

GOD, MARRIAGE *and the* EUCCHARIST: *ONE and the* SAME LOVE



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Icons of the Divine

Within Christianity the most ancient form of visual art is the Sacred Icon. Unlike other forms of religious art, the icon leaves little room for artistic freedom; the colours, symbols and style all have a significant meaning. When a person looks into the eyes of the icon they are meant to see beyond the image into the divine. The icon is deemed sacred, because it points to the sacred.

At the very dawn of creation, God made icons, icons of himself. Yet these icons were not carved in wood or stone, embroidered on cloth, or created as a fresco or mosaic:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our own image, in the image of ourselves.”
So God created man in the image of himself,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.
And God saw all he had made, and indeed
it was very good.”¹

The original icons of God are us! Man and Woman. In our physical bodies (which are ‘very good’) we image a God who is pure spirit. It is a reality that should impress upon us the value and dignity of each human person. We are visible pictures of the invisible God! Like no other creature or part of creation, man and woman, in their complementary bodies, echo the Creator. Just as the icon is sacred because it points to God, the life of each human person is sacred. And because as human beings we carry God’s own breath of life, each person is worth infinitely more than the most beautiful piece of sacred art.

If an icon is meant to reveal the divine, and if we are the ultimate icons, it is necessary to ask, who is this God that we image? What are we supposed to be images of? In his first letter Saint John gives the answer when he states, “God is Love”.² Reflecting on these words, Pope John Paul writes that because we are created in God’s image, “**Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being**”.³ Traditionally theologians have said it is our capacity to reason and to choose which makes us God’s images; John Paul is expanding this understanding. Whether you are married, single, priest or religious; whether you are a teacher, plumber or astronaut - all of us are called to love. To be fully human is to love.

It is very easy to say that we are called to love but what does that mean in reality? We hear the word love so often. We can say we love chocolate, we love our spouse and we love God, but these are (hopefully) not all the same type of love. What we need to ask is, how does God love? When we know that, we should be able to discover the exact way in which we are meant to im- age God.

The Trinitarian Love of God

It was Christ himself who taught us that God does not exist as an isolated being but as a unity of three distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Pope John Paul once said, “**Our God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude, but a family**”.⁴ The Trinity is a mystery but we can, in some small way, understand the love between the Divine Persons. In the Trinity, the Father *freely* gives himself *totally* to the Son in a *faithful* gift. The Son receives this love and responds, *freely* giving himself *totally* to the Father in a *faithful* gift. This love between the Father and

The cross may be the highpoint of God’s love but Christ did not leave us with an event that would always be ‘in the past’. We see in two of the Sacraments a very real connection to the love of Calvary: that is, in the Eucharist and in Marriage.

The Eucharist: The Love of the Trinity

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI reflects on the Holy Eucharist as the Sacrament of Charity. His opening words contemplate the Eucharist as being the extension of the Cross. On the Cross, Jesus offered his Body and Blood for our salvation; in the Eucharist, Jesus continues to offer us his Body and Blood, and by doing so, he reveals to all ages God’s infinite love for every man and woman.⁵ The Eucharist is very much connected to the Trinity because through the Eucharist we enter into that same love which is the essence of God (free, total, faithful, fruitful). It is the same love which moved Jesus to embrace the Cross.

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the Son is so perfect, so dynamic and so alive, that it is actually *fruitful* in the person of God the Holy Spirit. We can say then, **that the love of God has four qualities, it is free, total, faithful and fruitful**. As image-ers of God we are called to love as God loves, with a love that is free, total, faithful and fruitful. In a particular way, the sexual moral life, at its heart, is about engaging in actions that reflect the love of God. Anything less would not be worthy of human persons.

In the Old Testament we see these qualities of love in the relationship between God and his chosen people. It was in person of Jesus though - the Son of God and God Himself – that the love of God was full revealed. In Jesus, the Trinity showed its love in a way that would speak to all generations. **And that love was shown on the Cross.**

When we look at a crucifix we see God’s love poured out for the world. It is a statement of individual love for every person who would ever live. It is a love that mirrors the love of the Trinity. Jesus went to his death *freely*, he gave *everything* he had, in a *permanent* gift, and his death bore the *fruit* which allows us to live with the real hope of heaven.

During every Mass, at the Consecration, we hear those words from the last supper, “**This is my Body, given up for you**” (Matthew 26:26). Christ gives everything up for his Bride the Church, and at the Altar, we, as the faithful Bride, are called to receive the gift. It is the gift of complete self giving, a gift that is nothing less than the love of the Trinity. That is why St Augustine wrote, “If you see love, you see the Trinity.”⁶

Marriage: A Commitment that Points to God

When a couple are getting married they stand before the priest or deacon and are asked a series of questions:

Have you come here freely?
And without any reservation?
Do you promise to be faithful unto death?
Will you accept children lovingly from God?

What is the minister asking? The man and woman are being called to declare that they are willing to love with the love of the Most Holy Trinity! Free, Total, Faithful and Fruitful. It is the only type of love that is suitable for marriage. This is no Hallmark Card love...this is the real deal! Are they willing to offer themselves to one another with the depth of love which Christ revealed on the Cross? Are they willing to receive one another in the way the Church receives the love of Christ in the Eucharist?

In this way we see the intimate connection of the love between a man and a woman in Matrimony, and the love of Christ in the Blessed Eucharist. Pope Benedict discusses this idea in *Sacramentum Caritatis* stating that,

“Conjugal love is a sacramental sign of Christ’s love for his Church, a love culminating in the Cross, the expression of his ‘marriage’ with humanity and at the same time the origin and heart of the Eucharist.”⁷

The Holy Father is saying that conjugal love (including the sexual union of spouses) is a sacrament; that is, it is a reflection of divine love. Not only do we image God through our reason and free will, but we image God through our very bodies! Marital intercourse is meant to be

their bodies to speak the truth and renew once again the vows of their wedding day, when they promised to love one another with the love of the Trinity.

The whole of married life is a series of actions and the language of these actions is Eucharistic:

The Eucharist is the sign of the covenant between Christ and his bride the Church

The Marital embrace is the sign of the covenant between husband and wife

The Eucharist consummates the union of Christ and the Church

The Marital Embrace consummates the Sacrament of Marriage

The Eucharist is the living out of the baptismal promises

The Marital Embrace is the living out of the wedding vows

The Eucharist is the summit of our union with Christ (if we receive it worthily)

The Marital Embrace is the summit of the union of husband and wife (if they receive one another worthily).⁹



a participation in the inner life of the Trinity! God desires husbands and wives to live their lives with a free, total, faithful and fruitful love, because that is where they will find the joy their hearts long for. The greatest symbol of married love is the Eucharist because it is the sacrament of love. The Eucharist should inspire every couple (indeed every person) to love with a more perfect love, a Divine Love.

Marital Love and the Eucharist

Some religions teach that the way to reach perfection is to ignore the material and focus on the spiritual. We know however that even through fallen, creation is good. Pope John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body* had this to say:

“The body, and it alone, is capable of making visible what is invisible, the spiritual and divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world, the invisible mystery hidden in God from time immemorial, and thus to be a sign of it.”⁸

In the sexual union, husband and wife are called to use

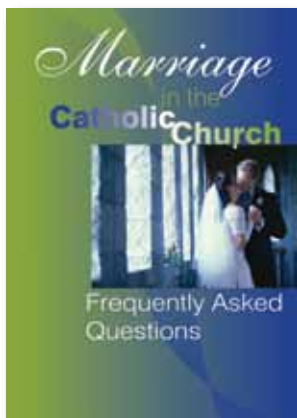
Living in Truth; Loving in Truth

If we can speak truth with our bodies, the converse is that we can also lie with our bodies. And sexual morality is about asking if our sexual actions are truthful. Recently the Australian Bishops issued a booklet of frequently asked questions about marriage and they had this to say:

“By loving well – loving as Jesus loved (John 15:12) – we can become more like God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who give their total selves to each other without holding back and so make gifts of themselves. By failing in love, on the other hand, as when we sin sexually or against our marital commitment, we obscure the image of God in ourselves”¹⁰

With the truth of God’s love for us visible through the Cross, the Eucharist and Marriage, it becomes easier to see why Christianity has always regarded pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, homosexual actions, contraception, and divorce and remarriage, as grave concerns. They are serious concerns, because the sexual act which

is meant to imitate the free, total, faithful and fruitful love of God becomes conditional. An impediment is introduced which undermines one or more aspects of that love. When truth does not abound in love, when God is closed off to the most intimate aspects of a person's life,

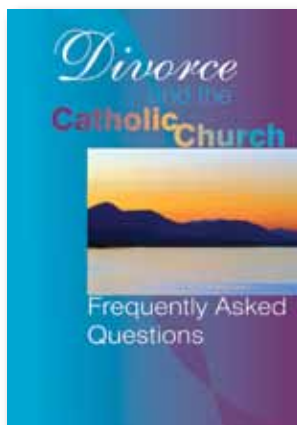


we lose sight of that great joy for which we were made.

It is necessary to discuss the difficult situation experienced by those who have embraced the Sacrament of Marriage and have then divorced and 'remarried'. Christianity has always taught that Catholics in this position are not permitted to receive Holy Communion.¹¹ The marital covenant is meant to be a public sign

of a free, total, faithful and fruitful love. Unless a Church tribunal has found a marriage invalid, the marriage bond is unbreakable. Jesus himself insisted on the original intention of the Creator that marriage be indissoluble.¹² The Australian Bishops commented, "both the Eucharist and Marriage transmit and nourish unity, life and love They also manifest the unbreakable determination of God to continue to do this for humanity and to continue to call us to do so for each other"¹³

All Catholics (married or not) who approach the altar to receive *Holy Communion* must be in a *Holy Union*



with Christ and with Christ's Church. Without judging the personal guilt of any individual, and while divorce does not of itself exclude Catholics from receiving Holy Communion, a 'marriage' after divorce does not share in that union which images God's love. Those who remarry after divorce are excluded from the Eucharist as the bond with their original spouse is

still intact. The Eucharist is no mere symbol, it is the real Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and Saint Paul cautions all Christians against receiving these gifts unworthily.¹⁴ Saint Paul's words are the words of the Church and must be understood as a response to Truth. Pope Benedict, striving to unite Truth and genuine pastoral care states that "where the nullity of the marriage bond is not declared and objective circumstances make it impossible to cease cohabitation, the Church encourages these members of the faithful to commit themselves to living their relationship in fidelity to the demands of God's law, as friends, as brother and sister; in this way they will be able to return to the table of the Eucharist."¹⁵

I Lift my Eyes to You (Psalm 123)

None of us can afford to take our eyes away from the Cross, we need this love. That is why the great Saints of the Church would never tire of receiving the Blessed Eucharist each day; that is why the Lord gave us the Sacraments. We need Jesus. We might consider this analogy: if Marriage is the vehicle that will carry a couple to heaven, worthy reception of the Eucharist is the fuel for that journey, and regular confession is like the mechanic who both prevents and fixes any problems. Through worthy and faithful reception of the Sacraments we immerse ourselves in the love of the Trinity and we strengthen ourselves against any temptation. Our happiness in this life will work in direct correspondence with the level of openness we have to loving as God loves. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta understood the joy of the nuptial love to which we are called. She remarked that "When I see someone sad, I always think, she is refusing something to Jesus".¹⁶ The more we open ourselves to the love of Christ; the more we receive and live that love in the Eucharist and in Marriage; the more we become what we are meant to be; image-ers of Divine Love.

1 Genesis 1:26-31

2 1 John 4:16

3 John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio: Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World* (1981), 11.

4 John Paul II, Homily at Puebla de Los Angeles (Mexico), Palafox Major Seminary, 28 January 1979.

5 Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis: Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission* (2007), 1.

6 *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 8.

7 *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 27.

8 John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Walstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 201.

9 Christopher West, *And the Two Become One: Unity, the Eucharist and God's Plan for Marital Love* (CD). www.ascensionpress.com

10 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: Frequently Asked Questions*, (2006), 4. <http://lifemarriagefamily.org.au/marriagefaq.pdf>

11 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1650.

12 Matthew 19:3-8

13 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Divorce and the Catholic Church, Frequently Asked Questions*, (2007), 17. <http://lifemarriagefamily.org.au/divorcefaq.pdf>

14 1 Corinthians 11:23-27

15 *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 29.

16 Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, (New York: DoubleDay, 2007), 33.

*FRONT PAGE – This Icon was painted at St Issacc of Syria Skete by Iconographer Brendan Kulp. To view more of his work or to commission an Icon please visit www.stjohnsiconstudio.com

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