

MARRIAGE AS SACRAMENT: A THEOLOGY IN TRANSITION

Brennan R. Hill

The theology of marriage as sacrament seems to be in a crucial period of transition. Catholic theology has gradually moved from the highly legalistic position of the medieval and Tridentine period to the more personalistic perspective of Vatican II. Still, the current thinking seems to be often a blending of traditional and contemporary insights, resulting in a theological perspective that has severe limitations. Those engaged in teaching often find it difficult to deal with the theology of marriage in a manner that is compatible with contemporary experience. Those involved in canonical and pastoral work also find that the current theological thinking does not allow them to deal adequately with modern marital dilemmas. As a result, discussion of marriage as a sacrament is often left a moot question. What Rahner pointed out some years ago is still true: with all the discussion about marriage in our time, little attention is paid to the crucial sacramental dimension.¹ In light of all this, I would agree with Orsy that the time has come to look for new insights, new categories and broader horizons in our considerations of marriage as a sacrament.²

In this article I would like to focus on some of the key factors that are coming into play in this reformulation of a sacramental theology of marriage. These factors are as follows: 1) the dynamic nature of marriage; 2) the integration of the secular and sacred dimensions of marriage; 3) the centrality of love, especially romantic love in today's marriages; 4) the relational and inclusive view of faith; 5) the growing linkage between ministry and marriage; and 6) the effect of liberation themes of sexism, oppression and social justice on marriage.

BRENNAN R. HILL, Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Education at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, U.S.A., was educated at St. Bonaventure University, the Catholic University of America, Cambridge, and Marquette University. He also holds a doctorate in Religious Studies from the latter university, and has published several books and articles on theology and religious education, including audio and television tapes for NCR and Argus. Recent publications: *Key Dimensions of Religious Education* (St. Mary's Press 1988); *Faith, Religion and Theology* (with Wm. Madges and Paul Knitter, Twenty-Third Publications 1990)

- 1 Karl RAHNER, *Theological Investigations*, Vol.X (Herder and Herder; New York 1973) 199.
- 2 Ladislav ORSY, "Faith, Sacrament, Contract, and Christian Marriage: Disputed Questions," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982) 398.

Moving from a static to a dynamic perspective

Central to the Christian view of marriage is the belief that marriage is a sacred symbol of Christ's presence and power. Traditional theology, however, has tended to describe this symbol more as a static reality. Marriage in fact has often been looked at as a "state", a reality created by God and then instituted or raised to the level of sacramentality by Jesus. This traditional view seems to have been built largely on the thinking of Augustine, who first described marriage as a "sacramentum", or an indelible sign or sealing of an irreversible commitment. This commitment, in Augustine's view, is not primarily of the spouses to each other, but rather it is a joint commitment of the couple to God.³ The two Christians making such an irreversible commitment have already been "sealed" indelibly in Baptism, and now by virtue of the baptismal "sacramentum" enter into another sealed commitment to be married indissolubly. From this thinking the traditional point of view has taken the position that marriage is a pre-ordained 'state' that is irrevocably "entered into" by the vows of marriage, and that the agreement is finally "sealed" through sexual intercourse.

The traditional sacramental theology of marriage seems to have been largely formulated during the medieval period, at which time marriage was for the first time declared to be one to the Church's seven sacraments. At this time Augustine's view of "sacramentum" was reclaimed, largely because it was compatible with the rather legal mentality toward marriage then current. The "sign" now became interpreted as a contract, which once made and consummated became an irrevocable commitment to God. Out of this contractual agreement arose the obligations toward the three "goods" of marriage as enumerated by Augustine: offspring, fidelity, and permanence. In addition, the contractual agreement included duties towards what were considered to be the "ends" of marriage: the procreation and nurture of children; mutual help; and the remedy for concupiscence. The "sacramentum" or seal of this contract then became also the cause of the graces needed to carry out these obligations. This medieval view gained verification and emphasis at the Council of Trent, which was attempting to defend the sacramentality of marriage against the denial of the Protestant Reformers. This perspective was strongly promulgated by Pius XI and prevailed until the time of Vatican II.⁴

3 Theodore MACKIN, *What is Marriage?* (Paulist Press; New York 1982) 20.

4 For an overview of this historical background, see Denise LARDER CARMODY, "Marriage in Roman Catholicism", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22 (1985) 28-40.

Granting that there is much of value in this classical approach to marriage, sufficient attention is not given here to the dynamic nature of marriage. The terms "seal", "bond", "indelible sign" and "sacred contract" are rather static terms, and when they are used the emphasis is usually placed on the ceremony wherein the sacrament "is conferred". Thus the classical view tends to "thingify" both the sacrament of marriage as well as the grace which is described as being "given" by the sacred sign.

Marriage as a dynamic reality

Marriage is one of the oldest social institutions, existing in one form or other in all cultures. As a human institution, it has existed in several forms; polygamist (including polygyny and polyandry), as well as the more common monogamist model. It has undergone significant changes throughout the centuries. In the past this institution has largely been patriarchal and male-dominated, while today there seems to be a shift more toward egalitarian forms, with radical changes taking place in the roles exercised by each spouse. Mate selection was at one time largely in the hands of families, while today in many cultures it is more common for individuals to select their own spouses. Motives for marriage have ranged from concerns for property rights, inheritance, and procreation of heirs, workers, or even soldiers to today's more widespread motive of romantic love. The extended family of the past now is gradually being replaced in the West by the nuclear family. And the traditional permanency of marriage is now often giving way to what some call the "serial monogamy" that has come about from the increasing divorce rate.⁵

Not only is the institution of marriage itself changing and dynamic, but each individual marriage is itself an individual process. Each couple gradually builds its own unique marriage, bringing together the individual characteristics of both spouses, varying family systems, and the visions of the spouses into a new union. Moreover, each marriage passes through a number of stages of development.⁶ The marriage lived by newlyweds will certainly differ once the couple has children, once children have grown and left home, and later when the couple become grandparents and enter the elderly years together. Marriage, then, both as an objective institution and as an individualized reality is a dynamic process which develops and changes, which can go through periods of growth or deterioration. Healthy marriages are "built" over a long period of time and

5 See Jeffrey S. TURNER and Donald HEIMS, *Marriage and Family: Traditions and Transitions* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; New York 1988) Chaps. 1 and 2.

6 See Jack DOMINIAN, *Marriage and Faith: A Basic Guide to Christian Marriage* (Crossroad; New York 1982) 107-151.

through a great deal of effort and self-sacrifice: they do not come about automatically by a mere contractual agreement.

A dynamic view of sacrament

Contemporary sacramental theology has moved away from the mechanistic and automatic tendencies of the past to a more personal, relational and communal notion of sacrament. Since Schillebeeckx' seminal study, we have become accustomed to speak of sacraments as "encounters", as living experiences of the presence and power of Jesus, rather than as symbolic rituals that "give grace". Moreover, theology has moved from a literal view of "institution by Christ", to a more nuanced interpretation whereby the Church in the name of Jesus gradually develops its sacred symbols, with each having its own complicated and varied history.⁷

Applying these notions to marriage, this sacrament is viewed as a unique union involving two lovers who wish to join their lives, and encounter each other "in the Lord". The language, therefore, shifts from contract to covenant, to a living relationship in grace and faith, a relationship which must be freely chosen and actively nourished if it is to remain alive and life-giving. Relationships neither come about nor are they sustained automatically. Rather, they must be gradually built through mutual effort, dedicated love, unselfish sacrifice, and an ongoing commitment to fidelity in its broadest meaning. As a sacrament, marriage is a dynamic and living sign of the presence of the couple to each other and to the Lord.

This understanding of marriage as a dynamic covenant implies a departure from the traditional view of how this sacrament was created by God and instituted by Christ. In this newer view, marriage is not crafted by God as an unchangeable institution, nor is it made into a sacrament explicitly by Jesus. Rather, one sees God revealing self through the human institution of marriage from the beginning as well as now. Marriage thus becomes a living image of the loving relationship which God has for all people; and each individual marriage acts uniquely as a revelation of this covenant. As Kasper puts it: "Marriage, then is the grammar that God uses to express his love and faithfulness".⁸ The Christian disciple sees this covenant realized in Jesus Christ in a unique and unrepeatable manner. Christ becomes the epitome of the loving and sacrificing

7 See Jared WICKS, "Marriage: An Historical and Theological Overview", in Michael J. TAYLOR (ed.), *The Sacraments: Readings in Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (Alba House; New York 1981) 189ff.

8 Walter KASPER, *Theology of Christian Marriage* (Crossroad; New York 1981) 27.

spouse and expresses his saving power within marital unions. It is in this sense that Christ institutes marriage. As Kasper writes: "The sacramental nature of marriage cannot be proved by using individual words of institution. It is more important to show that marriage is a sacrament because it is fundamentally related to the saving work of Jesus Christ".⁹ Thus Paul maintained that those who are married "in the Lord" experience and mirror the love which Jesus has for his Church. (1 Cor 7,39; Eph 5, 21-33) The work of Jesus is dynamic as well as manifold, varies from one marriage to another, reveals itself differently in all stages of marriage, and is expressed differently in various cultures. In this sense, marriage is a living and changing symbol wherein God is powerfully bestowed on the couple and through them on the world which they touch.¹⁰

This dynamic view of marriage as sacrament shifts its focus from the ceremony and the vows to the daily living out of the commitment. The ceremony is but a beginning of a long process wherein the couple sacramentalize their lives together. As Lawler puts it: "...it is a married life, much more than a marriage ceremony, that is both the prophetic symbol which proclaims and makes real and celebrates in representation the community between Christ and his Church and the life situation in which married men and women encounter Christ and God and grace".¹¹ Rather than being a static reality, then, marriage is a dynamic process wherein "God promises to stand by the couple, to be their strength in their weakness, so that they can initiate a union, grow into it through successes and failures, consummate it in grace, and bring it to maturity in love".¹² The sacramental dimension is more than a seal on the union, it is an integral factor in the development of the union.¹³ It is the very life-blood of the union, the living source of God's power and love in the everyday life of the couple.

This dynamic view of marriage as a sacramental is compatible with our contemporary awareness of the evolutionary and relative nature of things. It better fits in the context of today's insights regarding the stages of developmental growth. Moreover it reflects the contemporary experience of marriage as an ongoing process in constant need of nurturing. In addition it helps us in part understand the contemporary phenomenon wherein so many marriages either

9 *Ibid.*, p.28.

10 RAHNER, *Investigations*, 201.

11 Michael G. LAWLER, *Secular Marriage, Christian Sacrament* (Twenty-Third Publications; Mystic Ct. 1985) 57.

12 ORSY, *Christian Marriage*, 383.

13 Karl LEHMANN, "The Sacramentality of Marriage: The Bond between Baptism, Faith, and Marriage", in Richard MALONE and John R. CONNERY (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives on Christian Marriage; Propositions and Papers from the International Theological Commission* (Loyola Univ. Press; Chicago 1984) 99.

never acquire or in fact seem to lose their sacramentality. Most certainly it provides motivation for the Church to move beyond mere involvement in the ceremony of marriage and begin to meet its serious responsibilities to minister to marriages in all stages of development.

The secular and sacred in marriage

It would seem to me that our view of marriage becomes distorted when marriage's secular and sacred aspects become separated and dichotomized. So often this appears in studies of marriage. When one reads secular accounts, little if any attention is given to the religious dimension of marriage. Conversely, in many of the theological studies of marriage, scant attention is paid to everyday human experience of marriage or to the many valuable insights gained from modern psychology, sociology and cultural analysis. Certainly, the Catholic tradition in maintaining a classical tradition regarding the sacramentality of marriage often finds itself isolated from the perspectives of other churches and religions as well as from the outlooks of modern society.

Background on the separation

The dichotomy between the human and divine aspects of marriage has a long history. Schillebeeckx, in his classical study of marriage, points out that Christianity first had to deal with marriage as a human reality, largely under the control of families. The emerging Church viewed marriage as a secular and human reality that took on a new dimension when entered into by the baptized, and this view prevailed for many centuries. Rather than speak of Christian marriage, the Church approached this reality as "marriage by Christians". As Schillebeeckx puts it: "For the first eleven centuries marriage was seen--both in Christian experience and in Western theology--above all as a secular reality to be experienced 'in the Lord' and meriting special pastoral care in the moral and religious sphere".¹⁴ For centuries no religious ceremony was required, and it was only after the collapse of the Roman Empire that the Church began to assume legal and religious authority over the institution of marriage. As we know, it was not until the twelfth century that the Church finally declared that marriage could be considered to be one of the seven sacraments. A number of reasons seemed to contribute to the Church's distancing itself from the institution of marriage. O'Callaghan lists some of these as "distrust of the body and its sense, the tendency to identify concupiscence of fallen man with sexual passion,

14 Edward SCHILLEBEECKX, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (Sheed and Ward; New York 1965) 338.

the need to extol virginity".¹⁵ It was only when extreme heretical cults carried these prejudices against sex to the extreme and taught that things of the flesh were evil, that the Church was moved to defend the sanctity of marriage and declare it to be one of the sacraments.

Even though marriage was eventually declared to be a sacrament in the twelfth century, there remained a marked legalism in the theological approach. As Boff points out, the declaration that marriage was a sacrament comes across more as a "doctrinal addition" to the human reality of marriage, rather than as a recognition of the intrinsic sanctity of marriage.¹⁶

The role of the Reformation

The dichotomy between marriage as a human reality and as a sacred mystery was further deepened by the Reformation and its separation of the order of creation from the order of redemption. Luther, even though recognizing that marriage was "God's work and commandment," declared that marriage was a "wordly affair".¹⁷ He recognized marriage as being in the realm of God's creation, but not as part of the order of redemption. Salvation was gained through faith alone, not through marriage. Luther and the other Protestant reformers thus denied Christ's institution of marriage as one of the Christian sacraments of redemption. The Council of Trent, in its efforts to defend the sacramentality of marriage and its institution by Christ, reasserted the classical tradition regarding the sacramentality of marriage and further set up barriers between marriage as a secular reality and as a sacrament, between Christian and non-Christian marriages, and even between Catholic and Protestant marital unions. This exclusive approach to the sacramentality of marriage often prevails even today, and is perhaps one of the reasons why it becomes so difficult to discuss the sacramentality of marriage in contemporary terms. Referring to this classical approach to the sacramentality of marriage, Boff points: "...it is difficult today to see how this doctrine applies the concept of marriage to the fact of marriage".¹⁸ The classical approach to the sacramental aspect of marriage often seems spiritualized and so cut off from human experience that it becomes difficult to relate it to married life as it is experienced today.

15 Dennis O'CALLAGHAN, "Marriage as Sacrament", in Franz Bockle (ed.), *The Future of Marriage as Institution. Concilium* 55 (1970) 101.

16 Leonardo BOFF, "The Sacrament of Marriage", in Michael TAYLOR (ed.), *The Sacraments: Readings in Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (Alba House; New York 1981) 193ff.

17 KASPER, *Theology*, 33ff.

18 BOFF, "Marriage", 193.

The role of secularism

The Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the rise of Nationalism, and other secularistic movements further separated the "wordly" aspect of marriage from the religious. These movements went beyond the Reformers and denied the "order of creation" altogether, viewing marriage as a secular reality under the jurisdiction of the state. As a result, the Church was moved even more to the defensive in protecting its traditional views on the sacramental notion of marriage and has become increasingly more isolated from the secular aspects of marriage. Its central concern has thus been more often with the protection of the bond or more recently with decisions on validity, than with the ongoing pastoral attention to the everyday needs of marriages as they are lived in contemporary society.

A need for integration

Further reformulation of the Catholic sacramental theology of marriage will have to move beyond the classical dichotomy between the secular and the sacred, the natural and the supernatural. Marriage, and indeed all reality, will have to be seen as multi-dimensional. Marriage is indeed a secular affair that is undergoing marked changes in the midst of an extremely complicated society and is facing financial, social and political challenges never before encountered. Studies in anthropology, science, psychology and many of the other disciplines have offered extremely valuable insights with regard to marriage, and all of this must somehow be incorporated into the sacramental theology of marriage. Moreover the experiences of those who experience marriage in contemporary society need to be listened to as a new theology of marriage "from below" becomes formulated.

Those who process Christian faith generally believe that marriage is of God's creation. This is not to say that marriage is to be identified with the Holy or with Mystery. The Judeo-Christian tradition did desacralize marriage, refusing to accept pagan views that marriage and sex is a divine participation in the life of the gods. Marriage is indeed a human reality, with its weaknesses and limitations.

Nevertheless, it is a real and effective means of experiencing the Kingdom, the saving power of God through Christ in our midst. The married Christian does indeed enjoy a unique opportunity to share in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord.¹⁹

19 LAWLER, *Secular Marriage*, 71ff.

From this perspective it is not so much a case of a human reality "being raised" to the level of sacrament by Church as it is a gradual recognition on the part of the Church of the inner depths of marriage wherein there is access to the presence and power of God. As Lawler points out, there are two tiers in marriage: "The first, the human tier proclaims and makes real and celebrates the intimate community between this man and this woman. The second, religious tier proclaims and celebrated in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, the steadfast covenant and loving community between Yahweh and his holy people, and between Christ and his holy people, the Church".²⁰ These are not two separate realities, but two dimensions of the one reality of marriage, and the two experiences overlap and so-mingle. As Rahner says, human love and divine love are connatural in that the love of human leads to and indeed makes possible the love of God. Applying this notion to marriage, Rahner writes: "Now this personal love, which creates the state of marriage as the mode in which to manifest itself, is in fact in the present order of salvation sustained by the grace of God which always imbues this love with its salvific power, exalts it and opens it to the immediacy of God himself. Now this can take place even before this love encounters the message of the gospel proclaimed and made known in such explicit words".²¹ For Rahner, all moral acts are in fact salvific acts in virtue of God's grace and universal salvific will. There are no "merely natural" acts, in that all moral acts are upheld by grace and thus oriented toward God. We might then add that there are no "natural marriages". There is a sacramental dimension to all marriages, even though there are those who choose to ignore this sacred level of marriage. From this perspective, marriage is a human reality at the depths of which is the experience of the Kingdom of God and the Church of Christ. For unbelievers, and even commonly for believers these depths remain hidden. At the same time, for those who are open to it, the experience of salvation, which is the basis of the sacramental dimension of marriage, is available.²² This sacramental dimension marriage is, then, not extrinsic to marriage. Sacramentality, or the experience of the sacred, is intrinsic to marriage and is accessible not only to the baptized but to all spouses. If this be true, does it not provide an avenue to address some of the more difficult ecumenical and pastoral questions regarding marriages between the unbaptized and the baptized, the status of annuled marriages and the children of such marriages, the situation of second marriages where there has not been an annulment, and the common occurrence today where baptized unbelievers have

20 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

21 RAHNER, *Investigations*, 205.

22 See Bernard HÄRING, *Free and Faithful in Christ* (Crossroad; New York 1982) 534ff.

only the option of a sacramental marriage? Might we not say that marriage is one, a human reality with access to the experience of mystery. Some believe and choose to have access to these depths, while others for one reason or other choose not to realize this experience of Mystery. In light of religious freedom, whatever the choice, it should be recognized and honoured, and all marriages should be held in esteem.

Love and marriage

One of the most crucial problematics in the reformulation of the sacramental theology of marriage will be the area of love. While it is true that Christian love has always been part of our theology of marriage, in the past insufficient attention has been given to married or conjugal love itself. Married love was mentioned in Pius XI's influential encyclical on marriage, but the letter's emphasis on the primary and secondary ends of marriage had much more impact, and there love was not included. It was only at Vatican II that conjugal love was given a central role in marriage, and marriage was described as "a community of love" and an "intimate partnership of married life and love".²³ The Council recognized that conjugal love is a unique kind of love that is warm, intimate, self-giving, and both expressed in and nurtured by sexual acts. It was recognized out of this unique love come offspring, and that this love also enables the couple to experience the divine of their lives.

Romantic love

The Council's emphasis on conjugal love in marriage shifted the emphasis away from what had formerly been the dominating purpose of marriage, the procreation of children. This change of emphasis was most certainly welcome in contemporary society where having a large number of children is often not the central concern. At the same time, the Council made not mention of "romantic love", which seems to be the major factor in the decision to get married today. Especially in Western countries, people do not think of marriage until they have "fallen in love", that is experienced what is usually a highly emotional experience of being attracted to an individual and wanting to be at one with that person psychologically, socially and physically. Furthermore, as Dominian points out, most couples have high hopes of maintaining these romantic feelings throughout the course of the marriage.²⁴ They expect that this romantic love will include mutual and social support, an intimate sharing

23 See "Gaudium et Spes", in Walter Abbot (ed), *The Documents of Vatican II* (Guild Press; New York 1966) 249ff.

24 See DOMINIAN, *Marriage and Faith*, 271ff.

on all levels, and an exciting sex life. Even though couples eventually experience a certain loss of the original thrilling and idealized love as they move from love as an "atmosphere" to love as a daily commitment, most couples want to sustain a modicum of romantic feelings. "Falling out of love" causes great distress and possibly even disintegration in the marriages of today.

It would seem that any reformulation of the theology of marriage would have to take romantic love into consideration. Does the experience which young people, and many not so young, have of falling in love have any connection with the life of faith and with the sacramentality of marriage? Is there any connection between the cooperation, commitment, trust, loyalty and fidelity that the couple experiences and their religious commitments? How do the passionate feelings associated with romantic love relate to one's covenant with God, and with Christ and the Church. Unless these connections can be made realistically and in the language of the modern young person, somehow the sacramental theology of marriage will seem distant and perhaps irrelevant. It is clear that in order to make these connections theology will have to do a great deal more listening to the cultural experience of love, to other disciplines which deal with love, and indeed consult with those involved in such experience themselves. Most certainly advances such as Rahner's personalistic view of love and Cooke's analysis of conjugal love in terms of human friendship are encouraging.²⁵ However, a great deal needs to be done to integrate the contemporary experience of love into the theology of marriage.

Canon law's difficulty with love

Canonists in particular seem to be having difficulty integrating the crucial factor of love into their dealings with marriages. In fact, some canonists maintain that love does not belong to the essence of marriage.²⁶ The classical position on marriage, as enunciated by Augustine, does not include love as one of the so-called "goods" of marriage. Since these "goods" are essential for a valid marriage, one might conclude that in this outlook on marriage love would not be necessary. The marked limitations to this approach was demonstrated fifty years ago by an Italian jurist, A. C. Jemolo, in a case which he presented to his students. The case involved a man who married a woman out of a vendetta, wanting to subject her to a life of cruelty and thus pay back her family for all the injuries they had inflicted on him and his family. But by the old rules this would be a valid marriage since he intended to have children, be sexually faithful, and

25 RAHNER, *Investigations*, 303ff and Bernard COOKE, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Twenty-Third Publications; Mystic, Ct. 1983) 81ff.

26 MACKIN, *Marriage*, 333.

live with her until death. Obviously something was missing--he did not love the woman. Jemolo had demonstrated the severe limitations of the classical approach to the validity of marriage.²⁷

We have seen how the classical Augustinian formulation was changed by Vatican II's inclusion of conjugal love as being central in Christian marriage. Subsequent to the Council's new approach, the revised canon law saw need to add a fourth "good" to the Augustinian list. Canon 1055 states: "The matrimonial covenant, which a man and a woman establish themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its very nature ordered to the "bonum conjugum" and to the procreation and education of offspring".²⁸ It is true that there is a new element added, yet the work "conjugum" is ambiguous and does not necessarily refer to love. Many would conclude that we have here only half a loaf. That conclusion is confirmed when we listen to Paul VI's allocution to the Rota in 1976, where he challenged those who would consider conjugal love to be essential for validity, since "conjugal love is not included in the province of law."²⁹ Some canonists would agree, since love is such an elusive reality and very difficult to deal with in determining the validity of a marriage. However, I would concur with the position of Mackin who points out: "Those churchmen and canonists who insist that love and the intimate community do not belong to the essence of marriage must as a consequence rethink the theology of marriage quite thoroughly. For centuries Popes, Bishops and theologians have explained that the marriage of two baptized persons is a sacrament in this; that their union is an earthly image, a sacrament, of the love union of Christ and the Church. But obviously a marriage cannot be such an image unless love is in it".³⁰ Once we separate love from the discussion of the contract of marriage, we also separate it from the covenant. In marriage contract and covenant are inseparable. In sum, unless we can incorporate christian, conjugal and indeed romantic love into our discussion of the sacramentality of marriage, it will never be suitable to address contemporary Christians.

Faith as relational and inclusive

The classical sacramental theology of marriage has not kept pace with the contemporary understanding or experience of faith. The past theology of faith developed during the time of Christendom when it was assumed that the majority of civilized people were baptized and thus had the faith. The contem-

27 Lawrence WRENN, "Refining the Essence of Marriage", *The Jurist* 46 (1986) 532ff.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 535.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 547.

porary situation is quite different and we now observe the phenomenon wherein many people are indeed baptized but show little sign of faith. Pastoral ministers constantly are confronted with such persons, who nevertheless want to be married in the Catholic form. At the same time there are increasing members of petitions for declarations of nullity filed with tribunals on the grounds that one or both parties were not qualified to have a sacramental marriage because of lack of faith.³¹

This modern faith dilemma first became noted about twenty-five years ago in France, a so-called "Catholic country" where most were baptized and yet only 2% attended liturgy. At the same time about 40% of the people in France wanted Catholic church weddings. In 1969 the French hierarchy addressed this crisis by proposing three forms of marriage vows: one for those with faith; one for those with some feeling for the Christian religion; and a third civil ceremony for unbelievers. One diocese, Autun, allowed couples these choices and considered only the first choice of ceremony to be sacramental. In 1977 the International Theological Commission criticized this practice of having weddings on different levels, pointing out that when the baptized celebrate a non-sacramental wedding they do not have a valid marriage.

The Commission stated: "For the Church no natural marriages separated from the sacrament exists for baptized persons".³² At the same time the Commission maintained that the absence of faith casts doubt on whether one is capable of making a sacramental intention and on whether such marriages are valid.³³ The Commission took the position that the intention to marry validly arises out of a living faith. The dilemma for many young people today is obvious. If they are baptized unbelievers they cannot enter a "natural marriage", yet neither do they have faith enough to enter into a valid sacramental marriage. Generally the pastoral recommendation in such cases is to take time to renew and strengthen the faith before the wedding. For many pastors this is hardly a realistic solution for the many situations they face today.

Subsequent official statements attempted to deal further with this dilemma of faith. In 1980 the Synod of Bishops pointed out that the very request for a wedding for religious reasons may be a sign of faith, and they reiterated the traditional view that to receive a sacrament it is sufficient to have the intention "to do what the Church intends to do".³⁴ In 1981 John Paul II in his official

30 MACKIN, *Marriage*, 333.

31 ORSY, "Christian Marriage", 383.

32 Quoted in Denis F. O'CALLAGHAN, "Faith and the Sacrament of Marriage", *Irish Theological Quarterly* 52 (1986) 175.

33 MALONE and CONNERY, *Contemporary Perspectives*, 20.

reflection on the Synod took the position that by baptism engaged couples are sharers in Christ's covenant with His Church and need only implicitly consent to what the Church intends to do. The Pope noted that only those should be turned away who explicitly and formally reject what the Church intends to do. Significantly, at no time does the Pontiff invoke the principle that a valid marriage between baptized persons is always a sacrament.³⁵ However, from this it has not been concluded that baptized unbelievers have had their dilemma solved.

Beyond minimalism

In light of the current theological advances regarding both sacraments and faith, it would seem that the present pastoral practice is settling for a considerable minimum when it comes to sacramental weddings. Have we not moved beyond a magical notion of sacraments, whereby rituals work automatically and mechanically. Are not sacraments dynamic encounters with the Lord, "graced events" that endure in their effects long beyond the ritual celebrations. In order to celebrate and participate in these sacred symbols, it is not necessary for one to have a living and active faith and to make a deliberate and free choice to enter into these mysteries? Moreover does not the contemporary theology of Christian faith indicate that genuine faith involves the free acceptance on the part of the whole person of a covenanted relationship with God as revealed in Christ Jesus? Baptism may indeed plant the seed of faith, but authentic faith, the faith needed to enter into a sacramental marriage, implies a mature and free acceptance of this faith relationship with the Lord.

Religious freedom demands that we allow people to make conscience choices. If a baptized couple with genuine faith wishes to enter into a sacramental union, such a choice is welcomed by the community. However, in the case of so many baptized young people today who for one reason or other are at a time of their lives when they have not yet made a faith choice, these should be able to enter into a natural union that is valid and yet not recognized by the couple or the Church as officially a sacrament. I would agree with Orsy that being baptized would not take away one's right to marry validly. In order to right this situation, of course, it will be necessary to revise the new code of 1980, which requires only baptism for a valid marriage and ignores the crucial question of faith. The contemporary theology of marriage cannot tolerate a return to the

34 Denin F. O'CALLAGHAN, "Faith and the Sacrament of Marriage", p. 163.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

legal notion of marriage which does not take into consideration living faith and love.³⁶

Marriage and ministry

In the past marriages and families have been more the object of ministry, and the pastoral focus has been on assisting couple in the everyday maintenance of their sacramental marriages. In recent times new developments are beginning to take shape. Since Vatican II there is a new awareness that marriage itself is an authentic "vocation" and that married couples serving each other and their children are indeed engaged in an important ministry. Moreover the Council's call for a more active role on the part of the laity as well as its reclaiming the teaching of the priesthood of all have given married couples a new sense of responsibility to minister beyond the family to the larger world. As the Whiteheads put it: "To be married in the Lord is to have eyes to see a deeper meaning and presence of our love. It is also to respond to this presence--a presence which calls us, together, beyond 'just ourselves', into an awareness of our involvement in the work of God in the world. As believers, we participate in the mission of Jesus".³⁷ The recent decline in the numbers of clergy and religious available for ministry have even more shifted the responsibilities for church ministry to those who are married. We might well see in the future that marriage and family will become the main source for ecclesial ministry. Since the emerging sacramental theology of marriage recognized marriages as a living symbol of Christ's power and presence, such a shift in minisry is perfectly logical and acceptable.

The domestic Church

The basis of sacramental thinking regarding marriage has been the teaching of *Ephesians* that marriage mirrors the union of Christ and his Church. As the Catholic community becomes more aware of the reality of the "domestic church", new levels of meaning begin to be derived from this text. As Rahner points out, marriage has a definite function in the Church and belongs to the "full constitution and full accomplishment" of the nature of the Church.³⁸ Marriage in a very true sense is Church and make the Church present in the world. "It is the smallest community, but for all that, a genuine community of the redeemed and sanctified, whose unity can build on the same foundation as

36 ORSY, "Christian Marriage", 390.

37 Evelyn EATON WHITEHEAD and James D. WHITEHEAD, *Marrying Well: Stages on the Journey of Christian Marriage* (Doubleday, New York 1983) 442ff.

38 Karl RAHNER, *The Church and the Sacraments* (Herder and Herder, New York 1963) 293.

that on which the Church is founded".³⁹ If it be true that the family is a true Church in miniature, obviously it carries the ecclesial responsibilities of carrying out Christ's mission to the world.

It is unfortunate, as Orsy notes, that this teaching that the family is the domestic church is generally presented in exalted fashion and then "quiteily disregarded--and discarded".⁴⁰ If the domestic church is to ever move from rhetoric to reality, the official church will have to begin to realize the authentic priestly and ministerial gifts that exist within marriages and families. We will have to move beyond our persistent reluctance to recognize a married clergy and beyond our refusal to allow resigned priests to participate in ministry. In addition, the official Church will have to provide much more pastoral care, support and assistance to families than it has in the past. The vast majority of Christians live out the gospel as married persons, and somehow this fact has never been sufficiently recognized by a Church which still often centres on the clergy.

The impact of liberation themes

The revision of our sacramental theology of marriage will also have to include the recent insights gained from the theology of liberation. Equality, freedom from oppression, and resistance to injustice and violence are becoming major themes in the Church throughout the world. Since marriage is indeed the "Church in miniature" these themes are impacted them as well.

A new feminine awareness

Many Christian women are pointing out that the classical theology was formulated at a time when women were viewed as inferior, a time when they were "handed over" in marriage as property. Even as the early community theologized about marriage in *Ephesians*, the husband was considered to be the "image of God" and the representative of Christ, while the wife was given the image of the Church. As Schillebeeckx points out, it was for this reason that the brides were the ones who needed to be veiled and blessed at the wedding. They were the "brides of Christ", and therefore in need of blessing, while the male spouses stood in the place of Christ and were thus in no need of such consideration.⁴¹ Many women are quite dissatisfied with their position of inferiority and

39 *Ibid.*, p. 294.

40 ORSY, "Christian Marriage", 381.

41 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Marriage*, 305ff.

with the patriarchal thinking which exists in this classical interpretation of marriage. They call for a revised theological understanding of marriage that will stress equality and partnership rather than dominance and submission.

Rahner has recognized the inadequacy of the classical views in *Ephesians*. He points out that assigning the role of Christ to the husband and Church to the wife is conditioned by the historical and social factors of the times, and is not the heart of the revelation. The core of the teaching, according to Rahner, is that the love between husband and wife parallels the love for Christ and his Church. The very foundation of the Christian tradition is God's covenant with people, and this covenant is fully manifested in the life of Christ. It is the dynamics and characteristics of Christ's love that serves as both model and sustenance for marriage, and not the assignment of specific roles for husband and wife.⁴² In other words, conjugal love parallels and is sustained by the love of Christ, a love that was and is caring, compassionate, faithful, forgiving and sacrificing. Christ's love is not characterized by prejudice, domination, or oppression of any kind, and therefore none of these legitimately belong in conjugal love.

Feminists call for a reformulation of the theology of marriage that will focus, not only on Christ's love for his Church, but also on his role as liberator of the Church and world. As Silberman points out, many women are discovering that they are in sacramental marriages wherein Christian values are not experienced. Instead of experiencing love, equality and justice, women often experience cruelty, domination and abuse. Marriage for these women has lost its redemptive qualities, and is instead still another encounter with the oppressive of a male-dominated and patriarchal society.⁴³ Silberman and many other theologians advocate a rethinking of the classical theology of marriage. This reformulation should not, as it has been in the past, be done primarily by male ecclesiastics and theologians. The sacramental theology of marriage for the future should primarily be done by women and men who not only know the resources, but who also have had first-hand experience of the challenges of marriage. Their task is to formulate a model of marriage wherein both women and men can hope to experience equality, freedom and love "in the Lord".

The Third World experience

The Church that is emerging in the Third World brings with it further challenges to the classical theology of marriage. First of all, looking at that severe poverty, the oppression and the brutal violence in many of these areas makes

42 Karl RAHNER, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (Crossroad; New York 1978) 419ff.

one wonder what connection there is between the sacramental theology and real life as it is experienced. Much of the injustice here is done by families to families.⁴⁴ In the oligarchies of these countries the land, wealth and power are in the hands of just a few families, while the vast majority of households live in the depths of poverty and powerlessness. Moreover, if the marginalized majority attempt to stand up for their rights, they are subjected to terrorism, torture, and even death, often by people who consider themselves to be "good Christians". No doubt sacramental weddings continue for the members of the wealthy classes in these countries. One wonders how this can all go on in the midst of such contradiction and scandal on the part of these controlling families. At the same time, is it not incongruous how those living in sacramental marriages in South Africa generally do not see the contradiction of their support of Apartheid. Closer to home, what impact does our Christian view of marriage have on our own attitudes toward materialism, racial prejudice and the struggle for justice in our own country?

The family as unit of resistance

We see in Central and South America a church emerging in base communities, a church centred in homes and consisting largely of families. No doubt the future reformulation of the theology of marriage will be affected by this phenomenon. Here the relationship between Christ and the Church takes on new meaning. Many of these people know poverty, suffering and death as daily companions and turn to the Lord for strength, courage and hope. For them Christ is the lover that sustains them, but also the liberator that empowers them to struggle for peace and justice against overwhelming odds. Perhaps it is here "from below" that the Church will begin to learn a new and fresh sacramentality of marriage that will connect with life and be a powerful symbol of freedom, peace and justice. In my opinion the main line liberation theologians have not given sufficient attention to how "liberation begins at home" and should include the freeing of women from what is often an oppressive situation in their marriages. If the liberation movement is to find its strength in the home churches, it must first offer freedom to the women who live in these homes, women who are an integral part in the movement to struggle against social injustice and oppression.⁴⁵

43 Eileen ZIEGET SILBERMANN, *The Savage Sacrament: A Theology of Marriage after American Feminism* (Twenty-Third Publications; Mystic, Ct. 1983) 7ff.

44 Juan Luis SEGUNDO, *The Sacraments Today* (Orbis Books; Maryknoll, NY 1974) 72ff.

45 The new consciousness of the sacramentality of marriage among the basic communities of El Salvador is discussed in Pablo GALDA MEZ, *Faith of a People: The Life of a Basic Christian Community in El Salvador* (Orbis Books; Maryknoll, NY 1986) 15ff.

Summary

In this article I have attempted to show the transitional movement of the sacramental theology of marriage from a classical position to one with broader horizons and fresh insights. I maintain that a relevant and effective sacramental theology of marriage will have to take into consideration the dynamic aspect of marriage, provide an integration of the secular and sacred, consider the contemporary experience of love and faith, be attuned to urgent needs for ministry, and carefully listen to the themes of liberation so prevalent in the contemporary church.

Xavier University
3800 Victory Parkway
Cincinnati, Ohio 45207
U.S.A.