

Synopsis of “The Sacramentality of Marriage in the Fathers”  
John C. Cavadini

On the one hand, the patristic period was not, as a whole, a period characterized by sustained reflection on the sacramentality of marriage. The idea of marriage as a “sacrament,” in the more technical sense of the term we find developed in medieval and contemporary theologians, had not explicitly arisen. On the other hand, there was a continuous appreciation of marriage since the time of Jesus himself as we can see reflected in the canonical Gospels, and there can be found among the Fathers increasing attention to the meaning of Christian marriage, culminating in the late fourth and early fifth century reflections of John Chrysostom in the East, and of Augustine in the West. We have to be careful not to underestimate the contribution of the Fathers even if they did not speak the technical language of later ages. Their rich use of imagery and analogy in the context of exhortation and pastoral counsel is the basis for later developments and it can still serve as a resource for us.

To the extent that Christian marriage is understood in terms of the love of Christ for the Church, inspired by Eph. 5.31-32 and related passages, to that extent it is, I would argue, understood as sacramental in this period. In the theology of the Fathers, there seem to be two complementary approaches. The first one might call the “ascetic” approach. It begins from a philosophical starting point. In the ancient world philosophy was a way of life, an ascetic path of self-control and discipline in the pursuit of the virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and courage. Marriage was a matter of ordering one’s own passions and one’s household according to the restraint and moderation proper to the philosophical pursuit of virtue. This ideal was “Christianized,” with varying degrees of success, by authors as diverse as Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom. To the extent that the classical virtues come to be re-defined in terms of

the love of Christ for the Church, marriage as an ascetic enterprise is caught up into and re-defined by that love. It comes to be an authentic representation of, and encounter with, that love.

The second approach one could call the “ecclesial” approach, and it is represented by Augustine. This view does not begin from philosophical conceptions of virtue or of ascetic restraint, but from faith in the Incarnation as Christ’s espousal of human nature to the point of being “one flesh.” The Church is the ongoing sacrament of the Incarnation, the efficacious presence (to use later language) of the “spousal” love by which Christ the Word became Incarnate. We are configured to this love by “incorporation” into Christ’s Body, the Church, where we, as members of the Church, experience over a lifetime the purifying power of the self-giving Love to which we are configured by baptism. We are slowly being transformed from selfishness to charity. Christian marriage builds on the natural community of husband and wife, predicated on sexual difference for the purpose of procreation, and transforms it into an ecclesial community (a “domestic church,” to use later language) in which the spousal love of Christ for the Church is authentically both represented and encountered. The paper closes with a brief reflection on the potential that this Augustinian view may have to offer a useful complementarity to the Theology of the Body espoused by Pope John Paul II.

## The Sacramentality of Marriage in the Fathers

John C. Cavadini

Department of Theology, University of Notre Dame

Recently I told a colleague that I was working on a paper on the sacramentality of marriage in the Fathers. My colleague responded by saying that would be a short paper. And in a way, I can see the point of this quip. The patristic period was not exactly the golden age of marriage, if one is looking for a widespread, rich tradition of reflection on the religious or theological significance of marriage. As Peter Brown has shown, there was an emphasis on asceticism and the single life in many of the earliest Christian communities.<sup>1</sup> Marriage often came to seem at best a kind of given, a fact of life, not worthy of a great deal of reflection, and at worst an ambiguous good or even an evil. Even some orthodox writers – Tertullian in his Catholic phase, for instance – seemed to wonder how good an alternative marriage really could be, if it were only good in comparison to an evil, that is, as an alternative to “burning.”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the canonical Gospels do not disparage marriage, but rather defend it as established by God and, if anything, argue that it should be restored to the pristine purity it had when it came forth from the hand of the creator. Marriage in the canonical Gospels is used by Jesus as a suitable and even preferred image for the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, even if at the same time there is reserved a place of admiration for those who leave marriage and family behind to follow their itinerant Lord, the Son of Man, who “had no place to lay his head” (Mt. 8.21). Paul’s letters seem to reflect this tension between an appreciation for marriage on the one

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Tertullian, commenting on 1 Cor. 7.9 in *To His Wife* 1.3: “Scripture says that *it is better to marry than to burn*; but what sort of good, I ask you, can that be which is such only when it is compared to what is bad?” (translated by William P. Le Saint, *Ancient Christian Writers* no. 13 (New York: Paulist Press, 1951), 13, even more forcefully stated at *Exhortation to Chastity* 3 (Le Saint, 47), though this somewhat negative assessment is balanced by the closing peroration of *To His Wife*, on the beauties of Christian marriage, in the face of which “Christ rejoices” (2.8; LeSaint, 35).

hand, and a recognition that all things connected with the flesh and this world have been relativized by the prospect of the imminent return of the Lord in glory.<sup>3</sup>

As the return of the Lord was prolonged, the elements that Paul held in tension seem to have come somewhat undone and were represented in different strands of the later Pauline tradition. Deutero-Pauline texts such as Ephesians and later the pastorals developed a robust appreciation for what Augustine would even later call the “good” or the “excellence” of marriage, while the apocryphal *Acts of Paul* embrace an almost heroic ideal of asceticism that borders on the disparagement of marriage. In the radical Pauline heretic Marcion, this disparagement passed over into outright rejection. Other sects and movements that emphasized the impending return of the Lord, who thought of the Church as essentially the church of the martyrs in the face of a hostile Empire, also disparaged marriage.<sup>4</sup> This was probably, in part, a reaction against the spirituality reflected in the Pastoral Epistles, which not only endorses marriage as a good but also verges on canonizing received, non-Christian wisdom about the ordering of households, presenting an almost too settled Christianity. These Christians were perhaps content to pattern the ordering of their households after their non-Christian, post-Augustan neighbors in order to please them. It is sometimes hard, looking back on these texts, to discern what elements are proclaimed as essential to an understanding of marriage as a good

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<sup>3</sup>Paul was concerned “not to sweep away the structures of the pious household,” yet “[m]arriage, like household slavery, was a ‘calling’ devoid of glamour. It did not attract close attention as the present age slipped silently toward its end” (Peter Brown, *BS* 54, 57).

<sup>4</sup>The New Prophecy (Montanists, especially as exemplified by Tertullian), Marcionites, Encratites, Valentinians (from a very different point of view), all had relatively negative views of marriage (see Brown, *BS* 76-82, 83-121). The evidence of the *Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* shows that even married women bearing children could receive the gifts of the Spirit and become spiritual leaders, but this does not seem to be a gift thought of as mediated by marriage *per se*. Peter Brown hints that Perpetua’s courage and poise was in part a reflection of her status as a matron (*BS* 75, “A *matrona* to the last, ‘with shining face and quiet poise’ she asks for a hairpin so her free flowing hair will not be mistaken as mourning) but the fact that she is married seems mostly unremarkable to the ancient editor of the text.”

established by God, and what are apologetic concessions to the Roman way of doing things in the face of suspicion and persecution.

For the most part, orthodox Christians did continue to defend the goodness of marriage, based on passages such as 1 Cor. 7 and Eph. 5.21-33. Their articulation of the ideals of married life often drew heavily on earlier philosophical ideals, Stoic in particular, “Christianizing” these ideals with greater or lesser success. These philosophical ideals generally regarded marriage from an ascetic perspective, emphasizing that sex is for procreation only, and devaluing physical beauty and disapproving of passion. Clement of Alexandria is a good second century example of an exponent of civilized, philosophical sex.<sup>5</sup> Clement remarks, for example, that it would be difficult for a wife to continue to respect her husband if he conducted himself in an undignified way during sex. Clement instructs couples not to have sex “during the day, nor ... after coming home from church, or from the marketplace or early in the morning like a rooster.”<sup>6</sup> Brown warns against reading too much into these observations which may strike contemporary sensibilities as odd. Clement’s overall vision, of a partnership of husband and wife who serve Christ together in an age when they might both be called upon to be martyrs, is very compelling. The family served as a center of prayer<sup>7</sup> and presumably a source of strength. Clement’s married Christian sage was not cold or gloomy and could regard sex and family, when taken up into the

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<sup>5</sup> “Clement’s ideal of the Christian life was permeated by a deep sense of the service of God ... combined with an awareness of the presence, in the soul of the believer, of His Word, Christ – an intimate companion. ... To do justice to this notion, and to the program of lifelong moral grooming that it implied, Clement fell back instinctively on the Stoic views which, along with Platonic metaphysics, were part and parcel of the intellectual *koiné* of the age” (Brown, *BS* 128).

<sup>6</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* 2.96, translated by David Hunter in *Marriage in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 45. Hunter’s Introduction is a very helpful theological overview of developments and views regarding marriage in the patristic period. On the incorporation of Stoic ideals into Christian understandings of marriage, see pp. 7-9. Clement’s use of philosophical ideals is, however, in the service of defending particularly Christian notions such as the good of the world precisely as *creation*, as implied by Brown, and noted by Hunter, p. 15, against the disparagement of the goodness of creation by Encratites and Gnostics alike. Brown argues that Clement goes farther than the pagan moralists by attempting to regulate the etiquette of intercourse, but he points out that that was because Clement had to defend intercourse against attacks from hostile pagans. His point was to show that Christians behaved philosophically even in sex.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, *BS* 134-36.

civilizing arts that were meant to enhance and nurture the educated life, as entirely positive, though there is no developed theory of what we would call the sacramentality of marriage *per se*.

John Chrysostom's preaching may offer one of the most potentially appealing versions of this Christianized philosophical view of marriage, at least in his own later years.<sup>8</sup> Chrysostom has a rich appreciation for the love that should obtain between husband and wife. Although the wife is to submit to her husband, Chrysostom emphatically distinguishes her submission from the submission of a slave to a master. "What sort of union is it," he asks rhetorically, "when the wife trembles before her husband? What sort of pleasure will the husband himself enjoy, if he lives with a wife who is more a slave than a free woman?"<sup>9</sup> The wife is not a slave, but a "second authority," having "authority and honor equal to the husband's in many respects," but with the

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<sup>8</sup> I am following Hunter here, who de-emphasizes the more negative views that Chrysostom held and preached in his earlier days, views that are more to the fore in Brown's treatment (e.g. at *BS* 309, "John's was a bleak and deliberately atomistic vision that has elicited little sympathy from modern readers"). Hunter notes that in his *Homily 20 on Ephesians*, "Chrysostom evidences little of the mistrust of human sexuality that characterizes so much of the Christian literature of this period (and that characterized Chrysostom's own early writings). On the contrary, Chrysostom speaks of the desire (*eros*) that draws two human beings together as the creation of God and as the highest form of human love (*Homily* 20.1). Rather than develop a sexual asceticism, Chrysostom focuses on the problem of attachment to money" (Hunter, *MEC* 19-20). For an extended statement of a more sympathetic view, see, David C. Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Full Views of St. John Chrysostom* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1995). Jean-Pierre Cattenoz, *Le Baptême, Mystère Nuptial* (Editions du Carmel, 1993), while not on the topic of marriage itself, offers a good resource for continuing reflection. Peter Brown's view builds on the earlier treatment offered by Elizabeth Clark, *Women in the Early Church in Message of the Fathers of the Church*, vol. 13 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983); see more recently, *idem.*, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Women' in Late Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994), 155-84.

<sup>9</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homily 20.2 on Ephesians* (Hunter, *MEC* 80). It is interesting that Jerome, perhaps a seemingly unlikely candidate, can take this one step farther. Commenting on Eph. 5.33, he notes, "*The woman, however, fears her husband. If fear of God, because of fear of punishment, disqualifies the one who fears from being perfect, how much more imperfect will be the wife who fears, not only God, but also her husband? Because of this it should be asked whether wife and the fear of a wife should be understood in a literal sense, since frequently wives are found to be much superior to husbands at ordering them, and running the house, and educating the children, and maintaining family discipline, while the husbands live in luxury and pursue mistress after mistress. Whether wives of such caliber should rule, or fear, their husbands, I leave to the reader's judgment*" (*Commentary on Ephesians* 3.5, in *The Human Couple in the Fathers*, Introduction and Notes by Giulia Sfamini Gasparro, Cesare Magazzu and Concetta Aloe Spada, English Translation by Thomas Halton [New York: Society of St. Paul, 1999], 249-50).

husband having something additional – it is he who is particularly charged with the well being of the household, with its proper ordering.<sup>10</sup>

Chrysostom understands this to mean that the husband is responsible to lead in the matter of love, because Eph. 5.25 instructs him to love his wife as Christ loves the Church, and Eph. 5.28 explains that this means that husbands should love their wives as much as their own flesh.<sup>11</sup> Husbands who would like their wives to obey them must lead in and with love, overlooking irritations that accumulate day to day and renouncing contempt. No matter how unappreciative or foolish or unattractive his wife may be, she could not, Chrysostom drily remarks, be as distant from the husband's imagined ideal as the church was from Christ, who nevertheless espoused her and loved her.<sup>12</sup> A well-ordered household with the husband at the head should be one in which the spirit of love has overtaken the whole. When the husband can say that he, like Christ, loves his wife as much as his own body, he can then expect the obedience appropriate to a wife (as distinguished from the obedience appropriate to a slave, to which he is not entitled). The husband's authority as "head" does not authorize him ever to resort to violence or threats of violence, but rather to treat his wife as though he has been entrusted with the care of a "sacred image."<sup>13</sup> Such a household, where the love of the wife is worth more than anything else to the husband, and where children are loved for her sake, and not more than she

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<sup>10</sup> "The wife is a second authority; she has authority and honor equal to the husband's in many respects. But the husband has something more. His special concern is the well-being of the household" (*Homily 20.6 on Ephesians* at Hunter, *MEC* 87).

<sup>11</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homily 20.3 on Ephesians* (Hunter, *MEC*, 82).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 20.2, "*Husbands*, he says, *love your wives, as Christ has loved the church*. You have seen the measure of obedience; now hear the measure of love. Would you like your wife to obey you as Christ? Then you must care for her, as Christ does for the church. Even if it is necessary to give your life for her, even if you must be cut into a thousand pieces, even if you must endure any suffering whatever, do not refuse it. Even if you do suffer like this, you will never suffer as much as Christ did. For you are doing it for one with whom you are already joined, but he did it for one who rejected him and hated him" (Hunter, *MEC* 79-80).

<sup>13</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homily 20.7 on Ephesians* (Hunter, *MEC* 90).

is<sup>14</sup> – such a household would be filled with the mutual submission of husband and wife, enjoined by Eph. 5.21, and would be a “marriage that is according to Christ,” “entirely spiritual, when the soul is united to God in an ineffable union which He alone knows.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps we would locate the sacramentality of marriage in Chrysostom in a statement such as this. Leading in love, the husband’s headship, and therefore his received cultural authority, is transformed into a kind of submission, while the wife’s subjection becomes a being-received-in-love and a loving in return.

Chrysostom imagines that living in such a household would afford a deep and satisfying pleasure to anyone who was a member of it. Unlike some of the other more “philosophically” minded theorists, Chrysostom in his later years does not seem as invested in disparaging the pleasure of sex. Perhaps he imagines that the pleasure of sex would be part of the pleasure of a larger spiritual enterprise. Perhaps we are not unjustified in thinking that for Chrysostom, the pleasure of sex in Christian marriage is felt as the pleasure of being at home in a household configured by the love of Christ for the Church. If this is correct, it would seem to be a true sublation of *eros* into *agape*.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the “philosophical” ethic of marriage is bound to seem austere insofar as it eschews many pleasures that were commonly thought (and probably are commonly thought today) to be innocent enough in themselves – wealth, ostentation including gold jewelry, make-up and perfume, extravagant clothing (as opposed to simple elegance), dancing, etc. And although it is not intrinsic to marriage as Chrysostom describes it, he seems to envisage a situation where the husband is older than the wife and serves as her teacher in this kind of philosophical life:

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.8 (Hunter, *MEC* 93).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.5 (Hunter, *MEC* 85).

<sup>16</sup> See Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* 1.7 on the relation between *eros* and *agape*.



From the very first evening that he receives her into the bridal chamber, he should teach her self-restraint, moderation, how to live a holy life, rejecting the desire for money at the very outset, as soon as she comes through the door. He should instruct her in philosophy and advise her not to have pieces of gold dangling from her ears ... or strewn about the bedroom.”<sup>17</sup>

In practice Chrysostom’s ideal marriage may have seemed rather confining, especially to women, just another variant on codes of household management that emphasized the power of men over women and nobility over slaves. And yet perhaps this aspect of the ideal is more accidental than essential to it. Again, if there is a sacramentality to marriage in Chrysostom’s ideal, could we not say that it is to be located in the way in which such notions as leadership and obedience cease being absolute quantities determined by cultural standards at large, but rather are recontextualized, against, and relativized by, the love of Christ for the Church?

Chrysostom’s preaching suggests an ideal of marriage which, at least theoretically, has gone beyond the mere recommendation of a previously extant philosophical or economic ideal for Christian couples, to a point where the essential character of married life cannot be understood apart from reference to the love of Christ for the Church. It therefore becomes capable of imaging and re-presenting that love: “What sort of children do you think will come from such parents? ... What will happen to everyone else who comes near them? Surely, they too will be filled with countless blessings.”<sup>18</sup>

As appealing as it may have seemed, not everyone who defended the good of Christian marriage in Antiquity was as sanguine about such an ideal. Augustine, for example, would likely have felt that it left largely unexamined some fundamentally problematic realities of human life. It would have struck Augustine as too ready to accept the sexual drive as unproblematically positive (even if in need of philosophical restraint), and as too eager to project an equally

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<sup>17</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homily 20.7* on Ephesians (Hunter, *MEC* 90).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 20.9, p. 96.

unproblematic straight line from *eros* to an uncomplicated domesticity. Augustine is as aware as anyone of the goodness and pleasure of domestic and family life and often comments on the enjoyment a father has in uttering nonsense words to his little son, or that a mother might have in pre-chewing little bits of food for her baby.<sup>19</sup> He is not above bragging about his own son, Adeodatus, years after his death.<sup>20</sup> He has obviously kept track of his own common law wife, and he states his admiration for the celibate life she took up after returning to Africa, in contrast to his own miserable lapse into fornication while awaiting his formally arranged bridal prospect to reach legal age. Augustine seems to call himself an adulterer, later on, for leaving his concubine and immediately embracing another.<sup>21</sup> He comments, too, on the obviously welcome and desirable pleasures of endearment and affection between husband and wife.<sup>22</sup> He is not unaware or unapproving of the kind of love that Chrysostom highlights.

And yet it figures hardly at all in his extensive and impressive body of writing on marriage and related topics. To Augustine's mind, there is something naïve about a view of marriage that treats sexual desire as a relatively uncomplicated *eros* which education and ascetic living can easily channel into the pleasures of home and family. For Augustine, sexual desire as we know it now is anything but uncomplicated. To people accustomed to thinking that sexual desire and the pleasure it seeks are obvious and uncomplicated goods that contribute, in a

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<sup>19</sup> For example, at *De catichizandis rudibus* 10.15.

<sup>20</sup> See *Conf.* 9. 6.14

<sup>21</sup> In *Conf.* 6.15.25, it is obvious that Augustine knows what has happened to her and where she is. Peter Brown (*BS* 393) points out that the case, raised in *On the Excellence of Marriage* (*De bono coniugali* 5.5) of the man who dismisses his concubine only to live and have sex with another woman, is Augustine's own condemnation of himself. Augustine judges that such a man is an adulterer against the concubine.

<sup>22</sup> In *City of God* 19.12, Augustine notes the miserable condition of the mythic Cacus, "who had no wife with whom to exchange endearments, no children to play with when little or to give orders to when they were a little bigger, no friends with whom to enjoy a chat . . .," translated by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Classics, 1987). See also *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 40, sec. 5, for another example (St. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, translated by Maria Boulding, OSB, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* vol. III/16 [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000]), 230-31: "A good man finds rest in his own home, in his household, his wife and children, in his modest way of life, in his smallholding, in the young plants he has set with his own hands, in some building that has been put up through his initiative. Innocent people find their relaxation in things like these."

straightforwardly positive way to the bonding and happiness of a married couple, Augustine's views will look pessimistic. Yet Augustine would probably insist that it is simply realistic.

Sexual pleasure is not a fixed quantity, unambiguously and obviously good as we experience it in a fallen world.<sup>23</sup> Rape, presumably, is pleasurable for the rapist, and husbands are not immune from the pleasure of violent sex just because they are married, and the elements of violence contributing to the pleasure of sex may be subtle enough. Pleasure of any kind (or pain, for that matter) is not simply a physical reality or given for Augustine, but rather is a function of deep prior commitments of the human spirit, of the "heart." The heart that is configured by pride, that is, love of self over God, will take greatest pleasure in its own use of power, whether that is exhibited overtly in rape or in such less obvious forms as narcissistic self-admiration for one's (supposed) excellence as a lover, married or not. Such pleasures are not innocent and ultimately break down communion of persons rather than contribute to it. The heart that is configured by humility, that is, love of God above all, on the other hand, will find pleasure in creatures, including other people, as a reflection of the glory of the Creator, and not as opportunities to exercise and admire their own power and ability, that is, occasions of the reflection of one's own glory.

This means that any given emotion, such as joy or fear, is, in itself, neutral, but can be felt differently depending upon the fundamental configuration of the will.<sup>24</sup> The humble person does not give up feeling joyful, but feels joyful in loving God and neighbor, while the prideful person feels joy in exercising his or her own power in preference to love of God and neighbor. Unfortunately, in fallen human beings, all emotions and desires are formatted or configured to

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<sup>23</sup> I tried to take up this topic in an earlier essay, "Feeling Right: Augustine on the Passions and Sexual Desire," in *Augustinian Studies* 36.1 (2005), 195-217, and the comments that follow on lust and sexual pleasure are treated in greater length there.

<sup>24</sup> As explained, for example, in *City of God* 14.6.

pride, at least at first. No descendent of Adam can say with certainty that any anger they feel is righteous more than self-interested; that their sadness is perfectly conformed to the sadness of Christ in the Gospels and bears no trace of envy or selfishness; and certainly no fallen human being can claim that their desire for sex is free of what Augustine calls “lust.” Lust is a desire for sexual pleasure that is pleasure in one’s own power or ability independent of love of God and neighbor, pleasure, for example, in domination, manipulation, use of the other for self-admiration or gratification, rather than wondering joy in the presence of the other as a creature of God and, as such, a form of praise of God. The latter way of feeling would always be loving, ready at any second to interrupt sex (for example) without regret and with joy in favor of a greater demand of love that might present itself, and so desire for sex would never outstrip reason or freedom. Lust, by contrast, is always at least partly self-absorbed, anxious for gratification even if in competition with other demands of love, and so lustful desire for sex is always, to the extent that it is lustful, unfree, a kind of “goading” or compulsion that intrudes itself regardless of the demands of love or justice. Lust, *qua* lust, in the Augustinian sense, is not a good and can never be made a good. If it became something good, it would cease to be “lust.” That does not necessarily mean it would cease to be sexual desire, or that sex would cease being enjoyable, but the source of pleasure or enjoyment would be freedom, humility and love, with no trace of self-absorption or self-admiration or other seeds of violence as an admixture.

Augustine, accordingly, thought of the Christian life as a journey of healing or purification of the heart, one that entailed leaving behind the pleasures of pride and complacency, and learning the new pleasures of humility and love. Christian life is life in transition, a life which is a struggle, described in Gal. 5.17 as the opposition of the desires of the “spirit” and of the “flesh.” One learns to replace the pleasures of the flesh, meaning all pleasures

configured by pride, with the pleasures of the spirit, meaning all pleasures configured by charity or love.<sup>25</sup> “As long as the spirit has desires opposed to the flesh, this work goes on with great intensity; perverted pleasures, lust, and base carnal impulses are resisted with the gentle joy of sanctity, the love of chastity, spiritual energy and the prized virtue of continence.”<sup>26</sup>

“Continence” in Augustine is not the name of sexual renunciation but the name of the Christian life, the life in transition and healing, a matter of the heart, not dependent upon any particular bodily state,<sup>27</sup> and ultimately a gift from God.<sup>28</sup>

Chrysostom’s view of marriage envisions the husband taking the lead in creating a transformation in his wife, implying that the superiority of the husband’s education and training are sufficient for his own transformation as well. Augustine from the time of the *Confessions* never implies that education or philosophical discipline on its own is enough for the healing or purification he has in mind. In fact a good education and the discipline and prestige that goes with it can more likely become the occasion for pride rather than a formation in humility. Nor is Augustine inclined to imply that the husband, as the male or older spouse, is likely to have the kind of moral advantage whereby he could be the primary agent of the Christian life of transformation for his wife. From an Augustinian view, Chrysostom’s idea of marriage almost verges on the sacramentality of the husband, who occupies the place of Christ *vis à vis* his wife

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<sup>25</sup> Passages dramatizing the opposition of flesh and spirit from Gal. 5.17 are common in Augustine. The most famous is in *Conf.* 8.5.10-12. In *City of God* 14.2-3, Augustine is insistent that “flesh” in the Pauline verse does not mean “body”; the body is not the source of sin, but the soul, and some of the pleasures of the “flesh” have nothing to do with the body (such as envy; see also *Continence* 4.11; 9.22). The *Enarrationes in Psalmos* often take up Gal. 5.17 into Augustine’s preaching.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *Continence* 14.31 (translated by David Hunter, in *Marriage and Virginit*y, Part I vol. 9 of *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), p. 214-15).

<sup>27</sup> *Continence* 1.2-2.5: “It follows that the purity that is exercised in controlling the reproductive organs, which is what is usually meant by the word ‘continence’ used in its literal sense, suffers no violation or infringement, if the more perfect continence we have been speaking about at length is maintained in the heart” (Hunter, *MV* 194).

<sup>28</sup> Married life is a gift of God, even as the single (celibate) life is (Augustine cites 1 Cor. 7.7 as his authority), and both offer continent ways of life, that is, ways of life in transition and transformation from pride to humility.

and household, rather than the sacramentality of marriage, strictly speaking.<sup>29</sup> For Augustine, the transformation of desire is not in the first place a matter of education, either of oneself or, especially, of one spouse by the other, but rather of *incorporation*. Incorporation as a member of the Church into the Body of Christ is also, at least incipiently, an incorporation into Christ's way of feeling, a configuration to his way of loving. It is impossible to acquire a complete picture of the "sacramentality of marriage" according to Augustine without considering first this primary notion of transformation-in-incorporation, especially because Augustine's favorite biblical passages for explaining it are passages associated with marriage.

In his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Augustine frequently comments to his listeners--so frequently that he expects them to know it before he says it—that the voice speaking in the Psalms is always Christ's voice, even when the psalmist's voice seems to be saying something that would seem unbecoming of Christ. Augustine's listeners knew why this could be true, namely, because in the Psalms sometimes Christ speaks in the voice of his members, the members of his Body, and sometimes in the voice of himself, the Head. In a famous passage, Augustine is explaining that the title of Psalm 30 implies that the Psalm was spoken in fear, and then goes on to explain:

Whose fear? Christ's certainly ... He who deigned to assume the form of a slave, and within that form to clothe us with himself, he who did not disdain to take us up into himself, did not disdain either to transfigure us into himself, and to speak in our words, so that we in our turn might speak in his. ... Facing death, then, because of what he had from us, he was afraid, not in himself, but in us. When he said that his soul was sorrowful to the point of death, we all unquestionably said it with him. Without him, we are nothing, but in him, we too are Christ.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Augustine did believe that Eph. 5.22-23 meant that the wife was to be subordinate, that is, obedient, to the husband, but he does not picture Christ's saving work as somehow being mediated to the wife through the husband (see *Contenance* 9.23, one of Augustine's strongest statements of the superiority of husband to wife on the pattern of Christ and the Church and spirit and flesh, and yet there is no indication of the husband as therefore the agent of transformation of his wife in any intrinsic way).

<sup>30</sup>*En.* 2 in Psalm 30, sec. 3 (Boulding, vol. III/15, p. 323).

It is the “bond of charity” that links the Head and members so intimately into one Body, that made the Head cry out, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?” (Acts 9.4) when Saul was obviously persecuting not the risen Jesus, but his members on earth.<sup>31</sup> The charity or love of the Incarnation is compassion so radical that it generates a solidarity in which the Head takes on the sufferings of his members, and speaks in their voice, on their behalf, and in so doing, “transfigures” the members into himself, identifying with them completely. Augustine points out that the Father never forsook the Son, even in the crucifixion, and yet the Son cried out, “Oh God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” speaking the Psalm verse in our flesh, making our situation of abandonment by God because of our sin his own, and yet in making this cry his own, he was “transfiguring it.”<sup>32</sup> Our voice, our fear, our desolation, taken up by Christ’s compassion, becomes his, and our fear is transfigured so that when we give voice to it, our speech is Christ’s, that is, it is a remembrance of and an invocation of his compassion. Our very fear can be the place of contact with Christ’s compassion. “This is the wonderful exchange, the divine business deal, the transaction effected in this world by the heavenly dealer.”<sup>33</sup> Voicing our own desolation, we are at the same time voicing Christ’s solidarity with our desolation, and so, at the same time, at least in faith and in hope, we are voicing our joy at being the objects of such compassion.<sup>34</sup> We are, at least incipiently, feeling the joy of being espoused by Christ. “By a

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 11 (Boulding III/15, p. 331).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 3 (Boulding, III/15, p. 323).

<sup>34</sup> In the second exposition of Ps. 31: “God scourges every son whom he acknowledges (cf. Heb. 12.6). Every single one? Yes. ... Even the only-begotten Son himself, he who was sinless, even he was not exempt. The only-begotten Son himself, bearing your weakness and representing you in his own person, as the Head which included the body in itself, even he was deeply saddened in his human nature as he approached his passion, in order to give you joy. He was saddened that he might comfort you” (*ibid.*, sec. 26).

great sacrament (Eph. 5.31), these two were united in one flesh.”<sup>35</sup> The Incarnation is the great “mystery” or “sacrament” in which Christ espoused the Church by taking on our flesh.

Augustine’s favorite way of speaking of this intimate unity of Head and Body, the Church, is to say that they are “two in one flesh,” (Mt. 19.50). This way of talking, Augustine notes, is not meant to apply only to an ordinary human marriage because Paul says that the two in one flesh, the spouses in a marriage, “are a great mystery [*sacramentum*], but I am referring it to Christ and the Church” (Eph. 5.31-32). “So,” Augustine goes on to remark, “out of two people, one single person comes to be, the single person that is Head and body, Bridegroom and bride.”<sup>36</sup>

It is interesting and significant to note that, unlike his spiritual “father” Ambrose, and unlike Origen before him, Augustine almost never refers to the individual soul as a “bride” of Christ. Ambrose used the wedding imagery from the Song of Songs to refer as much to the relationship between the individual soul and the Word of God as to the relationship between the Church and the Word,<sup>37</sup> but Augustine leaves this former dimension of the allegory almost completely behind. “There are many churches, but one Church; many believers, but one bride of Christ.”<sup>38</sup> Or, in the words of St. Paul, which Augustine cites, “As the body is a unit and has many members, and yet all the members of the body, many though they be, are one body, so too is Christ” (1 Cor. 12.12).<sup>39</sup> The bond of charity does not only link the Head with the members individually, but the members with each other. Our relationship with Christ is ecclesially mediated: in the unity with each other, which is founded in and configured to the charity of

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<sup>35</sup> *En. 3 in Ps. 30*, sec. 1 (Boulding III/15, p. 334).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 4 (Boulding III/15, p. 324).

<sup>37</sup> So, frequently, in his *De Isaac vel Anima (On Isaac, or, The Soul)*. For an English translation, see *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works*, translated by Michael P. McHugh in *The Fathers of the Church* vol. 65 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1972).

<sup>38</sup> *En. in Ps. 64*, sec. 14 (Boulding III/17, p. 281).

<sup>39</sup> *En. in Ps. 2 of Ps. 30*, sec. 4 (Boulding III/15, p. 324).



Christ, we know ourselves as beloved by Christ as by a Spouse. None of us alone can claim the title Spouse or Bride because we do not know ourselves as such apart from the charity that binds us all together. That binding charity is not something we could have created for ourselves or drawn from the innermost resources of our being with a lot of education and effort, but is the love of Christ which prompted the “great sacrament” of the Incarnation, the assuming of human nature into a nuptial union of two in one flesh. We experience ourselves as loved with a Spousal love in our experience of the Church, of the unifying love which was Christ’s “voluntary sleep” on the Cross, giving being to the Church from his wounded side as Eve came forth from Adam’s side:

“I have the power to lay down my life, and I have the power to take it up again. No one takes it away from me; but I lay it down of my own accord, that I may take it up again” (Jn. 10.18). They disturbed him, but he lay down to sleep (cf. Ps. 56.5). In this respect Adam was a type of Christ. God sent a deep sleep upon Adam, in order to fashion a wife for him from his side. Was God unable to make a wife for the first man by taking her from his side while he was awake? ... Because in Christ’s case, a bride was made for him as he slept on the cross, and made from his side. With a lance his side was struck as he hung there, and out flowed the sacraments of the Church.”<sup>40</sup>

The “voluntary sleep” of Christ, that is his utterly freely willed death on our behalf, both is and represents a love so strong that it shows that Christ actually did care about us as much as a man cares about his own flesh, just as Paul invites husbands to think about their wives. We experience this same sense of being cherished as a man cherishes his own flesh, namely, according to Ephesians, as a spouse, precisely *as* members of the Church united in charity. We experience the “marrying” love that prompted the incarnation in the first place as members of the Church. In other words, the primary place to experience Christ’s spousal love is in the Church, simply as a member bound to all others, not in marriage.

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<sup>40</sup> *En. in Ps. 56, sec. 11* (Boulding III/17, pp. 111-12).

Being a member of the Body of Christ, his Bride, is, then, to be configured to the spousal love of Christ for the Church. This does not mean that individually we are fully conformed to the love of Christ and feelings, emotions and affections that are formed by that love, but rather that we are members of a Body whose very identity is that love, and that we are each of us in the process of being transformed more and more fully by that love as we interact with each other. It is a process of our hearts being conformed to the “deep heart” of Christ. Augustine comments on Ps. 63.18 (“*The just one will be joyful in the Lord, and will hope in him; and all the upright of heart will be commended*”), saying that the Lord “represented” or “transfigured” us in himself, bearing our heart “within his own,”<sup>41</sup> and that now we are instructed to correct our hearts by the rectitude of God’s eternally straight heart. This means, among other things, not looking self-righteously and enviously at persons we imagine are more evil than ourselves who are certainly prospering more than we ourselves, wondering why God does not chastise and punish them. That is the kind of “crookedness” of heart that needs correction. We experience the love of God in Christ as a quality of love extended to our neighbor, on the one hand a suffering, but on the other, a joy because we are “yielding to the heart of God.” It is a joy experienced in faith and hope. It is learning to feel a new kind of joy or pleasure.

One may think that up to this point we have not seen much, strictly speaking, about the sacramentality of marriage itself, but that is only true if one is looking for a scholastic style theory of sacramentality, an explicit concept of efficacious sign. The Fathers work in images as much as they do in concepts. David Hunter points out that “Augustine’s discussion of the sacrament of marriage must be clearly distinguished from later Christian formulations,” and that in Augustine “[t]he ‘sacrament’ in Christian marriages refers to the sacred mystery or symbolic

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<sup>41</sup>*En. in Ps.* 63, sec. 18 (Boulding III/17, p. 262).

meaning that is found in the indissolubility of the marital relationship.”<sup>42</sup> He seems to be implying, and in this he is right, that Augustine does not have an explicit theory of marriage as an “efficacious sign” which not only signifies but also makes present Christ’s love for the Church to the spouses.

Yet one can, I think, also exaggerate the differences too much, if one is not careful to include a broader range of evidence from the world of imagery that Augustine creates around this topic.<sup>43</sup> Scholastic sacramental theology does not come out of nowhere. If we are to see it as an authentic development of earlier theology, we must be as attentive to the underlying continuities in doctrine as we are to the differences in formulation and style of thinking. In Augustine’s case, to say that the two-in-one flesh of marriage is an image or a sacred sign, a “sacramentum” or mystery-bearing representation of the unity of Christ with the Church such that the Church is Christ’s Bride, is to have said a lot already about marriage as a “sacrament” even in our later sense of the term. If we can learn so much about the Incarnation, passion and resurrection of Christ – the Paschal mystery – from reflecting on the unity of husband and wife and from using spousal imagery for its various moments, then we have also already learned a lot about how marriage is sacramental for Augustine.

For one thing, even if one cannot squeeze a full blown scholastic theory of sacramentality out of Augustine’s rich and textured imagery, it is not enough to say that marriage is simply and only a sign of something other than itself. One could not learn so much about the reality it signifies if it did not in some way truly make present the reality it signifies, namely, the

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<sup>42</sup> MV, “General Introduction,” p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> On this point, Emile Schmitt, *Le Mariage chrétien dans l’oeuvre de Saint Augustin: Une théologie baptismale de la vie conjugale* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1983) offers a view that states the basis for continuity, *Le Mariage*, 298-301. See especially, on 299, “C’est le moment de se rappeler que, suivant la perspective platonicienne plus or moins inhérente à la structure mentale d’Augustin, une figure n’est jamais pure représentation d’une réalité, mais déjà, en quelque sort, participation à cette réalité. Plus qu’une image “conceptuelle” de l’union du Christ et de l’Eglise, la vie conjugale chrétienne fournit de cette réalité surnaturelle une image “virtuelle,” dynamique.”

transformative and healing love of Christ for the Church. If this is not recognized as often as it could be, it is because Augustine's theology of marriage is mostly separated by commentators from his ecclesiology. But they are joined precisely by the spousal imagery drawn from Scripture, namely Genesis, the Gospel of Matthew, and the Letter to the Ephesians among others. Augustine's theory of marriage is often thought of as somewhat pessimistic or thin, but that again is because it is almost always separated from the ecclesiology that reveals and constitutes its true depth. The sacramentality of marriage in Augustine is entirely derivative of his ecclesiology. The primary place, or logically prior place, where the transforming spousal love of Christ is encountered is in one's membership in the Church, and not in marriage. Nevertheless, that encounter is made present for married Christians in and through their mutual incorporation into each other as "one flesh." They find Christ's Church-forming love, his "spousal" love, in their bond to each other.<sup>44</sup>

In Augustine this is expressed, almost paradoxically, by the image of the Virgin Bride. The Church is virginal because of the purity of Christ's love, which forms the Church. Married Christians participate in that virginity, not in virtue of a frame of mind they have acquired through education or philosophical training, and certainly not because they are physically virgins, but because they are incorporated into Christ:

The whole Church, of which they [widows] are members, is itself his spouse, because by the integrity of her faith, hope and love she is a virgin, not only in holy virgins but in widows and the married faithful too.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> This point is made nicely, in somewhat different language, by Schmitt: "Par le baptême, les époux sont déjà introduits dans la réalité de ce mystère auquel ils participent l'un et l'autre comme membres du Corps du Christ. Leur mariage développe ce double caractère christique et ecclésial qui les mène et les incite à imiter d'une manière spéciale cette mystérieuse alliance. C'est en référence à celle-ci que l'union des chrétiens tire son excellence et sa valeur surnaturelle. Plus qu'un 'bien,' même le plus éminent du mariage, le 'sacramentum' christo-ecclésiale représente, en vertu du baptême qui le sous-tend, le point ultime de référence et le principe de cohérence de toute la doctrine augustinienne du mariage chrétien" (*Le mariage*, 298).

<sup>45</sup> *EW* 10.13 (Hunter, *MV*, p. 121).

Married Christians participate in the virginity of the Bride of Christ in virtue of their baptism. And yet they have this participation not simply because they are baptized, but because marriage affords them a way of life that mediates the “healing” or pure, transforming love that is the origin of the Church in the first place. It mediates the “virginity” of the Bride to those who are not virgins and who continue to have sex. If it is not too cute to put it this way, marriage is the sacrament that allows a way of life for Christians to have sex and not lose their virginity. That is the “excellence” of marriage.<sup>46</sup> It is a transformation-in-incorporation. Marriage is a state of life, a “gift from God,” in which the “two in one flesh” of the literal marriage bond forms a special, small Christian community in which to experience the “marrying love” of Christ, the pure and purifying love of the Incarnation. Note that this is not a special, romantic love different from the love bonding all members of the Church, but rather it is *that* love that marriage mediates or makes present for the spouses. Marriage does not isolate them from the Church or set up a community that is competing with the larger Church, but rather makes the community of the two spouses authentically ecclesial, a “domestic church,” to import a later phrase. It may be that the spouses do have a special, natural affection for each other and such natural happiness that comes from this friendship<sup>47</sup> is all to the good, but that is not what makes marriage “sacramental” in Augustine. Rather, that natural affection is itself transformed or taken up into the higher love that is the bond between all Christians in the Church. This natural affection or

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<sup>46</sup>See also *EW* 10.13, “... it is unthinkable that the holy widows see Christ as their second husband. He was already their spouse, not physically but spiritually, before that, when they were faithful and submissive to their husbands (1 Pt. 3.5-6). The whole Church, of which they are members, is itself his Spouse, because by the integrity of her faith, hope and love she is a virgin, not only in holy virgins but in widows and the married faithful too. The apostle says to the whole Church, of which they are all members, *I have prepared you to present you to the one husband, Christ, as a chaste virgin* (2 Cor. 11.2). He, whom even in the flesh his mother could conceive without defilement, knows how to make it possible for that virgin spouse to bear children without being defiled.”

<sup>47</sup> See *The Excellence of Marriage* 9.9 (Hunter, *MV* 40), “Undoubtedly we should take note that God gives us some benefits that are to be sought after for their own sake, such as wisdom, health and friendship, and others that are necessary for the sake of something else, such as learning, food, drink, marriage and sleeping together. Some of these, such as learning, are necessary for wisdom; others, such as food, drink and sleep, are necessary for health, others, such as marriage and sleeping together, are necessary for friendship. The latter also contribute to the continuation of the human race, in which loving relationships are of great benefit.”

friendship has nothing in it that is intrinsically sacramental, though as part of God's good creation it can be molded by and transformed by the sacrament into an ecclesial reality, into a mystical participation in the Body of Christ. Augustine's theology of marriage is entirely dependent upon his theology of the Church.<sup>48</sup>

It is easy to be misled by the seemingly minimalist language that Augustine applies to marriage. In an era of especially heightened ascetic sensibility that prompted Manichees and even an otherwise orthodox doctor of the Church to disparage marriage (Jerome), Augustine defended it as a good, though a lesser good than consecrated virginity or widowhood.<sup>49</sup> True, marriage is a state of life, Augustine always insists, for the weaker sort of Christian who cannot manage celibacy.<sup>50</sup> It is a "cure for weakness, and in some cases a source of comfort for human nature."<sup>51</sup> The "comfort" comes in such things as "living with one's husband for a long time and having children," the "natural happiness" which Anna, the prophetess, was denied because her husband died when she was young.<sup>52</sup> Marriage provides a way of life that takes up this "natural happiness" into the Body of Christ, so that one experiences all of the joys and comforts proper to natural happiness as part of or in the context of one's incorporation into a new society, the new Body, even if this is an incorporation in a lower or lesser place:

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<sup>48</sup> Another way of putting this is offered by Schmitt, who points out that it is the state of incorporation into Christ, following upon Baptism, that confers upon Christian marriage its sacramental signification of the nuptial mystery of Christ and the Church. He talks about Baptism and Christian marriage as a kind of double symbolism for the one fundamental mystery of Christ's nuptial relationship to the Church: "Il s'agit fondamentalement du même mystère considéré sous un double symbolisme, similaire et complémentaire. Ceci nous permet d'entrevoir que, dans la pensée d'Augustin, c'est dans sa relation au baptême, qui introduit le chrétien dans la mystère du salut, que le mariage trouve fondamentalement sa signification de 'sacramentum'" (*Le mariage*, 257).

<sup>49</sup> David Hunter offers a good introductory sketch to the way in which Augustine's *On the Excellence of Marriage* (*De bono coniugali*) steers a middle course between the positions of the monk Jovinian, who regarded marriage as in every way equal to a life of consecrated virginity, and the disparagement of marriage evident in Jerome's earlier reply to Jovinian. See Hunter, *MV* 14-16, 29-30, and *MEC* 20-22.

<sup>50</sup> See *EM* 10.10, "It seems to me, therefore, that at the present time the only ones who should marry are those who are unable to be continent, in accordance with that advice of the . . . . Apostle," (Hunter, 42), etc.

<sup>51</sup> *EW* 8.11 (Hunter, 120).

<sup>52</sup> *EW* 13.16 (Hunter, 123-24).

How great is the excellence in the fidelity of married women, that is to say Christian and religious married women, can be concluded from the fact that, when he was commanding them to flee from fornication (and certainly he was addressing married person), he said, *Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?* (1 Cor. 6.19, 7.34). So great is the excellence of Christian marriage, therefore, that they are even members of the body of Christ. Nevertheless, while the excellence of chastity in widowhood is greater, it does not follow that in this state of life a Catholic widow is something greater than a member of Christ, but among the members of Christ who occupies a place superior to that of the married woman.<sup>53</sup>

In Augustine, “fornication” refers to sex with a prostitute (as here) or between unmarried persons, but it also always refers metaphorically to a turning away from God’s embrace. Fallen sexual desire, that is, “lust,” is a desire to turn away from God’s embrace and be joined to the body of those who are turned away, towards incorporation into the world, the network of relations and identities configured by pride. “Lust” for Augustine, once again, is not simply a biological desire for an uncomplicated, physical pleasure, but is a desire for an exclusive identity apart from God, an identity wholly in the world. It is the desire for the pleasure of constructing one’s identity exclusively as a cultural project, rather than receiving it first and foremost from God, as a creature of God. This desire does not go away simply because one is married. But marriage turns the evil of lust into a “good use,” without making it, *qua* lust, good. It turns fallen sexual desire, and the community of two it creates, unbelievably and wondrously, into a locus of continuing incorporation into Christ’s body, even if it remains, strictly speaking, a community generated by lust. In marriage, lust itself is exercised within the healing bounds of continence. The fact that lust, *qua* lust, does not become good, is grounds for a continuing formation in humility, lest one regard one’s incorporation into Christ as an achievement of one’s own, a

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<sup>53</sup> *EW* 3.4 (Hunter, 114).

natural achievement of human nature. Lust issues in bragging.<sup>54</sup> Married love is founded in humility, and so in confession and gratitude.

We can look a little more closely at how this works, using Augustine's idea of the three "goods" of marriage. Marriage turns the evil of lust into a good use, and even sexual pleasure which is indulged simply for the pleasure and not for the procreation of children is "pardonable because of the good there is in marriage"<sup>55</sup> as long as there is no intention to thwart the procreative effect of intercourse. Having children is a natural good, the original and primary intention of the Creator in making human beings "male and female," so intercourse that is open to procreation respects the Creator's intention and is an implicit confession of the goodness of God, a training in humility and praise.

The fidelity of the spouses to each other, meaning both that they do not have sex with anyone else, and do not abstain from sex except by mutual agreement, is the second good of marriage. Restricting sex according to the norms of procreation and fidelity is a form of chastity, a discipline which is the form that "continence" takes in married people.

Continence in marriage usually allows some freedom to ... carnal desires,<sup>56</sup> but it reins them in and keeps them under control. Not even in marriage are they let go with unlimited freedom. They are limited either by what is required because of the weakness of one's spouse ... or to what is appropriate for the purpose of having children. ... In so doing, that is, controlling carnal desire in married couples, and placing certain limits on it, and bringing a certain order to its lively and unruly stirrings by imposing definite limits, it uses the evil in people for good. It makes them good and wants to make them perfect ...<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> There is an unforgettable image of this bragging depicted in *Confessions* 1.18.28 and 2.3.7. On fornication as a metaphor for turning away from God, see John C. Cavadini, "Book Two: Augustine's Book of Shadows," in Kim Paffenroth and Robert P. Kennedy, eds., *A Reader's Guide to Augustine's Confessions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 28-29.

<sup>55</sup> *EW* 4.5 (Hunter, 115),

<sup>56</sup> Augustine knew this was usually considerable freedom: see *EM* 13.15 (Hunter, p. 45): "Yet in private conversations, either with married persons or those who have been married, have we ever heard any people give any indication that they never have relations with their wives except with the hope of conceiving?"

<sup>57</sup> *Continence* 12.27 (Hunter, 212).



As already mentioned, continence is primarily a spiritual good, not a physical good.<sup>58</sup> It is another name for the process and the progress of the healing and purification of desire that we receive when configured to Christ. *The Church is subject to Christ*, it says, in Ephesians 5.24, but this does not indicate that the Church is perfected now, without spot or wrinkle, but that it is being perfected both in married persons who are sexually active within the bounds of the goods of marriage, and in celibate persons. This is the Body that cries out with one voice in the Psalms, to the one who *heals all our infirmities* (Ps. 103.3). “Christ heals these [carnal] desires in those who belong to him,” and Augustine is clear that this means both sexually active married persons and celibates, married or single.<sup>59</sup>

Marriage is a way of life instituted in particular as a “cure for weakness,” but this is more than it seems at first, because as such it images the whole Christian life, which (as we have seen) is one continual healing and purification in Christ. The openness to procreation and the fidelity of the spouses are not healing because they are ascetical enterprises undertaken out of a desire to live philosophically, but because they are the expressions of being incorporated into Christ, into his healing love, first at baptism, and then by marriage. This is where the third good of marriage comes in, its indissolubility or permanence of commitment. It is this good especially which carries the “sacrament” or mysterious signification of the love of Christ for the Church<sup>60</sup> and conveys it to the other two goods. A couple might be “two in one flesh” at the time of intercourse, but the indissolubility of marriage makes this “two in one flesh-ness” a permanent condition, a matter not simply of body but of the spirit. It is not sexual union, *per se*, that signifies the “two in one flesh” that is Christ and the Church, but the permanent intimacy of life,

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<sup>58</sup> Abstaining from sex, or from adultery if married, is not enough to make it true continence. Continence is a matter of intention. See, e.g., *Contenance* 12.26-27 (Hunter, 211-12).

<sup>59</sup> See *Contenance* 11.25 for these points and quotes (Hunter, 210).

<sup>60</sup> *EM* 7.6-7 (Hunter 38-39).

body and spirit, that characterizes a Christian marriage in particular<sup>61</sup> and so enables it to carry this significance. It is not significant because it is an extra, added on element of ascetic effort, but *because* of the union of Christ and the Church, because it is a configuration of the couple to that larger mystery and so the presence of it in *their* flesh and spirit. In their married life, their hearts are being ever more closely configured to the love of Christ for the Church, and that is what all of their “use” of marriage means.

How far can that configuration go? The only limit on it is that the spouses cannot be literally virgins.<sup>62</sup> But, Augustine comments, there are the beatitudes, and married persons can grow in perfection of these,<sup>63</sup> and there is martyrdom, and the married have been martyrs, and one can never know from one’s way of life, married or celibate, who at any given time is actually ready to endure martyrdom. Of two people, one married and one celibate, it could be the married person,<sup>64</sup> and martyrdom is a greater perfection,<sup>65</sup> Augustine reminds us, than virginity.<sup>65</sup> Celibacy is more prone to pride than is married life. There is no doubt in Augustine’s mind that consecrated virginity ranks higher than marriage, yet he comments that, apart from Christ and the Virgin Mary, there is no way of knowing if, in fact, those with the highest reward will be married persons or virgins. Also, although the life of consecrated virginity is higher than marriage, there is ultimately no higher way of describing the good of virginity or celibacy except by describing it

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<sup>61</sup> Pagan marriages only have the first two “goods” – that is, at their best, they are simply exercises in philosophical asceticism, though Augustine later modified this view somewhat (see David Hunter, *MV* p. 59, n. 18).

<sup>62</sup> Virgins, both men and women, boys and girls, can follow the Lamb “wherever he goes” (Rev. 14.4), because by virginity they follow him both “in body and heart, wherever he goes” (*HV* 27.27; Hunter, *MV* 85), not just in heart.

<sup>63</sup> See *HV* 28.28, “The rest of the faithful, therefore, who have lost bodily virginity, must follow him, not wherever he goes, but wherever they can. They can, however, go everywhere, except when he walks with the honor of virginity.” Augustine then goes through all the Beatitudes, and concludes, “Those who imitate him in these respects, in that way are following the Lamb. No doubt even married people can follow those footsteps; even if they do not put their feet exactly in the same footprints, at least they walk the same path” (Hunter, *MV*, 85-86).

<sup>64</sup> *HV* 44.45 (Hunter, *MV*, 98): “...how does the virgin know whether, perhaps, because of some hidden spiritual defect, she is not yet ready for martyrdom, whereas the other woman, whom she delights to think is her inferior, is already able to drink the cup of the Lord’s humility ...? ... How can she know whether perhaps she is not yet a Thecla, but the other woman already is a Crispina?”

<sup>65</sup> *HV* 46.47 (Hunter, *MV*, 99).

in terms of marriage imagery, that is, of the permanent intimacy of Christ and his Spouse the Church, and of the ongoing configuration of this Bride, in the person of all who are members, to her Spouse. Without this imagery, celibacy itself has no language to interpret its own significance, and would be forced back merely onto the language of philosophical discipline and self-perfection. Marriage is a *visible* sign of the purifying love of Christ for the Church. For that reason, and because, as a visible sign, it *presents* an encounter with that love for those who are married, it can also serve as a symbol for other ways of life in the church in which that love can be found. That is why marriage is “sacramental,” and not, paradoxically, the higher way of life of virginity.

Augustine has been criticized frequently because he could find no positive place for sexual pleasure in a marriage,<sup>66</sup> but the sacramentality of marriage should not, in Augustine or anywhere else, be a function of the contribution of sexual pleasure, but of Christ. Marriage, in restraining and channeling lust, does promote the healing transformation of prideful pleasures into pleasures of justice and charity. As mentioned above, lust in marriage is exercised within the healing boundaries of married continence, and so within the framework of healing, purifying love. Lust is not the principle of its own healing and can contribute nothing to the good of the

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<sup>66</sup> This is the position of Brown (*BS*, 402). Hunter (*MV*, 19) agrees and extends the point saying that Augustine “could find no truly positive role for sexuality and procreation in the Christian dispensation.” He does not explain what a “truly positive role” might be. It is true that, for Augustine, procreation does not make married women equal to those who are consecrated virgins, for procreation is common to Christians and non-Christians alike, and “one does not give birth to Christ, but Adam” (*HV* 6.6). Before the Incarnation, physical conception and birth was a necessary prophetic sign, because the Jewish people as a nation had to be built up in order to bear prophetic witness and in the end give rise, physically, to the Savior (*HV* 9.9, etc.). But since the Incarnation, it is no longer strictly speaking necessary for Christians, since there are so many people of so many races being born who can be reborn spiritually (see *EW* 8.11, etc.). “The essential good of marriage is indeed always good; but for the people of God it was once an obligation of the law, while now it is a cure for weakness, and in some cases a source of comfort for human nature” (*HV* 8.11, already quoted in part above). It is only because procreation is a genuine and unquestionable good, *even* after the Incarnation, that marriage can hold any kind of a cure for weakness, and no form of Christian life can offer anything greater, in one way or another, than such a “cure.” Procreation does not in itself confer holiness; it is not the sacrament itself; and marriages that are non-procreative through no intentional fault of the spouses are still valid and beneficial to the spouses, but that is only because marriage of itself is ordered to the good of procreation and even the unintentionally childless respect that ordering. On the point of the “positive” role of sexual pleasure in marriage, see also Cavadini, “Feeling Right.”

married partners, yet exercised in the boundaries of married continence it is perhaps worn down by the glacial pressure of married continence. For Augustine, this does not mean the sexual desire is ever free of lust in this life, just like all fallen emotions are never quite free of disordered passion. What sex feels like as this transformation takes place is left largely to the imagination in Augustine. It must, at least, mean learning to take pleasure in humility and all of its fruits. Sex that is truly humble may not seem pleasurable in the first instance to those whose desires have not been configured by marriage, Christ's sacrament, into the love that gave its life for someone ugly and undesirable and hostile. One does not "lust" after such pleasure, yet it is highly desirable, a true joy and real pleasure, greater than any "lust" can promise or provide, and one may, in fact, experience it now, even if only (or mostly) "in faith and in hope."<sup>67</sup>

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#### Brief Afterword on a Contemporary Application

The "theology of the body" that was so creatively articulated by Pope John Paul II as a way of offering a robust account of the meaning of Christian marriage in the idea of the "nuptial meaning" of the body, its fundamental orientation to self-donation as symbolized and enacted in permanently committed sexual union that is open to procreation, is a true theological contribution to Christian reflection on marriage. It draws on a Thomistic sensibility more than an Augustinian one, and perhaps does a much better job than Augustine does in accounting for the "positive" role of sexual intercourse open to procreation in marriage. Yet not all theologies can have all goods; perfectly orthodox theologies can have differing strengths that complement one another. Augustine's view is probably more suspicious of the perceived pleasure of "self-

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<sup>67</sup> I would like to thank Nancy Cavadini, Cyril O'Reagan and Jean Porter for kindly reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper. I also profited from the comments of those at the seminar on the "Sacramentality of Marriage" held at the University of Notre Dame in October, 2005. Of course mistakes that remain are my own responsibility.

donation,” which, just as much as the celibacy of a proud virgin, can be a pleasure of pride without even realizing it.

Without disparaging the goodness of the body or of procreation, Augustine locates the sacramentality of marriage more firmly in the good of Christian fellowship in the church. For the same reason that Augustine’s theology of marriage will look very different, in the end, from Chrysostom’s, it will look different from similar efforts, medieval or modern, to Christianize a philosophical or educational ideal, whether that is Aristotelian or “personalist.” For one thing, for Augustine, there is no question that the husband in a particular marriage has or mediates the place of Christ in the sense that he is the agent of transformation or purification, or that he is more the “donor” and less the “receiver.” Both husband and wife are members of the one Body, the Bride of Christ; both are profoundly receivers before they are anything else. It is in the first place as members of the Church, bound to all others in charity, that they are configured to Christ’s transforming and purifying love. Members of the Church are not in the first place souls in individual relation with the Word of God, but rather members of each other in the flesh that the Word “married” in the Incarnation. This flesh now signifies Christ’s love, and one is configured to it by incorporation, not in the first place by education, effort or gendered bodily form. Marriage mediates to the spouses in a more immediate way, and in a way that is predicated on the possibility of sexual intercourse, the same love that characterizes and binds all members of the Body to all others.

Further, if sexual desire in Augustine is a much more ambiguous affair than in Thomas or in the theology of the body he has inspired, it also means that it may make it easier to find a pastoral approach that understands the intractable problems that may arise in matters sexual. Sexual desire is not as self-evidently and unassailably positive, and its expression not as

straightforwardly uncomplicated, as more “positive” views sometimes make it seem. These positive views may lend themselves, without the intention of doing so, to harsher pastoral expectations (if it is so straightforward, then it’s *your* fault if you can’t get it right), or to unnaturally idealistic or romantic expectations in those about to be married, which could end up in serious disillusion and rejection of the whole Catholic idea of marriage. Foregrounding the issue of “healing,” where that means a slow, patient formation in the humility of Christ, in the purifying love of the Incarnate, may not be such a terrible pastoral strategy in an age where everyone is convinced that anything that feels good is in fact evidently good, and where gratification, or an enthusiastic feeling of “self-donation,” cannot always be called forth. Without making the roles of men and women in sex and reproduction interchangeable, and without removing the good of reproduction as intrinsic to marriage, Augustine finds a way to make the “self-donation” of the spouses a function not primarily of natural inclination, but of the long, hard, purifying pedagogy in the loving humility of Christ which begets the only true joys.

I do not want to speak against the theology of the body, which, as John Paul II preached it (as opposed to the versions of it found in some of its proponents less learned than he was), I admire. But I would argue that, like any theology that is necessarily limited in some ways and superior in others, it can benefit from a complementary spirituality based on the Augustinian view. This complementarity should be seen as a positive, and as something worthy of development in its own right.