

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TRINITARIAN LIFE FOR US

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Part Two: *Marital Relationship as an Image of the Trinity*

IN PART ONE of this series of three linked articles, the changed approach to understanding the doctrine of the Trinity was explored through the work of two Catholic theologians, Walter Kasper and Catherine LaCugna. By putting emphasis on the saving work of God in the world (rather than the life within Godself) and on the relational dimension of the meaning of ‘person’, these authors showed how the Trinity can start to be seen as *the* perfect communion with implications for how we can lead our lives. (See *Compass* 2010, no. 4, pp. 24-28.)

This second article identifies twelve particular attributes from this re-vitalised understanding of Trinity and considers them from the perspective of their likeness to the marital relationship. Through these twelve attributes, it will be shown that, in their marital relationship, a man and a woman can together image the Trinity, albeit in a limited human way.

This awareness then will lead in the third article to a deeper contemplation of marriage as vocation, God’s call to married couples to use their individual and couple gifts as followers of Christ in the work of salvation. Various perspectives of marriage as vocation will be developed into an understanding of how this vocation can be lived in the life and image of the Trinity. As well as imaging Trinity, the married couple not only can follow this perfect example of unity and community as a model but also is called to participate actively in this trinitarian life.

Speaking of marriage and the family, John Paul II states: ‘In this entire world, there is

not a more perfect, more complete image of God, Unity and Community. There is no other human reality which corresponds more, humanly speaking, to that divine mystery’ (West 2003).

While there are limitations in the extent to which the marital relationship directly corresponds to the Trinity, it is possible to identify many parallels between the two forms of relationships. In the following paragraphs, attributes of trinitarian life are identified from the reflections in Part One and considered from the perspective of their likeness to the marital relationship. These particular attributes are not meant to be seen as either exhaustive or necessarily discrete from each other, but are meant to assist in showing how the marital relationship can be seen as being in the image of the life of the triune God.

1 Love

The Trinity is founded on love. For Kasper, the statement ‘God is Love’ (1 Jn 4.8, 16) is trinitarian; only because God *is* love can God self-communicate to us *as* love (Kasper 1984, 248). Our life is meaningful only when our love mirrors the love of the Trinity (Hogan and Le Voir 1992, 73). The Holy Spirit, as the spirit of love of the Father and of the Son, transforms the love of man and woman into part of trinitarian love, the very being of God (Roccheta 1996, 17). For Morton and Barbara Kelsey, ‘the heart and centre...of any life is love; and love is fed by the spiritual life, which, in turn, is deepened by the very love it feeds’.

They see a strange intertwining between human love and spiritual love in that we cannot sustain the demands of human love without being in touch with God as Divine Lover and yet, without human love, spiritual love will wither (Kelsey and Kelsey 1986, 241-2). By physically surrendering their bodies in love, the married couple becomes a physical image of God (Kelsey and Kelsey 1986, 76). Our sexuality is but one of the many ways God shows love for us; we in turn are expected to be channels of God's love to others (Kelsey and Kelsey 1986, 244).

2 *Self-Giving and Receiving*

The love consists of self-giving and receiving. Just as in the loving relationship of the trinitarian persons, so too in marriage there is 'a going out and a waiting in expectant joy to be filled by the response of the Other' (Gallagher, Maloney, Rousseau and Wilczak 1983, 8). From the time a couple first 'falls in love', there is a strong sense of the need to be with, and do things for, each other; this is exemplified in outings together and surprise gifts. While this romance phase often continues within the marriage, there usually comes an additional, even deeper response born out of the lifelong commitment to each other and full acceptance of the other, faults and all. This loving response can be expressed in the willing giving of time at inconvenient moments – choosing to be the one to attend to crying children in the middle of the night—or forgoing deep personal desires, such as career opportunities, for the sake of the other. And yet the paradoxical outcome is that the more each of the spouses gives of themselves to the other, the more they also receive, and in this knowledge and realisation they feel more loved and inspired to give even more in return.

Married couples also have the wonderful experience of physically being able to give themselves to each other. The depth of sensation of using the body as the gift of self to the other far exceeds any momentary thrill of mere



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sexual gratification for one's own pleasure which can be experienced between a man and a woman who have not committed themselves to each other in marriage. Through the deep experience of giving and receiving love to and from each other, the couple also comes to approach a sense of the boundless love of God for us—and *within* God as Trinity.

3 *Freedom of Choice*

Just as love is a choice of wills of the divine Persons in the Trinity and in creation, so too the consents of the spouses is an irrevocable choice which constitutes marriage and reflects God's love within the Trinity (Hogan and Le Voir 1992, 78-9). While marriage has not always involved freedom of choice (with issues of property transfer, political gain or social class often overriding in the past), men and women in contemporary society have more freedom in their choice of *whether* to marry and *whom* to marry. For each couple, this choice is probably a gradual process made with varying yet increasing degrees of certainty before being verbally expressed in mutual consent both privately at the time of proposal and publicly in the wedding ceremony.

Choosing a marriage partner is the most life-changing decision most humans ever make; while there are some indicators which may point the way as to the likelihood or otherwise of a successful outcome, there are no guarantees. Despite, or even because of, these risks, it is important for each spouse that this choice is made in freedom; their consent to

each other is consent to share an unknown future which will necessarily involve adjustments, changes and growing together as they progress through their faith and life journey (Leal 1996, 16-17).

4 *Persons in Relationship*

Our creation in the divine image is not just as individuals but also as persons-in-relationship sharing the same nature; man and woman are two ‘incarnations’ of human nature, created for each other (Butler 2003, 38-9). It is in their relational lives and in living as Christ did that both men and women can image God, despite women having different body parts to the human Jesus (LaCugna 1991, 314). In marriage especially, man and woman can complement each other in a mutual and reciprocal way by making decisions together and sharing roles which, rather than being defined simply on gender basis, may change according to prevailing circumstances, interests and skills (Butler 2003, 38-9). These interactions in their shared life require a willingness at times to take on less pleasant roles and to be flexible. This shared-life pattern is an expression of the couples’ love and mutuality; it emanates from and contributes to their ongoing marital relationship.

5 *Equality*

The persons in the relationship are equal; there is no hierarchy. True complementarity, as distinct from patriarchal complementarity, ‘requires complete mutuality, equality and reciprocity of persons’ (LaCugna 1991, 314). In any form of true community – and especially so of the Trinity and of marital relationship – the focus is on the other, not oneself; persons relate as equals in personhood, regardless of talents or rights (LaCugna 1991, 258). And yet this is not to suggest that everything is shared on a fifty-fifty basis, as in a business partnership for instance, for this would imply that each must seek or ensure their ‘fair share’, thus

focussing on oneself and hence working against the essential notion of self-giving. Instead, the spouses in marriage discuss together and then decide *as equals* as to the best outcome of any decision for them *as a couple*. What may initially seem on the surface to be a difficult decision because of the different potential outcomes for each spouse will often in the end not be so, if the focus is on the other rather than on oneself.

6 *Unity*

The love forms a unity—a communion of love. In the Trinity, there is love so perfect that the result is perfect unity, one God, and this perfect communion of love is ‘the highest and most influential model for the sexual union between man and woman’ (Dennehy 1981, 11). But marriage is much more than just physical unity. Human sexuality is significant in that it takes us beyond ourselves toward another and affords the potential of genuine communion among persons who are equals (LaCugna 1991, 314).

Mary Anne McPherson Oliver sees a growing recognition of ‘the human phenomenon of coupledness as the locus of a spiritual organism comparable to that of the *soul* for the individual and the *spirit* for the community’ (Oliver 1995, 26). This new entity comes into existence when the couple first realise that they are mutually chosen and continues to be formed and shaped during the couple’s life together (Oliver 1995, 33). In sacramental terms, the presence of the Trinity, already bestowed on the individual through grace at baptism, is effected in the Christian marriage in a new manner, as a joint communion of both spouses and their participation in trinitarian love (Roccheta 1996, 17).

7 *Differentiation*

Within the unity there is a differentiation, a uniqueness. As it occurs in the Trinity, the love between man and woman unites them without

destroying the uniqueness of each (Dennehy 1981, 11). The spouses genuinely foster and encourage this uniqueness of each other and grant each other the freedom to develop according to their own potential and God-given gifts (Gallagher *et al* 1983, 16-17). Yet in the marital relationship there can be tension between dependence and independence, and the challenge for each couple is to determine the balance of interdependence that enhances both of the spouses and their love (Whitehead and Whitehead 1983, 227-8). For Paul Tillich, 'unity in communion is only possible in perfectly centred persons who have no desire to destroy the uniqueness of the other. One cannot establish superiority over another without destroying him or her as a person' (Patton and Childs 1998, 135).

8 Intimacy

Within the unity, there is profound intimacy. In the Trinity, this intimacy is described as *perichoresis*. Gallagher *et al.* contend that marital intercourse—'two whole persons seeking to attain union through self-sacrificing love'—does not merely express or symbolise intimacy with God; they also affirm that this '*is* trinitarian intimacy, the couple's intimacy with the three divine persons' (Gallagher *et al* 1983, 12). While intercourse is not the only form of marital intimacy, it is often central to a couple's maturing in this virtue; through risking closeness in this way, the spouses learn to let down their defences to each other in other ways as well. Intimacy in marriage involves an overlapping of space, a willingness to be influenced and an openness to the possibility of change; it invites each spouse beyond the self, but only with a strong and flexible sense of self can the invitation be accepted. Mature intimacy includes a sense of autonomy and an awareness of continuing responsibility for oneself; if the capacity for closeness is not rooted in a sense of self-adequacy, the resultant intimacy will not lead to mutuality but to symbiosis (White-

head and Whitehead 1983, 226-7).

9 Permanence

While the trinitarian relationships are eternal, the marital relationship is 'forever' (or, at least at the time of promising this, it is intended to be so). The irrevocable commitments of the spouses in mutual self-surrender reflect the unbreakable fidelity of God within the Trinity and to those whom God loves outside it (Hogan and Le Voir 1992, 79). And yet the human reality is that some marriages do fail even though the marriage vows of each spouse were taken in all sincerity and with best intentions. In a specific marriage, each spouse is only able to make and live out the particular commitment to the other, despite flaws and limitations, by drawing on intimacy resources; without the resilience of intimacy, fear of what commitment may demand over the long run can overcome the urge toward union. Mature commitment is the fruit of married love, not its initial seed. In commitment, identity finds its final form and, through commitment, the relationship of love becomes a marriage (Whitehead and Whitehead 1983, 229).

10 Fruitfulness

Just as in the Trinity where the Father and Son bring forth the Spirit by their love, so too marital love is open to another who proceeds from the mutual love of the husband and wife (Gallagher *et al* 1983, 13-14). Carmody expresses this aspect even more directly: 'Healthy Christian marriage is divine love taking flesh so concretely that people fuse sexually and create new life' (Carmody 1985, 172). But the creativity of marriage, as in the Trinity, is not limited to generativity. Evelyn and James Whitehead see that the creative result of a marriage—children, shared purpose or a life project—has a life which comes from the couple but is more than the couple, and may well die unless it is nurtured properly. These dual aspects of fruitfulness—the capacities to

generate life and nurture it—first find expression in the relationship itself and then in the care of the children of the marriage (Whitehead and Whitehead 1983, 234-5). Finally, fruitfulness also encourages the couple to be able to let go, to hand on the future to those of the next generation and to give to them the space to create. ‘While the survival of the species depends on couples’ creativity and fruitfulness, the future is always necessarily beyond them and their control’ (Whitehead and Whitehead 1983, 245-6).

11 Transcendence

Transcendence is the outward focus of fruitfulness. In the Trinity, God’s superabundant love necessarily pours itself out; so too in married love human beings naturally give forth to others (notably their spouse and family) the love they have received from God and nurtured in their spiritual life (Sandor 2004, 168). Just as the love relationship of God in the Trinity reaches out beyond this to humanity, so too the married couple can allow their love for each other (and for God) to extend outward into other loving communities (Gallagher *et al* 1983, 15). Transcendence extends the couple’s fruitfulness beyond the family boundaries. As is the case for individuals, marriages and families are not meant to be only for themselves. The couple’s contribution to the faith community and to wider society is as much a part of human fruitfulness as is procreation (Whitehead and Whitehead 1983, 236). This contribution can occur through the use of one’s own gifts, with the loving support of the other, or through their unique togetherness.

12 Transformation

Not only do the couple contribute to civic and faith communities, but also they have the power to transform them:

As two spouses open themselves to God’s personalised energies of love in their love, they have the strength to believe the transfiguring power of God, who wishes to accomplish the

same unification of the world as a whole. ...They move together and individually into a broken world to cooperate with Christ in the world’s transformation by loving service (Gallagher *et al* 1983, 17).

This power of transformation is generally underappreciated by the couples themselves, by society and by the church. Through the deep love they have shown each other and from their learned experience of forgiveness and acceptance in their relationship, the mature couple has gifts to offer over and above any individual skills and attributes they may also have – and it is especially the acquired couple gifts through grace which are needed to transform the world towards the love and peace desired for us by God.

Concluding Remarks

Through these twelve attributes, it can be seen that, in their marital relationship, a husband and wife can together image the Trinity both in its immanent (inward) and economic (outward) dimensions. Even more significantly, the breadth and depth of the marital love relationship can best be articulated as the most powerful human expression of the love relationship of the three divine persons, despite the human limitations of this.

While the full extent of this image is perhaps not always fully appreciated or applied, the realisation of this likeness is not altogether surprising when considered in the context of God’s plan for the salvation of humanity and the role of Spirit-filled couples as instruments in it.

This growing awareness then will lead in Part Three to a deeper contemplation of marriage as vocation, God’s call to married couples to use their individual and couple gifts as followers of Christ in the work of salvation. Various perspectives of marriage as vocation will be developed into an understanding of how this vocation can be lived in the life and image of the Trinity. As well as imaging Trinity, the married couple not only can follow this perfect example of unity and community as a model but also is called to participate actively in this trinitarian life.

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For the baptised there is an even more profound dimension to this sacredness. For the baptised, marriage is a sacrament. A sacrament is a sign. This loving communion that exists between a husband and wife is the clearest sign and indication available of the extent to which God loves the human family. That's why the scriptures use so many marital images to describe God's relationship between God and God's people. Just as married love is a commitment to grow in intimacy, to permanence and to fidelity in good times and in bad, so God's love for us is all these things.

Yet, our understanding of marriage as a sacrament goes even further than this. Not only do a couple mirror or reflect God's love, they embody the presence of Christ in a unique way. They are tangible signs of what it means to be a Christian. In short, the sacrament of marriage reveals to us the intimate relationship we share with Jesus. We are his beloved.

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