

Conjugal Love and Marriage in the Homily, *Marriage: a Christian Vocation* by Saint Josemaría Escrivá

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The anthropological and cultural changes taking place in many countries have led to modifications in civil laws on marriage¹ and the family that, among other things, legalize unions between persons of the same sex and make divorce an increasingly simpler procedure. These changes have resulted in a redefinition of marriage, brought about through a deep deconstruction that has stripped from marriage the categories of conjugality, fatherhood-motherhood, and filiation–fraternity.²

Since the early 20th century, a deep renewal has been taking place in the Church's teachings on marriage and the family, based on faithfulness to God's plan for the human person. If up to that time theological reflection had focused mainly on the objective and juridical aspects of marriage, an important input was added from philosophical currents inspired by personalism. This led to rightfully stressing the supremacy of the person over the institution of marriage, the primacy of communion in love over the community established by a legal bond, and respect for personal freedom in the face of all external coercion. This renewal was reflected in such magisterial documents as the Encyclical *Casti Connubii* of Pius XI in 1930, the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II, the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Blessed Paul VI in 1968, and the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* of Saint John Paul II in 1981.

Nevertheless, in this ongoing renewal the Church herself has not been exempt from a few tentative attempts to redefine marriage. Some of these authors lobbying for a more personalist approach, in stressing that marriage is a path for personal fulfilment through mutual self-giving in conjugal love, have defended a partial and problematic position: that procreation and the

1. See the discussion by Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson and Robert P. George in *What is marriage? Man and woman: a defense*, Encounter Books, New York 2012.

2. See Carlo Cafarra, "Fede e cultura di fronte al matrimonio," in Héctor Franceschi (ed.), *Matrimonio e famiglia. La questione antropologica*, EDUSC, Roma 2015, p. 22.

raising of children should not be considered an essential end of marriage.³ On its part, the recent Magisterium, while stressing the personal elements of the conjugal union and above all the primacy of conjugal love, has emphasized its intrinsic connection with the institutional aspects of marriage found in the Church's traditional teaching. For example, Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that conjugal love "is indissolubly faithful" and "excludes both adultery and divorce," and by nature is "ordered to the procreation and education of children."⁴

Coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis convoked in 2015 the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, to continue the Church's reflections, in the light of the Gospel, on the reality of the family in the face of contemporary anthropological and cultural changes.

It is in this context that the Christian understanding of marriage presented by St. Josemaría in his homily *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*⁵ is especially timely. Its origin was a request in 1970 by the director of the supplement of the Spanish newspaper *ABC*, Luís María Ansón, who wanted to give readers orientation on the role of marriage and the family in the face of some deep changes taking place in society. After receiving St. Josemaría's text, the journalist remarked that the topic of marriage "needed to be tackled as Father Escrivá has done: with clear doctrine, with common sense, with fidelity to the Church's principles, and with a modern outlook on reality."⁶

The title of the homily shows the personalist perspective with which the teachings about marriage are focused. The central topic is conjugal love. Starting from an understanding of the authentic love between the spouses, the homily goes on to discuss some important elements of the institution of marriage, including its divine origin, its indissolubility, and its purpose of procreation and education of the offspring. Drawing also on other writings of St. Josemaría, we want to present here an overview of his teachings about these elements that configure the institution of matrimony.⁷

3. The first author to defend this thesis was Herbert Doms in 1935, in his book *Vom Sinn und Zweck der Ehe*. For a fuller discussion of the open debate between this author and other Catholic writers in the first half of the 20th century, see: Rolando B. Arjonillo, *Sobre el amor conyugal y los fines del matrimonio. El pensamiento de algunos autores católicos y la doctrina del Concilio Vaticano II (1930-1965)*, Instituto de ciencias para la familia, Pamplona 1999.

4. See Pastoral Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 49-50.

5. Included in *Christ is Passing By*, Scepter, New York, nos. 22-30.

6. Antonio Aranda, *Es Cristo que pasa. Edición crítica-histórica*, Rialp, Madrid 2013, p. 247, note 11.

7. A theological study of this homily can be found in Augusto Sarmiento "El matrimonio, vocación cristiana. A propósito de la homilía sobre el mismo título del beato Josemaría Escrivá," in José Luis Illanes, José Ramón Villar, Rodrigo Muñoz, Tomás Trigo, Eduardo Flandes (coord.), *El Cristiano en el mundo. En el centenario del nacimiento del Beato Josemaría Escrivá (1902-2002)*, Servicio de publicaciones de la Universidad

1. The Divine Origin of Marriage

St. Josemaría begins his homily, given during Christmas time in 1970, by reminding us of a key element of his message: the universal call to holiness.⁸ The mystery of Jesus' birth signifies "the moment God chose to show the extent of his love for mankind, by giving us his own Son."⁹ God's Love becomes present "in the simplest, most ordinary of circumstances: a woman who gives birth, a family, a home."¹⁰ Hence lay people too, and not only religious or priests, can and should aspire to Christian perfection: "Since that moment Christians have known that, with God's grace, they can and should sanctify everything that is good in their human lives. There is no human situation, no matter how trivial and ordinary it may seem, which cannot be a meeting-place with Christ and a step forward on our journey toward the kingdom of heaven."¹¹

For the Founder of Opus Dei, all the earthly realities in which Christians are immersed spell out the content of their baptismal vocation. As he teaches in his homily *Passionately Loving the World*, "any kind of evasion of the honest realities of daily life is for you, men and women of the world, something opposed to the will of God.

"On the contrary, you must understand now, more clearly, that God is calling you to serve Him *in and from* the ordinary, material and secular activities of human life. He waits for us every day, in the laboratory, in the operating theatre, in the army barracks, in the university chair, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of work. Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it."¹²

Marriage is thus seen as vested with a great dignity, since it "marks out the existential framework, conjugal and family life, in which and by which the spouses have to live out their own Christian vocation, that is to say, the call to holiness to which they have been convoked in a radical way in Baptism."¹³

de Navarra, Pamplona 2003, pp. 347-365. Sarmiento seeks to "highlight the main points of the theology of the vocation to marriage." Our objective, on the other hand, is to better understand the harmony between the primacy of conjugal love and the institution of marriage in the teachings contained in this homily.

8. As he says explicitly towards the end of this homily: "To every Christian, whatever their state in life—priest or layman, married or single—we can apply fully the words of the apostle, which we read precisely on the feast of the Holy Family: *chosen by God, holy and beloved.*" In *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 30.

9. *Ibid.*, no. 22.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Conversations with Saint Josemaría Escrivá*, Scepter, New York 2002, no. 114.

13. Augusto Sarmiento, *El matrimonio, sacramento y vocación*, in *Romana* (1997), *Estudios 1985-1996*, p. 74. Also Francisco Gil Hellín, "La vida familiar, camino de santidad," in *Romana* (1997), *Estudios 1985-1996*, pp. 347-363.

Referring specifically to marriage, St. Josemaría insists that it is “an authentic supernatural vocation.”¹⁴ So we can ask ourselves: what is the specific nature of the married state with respect to other ordinary situations by which it merits such a high qualification? We find the answer in the following words from the homily we are discussing: marriage is “a great sacrament in Christ and in the Church, says St. Paul (see *Eph* 5:32). At the same time and inseparably, it is a contract that a man and a woman make forever. Whether we like it or not, the sacrament of matrimony, instituted by Christ, cannot be dissolved. It is a sacred sign that sanctifies.”¹⁵

St. Josemaría highlights the simultaneous and inseparable tie between the contract and the sacrament. He thus employs traditional terminology that was still in use in the Code of Canon Law. The term “contract” emphasizes that the conjugal bond stems from the spouses’ free will.¹⁶

The same homily explains the meaning of “inseparable” in this context when, once again using traditional theological terminology, he says that “marriage is a sacrament that makes one flesh of two bodies. Theology expresses this fact in a striking way when it teaches us that the matter of the sacrament is the bodies of husband and wife. Our Lord sanctifies and blesses the mutual love of husband and wife. He foresees, not only a union of souls, but a union of bodies as well.”¹⁷

In harmony with the meaning of the Biblical expression “*basâr*” (flesh), the meaning of the term “body” or “flesh”¹⁸ denotes the whole person—soul and body.¹⁹ Therefore, as St. Josemaría says in another place, “the spouses are both the ministers and the matter of the sacrament of Marriage, as the bread and wine are the matter of the Eucharist.”²⁰

In traditional terminology, the sacramental sign is made up of both matter and form. These texts make no explicit mention of the form, but by stressing that the couples are the ministers of the sacrament of matrimony we can conclude that the form is specified by the human act carried out by the spouses.²¹

14. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 23.

15. *Ibid.*

16. On the use of the term “contract” in this homily, see the article by José María Vázquez García-Peñuela, “*Contrato y sacramento: las claves humanas y sobrenaturales del matrimonio en el pensamiento de san Josemaría Escrivá*,” in Alfonso Méndiz, Juan Ángel Brage (ed.), *Un amor siempre joven. Enseñanzas de san Josemaría Escrivá sobre la familia*, Palabra, Madrid 2003, pp. 128-133.

17. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 24.

18. See *Gen* 2:24.

19. On the Biblical significance of the term “*basâr*,” see Paul O’Callaghan, *Figli di Dio nel mondo*, Edusc, Roma 2013, pp. 514-515.

20. *Conversations with Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 92.

21. For St. Thomas Aquinas, the form is the interior consent of the couple expressed externally: see *Super Sent.*, IV, d. 26, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1. See also: José Granados, *Una sola carne en un solo espíritu*, Palabra, Madrid 2104, pp. 214-219; Antonio Miralles, *El matrimonio. Teología y vida*, Palabra, Madrid 1997, pp. 347-352.

Thus the sacramental sign that sanctifies, the sacrament, is not seen as something accidental or juxtaposed to the conjugal union. And so for St. Josemaría the inseparable tie between the contract and the sacrament means that the sacrament of matrimony, through Christ's institution, is the conjugal covenant itself between the Christian spouses.

This inseparability shows clearly that Christian marriage possesses a special dignity among all earthly realities because it is a sacrament instituted by Christ, and because its celebration is an action of Christ, as is true of every sacrament. Below we will look more closely at this second aspect, which sheds important light on the divine origin of marriage.

The Christian spouses mutually give themselves to each other, giving rise to the conjugal bond by which they are husband and wife. But at the same time it is Christ who has instituted the sacrament of marriage, and thus its celebration between baptized persons is also an "action of Jesus. He fills the souls of husband and wife and invites them to follow him. He transforms their whole married life into a divine path on earth."²²

Jesus' call to the spouses cannot be understood in a vague way. The inseparability between the contract and the sacrament means that Jesus' action in the celebration of marriage is not something external or accidental to the matrimonial consent that gives rise to the bond, but rather that it is He who unites the Christian spouses. The Book of Genesis tells us that God formed the man and the woman, and that it was He who gave Eve to Adam as his wife.²³ Jesus refers to this passage from the Bible to teach us that it is not licit for a man to repudiate his wife, since the two were united by God.²⁴

Christ's reference to the marriage of our first parents makes clear that it was not an institution established by human society that he elevated to the dignity of a sacrament, but rather a reality instituted by God. As the Second Vatican Council teaches, "the intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by his laws, and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one. For the good of the spouses and their offspring as well as of society, the existence of the sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone. For God himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes."²⁵

22. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 23.

23. See *Gen* 2:22–24.

24. See *Mt* 19:3–9.

25. Pastoral const. *Caudium et Spes*, no. 48.

But we should add here that, in accord with the divine plan for our first parents referred to by Christ, the one who unites the spouses is God. For he “created the two sexes, each made for the other. If God himself unites two people in a conjugal union, it would be impious and vain for anyone to seek to dissolve the knot that God has tied and guaranteed, usurping the divine rights and performing a vivisection to try to separate two beings God has united.”²⁶ Therefore “when a man and a woman marry, although their union is produced by their free will, that is, by the reciprocal gift of self, nevertheless it is God who unites them strictly speaking; the spouses have simply inserted themselves in the original divine plan for marriage.”²⁷

In accord with the divine salvific plan by which all things were created through Christ and for Christ,²⁸ marriage is not simply part of the order of creation; it has been inserted into the plan of redemption. Thus marriage between baptized persons, by the institution of Christ, has been raised to the dignity of a sacrament of the New Law. And therefore the sacramental celebration of matrimony is an action of Jesus: “it is Christ, the Son of God incarnate, as head of the body to which they belong, who unites them. Each of the spouses belongs to Christ by baptism and, when they give themselves to one another, they also become a gift of Christ who gives the man to the woman and the woman to the man. This once again makes clear that the sacrament is an act of Christ, without detracting in any way from the full human meaning of mutual self-giving.”²⁹

Christ’s presence entails, for St. Josemaría, a specific divine call to “transform their whole married life into a divine path on earth.”³⁰ For the fulfillment of their mission, the Christian spouses “have the grace of the married state—the grace they receive in the sacrament of marriage—which enables them to live all the human and Christian virtues in their married life: understanding, good humor, patience, forgiveness, refinement and consideration in their mutual relations. The important thing is not to give up the effort, not to give in to nerves, pride or personal fads or obsessions. In order to achieve this, husbands and wives must grow in interior life and learn from the Holy Family to live with refinement, for supernatural and at the same time human reasons, the virtues of a Christian home. I repeat again that the grace of God will not be lacking.”³¹

26. Mario Adinolfi, “Gesù e il matrimonio. Riflessioni sui testi evangelici,” in *Bibbia* 14 (1972), pp. 14-15. See also, Dionigi Tettamanzi, “Esiste una ‘vocazione’ al matrimonio?,” in *La famiglia* 7 (1973), pp. 128-129.

27. Antonio Miralles, *El matrimonio. Teología y vida*, p. 169.

28. See *Col* 1, 16.

29. Miralles, *El matrimonio. Teología y vida*, pp. 169-170.

30. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 23.

31. *Conversations with Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 108.

The sacramental reality of marriage, therefore, is not limited to the moment of celebration. Jesus not only “comes into the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony. He abides with them in order that by their mutual self-giving spouses will love each other with enduring fidelity, as he loved the Church and delivered himself for her.”³²

2. Self-giving and Freedom: the Indissolubility of Marriage

St. Josemaría tells us that indissolubility is a law of marriage that does not depend on the spouses, since it is of divine institution. As in Jesus’ time, this law could seem an insupportable yoke that suffocates the freedom of the spouses. However, any possible dilemma between freedom and self-giving is resolved in the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God, to which St. Josemaría refers at the beginning of his homily.³³

For the Founder of Opus Dei, the birth of Jesus is “the moment God chose to show the extent of his love for mankind, by giving us his own Son.”³⁴ Out of love for his Father and mankind, the Son embraces the will of his Father, and gives his life on the Cross with full freedom. “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord, I have power to lay it down it, and I have power to take it again.”³⁵ Seeing Christ’s self-giving, St. Josemaría exclaims: “we will never fully understand Jesus’ freedom. It is immense, infinite, as is his love.”³⁶

If love isn’t free it isn’t love. And the highest expression of love is giving one’s life for one’s friends.³⁷ “It is utterly false to oppose freedom and self-giving, because self-giving is a consequence of freedom. Look, when a mother sacrifices herself for love of her children, she has made a choice, and the more she loves the greater will be her freedom. If her love is great, her freedom will bear much fruit. Her children’s good derives from her blessed freedom, which presupposes self-surrender, and from her blessed self-surrender, which is precisely freedom.”³⁸ “I insist, and I would like to engrave this deep in your hearts, that freedom and self-surrender are not contradictory. They sustain one another. Freedom can only be given up for love; I cannot conceive any other reason for surrendering it. And I am not just playing with words or phrases. When people give themselves freely, at every moment of their self-giving, freedom

32. Pastoral const. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48.

33. A study of the relationship between freedom and self-giving in St. Josemaría can be found in Lluís Clavell, “The Freedom Won by Christ on the Cross: Theological Reflections on Freedom in Blessed Josemaría’s Teaching,” in *Romana* 33, (2001), pp. 234-261.

34. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 22.

35. *Jn* 10:17-18.

36. “Freedom, a Gift from God,” in *Friends of God*, no. 26.

37. See *Jn* 15:13.

38. “Freedom, a Gift from God,” no. 30.

renews their love; to be renewed in that way is to be always young, generous, capable of high ideals and great sacrifices.”³⁹

The manifestation of God’s love in the Incarnation teaches us two important truths.⁴⁰ It reveals to us that the deepest and most radical meaning of our life is sincere self-giving to others.⁴¹ And it tells us that Christ gives us his grace to overcome the wounds of sin and to give ourselves with “the full freedom of love.”⁴²

The conjugal covenant is a “great sacrament in Christ and in the Church,”⁴³ by which “our Lord sanctifies and blesses the love of the husband for his wife and that of the wife for her husband.”⁴⁴ The union of Christian spouses is a real sign of the union between Christ and the Church, for the husband and wife share in this mystery as spouses. From Him they receive the graces needed to manifest it through their lives, and they are called to give expression to Christ’s ever faithful love unto death for his Church. In words of Pope Francis, “Christian spouses share as spouses in the Church’s mission . . . The route is well marked forever; it is the route of love: to love as God loves, forever. Christ does not cease to care for the Church: he loves her always, he guards her always . . . Christ does not cease to remove stains and lines of every kind from the human face. Moving and very beautiful to see is this radiation of God’s power and tenderness which is transmitted from couple to couple, family to family. St. Paul is right: this truly is a ‘great mystery’! Men and women, brave enough to carry this treasure in the ‘earthen vessels’ of our humanity, are (these men and these women who are so brave) an essential resource for the Church, as well as for the world.”⁴⁵

Therefore the indissolubility of marriage is not “a caprice of the Church nor is it merely a positive ecclesiastical law. It is a precept of natural law, of divine law, and responds perfectly to our nature and to the supernatural order of grace. For these reasons, in the great majority of cases, indissolubility is an indispensable condition for the happiness of married couples and for the spiritual security of their children . . . The humble acceptance of God’s will always

39. *Ibid.*, no. 31.

40. See Clavell, “The Freedom Won by Christ on the Cross,” pp. 372-373.

41. “Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.” Pastoral const. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.

42. St. Josemaría used this expression to refer to the self-giving of Christ on the Cross: “When our Lord arrives at Calvary, he is given some wine to drink mixed with gall, as a narcotic to lessen in some way the pain of the crucifixion. But Jesus, after tasting it to show his gratitude for that kind service, has not wanted to drink (see *Mt* 27:34). He gives himself up to death with the full freedom of love.” *The Way of the Cross*, Tenth Station.

43. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 23.

44. *Ibid.*, no. 24.

45. Pope Francis, General Audience, May 6, 2015.

brings with it a profound sense of satisfaction that nothing can substitute. It is not merely a refuge, or a consolation: it is the very essence of Christian life.”⁴⁶ Once again we cite Pope Francis, “The sacrament of marriage is a great act of faith and love: a witness to the courage to believe in the beauty of the creative act of God and to live that love that is always urging us to go on, beyond ourselves and even beyond our own family. The Christian vocation to love unconditionally and without limit is what, by the grace of Christ, is also at the foundation of the free consent that constitutes marriage.”⁴⁷

The greatest enemy of conjugal love is pride.⁴⁸ “People who are constantly concerned with themselves, who act above all for their own satisfaction, endanger their eternal salvation and cannot avoid being unhappy even in this life. Only if a person forgets himself and gives himself to God and to others, in marriage as well as in any other aspect of life, can he be happy on this earth, with a happiness that is a preparation for, and a foretaste of, the joy of heaven.”⁴⁹

Renewed by the gift of the Holy Spirit, spouses should “love each other ‘as though newly engaged,’ recapturing the ardent love of their engagement and first days of marriage.”⁵⁰ This is not a naive invitation, but one firmly based on Christian hope: “As long as we walk on this earth, suffering will always be the touchstone of love. If we were to describe what occurs in the married state, we could say that there are two sides to the coin. On the one hand, there is the joy of knowing that one is loved, the desire and enthusiasm involved in starting a family and taking care of it, the love of husband and wife, the happiness of seeing the children grow up. On the other hand, there are also sorrows and difficulties—the passing of time that consumes the body and threatens the character with the temptation to bitterness, the seemingly monotonous succession of days that are apparently always the same.

“We would have a poor idea of marriage and of human affection if we were to think that love and joy come to an end when faced with such difficulties. It is precisely then that our true sentiments come to the surface. Then the tenderness of a person’s gift of himself takes root and shows itself in a true and profound affection that is stronger than death (cf. *Song* 8:6).”⁵¹

St. Josemaría was well aware of the difficult situation of some people who find themselves separated, at times without any fault on their own part, and

46. *Conversations with Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 97.

47. Pope Francis, *General audience*, May 6, 2015.

48. See *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 26.

49. *Ibid.*, no. 24.

50. See Cormac Burke, “El beato Josemaría Escrivá y el matrimonio,” in *Romana* (1997), *Estudios 1985-1996*, p. 339.

51. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 24. See also *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, no. 91.

who have to carry on with the obligations stemming from their union. His response was always that the free self-giving in accepting God's will, following Christ's example, is the sure path to happiness. This is how he responded, for example, to someone who asked him about the situation of abandoned women with children:⁵² "If women who are separated from their husbands have children in their care, they should understand that their children continue to need their loving motherly devotion, and especially now, to make up for the deficiencies of a divided home. They should make a generous effort to understand that indissolubility, which for them means sacrifice, is a safeguard for the integrity and unity of the great majority of families and ennobles the parent's love and prevents the abandonment of the children.

"Surprise at the apparent hardness of the Christian precept of indissolubility is nothing new. The apostles were surprised when Jesus confirmed it. It can seem a burden, a yoke, but Christ himself said that his yoke was sweet and his burden light.

"On the other hand, although recognizing the inevitable hardship of a good many situations, which often could and should have been avoided, we should be careful not to overdramatize. Is the life of a woman in these circumstances really harder than that of other maltreated women, or of people who suffer any of the other great physical or moral sorrows that life brings with it?

"What really makes a person unhappy and even destroys a whole society is the frenzied search for well-being and the attempt to eliminate, at all costs, all difficulties and hardships. Life has many facets, and very different situations. Some are harsh, while others may seem easy. Each situation brings its own grace. Each one is a special call from God, a new opportunity to work and to give the divine testimony of charity. I would advise those who feel oppressed by a difficult situation to try to forget about their own problems a bit and concern themselves with the problems of others. If they do this they will have more peace and, above all, they will sanctify themselves."⁵³

The significant increase in marriage breakdowns in recent decades has resulted in the need for the Church to approach with pastoral concern the situation of many divorced Catholics, some of whom have contracted a civil marriage. Recently the Pope reminded us: "There are, thanks be to God, those who, sustained by faith and by love for their children, bear witness to their

52. In recent years, it has become more frequent to also find men who have been abandoned by their wives. St. Josemaría's words are valid for these people as well.

53. *Conversations with St. Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 97.

fidelity to a bond they believed in, although it may seem impossible to revive it.”⁵⁴ And seeing the situation of those who have contracted a new union after the failure of their marriage, “the Church is fully aware that such a situation is contrary to the Christian Sacrament.”⁵⁵

The Pope invites spouses who have broken their conjugal harmony to set aside their selfishness and concern themselves above all with their children’s welfare, who are the primary victims. “When adults lose their head, when each one thinks only of him or herself, when a dad and mom hurt one another, the souls of their children suffer terribly, they experience a sense of despair. And these wounds leave a mark that lasts their whole lives.”⁵⁶

Protecting the weakest members of the family is a goal that helps make many other problems seem much less important. “Think what a society would be like if it decided, once and for all, to establish this principle: ‘It’s true, we are not perfect and we make many mistakes. But when it comes to the children who come into the world, no sacrifice on the part of adults is too costly or too great, to ensure that no child believe he or she was a mistake, is worthless or is abandoned to a life of wounds and to the arrogance of men.’”⁵⁷

3. Marriage: A Vocation to Share in God’s Creative Love

The third aspect of the institution of marriage that St. Josemaría stresses is its ordering to the procreation and raising of children.

“Husband and wife are called to sanctify their married life and to sanctify themselves in it . . . It would be a serious mistake if they were to exclude family life from their spiritual development.”⁵⁸ St. Josemaría goes on to specify the content of the vocation to marriage in the task of lovingly creating a true family atmosphere.⁵⁹ And he continues: “Many Christian virtues are necessary in order to sanctify each day of one’s life. First, the theological virtues, and then all the others: prudence, loyalty, sincerity, humility, industriousness, cheerfulness.... But when we talk about marriage and married life, we must begin by speaking clearly about the mutual love of husband and wife.”⁶⁰

The special nature of married love in respect to other noble and clean human loves is due to its intrinsic ordering to procreation, such that “the love of the spouses cannot be called conjugal if one prevents its openness to life in an artifi-

54. Pope Francis, General audience, June 24, 2015.

55. Pope Francis, General audience, August 5, 2015.

56. Pope Francis, General audience, June 24, 2015.

57. Pope Francis, General audience, April 8, 2015.

58. *Marriage: A Christian Vocation*, no. 23.

59. “The aim is this: to sanctify family life, while creating at the same time a true family atmosphere.” *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.* Regarding the strengthening of virtues in conjugal and family life in St. Josemaría’s teaching, see: Antonio Vázquez, *Como las manos de Dios, Matrimonio y familia en las enseñanzas de Josemaría*

cial way.”⁶¹ In St. Josemaría’s words, “we have been created by God and endowed with an intelligence, which is like a spark of the divine intellect. Together with our free will, another gift of God, it allows us to know and to love. And God has also placed in our body the power to generate, which is a participation in his own creative power. He has wanted to use love to bring new human beings into the world and to increase the body of the Church. Thus sex is not a shameful thing; it is a divine gift, ordained to life, to love, to fruitfulness.”⁶²

Thus the ordering of conjugal love, and therefore of marriage, to procreation and education of the offspring involves two key elements: a) generation as a participation in God’s creative love; and b) procreation as a task that falls to the spouses. The first is the most important because it determines the precise meaning of the second.

As we have just seen, St. Josemaría sees the capacity for generation as a share in God’s creative power.⁶³ The parents are truly “pro-creators.”⁶⁴ As St. John Paul II teaches, “a creative act of God underlies the origin of every human person. No human being is born by chance; he or she is always the result of God’s creative love.”⁶⁵

In accord with this love, God loves each person for him or herself.⁶⁶ St. Josemaría insists that the measure of this love is shown in an eminent manner in the mystery of the Incarnation. On the cross God revealed that each person is worth all the blood of his beloved Son.⁶⁷ Therefore we can begin to understand why, in wanting to let man share in his creative power, God has also created the human grammar that corresponds to the language of divine love. This grammar, in God’s infinite wisdom, is conjugal love between a man and a woman. God instituted matrimony so that each human person would be generated as the result of an act of personal love that is always faithful and exclusive, in the image and likeness of divine love.

Escrivá, Palabra, Madrid 2002, pp. 141-165 and 241-283; Carlos Delpiazzo, Gabriel Delpiazzo Antón, *La familia como base fundamental de la sociedad*, in Various authors, *San Josemaría Escrivá, universitario*, University of Montevideo, Montevideo 2002, pp. 91-95.

61. Augusto Sarmiento, *Matrimonio*, in José Luis Illanes (coord.), *Diccionario de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Monte Carmelo—Instituto historico San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, Burgos 2013, p. 820.

62. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 24.

63. Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 27.

64. Among the homilies collected in *Friends of God*, he insists on the same reality twice: “the faculty of generating new life—a great and noble faculty, a participation in God’s creative power” (no. 84); “sex is something noble and holy—a participation in God’s creative power—which was made for marriage” (no. 185). And in *The Forge*, no. 691, he states: “You share in the creative power of God: that is why human love is holy, good, and noble.”

65. St. John Paul II, *Address to the priests taking part in a study seminar on “Responsible Procreation,”* September 17, 1983, no. 1.

66. See Pastoral const. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.

67. St. Paul stresses the universality of Christ’s redemptive work when he writes that “he died for us” (*Rom* 5:8), and “he died for everyone” (*2 Cor* 5:14); at the same time he emphasizes that Christ died not for

As a result, St. Josemaría invites us not to lower the Christian vision of marriage; it is “not just a social institution, much less a mere remedy for human weakness.”⁶⁸ Thus “it is important for married people to acquire a clear sense of the dignity of their vocation. They must know that they have been called by God not only to human love but also to a divine love, through their human love. It is important for them to realize that they have been chosen from all eternity to cooperate with the creative power of God by having and then bringing up children. Our Lord asks them to make their home and their entire family life a testimony of all the Christian virtues.”⁶⁹

The second element is the procreation and education of their children, seen as a mission entrusted to the spouses. After instituting marriage, God gave the first couple a clear command: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.”⁷⁰ St. Josemaría saw this essential end of marriage as an intrinsic demand of conjugal love, and stressed that contraception is a selfish way of acting, and therefore that it seriously undermines fidelity to the vocation to marriage. The Founder of Opus Dei encouraged spouses to “not be afraid of showing affection for each other,” since “this inclination is at the root of their family life.”⁷¹ But he also insisted that “to stop up the sources of life is a crime against the gifts that God has granted to mankind. It proves that a person is moved by selfishness, not love.”⁷²

Moreover, based on Christ’s call to the spouses to follow Him in and through conjugal love (which He himself has healed, perfected and raised up in the sacrament of Marriage⁷³), St. Josemaría points to the deepest reason why Christian spouses should be open to life: “No Christian married couple can want to block the well-springs of life. For their love is based on Christ’s love, which entails self-giving and sacrifice.”⁷⁴

Therefore he encouraged spouses to “build their life together on the foundation of a sincere and pure affection for each other, and on the joy that comes from having brought into the world the children God has enabled them to have. They should be capable of renouncing their personal comfort; and they

an abstract humanity but for each person in the singular: “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me” (*Gal 2:20*). In harmony with these teachings, St. Josemaría said: “Every soul is a wonderful treasure; every man is unique and irreplaceable. Every single person is worth all the blood of Christ”: “Interior Struggle” in *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 80.

68. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 23.

69. *Conversations with Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 93.

70. *Gen 1:28*.

71. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 25.

72. *Ibid.* See also *Conversations with Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá*, nos. 93-96.

73. See Pastoral Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, no.49.

74. *Furrow*, no. 846.

should put their trust in the providence of God. To have a large family—if such is the will of God—is a guarantee of happiness and of effectiveness, in spite of everything that the mistaken proponents of a life based on selfish pleasure may say to the contrary.”⁷⁵

This teaching was recalled recently by Pope Francis in his catechesis on the family: “having many children cannot automatically be an irresponsible choice. Not to have children is a selfish choice. Life is rejuvenated and acquires energy by multiplying: it is enriched, not impoverished! Children learn to assume responsibility for their family. They mature in sharing its hardship. They grow in the appreciation of its gifts. The happy experience of fraternity inspires respect and care for parents, to whom our recognition is due.”⁷⁶

Above we stressed that procreation acquires its true meaning precisely insofar as generation is a participation in God’s creative power. It is not enough to bring children into the world for the spouses to be faithful to their matrimonial vocation; procreation separated from a true relationship of conjugal love is not in accord with the dignity and holiness of the parents’ calling. St. Josemaría did not hesitate to compare such behavior to that of animals: “Some people bring children into the world for their own benefit, to serve their own purposes, out of selfishness. They forget children are a wonderful gift from God for which they will have to render a very special account. Do not be offended if I say that having offspring just to continue the species, is something that... animals can do too.”⁷⁷ Hence “the number is not in itself the decisive factor. The fact of having few or many children does not, on its own, make a family more or less Christian. What matters is the integrity and honesty with which married life is lived.”⁷⁸

God’s creative love not only gives existence but also conserves all created things with providential care. Sacred Scripture reveals the special care with which God provides for each person, inviting us to seek first the Kingdom of God.⁷⁹ St. Josemaría stresses that “being a father or a mother is not simply a

75. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 25. “The theories that make birth control an ideal, or a universal or general duty, are criminal, anti-Christian, and humanly degrading. To appeal to a presumed post-conciliar spirit opposed to large families would be to adulterate and pervert Christian doctrine. The Second Vatican Council has proclaimed that ‘especially worthy of mention among the married people who fulfill the mission entrusted to them by God, are those who, with prudent mutual agreement, generously accept a more numerous offspring to educate worthily’ (Pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 50). Moreover, Pope Paul VI, in an address on 12 February 1966, said ‘that the recently concluded Second Vatican Council should spread among Christian couples a spirit of generosity in order to increase the new People of God . . . they should always remember that this expansion of God’s kingdom and the possibilities of the Church’s penetration among mankind in order to bring about eternal salvation and the salvation of the world are also entrusted to their generosity.’” *Conversations with Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 94.

76. Pope Francis, General audience, February 11, 2015

77. *Furrow*, no. 845.

78. *Conversations with Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 94.

79. See *Mt* 6:25-34. See also *Is* 49:15; *Mt* 10:29-31; *Lk* 12:6-7.

matter of bringing children into the world. The capacity for generation, which is a share in the creative power of God, is meant to have a continuation. Parents are called to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the development of their children into men and women who will be authentic Christians.”⁸⁰

Since the task of raising children is a participation in God’s creative power, the parents are “the first persons responsible for the education of their children, in human as well as in spiritual matters. They should be conscious of the extent of their responsibility.”⁸¹ Carrying out this mission well requires great love and respect for children’s freedom: “Imposing things by force, in an authoritarian manner, is not the right way to teach. The ideal attitude of parents lies more in becoming their children’s friends—friends who will be willing to share their anxieties, who will listen to their problems, who will help them in an effective and agreeable way.”⁸² This mission can never be usurped by the State nor delegated to outside organisms, which are incapable of fostering the children’s harmonious human and emotional development, since their efforts are not inspired by love.⁸³

Finally we can ask: What meaning does the marriage vocation have for couples who don’t have children? In the homily in *Christ is Passing By*, we find only a brief remark in this regard: “It is a sign that he is asking them to go on loving each other with the same affection and to put their efforts, if they can, into serving and working for the good of other souls.”⁸⁴ Elsewhere he discusses this at greater length: “Often God does not give children because He is *asking more*. God asks them to put the same effort and the same kind and gentle dedication into helping their neighbors as they would have put into raising their children, without the human joy that comes from having children. There is, then, no reason for feeling they are failures or for giving way to sadness . . . If they give themselves generously to others and forget themselves, if they put their hearts into their work, they will be wonderfully fruitful and will experience a spiritual parenthood that will fill their souls with true peace.”⁸⁵

80. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 27. Articles on St. Josemaría’s teachings on raising children include: Michele Dolz, “Una pedagogía de la fe en familia: a propósito de algunas enseñanzas del beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer,” in *Romana* (2009), *Estudios 1997-2007*, pp. 339-354 [English version: “Teaching the Faith in the Family: Some Guidelines from Blessed Josemaría Escrivá,” *Romana*, no. 32, 2001, pp. 110-123]; Alfonso Méndiz, Juan Ángel Brage (ed.), *Un amor siempre joven. Enseñanzas de san Josemaría Escrivá sobre la familia*, op. cit., pp. 213-279.

81. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 27.

82. *Ibid.*

83. See Paul O’Callaghan, “I tempi dell’amore, della santità e della misericordia. Una riflessione sulle strutture di sostegno del matrimonio e della famiglia,” in Héctor Franceschi (editor), *Matrimonio e famiglia*, op. cit., pp. 50-59.

84. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 27.

85. *Conversations with Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 96.

4. Epilogue

In his homily *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, St. Josemaría presents the truth about conjugal love as a path for following Christ in the mutual self-giving of the spouses. The institution of marriage, with its properties and ends, is thus seen not as an external or arbitrary imposition, but as an internal demand of conjugal love itself. As St. John Paul II would later say, marriage is the only “place” that makes possible the mutual love between a man and a woman, who give themselves to one another in the totality of their person as sexually complementary.⁸⁶

In virtue of the elevation of marriage to a sacrament, this path for following Christ becomes a true supernatural vocation. It is a gift not only for the spouses, but also for the Church and the whole world, since “every truly Christian family reproduces in some way the mystery of the Church, chosen by God and sent to be the guide of the world.”⁸⁷

The Christian family is meant to play a key role in the evangelization of culture and society, as the Pope recently stressed: “The family that responds to the call of Jesus consigns the stewardship of the world back to the covenant of man and woman with God. Imagine developing this testimony today. Let us imagine that the helm of history (of society, of the economy, of politics) is entrusted—finally!—to the covenant of man and woman, in order that they tend to it with their gaze directed at the generations to come. The themes of earth and home, of the economy and of work, would sing a very different tune.”⁸⁸

As St. Josemaría insisted, “it is very important that the idea of marriage as a real call from God never be absent, either from the pulpit and the religion class or from the conscience of those whom God wishes to follow this way. Couples should be convinced that they are really and truly called to take part in the fulfillment of God’s plan for the salvation of all men.

“For this reason, there is perhaps no better model for a Christian couple than that of the Christian families of apostolic times: the centurion Cornelius, who obeyed the will of God and in whose home the Church was made accessible to the gentiles (see *Acts* 10:24-48); Aquila and Priscilla, who spread Christianity in Corinth and Ephesus and who cooperated in the apostolate of St Paul (see *Acts* 18:1-26); Tabitha, who out of charity attended to the needs

86. See Apostolic Exhort. *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 11.

87. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 30.

88. Pope Francis, General audience, September 2, 2015.

of the Christians in Joppa (see *Acts* 9-36). And so many other homes and families of Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and Romans, in which the preaching of our Lord's first disciples began to bear fruit.

“Families who lived in union with Christ and who made him known to others. Small Christian communities which were centers for the spreading of the Gospel and its message. Families no different from other families of those times, but living with a new spirit, which spread to all those who were in contact with them. This is what the first Christians were, and this is what we have to be: sowers of peace and joy, the peace and joy that Jesus has brought to us.”⁸⁹

The present day culture of the provisional, in which it seems that nothing is definitive, has caused a loss of confidence in marriage. Given this scenario, Pope Francis offers the same solution as St. Josemaría: “The most persuasive testimony of the blessing of Christian marriage is the good life of Christian spouses and of the family. There is no better way to speak of the beauty of the sacrament! A marriage consecrated by God safeguards that bond between man and woman that God has blessed from the very creation of the world; and it is the source of peace and goodness for the entire lifetime of the marriage and family. For example, in the first ages of Christianity, this great dignity of the bond between man and woman overcame an abuse then held normal, namely the husbands' right to repudiate their wives, even for reasons based on pretext or to humiliate. The Gospel of the family, the Gospel which proclaims this very Sacrament overcame this culture of customary repudiation.

“The Christian seed at the root of equality between spouses must bear new fruit today. The witness of the social dignity of marriage shall become persuasive precisely in this way, the way of a testimony which attracts, the way of reciprocity between them, of complementarity between them.”⁹⁰

89. *Marriage: a Christian Vocation*, no. 30.

90. Pope Francis, General audience, April 29, 2015.