

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TRINITARIAN LIFE FOR US

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Part Three: *Living Marriage as Vocation in the Life of the Trinity*

IN PART ONE of this series, the doctrine of the Trinity was explored through the work of 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.

Part Two identified twelve particular attributes from this re-vitalised understanding of Trinity and considered them from the perspective of their likeness to the marital relationship. Through these twelve attributes, it was shown that, in their marital relationship, a man and a woman can together image the Trinity, albeit in a limited human way.

In this current Part Three, an understanding of how marriage as vocation is lived in the life and image of the Trinity is developed by briefly outlining various authors’ perspectives of marital vocation and then gathering aspects of their work together within the twelve attributes of trinitarian life identified from the reflections in Parts One and Two.

Perspectives of Marriage as Vocation

The concept of marriage as vocation has been explored by many theologians and other authors. Here, the approaches of eleven authors are, for purposes of convenience and differentiation, given a label to indicate the primary perspective.

The psychological perspective of Evelyn

and James Whitehead sees a successful marriage dependent on a lifelong maturing of the couple in response to their growing awareness of their own identities and to the realisation of invitation coming from a loving God (Whitehead & Whitehead 1983, 199). In his ‘self-actualising’ perspective, William P Roberts sees each of us as being called to image this loving God by becoming ‘all we can be’ in both our state of life (married, single or celibate) and our occupation or role (Roberts 2004, 99-101).

From an ethical perspective on the married state of life, David Leal looks particularly at the ‘internal goods’—the experiences of the couple—and sees marriage as vocation to be a special calling not just to the married state but even to one particular person, chosen above all others (Leal 1996, 7). Walter Kirchschrager draws on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians for a biblical perspective in which he notes that marriage as a spiritual gift (synonymous with ‘God’s call’) is not only for the benefit of the couple itself but also for the church and the world by giving testimony of God’s loving life in Trinity (Kirschrager 2003, 159-161).

This experience of the God of love within the life of the married couple also comes through in Carlo Rocchetta’s three main areas for reflection in his sacramental perspective of marriage as vocation, as consecration and as communion (Rocchetta 1996, 5). From a missionary perspective, Thomas M Kelly argues a Christian marriage which takes place within an ecclesial community can both give

and receive much: the couple provides a visible example of and witness to the unconditional love of God through their unconditional commitment to each other and their outreach beyond this; the church provides the married couple with a supportive community that challenges materialism and convenient relationships (Kelly 2004, 153).

Coming from a marital spirituality perspective, Monica Sandor observes that true marital love is now understood to participate in the very being of God rather than merely being a metaphor for the love of God. Her research suggests that the Christian vocation of the married couple is to experience in their life together that ‘the personal spiritual quest for holiness overflows into the building up of the kingdom of God’ (Sandor 2004, 174). For Patton and Childs in their pastoral care perspective, marriage—understood as a shared calling—is not about living up to preconceived ideals but rather an undertaking to be involved deeply in the real world (Patton & Childs 1998, 101).

Adopting a societal perspective, William Johnson Everett also considers the private and public dimensions of the life of the married couple. He sees that to have a vocation is to be called out and lured ‘by a power and a purpose beyond ourselves’ to that which is not yet—‘the unique new life God intends for us’ within God’s redemptive purpose. Each married couple forges a new and unique identity which seeks its own worldly manifestation as the couple’s vocation (Everett 1985, 111-3).

From a feminist perspective, Denise Carmody seeks a fuller recognition (and hence expression) of vocation both for women and for the married couple in the life of the church. The church’s standard of suitability for ministry should be determined by a person’s gifts of the Spirit, not by one’s gender or marital status (Carmody 1985, 163-7). Another author seeking a fuller expression of the couple’s gifts is Julie Hanlon Rubio who argues that Christian mothers and fathers have a ‘dual voca-



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tion’—to care for their children and to contribute to the betterment of society. The call to be active disciples in the world today is especially strong for Catholics whose rich tradition of social teaching stresses the spiritual dimension of work and the prophetic role of the family in society. However, it is necessary to balance this with the commitment to care for children which is also part of the Christian tradition (Rubio 2004, 193-6).

Marriage as Vocation and Trinitarian Life

Aspects of the work of these eleven authors are now gathered within the twelve attributes of trinitarian life which were first noted in the previous article to demonstrate how, through their vocation, the married couple images Trinity (albeit to a limited extent).

1 Love

Just as the Trinity is founded on love, so too a personal vocation is a particular way of being called ‘to love, to care for world and to witness to Christian faith’ (Whitehead & Whitehead 1983, 199). The vocational aspect of marriage occurs within an intimate partnership of life and love which is a manifest realisation of the love of Christ as Redeemer and of the irrevocable love of God for humankind (Roccheta 1996, 6-9). The married couple is called to grow in their love (Sandor 2005, 255) which first renews them and then seeks to spread out and renew the earth (Everett 1985, 113).

2 Self-Giving and Receiving

Characteristic of successful marriages, the trinitarian sense of self-giving and receiving depends on confidence in 'self' (Whitehead & Whitehead 1983, 195) and on awareness, acceptance and practice of one's particular spiritual gifts, or 'God's call' (Kirschlager 2003, 158-9). The spouses participate no longer as individuals but as a couple (Rocchetta 1996, 9) in an active form of discipleship, of mutual giving and receiving (Kelly 2004, 149), by being Christ-like to each other (Roberts 2004, 102) and by putting the needs of the other before one's own (Sandor 2005, 248).

3 Freedom of Choice

The love in marriage is also given in freedom of choice. Marriage should be a chosen way of life which matches both identity and calling (Whitehead & Whitehead 1983, 208). To marry before being aware of one's vocation is to marry prematurely (Whitehead & Whitehead 1983, 201) because a vocation, whether taken to refer to a state of life or an occupation, must be freely chosen on its own set of merits for each person (Roberts 2004, 99). Leal's view of marriage as vocation also includes the calling not just to marry but to marry a particular person, chosen above all others, and he adds that the couple's consent is to share together a largely unknown future involving change and transformation (Leal 1996, 12-17). Kirschlager adds that 'marriage is not simply a choice but is God's calling of two persons within a community' (Kirschlager 2003, 158).

4 Persons in Relationship

It is perhaps as persons in relationship that the married couple most closely resembles the Trinity. Just as their relationality gives meaning to the three divine persons, it is the process of 'becoming one flesh' that gives meaning and purpose to a marriage. Rocchetta sees the vocational aspect of marriage as being es-

entially expressed in the man-woman relationship, occurring within their human community of love, not beyond or above it (Rocchetta 1996, 6). Patton and Childs agree on the importance of the relationship when they say that vocation is a way of looking at life and marriage as a process, with its meaning discovered from the journey itself rather than the manner in which the journey was begun (Patton & Childs 1998, 101).

Kirschlager finds even in Paul's rulings in 1 Cor 7 that marriage is described 'less in legal terms than in terms of the persons involved', i.e. in the relationship with each other. Kirschlager specifically sees that marriage images trinitarian life by participating in the process of a diverse sharing of life that reflects the vibrant life of God (Kirschlager 2003, 157-8). Kelly believes that in an intrinsically sacramental marriage, the spouses consciously choose to focus on their relationships, rather than on worldly things, but also accepts that these relationships do not always run smoothly (Kelly 2004, 152). Along similar lines, Leal sees marriage as a vocation towards a future and a quality of relationship which largely cannot be predicted (Leal 1996, 16-17). For Sandor, the core vocation of the couple includes the call to 'incarnate in their relationship ... the peace and unity that Jesus prayed for' (Sandor 2005, 248). In arguing that the couple's vocation flows from their baptismal life, Roberts sees that, as the couple grows in marital union and overcomes divisive issues, their relationship comes to new life and, relying on the action of God's Spirit, empowers them to grow in shared truth and love to reach out to the broader human community (Roberts 2004, 101).

So, just as the relationships among the Father, Son and Spirit are essential to the meaning of trinitarian life, it is the relationship between husband and wife which gives primary meaning to their vocation.

5 Equality

That being called to marriage as vocation means that the persons in the relationship are

equal is mostly accepted and implied in the various authors' perspectives in words such as 'mutual' and 'shared', rather than expressly stated. While Kirchsclager notes from 1 Cor 7 that Paul understands marriage as 'a partnership of equals' (Kirschlager 2003, 158), it is perhaps not surprising that Carmody's feminist perspective emphasises the point most clearly when she writes that the gift of femininity 'moves marriage towards an equal partnership, a shared life in which humanity actually is male-female, woman-man'. She later goes on to assert the priority of marriage among the sacraments 'because it most clearly shows the male-femaleness of our image of God' and laments the lack of equal rights for married people among the Catholic Church's administrative structures—a non-trinitarian approach (Carmody 1985, 163 & 167). Just as there is equality of the persons of the Trinity even though there is a significant differentiation of roles, so too husband and wife—created by God as equals—share equally in their vocation, albeit in different ways.

6 *Unity*

There is widespread acceptance that marriage as vocation involves a process of change and transformation of the spouses such that their love forms a unity—a communion of love. It is especially in this way that the couple can image the Trinity where the interaction in love brings about perfect communion. Everett sees that call to the vocation of marriage in part emanates from human need and desire for one's sense of worth to be affirmed and that this happens in the experience of marital communion which leads to the forging of a new and unique identity (Everett 1985, 111-2). Carmody adds that through their marital communion the couple can together accomplish things that neither could alone (Carmody 1985, 163). Leal agrees that becoming 'one flesh' is a way of living 'which is both more than and other than the two people who enter it' (Leal 1996, 15).

For Rocchetta, 'it is the very community of

love between man and woman which, in the grace of the Holy Spirit, becomes a 'sacrament' in Christ and in the Church' (Rocchetta 1996, 6). Kelly also refers to the couple's 'true community of love' from which the mission of social transformation emerges (Kelly 2004, 153). The couple's growing together in marital union and giving of themselves to each other brings new life in their relationship and opens themselves to greater communion with God (Roberts 2004, 101-3) which is part of the 'personal quest for holiness' within the Christian vocation of the married couple (Sandor 2004, 174).

7 *Differentiation*

A true vocation is one that also preserves within the marital unity the differentiation or uniqueness of each spouse. As earlier noted, the persons of the Trinity, though equal, have different roles; this is also true for the married couple. The Whiteheads caution that to marry before one has some awareness of one's own vocation is to marry prematurely and that, while marriage is a commitment to faithfulness to each other, faithfulness does not begin in marriage but in fidelity to who one is called by God to be (Whitehead & Whitehead 1983, 201 & 211). Roberts agrees that one's vocation is to image God, who loves each of us in our unrepeatable individuality, by becoming all we can be in accordance with our unique personality and gifts (Roberts 2004, 99). Hence, these authors are in agreement that one's 'state of life' vocation needs to be discerned from one's gifts and sense of call – and that this vocation may not be to marriage; but even if it is to marriage, then there is still a need to be true to oneself. Kelly sees that in a sacramental marriage the spouses consciously seek to fully realise each other's humanity and thereby will the good of each other (Kelly 2004, 152).

Patton and Child have a view of marriage as vocation to mean an understanding of the two spouses—separately and together—being responsible for making a future (Patton &

Childs 1998, 101). Everett points out that as well as the couple having its own vocation, another equally important aspect of vocation recognises that each of us has a unique role to play in God's renewal of creation (Everett 1985, 113). Similarly, Carmody asserts the couple's vocation with her expression, 'the gift of marriage', as well as emphasising the unique contribution of each partner in her use of 'the gift of femininity' (and by implication, the gift of masculinity) which is not forgone within the unity of marriage (Carmody 1985, 163).

8 Intimacy

The vocation of the couples in marriage to become 'one flesh' requires that within their unity there is profound intimacy. It is by accepting sexual life and intimacy 'as gifts from God and as finite images of God's very life' that, by becoming one, the couple most closely images trinitarian unity and intimacy (Roberts 2004, 100). Marriage is described by the Catholic Church as 'an intimate partnership of life and love' (Gaudium et Spes, n. 48). The intimacy within marriage refers to much more than only conjugal union and is achieved through the self-giving in love and the continual striving to break down barriers through greater honesty, humility and empathy (Roberts 2004, 103).

9 Permanence

In choosing the vocation of marriage, the partners must commit to the relationship as being permanent, as the lifetime sharing of one's self with another (Whitehead & Whitehead 1983, 195). As much as is possible in human terms, this images the eternal vocation of the Trinity. The Catholic Church refers to marriage as 'an unbreakable unity' demanding total fidelity (Gaudium et Spes, n. 48). However, Leal points out that the marrying couple are giving their consents to a future which is largely unknown (Leal 1996, 16-17). Similarly, the Whiteheads recognise that a vocation is 'a lifelong conver-

sation (rather than a single cosmic command)' and hence there is a need for the couple to 'learn the difficult virtue of fidelity to growing and changing persons'—oneself included.

Patton and Childs also acknowledge that marriage, as a shared calling, is not about living up to preconceived ideals but rather an undertaking to be involved deeply in the real world (Patton & Childs 1998, 101). Kelly goes even further by saying that there needs to be a better understanding of marriage that 'allows for the human element ... to fail at times, even break completely' so that real married love can become 'a form of discipleship ... and not a form of magic' (Kelly 2004, 149). Hence, while virtually all Christian marriages are undertaken as a calling to a permanent relationship (and most are lived out that way), human aspects in the changing circumstances of real life will inevitably mean that some marriages will fail.

10 Fruitfulness

The vocation of marriage usually carries with it expectations—by the couple, the church and society—that the unified love will be fruitful, especially in the procreation of children, in a way which parallels the creative and nurturing dimensions of Trinity. Indeed, this is a special and particular outcome of marriage intended by God and has been the dominant aspect emphasised by the church. The Whiteheads highlight the ongoing fruitfulness of Christian parents who, through living out their vocation of marriage, not only give birth to a new generation of Christians but also model for them a way of life which they too can later live out (Whitehead & Whitehead 1983, 207).

But the fruitfulness in marriage is not limited to procreation. Through their love for each other and the presence of the Spirit, the couple grows in themselves and in their giftedness which is another level of fruitfulness. (However, while fruitfulness is undoubtedly an important attribute, church and society have tended

to focus most heavily on this fruitful aspect of marriage and the good that comes from it while largely ignoring the transcendent and transforming dimensions covered below.)

11 Transcendence

The married couple begins to fulfil their vocation further when their unified love becomes transcendent such that they begin to reach beyond the relationship between themselves and with their immediate family. Kirchsclager, Kelly and Roberts use similar language to describe how the sacramentally-married couple, through their mutual love, reach out to meet the needs of the vulnerable and weak when they share this love with them for the others' sake rather than their own; in doing so, they witness to God as a God of love (Kirschlager 2003, 161; Kelly 2004, 150 & Roberts 2004, 102).

Sandor's research finds a growing recognition of the need to correct what is now being seen as an inward focus on the family but also acknowledges that there is a delicate balance involved and that developing an outward focus may depend on the married couple reaching a more mature stage of their journey together (Sandor 2004, 172-3). Rubio addresses the issue directly with her 'dual vocation' approach and draws on Jesus' teaching to warn that the married couple, as disciples of Jesus, must not make care for their family their only mission in life (Rubio 2004, 195).

12 Transformation

Marriage as a vocation undoubtedly reaches its climax when the couple becomes a transforming force in the world. As well as fulfilling their own vocations through marriage, the couple—through the process of becoming 'one flesh' forges a new and unique identity which itself seeks expression as the couple's vocation (Everett 1985, 113). In this way, marriage has a purpose beyond the benefit of the two persons involved; by imaging and participat-

ing in trinitarian life, the couple is able to introduce this process to the world and by understanding that their love for each other is a foretaste of God's love, they give testimony to this hope and belief through their marital life (Kirschlager 2003, 157-8). Rocchetta sees that the couple's covenant with each other takes place 'in the Lord' and 'transforms the earthly reality of marriage into a mystery of salvation.' (Rocchetta 1996, 6) In identifying marriage as an historical realisation of God's love for humankind, Rocchetta describes the vocational nature of marriage as a mission (Rocchetta 1996, 10).

Kelly develops the outward mission aspect further by envisioning marriage and family as a transforming source in society; by acting as leaven for the church's mission of proclaiming and furthering the reign of God in the world today, they become the principal way in which Catholic social thought impacts on it (Kelly 2004, 144) as they challenge 'ignorance, injustices and obstinacies' (Roberts 2004, 103). Everett expresses this as the redemptive and innovative impact of the couple's love which, having first renewed them, now seeks to spread out and renew the earth. Everett laments that within the church and society, this sense of joint vocation of the couple has been largely ignored and that the redemptive-innovative aspect has been carried almost solely by unmarried individuals (Everett 1985, 113-4).

This is very similar to Carmody's argument that the church has undervalued and underutilised not only the 'gift of femininity' but also 'the gift of marriage'; this argument leads her to claim that the church's standard of suitability for ministry should be determined by a person's gifts of the Spirit, not by one's gender or marital status (Carmody 1985, 158-167). This issue also troubles Rubio who notes that, while contemporary Christianity celebrates the 'dual vocation' of marriage, it also upholds the 'higher calling' of celibacy and in doing so implicitly questions the sacredness of marriage and family life (Rubio 2004, 195).

Conclusion

A re-vitalised understanding of the Trinity as outlined in Part One provides the basis for a better appreciation of how the marital relationship can be the closest human image of and likeness to it. This was demonstrated in Part Two by considering relevant and common attributes of both the trinitarian and marital relationships.

The trinitarian relationship also serves as a model or pattern for the married couple to follow in their life together. By modelling their marriage on this perfect example of unity and community, the couple begins to fulfil its vocation in bringing about the reign of God not only in their own lives and family but also, through their witness to the love of God, in the world.

When truly called to use their gifts and coupleness in full realisation and understanding of trinitarian life for the betterment of the world, the couple does not only image and model Trinity but also participates in trinitarian life. God came to us in the human form of Je-

sus to be with and to involve us. Through baptism we are drawn into this trinitarian life. Far from being a lesser calling, marriage can in fact be the highest human participation in or example of trinitarian life.

If then marriage is the sacrament of trinitarian life, for the sacrament to be the true sign of what it represents the couple must strive beyond their own relationship and family just as God as Trinity has reached out to include humanity within trinitarian life.

This striving is itself part of God's plan—the vocation of the couple—and God's way of using the couple in the trinitarian work of salvation. The married couple, within the fullest expression of their sacramental marriage, image Christ as they strive for peace and unity.

While there is a growing understanding of the significance of the marriage vocation and its transforming potential for both the church and the world, this is not yet fully appreciated by most couples themselves, by society in general or within the church's administrative structures.

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