation in the mystery of salvation. But is it theologically legitimate and pastorally wise to place God’s unfailingly faithful love and Christ’s total surrender as absolute norms

21 Cf. A. Scola: *The Nuptial Mystery*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI-Cambridge, UK, 2005, 203ff.

for the conjugal relationship? Not only does such an approach risk disregarding the basic rule of analogical speaking according to which similarity between God and humanity always implies greater dissimilarity. It also reverses the direction in which the biblical metaphors of covenantal love were originally to be read: as images taken from the experience of human love they ought to foreshadow the mystery of God's irrevocable covenant with humanity.<sup>22</sup> Whoever turns the image around, should be well aware that unending love can only be suggested as an ideal model which contingent human love has to strive after in a continual, gradual effort. As we have pointed out already, the pope is not totally insensitive to this method as he assumes himself that the human person has to undergo a growth process, "which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of his definitive and absolute love..." (FC 9). At crucial moments in the line of argumentation, however, there is a return to a deductive approach which starts with divine love and demands that human reality live up to its characteristics.<sup>23</sup> I quote two specific examples, the first one related to Christ's self-surrender: "Conjugal love reaches that fullness to which it is interiorly ordained, conjugal charity, which is the proper and specific way in which the spouses participate in and are called to live the very charity of Christ who gave himself on the cross" (FC 13). The second quote is related to the "ultimate truth of the indissolubility of marriage" allegedly contained in the plan of God who "wills and [...] communicates the indissolubility of marriage as a fruit, a sign and a requirement of the absolutely faithful love that God has for man and that the Lord Jesus has for the Church" (FC 20).

Do we really have to draw the contours of God's plan for marriage in such sharp and definitive lines, lines ultimately copied from God's own way of loving? The problem here is not only from an ethical and pastoral point of view that married couples will be confronted with an idealized image of marriage and given unrealistic expectations. What seems to me even more problematic if we were to follow this line of thinking is that it ultimately falls back into proposing an objective order of marriage and the family which it originally started out to overcome – the order of a natural matrimonial institution is now projected into God's plan of salvation itself. One may, however, legitimately ask whether it is a good idea "to make marriage itself function as the vehicle for the mystery of salvation in such a unique and absolute

22. Cf. J.-M. Aubert: "Pratique canonique et sens de l'humain", in: *RDC* (1978), 98-101.

23. Cf. M. D. Place: "Familiaris consortio: A Review of its Theology", in C. E. Curran/R. A. McCormick (eds.): *John Paul II and Moral Theology*, 184-210.

way”.<sup>24</sup> It would mean in turn that “marriage and the spouses’ relationship have to carry the burden of representing the entire mystery”.<sup>25</sup> It seems to me that instead of making marriage *the* image of the economy of salvation (the so-called “nuptial mystery”)<sup>26</sup>, it would be more useful these days to offer to couples *images* that may help them to live and love in their relationships “as Christ has loved us”.

### ***Conclusion***

It may seem as if our re-reading of *Familiaris consortio* has yielded an ambivalent picture at the end. My intention, however, is not to end on a critical note. I have pursued the exhortation’s line of argumentation up to a point where it takes a direction which may jeopardize the significant and innovative perspectives it has to be credited for. By way of conclusion, I will point out and sum up what I regard as two major perspectives in particular and briefly sketch how they could inspire a contemporary theology of marriage and the family.

First, the unquestionable starting point of the theology of marriage and the family in *Familiaris consortio* is the human person’s vocation to love. Pope John Paul has thus confirmed and given further shape to Vatican II’s innovative definition of marriage as “intimate community of life and love”. By doing so, he has revised the traditional view which looked at marriage primarily in terms of a social institution and only in a second instance at its interpersonal value. In contrast, *Familiaris consortio* gives due recognition to a relationship that has its own inner dynamic and has to be lived out in varying social contexts. Because of its importance, society “institutionalizes” marriage. The important message included here is that just as the human person has priority over social institutions, conjugal love takes priority over the marital institution. With regard to our current public debates about the significance and decline of marriage and the family, *Familiaris consortio* reminds us that we should be prudent not to instrumentalize marriage too quickly for societal purposes. It is true that the demographic development in our Western societies is alarming, just as is the situation of an increasing number of children that grow up without a stable network of primary relationships or the erosion of solidarity between the generations. However, without its inner principle of love marriage loses

24. J. Grootaers/J. Selling: *The 1980 Synod of Bishops*, 309.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Cf. for instance A. Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*.

its foundation and soul; likewise, “without love the family cannot live, grow and perfect itself as a community of persons” (FC 18). To have reminded us of these priorities is one of the major contributions of *Familiaris consortio* to a contemporary Christian understanding of marriage and family life.

Secondly, marriage and the family are rooted in God’s plan for humanity, more fundamentally in his salvific work which starts out at creation, finds its achievement in Christ’s incarnation and resurrection and extends into an eschatological future.<sup>27</sup> The insight that marital and familial relationships represent and participate in Christ’s work of salvation marks a significant shift in the narrower field of marriage theology but has implications for the whole of theology and also for the way the Church is to understand and to realize her salvific mission. *Familiaris consortio* has indubitably advanced – even sometimes over stated, as we have seen – this line of thinking. It contains an extensive and rich chapter on the family’s sharing in the life, mission, and ministry of the Church<sup>28</sup> which is not only totally unprecedented in previous magisterial teaching but also far from being explored by contemporary theology in its ecclesiological implications.

*Familiaris consortio* has set the agenda for a contemporary and future theology of marriage and the family, and it is up to us to go on from here.

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27. FC 16 reminds us of the role of virginity or celibacy which is to await “the eschatological marriage of Christ with the Church”.

28. Cf. FC 49-64. One of the key passages in this chapter runs as follows: “...the Christian family is grafted into the mystery of the Church to such a degree as to become a sharer, in its own way, in the saving mission proper to the Church...For this reason they (= Christian married couples and parents, TK) not only receive the love Christ and become a saved community, but they are also called upon to communicate Christ’s love to their brethren, thus becoming a saving community” (49).