'Til Death Are We Made One

Marriage and the Kingdom of God

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The relationship of sacramental marriage and eschatology is not widely discussed in pastoral or theological circles. Here four ways in which this eschatological content might express itself are presented: the relationship of marriage to Christ’s union with the church, the trinitarian persons-in-communion, creativity, and ultimate joy.

The frustration, hurt, and confusion of the newly widowed woman’s voice was so powerful I nearly had to pull the phone away from my ear: “Why isn’t there marriage in heaven? I just don’t get that!”

In the midst of her tears, I gathered that something at Sunday Mass had upset her, so I suggested asking the priest about it. This was met with a sigh: what good is that, she reasoned, when it is the Bible that teaches there is “no marriage in heaven”?

For that, I had no response. I attempted to console her by speaking about the communion of saints, sidestepping the problematic scripture passage. Nevertheless, I could tell from later conversations that my lame efforts that day held little solace for this grieving woman.

This experience has led me to ask, just what is the relationship of the sacrament of marriage and eschatology? What did Jesus mean by saying that in heaven there will be no marrying? When couples promise on their wedding day to love and

honor each other “until death do us part,” does that mean that in heaven they will be isolated from each other?

I doubt any Catholic expects the experience of heaven to include dating, planning wedding receptions, or procreating. However, when I talk with people in the pews, I get the impression that many expect to be reunited with their spouses (and others) in heaven. Certainly marital disagreements, arguments, and sins will evaporate in the next life, but might not there be something sacred from the marital relationship that will continue when we encounter the beatific vision?

In Catholic theology, marriage is often described as relating to creation in that God created Adam and Eve to share life together harmoniously. The sacrament of marriage is also viewed in the light of redemption, in the way that spousal love mirrors the sacrificial love Christ has for his bride, the church. However, the relationship of sacramental marriage and eschatology is less widely discussed. Sometimes it is said that marriage is an eschatological sign, but not actual participation in the spiritual reality of the next life.

It is my belief that marriage—a genuinely sacramental marriage—contains within it not only “sign value,” but elements that form a prolepsis (foretaste) of the coming kingdom. If we truly believe that marriage is sacrament, then it stands to reason that something inherent within it relates to the eschaton. After a brief theological grounding, this article proposes four ways in which sacramental marriage may contain a foretaste of heaven in the way it relates to the union of Christ and the church, persons-in-communion, creativity (new life), and ultimate joy.

It is important to note that when we speak of the afterlife, the fulfillment of salvation history, we speak in imagery that both reveals and conceals. We think of heaven as a space adorned with clouds, a great banquet, an eternal city, or a peaceful resting place. Although these images reveal something about heaven, they are nevertheless limited. Because heaven involves complete union with God, the Divine One who surpasses our language abilities, there is still more mystery than understanding. As declared at the Fourth Lateran Council and still taught in the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for every analogy comparing Creator and created things, “no similitude can be expressed without implying an even greater dissimilitude” (CCC 43). Because of this, the various images we use for heaven—including the ones in this article—are only a partial disclosure of the deeper reality of heaven. For “. . . eye has not seen, and ear has not heard . . . what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9).

**No Marriage in Heaven?**

Over the course of Christian history, much has been made of Jesus’ statement, “When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but they are like the angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). It is understandable that those
who embrace religiously-oriented celibacy have often found inspiration in this scripture verse. Jesus’ values—contrary to what many think—did not place family loyalty or producing children at the top of the list. Instead, Jesus sought to serve God and form a larger family of believers, a community not bound by bloodlines, social status, or nationality (Rubio, 48ff).

Unfortunately, this Bible verse has often been taken out of historical and cultural context. Scripture scholars Malina and Rohrbaugh explain that this episode takes place in the midst of a challenge-riposte, a competitive debate designed to strip the loser of honor or good standing in the community, something of high importance in an honor/shame culture. When the Sadducees devised the hypothetical story about the woman married seven times to seven brothers without giving birth, they were not seeking theological learning—they already “knew” that there wasn’t any afterlife. What they really wanted was to discredit Jesus in the community by making him appear ignorant, unsophisticated, and foolish. Through the challenge-riposte, the Sadducees might be able to make Jesus a social outcast and break apart his followers. Jesus, however, rises to the occasion by telling the Sadducees they do not know the Scriptures, practically an insult to this group that prided themselves on their devotion to the books of Moses (188; 257–258; see also Robinson, 530).

Although Mark 12:18-27 (and parallels Matt 22:23-33; Luke 20:27-40) has often been utilized to elevate vowed celibacy over marriage, Jesus does not say married people cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. He says that in the next life “they neither marry nor are given in marriage,” meaning that there are no arranged weddings in heaven, in which men marry and women are given. In the time of Jesus, marriage was less about personal love and more about a contract between two family clans, with the woman used as part of the exchange matter. When Jesus comments upon marriage of his day, he is saying that in the kingdom of heaven, there will be no more patriarchal marriage (Schüssler Fiorenza, 121; 144).

Over the course of Christian history, our theological understanding of marriage has developed in such a way that today we view sacramental marriage as a personal relationship of love and communio. Because of this, there has been a deepening emphasis on the spiritual good of marriage, and theologians have begun asking about its eschatological significance. For example, while recognizing that

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marriage in the next life would not exist exactly as we know it, Yves Congar nevertheless believed that some element of the marriage union would endure in the next life (104). Rosemary Haughton describes marriage as a “microcosm of the coming Kingdom” (83). In *Theology of Christian Marriage*, Walter Kasper notes that the tradition has seen marriage as “penultimate,” and yet he writes of marriage as a sign of eschatological hope and a “symbolic anticipation of the gathering together and reconciliation of mankind at the end of time . . .” (42–44). David Cloutier explores the eschatological dimension of sexual ethics as described in the writings of Pope John Paul II, Germain Grisez, Lisa Cahill, and Herbert McCabe. Italian theologian Carlo Rocchetta views sacramental marriage as more than mere eschatological sign:

As “sacrament” marriage is a sign and a way of eschatological realization. It is not merely a penultimate reality; it is an ultimate reality—prolepsis, sign and participation in the eschatological marriage of Christ with the Church and of God with humanity. The text of Mt 22,30 on the beatific state where there will be no more marrying and we shall be “like angels of God” does not authorize us to reduce the significance of marriage to the mere ambit of history. Marriage is a sign of an “other” reality, it bears in itself a content that is eschatological and proclaims in the act the hope of a glorious existence towards which the whole church is orientated. (183)

If marriage is truly lived in Christ under the influence of the Holy Spirit, I believe, along with Rocchetta, that it contains eschatological significance and content. Four ways in which this eschatological content might express itself are found in relationship of marriage to Christ’s union with the church, the trinitarian persons-in-communion, creativity (new life), and ultimate joy.

**The Union of Christ and His Bride, the Church**

The relationship of Christ to the church is often described using bridal imagery. Each one of us, male or female, is called to be Christ’s “bride,” and we often say that the entire ecclesial body (including the hierarchy) is also called the “bride” of Christ. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is sometimes described as the lover or spouse of his bride, Israel. In the New Testament, Christ is the bridegroom, in love with his bride, the entire church community. Saints sometimes describe their relationship to Christ in terms of bridal mysticism. In the Book of Revelation, the church is the bride who has dressed herself in a garment of righteous deeds, prepared for the wedding feast with the Lamb of God (Rev 19:6-8).

In Ephesians 5:21-33, the comparison of the husband/wife relationship to the Christ/church relationship is one of “reciprocal illumination” (mutually informative)
That is to say, Christ’s loving relationship with his bride, the church community, can teach married couples something about marriage; and at the same time, a healthy, loving marriage can teach us something about the love Christ has for us.

In our day, the verse from Ephesians relating to the “subordination” of wives sounds bizarre to couples who have a healthy, interdependent marriage and flat-out wrong to those who suffer spousal abuse. Analyzing the text in the original Greek, Mackin points out the textual subtleties that are not readily apparent in English. For example, verse 22 in English reads as an independent sentence: “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.” However, Mackin explains that in the original Greek, verse 22 is merely a descriptive clause, a group of words that serves as an example of how all Christians are to “be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” in verse 21. (In Greek, verse 22 does not even have a verb.) In other words, the author is teaching all Christians to be mutually deferring to one another, just as, for example, wives of the day deferred to their husbands (Mackin, 71).

When writing about this same Ephesians passage, Pope John Paul II also viewed marriage in terms of mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ. Noting that the biblical author was drawing from marriage customs of the time, the pope emphasized the need to instill gradually in our hearts the gospel “innovation” that this loving deference is in our day not just wives to husbands, but also husbands to wives:

. . . whereas in the relationship between Christ and the Church the subjection is only on the part of the Church, in the relationship between husband and wife the “subjection” is not one-sided but mutual. (Mulieris Dignitatem, no. 24)

Additionally, the writer of Ephesians gives a new command to husbands, to love their wives. In modern society we take this idea for granted, but this was not the case in ancient times: the wife was treated more like a material possession. And just what type of love is the husband to have for his wife? Ephesians says that Christ loved his bride, the ecclesial community, so much that he “handed himself over for her”—in Greek, the verb is paradidomi, a clear reference to Christ relinquishing his life on the cross (Mackin, 73). So, the first-century husband was being told to so love his wife—not as chattel, but as a person—that he would be willing to even die for her sake if necessary. (I believe it is assumed that wives love their husbands to the same degree.)

In today’s wedding liturgy, this mutual love and deference is expressed in the vow to love and honor one’s spouse. Schillebeeckx noted that in the life of faithful couples, “the reality of Christ’s redemption, the bridal relationship between Christ and the church, is made actual and present in marriage itself” (117). This covenantal relationship of Christ and his people is not limited to earthly time but
continues into eternity, and so it is that marriage contains a prolepsis (foretaste) of the coming kingdom of heaven, in which all will be gathered into one communio of saints.

Because of this, Alexander Schmemann explains that in the Orthodox Church, marriage is not a promise “until death do us part,” but rather “until death unites us completely” (91). Other Orthodox theologians agree that sacramental marriage has an eternal dimension (Meyendorff, 196–197; Ware, 85; Ford xxxiii–xxxiv). (The term “Orthodox” is used in this article in the same way these writers use the term, referring to Eastern Orthodoxy, especially as it applies to the Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Churches. Some ideas herein may also apply to other Eastern Christians, including some Eastern-Rite Catholics.) Genuine marital love draws us close to God: “Marriage is . . . the seal of a deep friendship. . . . United in the flesh, one in spirit, they urge each other on by the goad of their mutual love. For marriage does not remove from God, but brings all the closer to him, for it is God himself who draws us to it” (Gregory Nazianzen, 138–139).

**Persons-in-Communion**

Another way in which Christian marriage relates to the here-but-not-yet dimension of the kingdom is found in the way the couple (and to some extent their children) mirrors the persons of the Holy Trinity. John Zizioulas explains that while Western Christian theologians of past centuries have tended to locate the being of God primarily in the oneness or “substance” of the Trinity, Eastern Christian theologians traditionally have emphasized the primary importance of the hypostaseis or three distinct persons of God as containing the “ontological ‘principle’” of God (40–41). Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov describes this relationship of the creation of male and female to the Trinity as follows:

A one-personed God would not be love. God is Trinity, one and at the same time three. The human being, as a closed monad, would not be His image. . . . “One toward the other” forms their co-being; and thus it is from the beginning, in principio, that the human being has been a nuptial being. . . . (115)

I am not suggesting that we prescribe gender roles based upon persons of the Trinity. Both spouses are called by their baptism to immerse their lives in Christ; both are temples of the Holy Spirit. It is the concept of marital persons-in-communication mirroring the trinitarian persons-in-communication that is of interest. In his “theology of the body,” Pope John Paul II also uses “communion of persons” in similar fashion. The harmonious balance of two-yet-one that exists in a healthy marriage is a human expression of the mysterious three-yet-one that exists in God, who is three hypostaseis (distinct “persons”) in one ousia (being). In fact, the Greek Orthodox
Church sees the union of the married couple as so grounded in this trinitarian understanding that the term *synousia* (consubstantiality) is also used to describe sexual intercourse (Guroian, 87–88; Constantelos, 25). As St. John Chrysostom explained, marriage is a mystery in which the bond of husband and wife is “not an empty symbol. They have not become the image of anything on earth, but of God Himself” (75).

In the Orthodox wedding liturgy, this trinitarian image of God is expressed in the crowning ceremony. The decorative crowns or floral garlands placed upon the nuptial couple express their calling to be a New Adam and a New Eve, the crown of creation and a new creation in Christ. Marriage in the Lord is the reestablishment of this right relationship between men and women, and it empowers them to be servant leaders in their “little kingdom” of the home. Because of their sacrificial love for each other and their call to witness to the Gospel, the crowns also remind us of the crown of thorns Christ wore out of love for his bride, the church, and the crowns of glory that await them, as saints, in heaven.

**Creativity**

While eschatology usually refers to the imagery of “last things,” it also refers to something new. God’s creative side, so often thought of as just a one-time event when Adam and Eve came into being, is a permanent characteristic of the God we call Creator. God is ever-creating, ever-designing, and ever-renewing the face of the earth. In fact, we say that Christ, the *Logos*, is *eternally begotten* of the Father. We profess belief in the Holy Spirit as the “Giver of Life.” The author of Revelation talks about the eschaton in terms of God doing something new: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away” (21:1). The vision of heaven includes a new Jerusalem, complete with One who sits on the throne declaring, “Behold, I make all things new” (21:5).

Although not all marriages result in the birth of children—something I recognize from personal experience—most married couples will become parents. As any parent knows, being life-giving is far more than just giving birth; it involves decades of commitment to guarding, guiding, teaching, and nurturing one’s children and sometimes one’s grandchildren. I like to think of this as “creativity” because that is what the commitment to children demands over the long haul. This process of giving new life is no mere worldly affair, as if children were mere physical matter. Parents shape and influence the growth of their children’s eternal souls (to use an older term), and these souls are an integral part of the kingdom, destined for eternal life. In this way, parents participate in the creative, redemptive, and eschatological work of God. Those who adopt, offer foster care, or nurture life in other ways do the same.
Whether or not they become parents, all couples are called to bring life to the world in other ways. Spouses bring life to each other in the way they comfort, challenge, and nurture one another. They may find themselves caring for the lives of elderly family members.

At the same time, healthy marriages are not turned so inward on family life so as to become narcissistic. The love they share overflows to others, bringing about generativity in varied places such as the workplace, soup kitchen, legislative meeting, artist studio, or global community. These other ventures are not “worldly,” but rather bear fruit in God’s vineyard (Gaillardetz, 101–103; McCarty, 23, 45). To be a truly Christian family is to be participating in acts of social transformation for the good of all people, not just members of one’s own family (Cahill, 83–91, 135–137). In its dedication to nurturing life, marriage participates in the new life of the here-but-not-yet kingdom of God.

**Ultimate Joy**

In the Orthodox wedding liturgy, the beginning portion takes place in the back entryway of the church. Here in the gathering space, the couple declares their natural affection for each other. After a blessing, the procession of the bridal couple and priest into the church sanctuary is an outward expression that their marriage is entering into the sacred order of the kingdom of God:

Then, having blessed the natural marriage, the priest takes the bridal pair in a solemn procession *into the church*. This is the true form of the sacrament, for it does not merely symbolize, but indeed *is* the entrance of marriage into the Church, which is the entrance of the world into the “world to come,” the procession of the people of God—in Christ—into the Kingdom. The rite of crowning is but a later—although a beautiful and beautifully meaningful—expression of the reality of this entrance. (Schmemann, 89)

As the Orthodox wedding liturgy nears completion, the couple joins hands and follows the priest in procession around the table three times, called the “Dance of Isaiah”: “As in baptism, this procession in a circle signifies the eternal journey which has begun; marriage will be a procession hand in hand, a continuation of that which has started here, not always joyful, but always capable of being referred to and filled with joy” (Schmemann, 91).

After this circular procession, as the liturgy draws to a close, the priest removes the couple’s crowns, praying, “Receive their crowns in Thy Kingdom.” This is a way of saying “make this marriage a growth in that perfected love of which God alone is the end and fullness” (Schmemann, 91). Marriage contains both the sacrifice
and joy of Christ’s paschal mystery in the way spouses love each other—and hence the promise of still greater joy in the coming kingdom.

**Pastoral Significance**

While discussing the relationship of marriage and eschatology may feel removed from the ordinary daily life of married couples, I think it is important for those who do theology and minister to the faith community to understand how our underlying theologies of marriage impact our perceptions. The ideas presented here are intended to serve as a springboard for further development of an inspiring marriage spirituality.

These days, many younger couples (and older ones) have chosen cohabitation or civil ceremony over a church wedding. Developing a richer spirituality of marriage might gradually inspire next generations to want something more of their marriages, something sacramental. Liturgical wedding prayers might incorporate this richer meaning. Consider this excerpt from a French-language nuptial blessing:

> In receiving the bread of life and the cup of blessing, let them undertake to give their life for others; let them raise in faithfulness to the Gospel the children who are born of their love; let them seek before all things the Kingdom of God and his justice; let them be useful to the world where they are living; let them show themselves welcoming to those who are poorer; let them always be able to give you thanks and let them come one day to renew their covenant in communing together in the risen body of Jesus Christ. . . . We know that he intercedes before you for our friends N. and N., today, tomorrow and all the days of their life unto eternity. (Joncas, 228 [my italics])

Those involved in homiletics, catechesis, or other ministries might reflect upon the concrete examples used in presentations. Are simple examples about married life included? Why or why not? My observations are that some homilists only mention marriage in terms of “don’t” (don’t use artificial birth control, don’t divorce, don’t forget your children’s religious instruction) while others ignore married life completely. Some from this latter group have told me they are trying to be sensitive to those who are single, divorced, or separated. This is a good thought, but I think it would be still better to include simple illustrations drawn from a wide diversity of people who may be single parents, retired seniors, young adults, people from foreign countries, and, yes, married couples. Whenever possible, these examples should be connected to promoting the growth of the here-but-not-yet kingdom of God.
In recent years, Rublev’s icon of the Trinity has gained popularity in Catholic circles. The three divine persons of the Trinity are portrayed seated around a table in a manner that suggests peaceful harmony, humility, and loving relatedness toward one another. What is less known is that other icons of the same theme include figures of the married couple, Abraham and Sarah, serving the three “angels” a meal. The placement of Abraham and Sarah in the icon varies, but they, like us, are being drawn into the presence of the Divine Persons-in-communion. Modern versions of this icon could be incorporated into homiletics, catechesis, liturgical environment, and wedding services. Meditating on this icon, one is led to many of the concepts discussed in this article. The married couple is invited to use their life together to serve the Lord, to enter into deeper communion with the Trinity, to approach the eucharistic table together, to experience the gift of new life (after this mystical encounter Sarah finally became pregnant), until one day they approach God face-to-face in the joy of everlasting life.

References


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