

HUSBAND AND WIFE IN THE LIGHT OF THE INCARNATION

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Inspired by Edward Holloway's vision Dr Christina Read, wife and mother, reflects upon marriage in the light of the Incarnation and the meaning of the sexes. This article is a developed extract of a talk she gave at the 2008 Faith Summer Session in Woldingham, Surrey.

Introduction

Out of love, God creates us. He does not need to make us or our universe, but he creates us because he wants to share the infinite love and happiness of his own life with us. He does this in the Incarnation, the coming of Jesus Christ, God become man. This brings about 'the marriage of all marriages', the marriage between Christ and the Church, between Jesus and the people of God united to him in baptism. It is through this marriage union that God gives us a share in his divine life and so fulfils his plan in creating us. Everything in the universe is made with a view to this union between Christ and the Church, through which God fulfills his plan. It is only in the light of this union that anything can be fully understood. And so this also is how we will understand marriage between a man and a woman: from its relationship to the most important marriage of all, the marriage between Christ and the Church.

In this article we shall try to bring out how marriage flows from and serves the purpose of the coming of Christ and his union with the Church. We shall be building upon the basic reality that it is through marriage that we are called to co-create the people to whom Christ has come to give divine life. It is through marriage that we make and form the people who are to make up the Church which he has come to unite to himself.

This is the great and essential work of marriage in the plan of God.

Marriage is Natural

From the very beginning marriage is part of God's plan and so is entirely natural for us. In the book of Genesis human life at its very creation is immediately described as both male and female and as made to multiply, to make more people.

There is not just to be one sex, but two, to cooperate and help each other in a relationship that binds them together in a very distinctive and definite way: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" Adam says of Eve. And the writer of Genesis continues: "therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh." This extraordinarily intimate union, given the task of multiplying so that there are more human beings made in the image and likeness of God, is what we call marriage. Indeed, the writer of Genesis is already using the special terms man and wife (not just man and woman) and describing such a profound union between the two that it can be termed 'one flesh'.

¹ See also www.faith.org.uk

From the beginning God made it this way for our good. Jesus himself had to remind his hearers of this when they questioned him about divorce, which in his day meant putting aside a wife you didn't want any more: "for your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19: 8).

Despite the increasing divergence between secular and biblical understandings of marriage, signs of this original plan of God are still evident in the world around us, e.g. the fact that living together before getting married increases rather than decreases the risk of divorce and the fact that marriage is the best place for bringing up children.

Holloway's thought offers a profound illumination of the essential place which this male-female relationship has always had in the divine plan. Centred upon the Incarnation as the meaning of all things (cf. articles on "The Primacy of Christ" in *Faith* January 2006, 2007 and 2008), the separation of the sexes into male and female finds its primary meaning in God becoming man, where the female principle is essential to the enfleshing of the *Logos*. For the eternal, uncreated second person of the Trinity truly to become man he will take on human nature by being conceived and formed in the womb of a woman, like all human beings. This unique conception is achieved by the direct determination of the female principle by God himself (i.e., the Holy Spirit overshadowing the womb of the virgin Mary) and by Mary's free cooperation with this act of God.

This unique case of conception - for which the universe is made - is the foundation and exemplar of the procreative ministry of the union of the male and female human creature (fulfilling the command "be fruitful and multiply"). In this latter instance which involves the creation of a new person, the role of 'determining' the conception (which is God's alone in the Incarnation) belongs to the man, whilst the woman contributes in the same way as Mary (in accordance with the indispensable role of the female principle in bringing about the Incarnation).

In this way the union of male and female in marriage not only takes the Incarnation as its point of reference (as regards its purpose and meaning in the deepest sense) but also serves the Incarnation. For if God is to share human nature with the whole human race through the Incarnation, there need to be other human beings sharing this nature by virtue of their inheritance of it through conception of a woman. Unlike Jesus Christ, these human creatures are not eternal uncreated persons and will come into being, not only through Divine decision, but also through the decision and determination of the creature, a male principle determining the cooperative female, as is the case between a man and woman in human procreation.

Thus Holloway's fundamental insight is that the natural orientation of marriage towards family is focused upon the coming and person of Christ. All is for him, including all matter, and the distinction and complementary character of the sexes.

Marriage as Incarnational

We discover the full depth and wonder of marriage when we look beyond the beginning of creation to its *purpose* - that is the coming of Jesus Christ to share the life and love of God with us through his union with the Church.

It is clear that the marriage union reflects the relationship between God and his people, between Christ and the Church and there are various examples in the Bible where God's love for us in Christ is described in nuptial terms. But that doesn't mean that God's love is copying ours or is an image of

ours. God doesn't model his behaviour on ours. It is quite the other way around. St Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians:

"Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her...'For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.' This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church" (Eph 5: 25, 28-32).

So the love of husband and wife in marriage is meant to be like the love of Christ and the Church; it is meant to be a reflection of it. And the union of husband and wife in marriage can only be like the union between Christ and the Church by *sharing* in it. And that is what Christian marriage is: a sharing in the love between Jesus and the Church, a participation in the marriage of Christ and the Church. The marriage between Christ and his Church is the key for understanding marriage.

Covenant

The love relationship between God and the people he has made has this special name, covenant. Going back to the Old Testament the covenant referred to the bond that God establishes with his people, an utterly faithful and unbreakable bond described in terms of a nuptial relationship in which even if the people of Israel are unfaithful, God is always faithful. This Old Testament description is a preparation for the new and everlasting covenant in Jesus Christ in which God unites himself to us by becoming incarnate as a human being and living, dying and rising for us so that we can enjoy perfect union with God in and through him. This is the covenant between Christ and all those that are thus united to him in the Church. It is the fulfilment of the very being and pattern of creation.

As the marriage union between a man and a woman is a sharing in this union between Christ and the Church, so, like the love between Christ and the Church, married love is also a *covenant*. It is not simply a *contract*. It is modelled on and grounded in the covenantal love that God has for us, which means it is a 'God kind of love'. Like God's love it is unbreakable, utterly faithful, without conditions, essentially fruitful, life-giving - *because this is how God creates and loves*, this is how Jesus loves the Church, giving himself up for her. In Christian marriage we have this amazing reality that our human love is taken up into God's commitment so that it can be kept. (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) n. 1639). We might not be able to love perfectly, totally, unconditionally but *God* can, and when we make our commitment to this kind of loving on our wedding day it is taken up into God's commitment so that it can be kept. The Catechism calls it a "covenant guaranteed by God's fidelity" (n.1640).

As a reflection and continuation of Christ's relationship with the Church, marriage is thus also a witness to God's love. It is a visible sign, showing forth the union between Christ and the Church in which it is a participation. As such it is the high point of that which just being a man and being a woman is the seminal indication.

Looking back over the years I've been married, I see the marriage covenant is like a daily miracle. How can my husband and I live this, with all our weaknesses and inadequacies? And yet we do, because our marriage isn't a little private contract between ourselves, but is located in the infinite perfection and abundance of God's love for us in Christ and is sustained by that love of God in Christ.

Because marriage is a covenant modelled on the covenant that Jesus, the Bridegroom, has with his Bride the Church, it has the characteristics of being lifelong, faithful and fruitful.

Lifelong and Faithful

Marriage is unbreakable, a life-long bond 'till death do us part'. It is *indissoluble*, it cannot be dissolved; it cannot be undone while both parties are living. It is an irrevocable and complete commitment of self made before God and sealed by him.

Marriage's participation in the Christ-Church covenant makes it utterly faithful, year in year out, whatever happens. It is an *unconditional* love; it is not based on implicit conditions. There are no ifs and no buts. In marriage we do not say "I commit to you because I believe that what I like about you will not change." Like Christ, with Christ, we forsee the Cross. Unlike other forms of Christian love the unconditional faithfulness of married love is *exclusive*. This love is just between me and my husband; the way I love my husband is just for him, I do not love anyone else in that unique way that belongs to marriage, in which the sexes are re-joined. It does not mean that I do not love other people, but the love that belongs to the marriage relationship is for him alone, and his for me alone. This is different from the way a priest or religious sister or brother loves. As they do not have a particular commitment to one person they are freed up to love everyone. But in marriage it is different. Our strength is this fidelity to this one person, a fidelity upon which the love of our family life is built and indeed the loving that goes out beyond our family into the world around us.

Ultimately this is the fidelity of Christ. As married people our efforts are drawn into the perfect fidelity Christ has to the Church (cf. CCC n. 2365). *He* is our rock. And this is very important because human beings are not perfect and do let us down. But Christ is always faithful. It is as though his fidelity embraces and holds secure our fidelity.

Fruitful

Finally, like God's love, married love is fruitful; it is creative. Here we come to the heart of the meaning and purpose of marriage and the way it flows from the covenant between Christ and the Church. By coming to share our human nature in the incarnation, God can share his divine life with us. But there has to be an 'us' to share it with. And this is where marriage comes in. In marriage we have the extraordinary privilege of sharing in the love that prompts God to create us so as to share his love with us through becoming one with us. In a way that flows from the fulfilment of Mary's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit, together as husband and wife we actually cooperate with God in making people. This is so that God can share his divine life with them and the incarnation be fulfilled. We are involved in making new human beings who are going to live for all eternity. In this way we contribute to the realisation of God's plan to share his love with the people he has made, to fill heaven with people eternally fulfilled in his love, because it is through the love of husband and wife that these people, in the plan of God, come into being.

As well as sharing in God's work of creating people, husbands and wives also have a share in God's work of bringing them to salvation, bringing them into union with Christ in the Church by getting them baptised, bringing them to be fed by Christ in the Eucharist and to be cared for by him in the other sacraments; bringing them to know and love God through teaching, prayer, bible reading and example. Here we see again why marriage is a covenant, for if marriage shares in Christ's work of creating and saving, it "must be like Christ's own work. It must be an alliance, a covenant, a mutual office in which each needs the other." (Edward Holloway: "The Covenant of Christian Marriage" *Faith* editorial 1979 11.5 p1).

This then is the essential role of marriage in God's plan flowing on from and serving the incarnation. Jesus Christ has come amongst us to share his infinite life with us and with him

married couples make the people he is going share this life with, bring forth the people who will make the Church that he binds to himself to. Indeed this is our special office, our ministry in the Church; we are stewards of God's creative love (cf. the same Holloway editorial).

This of course brings us to the great dignity and purpose of sex: to make these new human beings within the unbreakable union of marriage. This is what sex is for; for family within the loving union of marriage; to make up the family of God, the Church. Sex has this amazing function that it is at one and the same time the means of making new people within the binding union of marriage and what establishes and affirms that binding union within which new life is nurtured and raised. In this way it flows from the pattern and reality of the annunciation and images the covenant relationship between Christ and the Church. The covenant between Christ and the Church is by definition a life-giving union - Jesus unites the Church to himself in order to communicate his new risen life through her, giving birth to sons and daughters of God in baptism and nurturing them to maturity (spiritually and sacramentally). Just as it makes no sense to separate this life-giving fruitfulness of Jesus' relationship with the Church from his union with the Church, so too we cannot separate procreation from the meaning of sexual union in marriage. To do so contradicts the purpose for which it is made, for which the sexes are split, for which the universe exists.

Contraception literally means 'against conception'. It stops conception, obstructs or interferes with the possibility of a child being conceived out of sexual intercourse. It makes the act of sex a 'no' to the conception of a new human being, a 'no' to the co-creation of a person.

This doesn't mean that all married couples must have 20 children, but that every act of sexual intercourse is open to the possibility of conceiving a child as the fruit of our love. Every week we stand up at Mass and say in the creed 'I believe in the Holy Spirit the Lord the giver of life', that same Spirit which hovered over the waters at creation and the womb of Our Lady. For married people this 'yes' to the Holy Spirit the Lord the giver of life involves openness to the fact that he may give new life out of our marital 'lovemaking'. This openness to welcoming children is evident in the marriage vows themselves: "Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?".

For this reason many married couples find natural family planning (NFP) helpful. This is not just because it works but because it is a way of being open to God's will, of cooperating with the Holy Spirit in the decisions we make about the size and spacing of our family. When we use NFP, each time we have sex we're not doing anything to stop that act of love result in a new life being conceived. If we have good, unselfish reasons for postponing getting pregnant we simply avoid the fertile days of the woman's cycle. (Successful use of NFP requires the training and support of an accredited teacher and proper, careful application of the rules).

I have found this creative aspect of marriage the most amazing thing I have ever done. I look at my children at all their various different stages of development, in all their wonderful movements and thoughts, all of them together and each one in turn, and I am overwhelmed with wonder to think I was involved in making them. They are the fruit of our love, they have come from the love my husband and I have for one another, together with the love of God. And of course this creative activity brings my husband and me closer together. Despite all the stresses of raising a family (where sometimes it can even seem difficult to make opportunities to *talk* to each other without interruptions) at a deeper level we are bound closer together, sharing the fundamental joy of making and raising these little people.

Sacrament

Finally let us turn to the fact that marriage is a sacrament.

The Catechism tells us:

"Matrimony signifies the union of Christ and his Church. It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved his Church; the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life." (CCC 1661)

We have seen that marriage shares in the salvific relation between Christ and the Church. When marriage takes place between two people who are baptised it is a sacrament. A sacrament communicates salvation, an action of Christ in his Church that makes holy and sacred, which continues the Incarnation and fulfils the patterns written into creation and our bodies.

So we are saying that this union of a man and a woman in marriage can actually make us holy, it can be a channel of God's saving grace, of his life, his love, his power, a meeting with Christ, a being touched by him through the Holy Spirit. Only two vocations in the Church are endowed with their own sacrament: priesthood and marriage. Becoming a religious sister or brother, a monk or friar does not involve a sacrament. The fact that Christian marriage is a means of grace for the couple and the wider community gives it a great dignity.

Marriage is a sign of Christ's presence that is not just a nice image that reminds us about Jesus, but is a sign in which he is actually present. It confers the grace it signifies.

The fact that marriage is a sacrament is very important to me. It means that Jesus himself is present in our marriage. He is working through the love we have for each other to help us, to heal us and to make us holy. The sacrament of marriage works in and through our ordinary human love consecrating it and making it the way that we can be raised up and come closer to God and live the new life he give us in Christ. From very early in my marriage I felt God's care for me in my husband's kindness, through his help I knew the power of God was working and healing me; but also too through the challenges and difficulties we've been through together I know the hand of God has been at work transforming us for the better. Just as Jesus sorted out a crisis at Cana and turned the water into wine he takes the difficult things and just the plain boring every day things in our marriage so that they can be turned into something good and wonderful, so that they can be used to bring us closer to God and to each other.

This brings us to a close, important link between marriage and the Eucharist. We have said that marriage shares in the communion between Christ and the Church and the Eucharist is the culmination of that communion, the wedding banquet of Jesus and the Church.

"There must also be an intrinsic relationship to the Holy Eucharist in Christian marriage, a relationship which is proper to the office of marriage and parenthood, both as spiritually unitive for the couple and as life-giving for the child. If the office of the covenant of marriage mirrors the covenant of Christ and mankind in the Church, then it would seem that there must be a similar special relationship between Matrimony and the Eucharist. The Eucharist as sacrifice and sacrament is the source of life and grace for us all. But what one is suggesting is that the graces which are promised in marriage, the special grace of life and state, must be obtained in a unique and special way though the Eucharist in the case of Christian spouses." (Holloway, *Faith* editorial 1979)

Conclusion

Most of us have been short-changed when it come to the views of marriage we have grown up with. Marriage is so much more than just something that everybody does at some point when they grow up and sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn't.

In marriage we have a unique share in the work of God's creation and God's becoming man.

A man and a woman are united, not just by nice words and romantic gestures, but in a covenant of lifelong, utterly faithful love that fulfils the way they are made and flows from and *really shares in Jesus' binding love for the Church*.

We are united in this divine way not just so that we don't have to watch telly on our own each evening, but in order to *share in God's work of creation and salvation, specifically to be ministers of God's creative love*. With God, marriage makes families, it makes the Church, it makes the people who will fill heaven. Without marriage there would be no Church, no people for Jesus to share his divine life with just as without Jesus marriage, family and our very sexuality in all its dimensions would make no sense.

This makes marriage an adventure greater than we can possibly imagine, because it takes us beyond ourselves into the divine adventure of God made man. It offers more than human fulfilment and takes more than human sacrifice because it rests in and draws life from the love of God who lives us unto death and into eternal life.

When I was explaining to my children recently that I was going to give a talk about marriage, my six year old said "*Great!* We're going to a wedding!" He misunderstood slightly. However he also showed that he understood something very important: that marriage is good news, a great thing to be really glad about, and if I hadn't known better, I might have thought he had been reading the passage from the Catechism of the Catholic Church with which I would like to close:

"Proclaim the good news that God loves us with a definitive and irrevocable love, that married couples share in this love, that it supports and sustains them, and that by their own faithfulness they can be witnesses to God's faithful love" (CCC 1648)