

Conference of
Father Alain MATTHEEUWS s.j.
and Priscilla and Jean-Louis SIMONIS

Monday 18th of September



Xth International Gathering
of the Teams Of Our Lady

The sacrament of marriage

To those in love, everything seems possible and easy. For others, perhaps after the trials of time or of other events, the only true recurring feeling is: “How difficult it is to love!” What is the truth about love? What is the truth about man-woman relationship? What is the source of it? What is its journey? What is its end? For thousands of years, men and women have loved each other. Various cultures and different religions have not remained silent on the subject and their wise teaching offers great riches to humanity. But what does God say about married love? Is not the covenant between man and woman the subject of Revelation?

What does the sacrament itself say?

1. The gift of freedom

Even in different cultural conditions, the Church stresses the ability of a man and a woman to commit themselves freely in love, to each other and to God. In the liturgy, one of the questions asked to the future spouses is: “Are you come freely and without constraints?” It is a condition for the validity of the sacrament. Freedom is something of value.

Of course, our freedom is always subject to certain conditions, but never totally so. To give ourselves to each other, our commitment needs to be “as free from any conditions as possible”. It is not out of habit, or out of interest or out of necessity that the spouses promise themselves to each other. There is no love in fear and constraint. “*The truth will set you free*”, says Jesus (Jn 8: 32). True love thrives only in a climate of freedom and cannot grow without the freedom we trustfully give each other. The beauty of this mutually given freedom is that it is a decision not to decide without the other. We set a “noble” condition to our personal freedom: namely our spouse. Thus we give our freedom so as “to find another one” that is broader through personal communion. We experience a self-imposed “exodus” so as to enjoy “something new”: we go from “ego” to “duo”. This freedom within the marriage is founded on love and has its end in love. It brings about a very real change in life since living together amplifies all the experiences of individual freedom. This gift of my individual freedom is an act of abundant generosity and is contrary to a selfish vision of marriage. Marriage expands the freedom and conditions of freedom of each spouse provided love is present and becomes stronger with time

One of the very special signs of a free commitment is the wedding day “Yes” [*Where we reply “I do”, the French reply “Yes”*]. To say “Yes” is to undertake freely a common project, it is to respond to a call that one has sensed, guessed, heard. To say “Yes” is to respond with the whole of our being, especially to the conjugal consent. Most often, lovers have said in many ways that they wanted each other, that they wanted to build together something lasting, that they love each other for always. The vows that are exchanged are a mutual “Yes” that is welcomed as a personal present. It is an “Yes” that makes one dream, that leads one into a new land, a land to be cultivated, to be made beautiful. This “Yes” is not always easy to give. For those who sense the implications of the commitment, this “Yes” contains all the weight of what is hoped and all the demands of what is to come. This “Yes” is a risk, not a refuge, but an adventure that is beginning.

P and J-L Simonis: *As a Christian couple, we know fully that this “Yes” followed by “I take you as my lawful wedded husband/wife and I give myself to you to love and cherish you throughout our life, in good and bad times, in joys and in pains until death does us part”, this little “Yes” contains the seed, the gene of our future life as a couple. This small “Yes”*

contains all the symphony of our life. It will resonate particularly as a thanksgiving in “good days” and as a “call to remember” in “bad days”.

We often say that we marry each other every day. Even if we do not say explicitly the words of our commitment, we relive every day this “Yes” as a gift of our life that we make to each other: “Today, I give myself to you and I welcome you”.

Our conjugal prayer in the evening on our prayer stools is like our wedding day. We give thanks to the Lord for having been with us throughout the day and we entrust each other to Him. He is close like a very loving father. He strengthens our marriage thanks to his tenderness for us both.

That this “Yes” of the man and of the woman is expressed publicly in front of the family and the witnesses is particularly symbolic. The word said is understandable by all. It allows all present to rejoice in such a love, in such a commitment, in such a hope. Every promise needs a third party. The witnesses who hear the “Yes”, are they not God’s witnesses who also hears the “Yes”, shares in the “Yes”, says “Yes” also to this commitment to love? If a human being is worthy of an “Yes”, how truly this “Yes” transforms them: henceforth they are no longer two but “one”! God rejoices in the “Yes” because he is love. To say “Yes” to love, is to say “Yes” to God, to praise him, to make visible his plan for the creation of every man and woman.

The beauty of human beings shines forth in their capacity to say “Yes” to existence, their own, that of others, that of their future spouse. The conjugal “Yes” is a “Yes” to life, to the loved and sought after difference even if it frightens sometimes or if it is disturbing. The “Yes” is not static; it is dynamic; it is life; it gives life. Happiness springs forth from this “Yes” to a common project. Are not spouses people who provide a service that they have found together? The “Yes” is a decision. It introduces the spouses into a “common home”. We affirm in this way that personal freedom is deployed and is strengthened within the exclusive bond of marriage. Whereas for some the horizon seems to be restricted in a monogamous union, freedom in fact grows and deepens in the mystery of the “other”. By giving oneself freely to the other, each spouse is called to find and love God who is the source of all love.

P and J-L Simonis: *We thus become a new entity. We can speak of “we” acting in the name of “us”, entering a new freedom, that of giving ourselves as a couple to others.*

When we were engaged, we took part in a manifestation to draw attention to the inappropriateness of public transport for the disabled. We had been asked to look after Martha, paralysed in her wheelchair. We took her on Brussels’s trams for a whole Saturday. After our marriage, we went on visiting her regularly. Tied to her bed, she welcomed us with such a joy, that we returned home transformed. This little bit of our freedom, regularly given to Martha, reinforced our married love and has bound us together as an “entity” able, in turn, to give itself to others.

2. Total giving

Giving ourselves to what end? What is the purpose of this total and demanding giving that involves the whole person? The purpose of this giving is the building up of the unity of the marriage and of the family.

In this respect, the act of giving is “open” to something greater than the person who gives and to a reality that is bigger than the giver: this reality is the couple, the family. The individuals are not “slaves” of these human realities, but at the service of a “mystery” that is

greater than themselves but which does not exist without their collaboration and presence within the couple and the family. Self-giving has this breadth of significance. This is why it seems normal that it should be total. Each individual finds himself/herself in a new oneness, that of “one flesh”.

Such a self-giving requires a fundamental trust without limits neither for the person who gives nor for the person who receives. Each spouse gives his/her best but also his/her limitations, imperfections, weaknesses. They give everything in giving of themselves. A spouse cannot remain single. They are joined to each other; therefore they give themselves to each other in their “nakedness”, that is to say in the reality of their person, as he or she is. This reality is of course approached and sensed before the exchange of vows, but it is also discovered in the act of self-giving. The marriage vows brings out the reality of each spouse. There is a jump into the unknown to be made, a risk to be taken that permit the discovery of something new.

This mutual giving is not a fusion or a dilution of personalities into a uniform whole or into an entity that enslaves human freedom. The couple is not a mini-enterprise to which all must be sacrificed. If we speak of a total and exclusive giving, it is on the following condition: each spouse retains his/her personality and finds in this mutual giving a “favourable soil” in which to grow, to be strengthened and to blossom in love. And it is true, even if difficult, that one can remain oneself while admiring and encouraging the other; one can remain oneself while loving and seeking to boost the other. It is on this condition that true love flourishes and the unity of the couple becomes solid. Together, we build in love something greater than ourselves which, at the same time, allows us to be truly ourselves in our own eyes, in the eyes of others and in the eyes of God.

P and J-L Simonis: *When asked how she saw her parents, one of our daughters wrote: “What I admire especially in my parents is their mutual respect... It is important to respect the fact that the ‘other’ is different. If we respect this, we allow each other to keep our freedom. We allow each other to be free, to be themselves. To take away this freedom from our spouse would make him/her unhappy and prevent him/her to flourish. In the long run, it would act as a break on the blossoming of our own couple”.*

This total giving in fact entails mutual respect and listening. The “total” must never become totalitarian. This means that each spouse freely commits himself/herself to respect the other in his/her deepest being. The other cannot become the slave of my wishes, my projects, my will. I am not the other’s policeman. Each spouse is the guardian of the other’s being, of his/her mystery. Respect requires that, first of all, we listen to who the other is in his/her difference. It is a transparency that is not “cold” but warm, respectful of the mystery of the other, of the beauty of this mystery, respectful of a part of his/her secret garden. This mutual transparency is a condition of the totality of the giving and allows this giving to assume all its breadth of significance in the life of the couple and of the family. It fosters respect and trust, even if one has to experience moments of obscurity, of lack of understanding, impassable limits. The other is always greater in his/her total giving than the particular ways he/she gives. His/her limits are not proof that his/her giving is not total but it shows that this giving both exist in spite of appearances and that it can be renewed and enriched by divine grace.

3. A definitive giving: one that is for always

Is it possible to give oneself and to continue to give oneself in the same way, with the same intensity over time? For most of our contemporaries, this doubt has arisen if only because the span of married life has clearly increased by comparison with previous

generations. We yearn for a love that carries on beyond death. At the same time, some think in terms of successive phases of faithfulness: the woman of my desires, the one with whom I built my working life, the mother of my children, the passionate lover of my middle-age lust, the companion of my old age... The indissolubility of the marriage bond is not only difficult to respect but to understand and to promise. Time is seen as the enemy of love: it erodes something that is good. Some would like to come to terms with this erosion of love and think in terms of some more flexible conjugal arrangements.

P and J-L Simonis: *And yet when we question young people today about happiness, about values that are important to them, the great majority reply "the family", "a family where there is peace, tranquillity, joy, sharing". Our daughter says of us: "Our parents gave us of their time, they paid attention to us, listened to us, helped us...They managed to do all this because, as a couple, they were at peace and in harmony".*

"It is up to us now to try to follow this fine example so that we too, my husband and I, can make our children happy and feel good about themselves".

Engaged couples and newly married couples therefore put at the head of their scale of values: "to make a success of my married life so that, together in our turn, we can produce happy children". The parents' life is thus observed in a search for an example to follow, of a recipe on "how to go about it".

*"What I admire about my parents is that, after 30 years of married life, they are still as much **in love** as ever. As a newly married couple, I know it is true because I see it! Many couples no longer embrace each other, or exchange tenderness after so many years of married life... but they do".*

We appreciate thus the importance of the fundamental values of faithfulness and indissolubility of Christian marriage, and of the destabilising effect that sadly results from the separation of parents of young children who seek solid values to guide them.

A strong bond strengthens. The original mutual giving between spouses is not of the same kind as a professional commitment or of a service to be rendered. The person who entrust himself/herself to another "totally" forges a strong bond linked to the mystery of the other. To give oneself to another in this way is not commonplace. The symbolism of the marriage ceremony signifies that the self-giving involves the totality of the human being for the duration of his/her life here below. Consequently, this giving is really definitely binding because it has been done freely. The marriage vow relates to the inexhaustible mystery of the person who gives and welcomes. The will to love is not only subject to the passing of time but to the effects of time on the other. This lasting bond remains whatever the effects of time on the spouses. If personality, qualities or the body assume different appearances according to stages of life, the person remains the same: an inexhaustible mystery of love the source of which still flows abundantly and forever... and can even become a river.

The giving of oneself in marriage is imbued with this will to love that places its trust in the other through thick and thin and which looks forward to the fruits of this love as the years go by. Time is on the side of the spouses if they live out their love as a union that is respectful of whom they each are. One can understand how this definitive giving of oneself cannot depend only on feelings and on the visible qualities of the man or of the woman. Life is sometimes full of dramatic events and love can only live through these events: sickness, changes of desires and unfaithfulness. Love is stronger than everything if the determination of the spouses expresses itself regularly in accordance with their original vows. Couples must renew their marriage vows daily because each day is a new day in which one is called to say and repeat freely: "I do". Time is the friend of Love. Without this friend how many gestures and words will not be expressed! With this friend, how many unexpected discoveries will be made and what fruitfulness will ensue!

The willingness to give oneself forever is a condition of true and sincere love. This willingness is also the soil of faithfulness. The promise of two human beings that is deeply rooted in what they offer each other, cannot be other than irrevocable, otherwise it becomes a play or ploy of love. To promise to love in marriage is to promise to love totally. The begetting of children is not a condition of this faithfulness, but it confirms over time the aim of married love: to become family. We live in a world dominated by the “virtual” and the “instant”. By creating a family, founded on love, we escape from the virtual and the instant and create something lasting, joyful and peaceful. For each of us, to be the son or daughter of our parents is a condition of having “arrived” and of happiness at having our personal identity.

Most of those who marry in Church fluctuate between asking God for his help to strengthen their love and sometimes a feeling of apprehension about a commitment that they know to be decisive and final from the point of view of their faith. In fact, God does not add like a varnish of indissolubility to human love by the sacrament of marriage. Love is a promise for life and eternity. But divine grace has indeed a place in the mutual giving of husband and wife. God seals the covenant between the spouses: he establishes this covenant because he was at the beginning of this love and he decides with the spouses to carry on to the end. Sacramental indissolubility bears witness to the constancy of God in human history; he remains present even if human beings run away from their relationship. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of the Covenant from Genesis to Mount Sinai. Our God is faithful, say all the prophets. The grace of the sacrament of marriage penetrates from inside the human couple’s vow of indissoluble faithfulness; it confirms it, saves it, strengthens it if necessary, gives it meaning. The covenant that constitutes a marriage is irrevocable. The spouses can rely on God. The couple can take Him as the “rock” of their love. Jesus is the saviour of all human love. He gives it its full meaning: in life as in death. The whole Pascal mystery is at the heart of the vows exchanged by the spouses. Despite the uncertain character of all human lives, we can each believe in the possibility of such a commitment based on God and rooted day by day in his grace. This indissolubility is a blessing for the spouses. The contract is more than a contract that one can terminate¹: it is a bond that unites husband and wife to each other and to God. “You are henceforth united by God in marriage” - this is the more positive side. “*What God has put together let no man put asunder*” is the other side of the human weakness that is taken in charge by the Lord and by the Christian community.

4. Fruitful giving from a love that surpasses itself

To give oneself totally to another is to experience that love makes us come out of ourselves and leads us towards the unexpected, towards “that much more”. The fruitfulness of a couple is expressed in this impulse, this surpassing of self. It includes the whole area of life in common. It must not be confused with efficiency in worldly matters². Fruitfulness is always characterised by a free gift to us such as happiness, joy, personality development, discovery of one’s qualities, strength in surmounting hardship and obstacles. Married and parental love is fruitful at all times of life. The children who have fled the nest remain our children: we remain parents to the end.

All couples are fruitful. This fruitfulness reveals itself in time as mutual self-giving develops individual qualities in husband and wife. The couple and the family find their fruitfulness in the giving of self to others. “*Enlarge the space in your tent*”, says the prophet Isaiah. The couple is not an end in itself: it is in so far that it “looses itself” that it “finds

¹ Cf. repudiation

² Making a success of a good meal, finding one’s way through some accounts, finding a new apartment etc.

itself". Love has value in itself, but it always means "coming out of oneself" in order to go to the other. The key to fruitfulness lies in "disinterestedness", in "not acting out of self-interest", in not "giving so as to receive" and in not "keeping accounts". It lies in the desire and willingness not to appropriate the things that one wants and in the willingness to build like the humble and faithful steward of the Gospel. To "guarantee" the real fruitfulness of married love we must give scope for adventure. To be able to say to the other: "You do not disappoint me" or, after a few years: "You have never disappointed me", is only possible if we do not restrict this statement to a particular project or some an ideal vision. The mystery of the other cannot be reduced to an image, a desire, a judgement. Having complementary characteristics is not sufficient either: fruitfulness is not just the result of complementary temperaments, qualities or desires. This longing for happiness as a couple must be imbued through and through with a desire for the infinite and with welcoming divine grace. Fruitfulness is in God's hands.

Fruitfulness is broader than procreation and the upbringing of children, but it includes it of course. What is there more refreshing, more different, more gratifying, more disconcerting, than the child that transforms the couple into a family? At each new birth, a new universe awakes and the changes are significant. There is something "natural" in the coming of a child to a loving couple. The bodies that unite are always affected by the symbolism of the advent of a child. The man is always fertile, the woman not always, but the married embrace has in itself the double significance of union and of procreation.

We know that a couple that deliberately and definitely refuses to have a child cannot contract a valid marriage. On the other hand, a sterile couple willing, for example, to adopt can get married. This means that the giving of self in marriage always has a parental note. The horizon of all fruitfulness is always "inter-personal". We know how much sterility can be a trial and a profound source of suffering: it shakes the couple to their foundations. The desire for a child is complex and love needs to purify these desires. The child has rights but there is no "right to a child". A man and a woman have no claim to a child either from society or from God. The absence of a child is not a sign of failure in the life of the couple just as some absolute right to a child is an illusion. The child is not an "object of desire" like any other, but a being in its own right, a gift of love, a gift of God.

P and J-L Simonis: Current scientific progress in the domain of procreation only partly solves the question of fecundity, or rather of non-fertile procreativity. At the most, it offers palliatives. We are becoming more and more aware of the fact that this scientific progress is opening the door to serious deviations that cause ethical concern, not only to Christians like us, but also to a growing number of non-Christians. Faced with lack of legal control on issues such as surrogate motherhood, embryos used for medical purposes, homosexual claims etc, political parties have rallied to legislate on these matters. The "right to a child" is assuming prominence in order to fill the sense of emptiness and to heal the pain caused by the absence of a child. This pain is very real and no remedies that science can offer can make us any less sensitive to this pain.

We have experienced this pain, Priscilla and I, following a secondary sterility resulting from successive miscarriages. Our wound, our suffering were eased only when we understood that the Lord was calling us to be "fruitful" in another way, in other spheres. Couples without children who are listening to us might say: "But you had the joy of cuddling a baby; you have had children, whereas we..." And they are perfectly right: our suffering does not compare with theirs.

This experience has allowed us nevertheless to understand that physical procreation does not allow us to practise less spiritual fruitfulness. The latter is no substitute for the former. We believe that our procreative mission cannot be limited to populating the world. We have

become aware that the Father-Creator, calls us, from Genesis onwards, to beget children of God in Faith, Hope and Love, spiritually as well as physically.

We have resolutely turned towards others. We have “come out of our shell” and turned to something “more” towards God’s “unexpected”. And this openness to the unexpected has made us available for what God expected from us now and in the future.

Let us go back for a moment to children welcomed as a sign of the fruitfulness of love. The spouses are called to collaborate with God, the Creator and Father. The way that they unite is a source of particular strength for them. By giving themselves to each other in the conjugal act, they give themselves and affirm themselves mutually in their male or female identity and in their being as parents. Close to the divine action, they experience its specific characteristics: power, creativity, free gift. God manifests himself in them as Master and Lord of all things created. Nothing escapes his creative action: the whole world is in his “potter’s” hands. *“Human life is sacred because from the beginning, it incorporates God’s creative action”*³. The same applies to the conjugal act and the human fruit of conception:

*“O Lord, you search me and you know me;
you know my resting and my rising;
you discern my purpose from afar.
You mark when I walk or I lie down,
all my ways lie open to you”*⁴

The spouses are closely aware of this action of God. Their awareness of His presence is gratitude, an ever-new discovery, thanksgiving. To experience this presence of God at the most intimate of oneself and of the couple’s relationship is a singular expression of human fruitfulness. Furthermore, if a baby results, the gift is doubled: this new being is a “fruitful gift of self-giving”. The baby is a person-gift that issues from the self-giving of its parents and of God’s gift to him of existence. *“No one comes into the world without having been immediately willed by God”*. This statement of the Council becomes doubly meaningful when parents are indeed aware of their responsibility and when their willingness to welcome the child freely coincides with God’s will. There are circumstances where this coincidence is not perfect and is even a challenge to human love. Nevertheless, every newly conceived child reveals a unique facet of the goodness and action of God. At each conception, it is not “nothing” that is presented to the world and to a particular couple. From its conception, the embryonic child is entrusted to our humanity. When its existence, disabled though it may be, has entered into ours, it is saying: “Love me as I am”. The conception of a child is a sign of a new ‘otherness’: it indicates that love is not simply dual, but always plural. This fecundity takes us back to the way God loves each human being by their name, from the smallest to the biggest, from the disabled to the healthy. The coming of a child is not the efficacy of a technique or of a human act: it is a sign of the generosity of God’s love who lets himself be touched by what human beings experience and who respects their personal freedom in the matter of procreation.

Since the child is a gift, he will fill his parents with joy because he is ‘special’. His presence, like his absence, cannot be used as an instrument for the happiness of adults. Fruitful married love is most often called to modify its desires. The dream of the perfect child must be abandoned in favour of recognising the real child. His/her qualities and talents will depend on the fact that he/she is an individual in his/her own right. The whole task of bringing up children, a wonderful fruit of married love, will be influenced by what sort of individuals they are. We can compare this task to that of the sower who scatters his seeds generously on the ground entrusted to him. To educate is to entrust one’s words to another human being for

³ *Donum vitae* Intro n°5.

⁴ Ps (138) 139: 1-3

him to welcome them, to be strengthened by them, to live by them and thus to find happiness in their turn. The harvest is not ‘automatic’. The fruitfulness of our words, of our example, of our uprightness, of our values takes time to become ‘visible’, not only to ‘take root’, but to grow in the hearts of our children. Our actions must correspond to our words. There is always a difference between what we say and what we do, but being attentive to truth in our life is essential if the good news is to be transmitted from generation to generation. We can always bear witness to the way we are loved by God through forgiveness, in the gift of life, in the blessings received. Children do not idealise their parents for long, but they are always sensitive to the uprightness of their witness. In the course of children’s upbringing we swing between teaching them the Lord’s commandment; “*Honour your father and mother*” and reminding ourselves of St Paul’s so very useful recommendation: “*Parents never drive your children to resentment*”⁵.

P and J-L Simonis: *Indeed, how many times have we noticed that what we had consciously or unconsciously sown when bringing up our daughters, resurfaced years later when they were married and were mothers themselves. For a time, we thought the seed had been lost, wasted, unfruitful, and behold it suddenly bore fruit. This observation encourages us to hope to see resurfacing Christian values that we had wanted to transmit and which we thought were so fundamentally present in our life. If our children do not believe or no longer believe, do not practise or no longer do so, there is no point pulling out the seeds that germinates nor the young shoot: we might pull them out of the ground. Rather, let us leave it to the Lord to make them grow at his pace and rhythm. “Patience and length of time are better than force or rage” my mother used to say, quoting an old French saying. God’s time is not men’s time! Cardinal Danneels once said to us: “Think of a river that disappears into a cave; we lose sight of it, not knowing where it is going; but we know one thing: it comes out again somewhere to pursue its course to the sea. Where? When? We do not know”. These words have often sustained our hope ever since.*

To be fruitful is to have the patience to wait and to put one’s trust in time until, with the grace of God, it reveals the full breadth of our “sowing”. The fruitfulness of a couple cannot be gauged using the same criteria as for a mini-enterprise. The family gains depth even when strength declines; but depth grows through memories of a long life - sometimes marked with suffering – and the approach of death. When vitality declines, we do not “close shop” – on the contrary! It displays other energies at the sunset of love and of life as a couple. At all ages, spouses help one another, sustain one another, give themselves to each other, bear witness of a flame that warms. Suffering is a soil for fruitfulness in which the presence of grace becomes more intimate and stronger. Handicap, sickness and old age can open a door to infinite hope. The death of one spouse leaves the other distraught and hurt, but the time has then come to show proof of a fruitfulness that unites heaven to earth.

5. A gift from the Lord

“*If you only knew what God is offering*”, said Jesus to the Samaritan woman by Jacob’s well. The whole history of the Hebrew people bears witness to that “tender and jealous” love of God for them. The numerous covenants made with them were always desired and suggested by this God of faithful love. They are symbolised by a married relationship between God and his people (particularly in the prophesies and life of the prophet Hosea). The Bible also shows the difficulties experienced by the people of God in remaining faithful to his

⁵ Eph. 6 :4.

Covenant. Man's fall, following his creation, requires redemption. Jesus, the Saviour, saves love. In truth he gives back to human beings the ability to love. This Good News is for all human beings. These "new" times are our times: everything changed from Christ onwards. Christ, the Son of God, is the Father's gift to humanity. By his Incarnation, he united himself to every human being. It is one of the most decisive events of our human history. "*He came to his own*", says St John. Henceforth, our lives are no longer the same because God is present in them in a special way. In Jesus, God the Trinity has united the whole of humanity to himself: He is close to every human being, past, present and future. By loving the Church, as he does from centuries to centuries and at every moment, he engraves in human history this new reality of redeemed love. The sacraments are the beams of light that testify, sometimes in our darkness, that God's gift is indeed real. We live by the presence of the Son of God: our actions and our words are his, are from him, are for him. The sacramental "economy"⁶ expresses a new presence of God. We experience it in a special and tangible way in the sacrament of marriage.

P and J-L Simonis: *We are well aware, in our life as a couple, that, if there is no giving, there can be no love. Love is faithful: it is a definite gift; love does not take back what it has given. There is a popular saying that goes: "to give is to give, to take back is to steal". But we realise that, in marriage, this gift is more than a gift, in the popular sense of the word. The giving of Christian husband and wife, our reciprocal giving, that of Priscilla to Jean-Louis, that of Jean-Louis to Priscilla, is more than our physical union – much more: it is a present from God; we wanted this grace, not only when we exchanged our wedding vows thirty-four years ago, but we still want it today and every day of our life.*

This "extra" that comes from God may express itself in different ways. But what is particular to the sacrament is that Christ gives us the grace to truly give ourselves to each other. With everything else in creation, Christ also saved love. By his Spirit, Christ frees in each one of us the power to love; he opens a passage in the heart. Over and above mutual physical attraction, love is "the will to give ourselves to each other as he/she is and to desire the other's good". There are many fears that dwell in our hearts; many wounds are engraved in our psyche and in our bodies. Christ does not wipe them all away, even though he heals; but he nourishes and fortifies a capacity to love in the men and women who intend to commit themselves in marriage. More deeply: when an engaged couple meet, it is not by chance but by Providence: that is to say, God who takes care of our lives, has a part in our meeting and gently guides our freedom of action. We do not "take a wife or a husband" by force or in accordance with social customs: through grace, we become aware that the other is a present from God; he/she is offered to us as a companion on our journey through life. He/she is a very special "face" of Christ. All our strength to love is awakened, fortified, animated by Christ and by his Spirit. What is specific about Christian marriage is revealed in the awareness of the fact that the 'other' does not belong to me and will never belong to me absolutely. Our spouse is the "sign" of that 'Other' who is God; God beckons me through the person that he has placed on my path and to whom I can say a faithful and unqualified "I do".

a) He gives us the grace to give ourselves

To trust in God is to place our life in his hands: decisions, meetings, various events. The Holy Spirit helps Christians to interpret the events of life and, from time to time, points out God's visible action to them. God "is present everywhere and in every place" and, as the psalm points out, nothing escapes his notice even if he respects infinitely our freedom:

⁶ Economy: coherent et organic structure of Christian life transformed by Christ

*“Behind and before you besiege me,
your hand ever laid upon me”
Too wonderful for me this knowledge,
Too high beyond my reach.*

*O where can I go from your spirit
Or where can I flee from your face?
If I climb the heavens, you are there.
If I lie in the grave, you are there.*

*If I take the wings of the dawn
And dwell at the sea’s furthest end,
Even there your hand would lead me,
Your right hand would hold me fast.*

Psalm(138)139: 5-10

God’s concern is a “loving” care for each of his creatures. The impulse that draws us to others so as to find out more about them, to serve them and to love them, stems from the deepest centre of our being.

Christ testifies in his own way of this impulse towards everyone; though not married, he shows that loving is an oblation or offering, that is to say, loving is being open and able to give oneself to “someone other than ourselves”. The shortest way from one human being to God is through another human being, because God wanted it that way and has reminded us of it in Christ. It is in giving one’s life that one finds it. Whoever loses his life for my sake, said the Lord, finds it. This exodus from self to ‘the other’ is founded on Christ. To save the world for Christ, consists in giving back to people the ability to give themselves totally in all decisions taken, in all relationships experienced. A man and a woman are not alone when they give themselves to each other: God is at the centre of their action.

b) He gives himself in our giving of ourselves

The Lord is at the heart of events, particularly in the actions undertaken freely by men and women of goodwill. In the exchange of wedding vows, He takes a further step with the bride and bridegroom; he too says: “I do”. He commits himself at the heart of human actions freely undertaken, “with” them and in support of them. He, himself, undertakes to love the couple as they are, each spouse as he or she is, and their whole family life as it unfolds. This further step is a specific divine decision that relates to the life of a particular couple and which they receive in the Church, through faith. We witness to it in the liturgy. We shall witness to it in more ways, ways that are sometimes more discreet, at the various crossroads of married and family life. God is more at the heart of the couple than we sometimes imagine; if a couple move into a new apartment, he moves in with them. Whilst fully respecting human freedom, He is truly “Emmanuel”: God with us. His presence is a guarantee, a strength and confirmation of the mutual relationship of the spouses as well as a demanding presence and the truth about their relationship.

c) He associates us to his permanent Giving of Himself to his Church

Christ is “giving” personified; he is totally “giving”; his presence on earth and his bonds with the members of the Church are expressed in this one word: “giving”. Love is at its heart. The Church, that is to say the People with whom God has sealed a “New and eternal

Covenant”, lives of this “giving” at every moment. This “giving” is so permanent that it is the Spirit of Jesus himself who manifests it and imbues the Church with it.

To imitate Christ, to follow him and love him is to enter into the ‘way’ of giving: an impossible task without the grace that he gives us for that purpose. The life of the Church is full of power and vitality because it is permanently linked to her Lord. “*Your spouse, your creator*”, says Isaiah. It is to that extent that Christ loves the Church. He gives himself to her like a young bridegroom, as a faithful and attentive husband, as a tender and docile husband, as an audacious and strong husband, as a patient and helpful husband. The bond between Christ and his Church is indestructible: “*I shall be with you until the end of time*”. “*This ‘mystery’ has great significance*”, says St Paul “*but I am applying it to Christ and the Church*”. Whoever loves Christ, loves his bride the Church and vice versa.

Through the sacrament of marriage, Christ places the newly married couple at the centre of his ‘married’ relationship with his Church. The couple is at the centre of the transmission of graces, of the love shared between Christ and his Church. Furthermore, as in all family situations, the husband and wife are called to bear witness to this bond of love. They represent in their very flesh an image of this relationship. This great “mystery” is made present and visible in human history and by millions of Christian couples throughout the world who love each other “in the Lord”. Through this sacramental love, they give a sign to others. They say in their own language and through their own life that God continues to love his people in a real and lasting way. Established by grace within the Christ-Church bond, the spouses are a very special sign of God’s love for all humanity, for all times.

P and J-L Simonis: *In this way we become aware of our own weaknesses and of our infidelities to God’s plan for us, for our marriage. We also suffer to see marriage lose its meaning in our contemporary society, including often those close to us. We need this saving love of God.*

Where are you Lord? Why have you forsaken us? Lord come to our help, to the help of “marriage and the couple”! If it is your wish that we should bear witness to your love for humanity, give us the grace, give us the strength, the strength of your Spirit, for the seedling takes time to come out of the ground and we get discouraged! Give us the grace to recognise the signs by which your Spirit calls us to bear witness! Help us, Lord, to respond to our mission as “Christian couples in the Church and in the World of today”, as our Movement reminded us following the international gathering in Santiago of Compostella in 2000.

6. A sacramental symphony

A sacrament is not an isolated act, at a particular point in time, without previous history or ultimate consequences. All sacraments belong to the great river of grace that Christ causes to flow for humanity in his Church. Marriage grows, flourishes and bears fruit in the sacramental garden that God offers us. It is a link with the sacraments of Christian initiation. It is a ‘mission’ sacrament. In other words, in the concert of joy and praise that we listen to by the power of the Spirit and in which we participate, marriage is a very special moment in this symphony. It bears witness to the presence of divine love in married and parental love. Let us listen to the music of these sacraments that play with each other and for each other.

Marriage and Baptism

Through baptism, we have immersed ourselves in Christ’s Pascal mystery: saved by Him from every form of death, we rise with Him. We have put on Christ in an intimate, physical

and spiritual way. Henceforth, “*It is no longer I, but Christ living in me*”⁷. United to Christ in this way, we no longer belong to ourselves; given to Him, we are transformed from inside. This mystery assumes already the characteristics of married love. Every baptised person is united to Christ as a “bride is united to her bridegroom”. It is therefore spontaneously normal for baptised persons to see Christ’s covenant with his bride becoming deeper in their married relationship. Through their marriage, baptised persons express, in the whole of their being, the married bond between Christ and his Church. It is as though they were “called” by the Lord to draw close to each other and walk with Him through life. In this way, marriage confirms the grace received in baptism and Christ gives the baptised person a mission in the Church and in the world. This mission is to show how Christ loves the Church and the whole of humanity with a Bridegroom’s love: an exclusive, creative, unifying, permanent and faithful love. From our baptism onwards, we belong first and foremost to Christ. Marriage confirms this fact: to love each other means that we no longer belong to ourselves but that we give ourselves to someone else and that we learn to say “I do” with the whole of our being and say it regularly. In the current of their baptismal grace, husband and wife give themselves to each other in order to give themselves together to God; to belong to Christ requires the same surrender of self.

Marriage and Forgiveness

He who loves is called to forgive much. Kindness, patience and gentleness are the expressions of this forgiveness. To forgive is giving to the point of forgiving [for-giving means: giving exceedingly]: it is a constantly renewed giving. So often, we need to “rediscover” this gift of God that is the sacrament of marriage. Love is possible, but one must conquer fears and wounds and bear with each other’s sins. The support of other believers within the Church-sacrament is fundamental, because “an isolated couple is always in danger”. The awareness of what we have received is renewed and strengthened “in” and “by” the Church. The sacrament of forgiveness can flourish in the soil of dialogue, of taking the trouble to explain oneself, of humble and calming gestures. This sacrament frequented by the one or the other or by both, mutually strengthens their life in the truth. Christ’s saving love renews us in the sacrament of Reconciliation; to receive it is also a deliberate way to humility and joy. It is to attune ourselves, just as we are, to the love of God and to admit that, without his grace, we cannot do much. Spouses and parents are not perfect - worse still - we may be unfaithful to the promised love and hurt God in various ways. Sacramental forgiveness rejuvenates the heart; it gives peace to face the conflicts that we have caused but also to face other difficult situations. Strengthened by God’s forgiveness, husband and wife can deepen their love and acquire a greater awareness of their many responsibilities. Between husband and wife, what affects one affects the other; thus the wounds and sins of the one can weigh on the other. Conversely, forgiveness swells the heart and puts the couple in greater communion with God and the Church. Whilst preserving their individual spiritual lives and consciences, forgiveness received by the spouses does them both good. What makes one spouse grow, makes the couple grow, and clearly and mysteriously affects the other spouse and the whole family. Forgiveness purifies and strengthens married love. Married and family love makes each spouse aware of the other’s weakness, makes them mutually supportive and forgiving as well as playing a part in each other’s salvation. Individual awareness of sin and of forgiveness refines a shared love. The one whose “debts God forgives” is called to do likewise and to forgive “up to seventy times seven”...

⁷ (Gal 2: 20)

Marriage and the Eucharist

Even though many marriages are, for various reasons⁸, not celebrated in the context of the Eucharist, the pastoral and catechetical tradition⁹ and spiritual and sacramental theology stress the link between these two sacraments. On the wedding day and later during the life of the couple, the link between marriage and the Eucharist is fundamental. Father Caffarel regularly stressed what a rich source of graces it was for the couple.

The source and the summit of love are to be found in the Eucharist: Jesus makes himself present in it so as to give himself to us and to his Father. Every Eucharistic celebration demonstrates to us that the action of Jesus is to give out of love - indeed more - it is "God's Gift". To celebrate the Eucharist is to enter into this giving out of love. Christ gives himself to the bride and bridegroom when they exchange their wedding vows; he too says: "I do"; he too commits himself. The Eucharist demonstrates to the spouses how far this commitment goes. At each celebration of the Eucharist, the spouses recognise the special grace that is theirs: how Christ gives his life to the full out of love for others. The spouses are fed in their daily life by this love of Christ. In the liturgy, we offer the bread and the wine that they may be transformed into the body and blood of Christ. This bread and this wine symbolically represent the congregation: its life, its efforts, its commitments.

P and J-L Simonis: *"Do this in memory of me" acquires a particular significance for us as a couple. In imitation of Christ who renews his eternal (i.e. past, present and to come) Covenant by offering his "body" and his "blood", we renew our covenant. We recall the mutual giving of the whole of our being in marriage, in joys and in pains, for better and for worse...until death separates us. "Through Him, in Him and with Him", we give glory to the Father who has given us to each other and who unites us together with Him.*

And so husband and wife can offer themselves and be "incorporated" in the mystery of the ever-living Christ. After every mass, a part of our selves (and therefore of our life) has entered into God, has been transformed and united to his Mystical Body. Hence we perceive what is particular to the sacrament of marriage: it is to say an "I do" that has the dimension of the "I do" of God. As Mary said "yes" to God's plan, so the bride and bridegroom say "I do" to each other and to God who is "at the centre" of their marriage vows. He is at the centre of the freely undertaken act itself. God calls the spouses to give themselves, to forgive each other; he takes them by the hand. He takes the risk of a loving relationship with them: he can be disowned and rejected. He walks along the path trodden by the couple. It is essential for the husband and wife to be aware of this divine presence; this awareness can be lulled, obscured; it is developed with time, over the passing of years. Often the spouses recognise, in hindsight, what is precious in this gift of the Lord; they experience a spiritual springtime during a retreat or family occasions: the christening of a child, the healing of a family or personal hurt.

P and J-L Simonis: *More and more couples hold hands at mass during the "Our Father" and until the "sign of peace" when they hug each other. These little external signs are full of meaning. They help us to become aware of the union of two loves: the love of Christ and the love of husband and wife.*

⁸ In the case of the absence of a priest, or of the celebration of the wedding by a permanent deacon, or of minimal faith

⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church n°1621

7. Giving and mission

To be in the Christ-Church relationship gives us roots, establishes the husband and wife relationship “on a rock”; it is the origin of a mission. It is neither the individual, nor the couple, nor the family that give themselves their particular mission; every mission is a call from the Lord. The mission is received from the One who is its origin; it is discerned and understood by the couple in the day-to-day reality of their life and it is founded on their sacramental grace.

To say that the couple receives a mission is to affirm, from the start, that they do not exist only for themselves. The ‘family-being’, this “*intimate partnership of married life and love*”¹⁰, overflows with a love that comes from beyond the husband and wife; this love is called to spread more or less spontaneously, to be fruitful and to witness to life and to divine love wherever the couple happens to be. It is a matter of letting the abundance of “spiritual waters” to spread into the deserts of our modern lives. The missions can therefore be numerous and different, but they are all based on the grace of baptism and of the sacrament of marriage. To get married is to answer a new call. Just as Jesus in the Gospel sent out his disciples two by two to proclaim the Good News, he sends out husband and wife on the path of love; they are, so to speak, “consecrated”, in the Church; they receive graces appropriate to themselves; by the grace of the sacrament of marriage, they will have a service to provide.

A mission common to most spouses is to witness to a faithful, permanent and strong love. This faithfulness is not “customary”, “a good habit”, “useful” and “valued by all”: it is the fruit of collaboration with God himself and of his faithfulness to his people. To be faithful and to seek to be so, is to “act as God acts” in the history of humanity. The first activity of the couple and of the family is to bear witness to God’s existence; doing so day after day, strengthens succeeding generations and shows a hope that flows through time and space. As Father D. Sonet said, couples who are united and who persevere, strengthening each other by their faith, “*make the impossible possible by believing that it is possible*”.

To be at the service of life by its transmission and by the upbringing of children is also essential. The horizon of this fatherhood/motherhood is limitless for it comes from love. It makes possible and gives rise to a “taste” for life in the full sense of the word. It is not only a matter of having children, of promoting life and of defending it, it is also important to give it meaning at every moment as well as a taste for eternity. To link human life to that of God is a magnificent task. It enters the names of all families in the family of saints. Parents are the first educators into the mystery of God. In a family, all members evangelise each other. We think also of prayer as a fire that shoots up from the hearts of husband and wife and which intercedes for everyone. **Married love unites the soul to its Lord.**

Father Alain MATTHEUWS s.j.

Priscilla and Jean-Louis SIMONIS

¹⁰ (*Gaudium et spes* - 48)