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Father Cantalamessa's Address at Family Meeting

"Human Sexuality Is the First School of Religion"

MEXICO CITY, JAN. 22, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of the Jan. 14 address from Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher of the Pontifical Household, at the 6th World Meeting of Families.

The World Meeting was held Jan. 14-18 in Mexico City.

Father Cantalamessa's address was titled "Family Relationships and Values According to the Bible."

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I divide my address into three parts. In the first part I will focus on God's initial plan for marriage and the family and how it came about throughout the history of Israel. In the second part I will speak about the renewal brought by Christ and how it was interpreted and lived in the Christian community of the New Testament. In the third part I will try to consider what biblical revelation can contribute to the solution of the challenges that marriage and family life are facing today.

I will focus on the foundation of the family, and therefore marriage and the relationship within the couple, because I believe the Bible always has a very opportune message in this regard; it is more apropos than in relation to the family as a social reality and the relationships within a family. In this context the Bible reflects a culture that is very different from today's culture. In addition, we know that a good relationship between the parents is the basic requirement for a family to be able to develop an educational role with their children. Many of the dramatic situations young people suffer today are the consequence of broken or dysfunctional families.

Part I

Marriage and Family: the Divine Project And Human Achievements in the Old Testament

1. The Divine Project

We know that the Book of Genesis has two different accounts of the creation of the first human couple, which go back to two different traditions: the yahwehist (10th century B.C.) and the more recent (6th century B.C.) called the "priestly" tradition.

In the priestly tradition (Genesis 1:26-28) man and woman are created at the same time, not one from the other. Being man and woman are related to being an image of God: "God created mankind in his image, in his image he created them, man and woman he created them." The primary purpose of the union between man and woman is found in being fruitful and filling the earth.

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In the yahwehist tradition (Genesis 2:18-25) the woman is taken from the man; the creation of the two sexes is seen as a remedy for solitude: "It is not good that man be alone; I will make him an adequate helper;" The unitive factor is highlighted more than the procreative: "The man will cling to his wife and the two will be one flesh;" Each one is free with regard to their own sexuality and to the other: "Both were naked, the man and his wife, but they were not embarrassed by each other."

Neither of the two accounts references any subordination of the woman to the man, before sin: The two are on a level of absolute equality, although it is the man who takes the initiative at least in the yahwehist account.

I've found the most convincing explanation for this divine "invention" of the difference between the sexes not from a biblical scholar, but from a poet, Paul Claudel:

"Man is a proud being; there was no other way to make him understand his neighbor except introducing him in the flesh. There was no other way to make him understand dependence and need other than through the law of another distinct being (woman) over him, due to the simple fact that she exists." [1]

Opening oneself to the opposite sex is the first step toward opening oneself to others, our neighbors, and to the Other with a capital O, which is God. Marriage is born under the sign of humility; it is the recognition of dependence and therefore of one's condition of being a creature. Falling in love with a woman or a man is the completion of the most radical act of humility. It is becoming a beggar and telling the other person, "I'm not enough for myself, I need your being." If, as Schleiermacher said, the essence of religion is the "sense of dependence" ("Abhaengigkeitsgefuehl") on God, then human sexuality is the first school of religion.

Thus far we have examined God's plan. Nevertheless, the rest of the Bible's text cannot be explained without also including the account of the fall in addition to creation, above all what was said to the woman: "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." (Genesis 3:16). The rule of the man over the woman is part of man's sin, not of God's plan; with those words God predicts it, he does not approve it.

2. Historic accomplishments

The Bible is a human and a divine book, not just because its authors are both God and man, but also because it describes, weaved throughout the text, both God's fidelity and man's infidelity. This is especially evident when we compare God's plan over marriage and family with the way it was put into practice in the history of the Chosen People.

It is useful to be aware of the human deficiencies and aberrations so that we're not too surprised by what happens around us and also because it shows that marriage and family are institutions that, at least in practice, evolve over time, as any other aspect of social and religious life. Following the book of Genesis, the son of Cain, Lemek, violates the law of monogamy taking two wives. Noah, with his family appears as an exception in the middle of the general corruption of his time. The very Patriarchs, Abraham and Jacob have children with a number of women. Moses authorizes the practice of divorce; David and Solomon keep a veritable harem of women.

Nevertheless the deviations appear, as always, more present at the higher levels of society, among the leaders, than at the level of the people, where the initial idea of monogamous marriage was likely the norm, not the exception. In order to form an idea of the relationships and family values that are held and lived in Israel we can turn to the wisdom books: Psalms, Proverbs and Sirach. These help us more than the historical books (which deal precisely with the leaders). They highlight marital fidelity, education of offspring and respect for parents. This last value is one of the Ten Commandments: "Honor your father and mother."

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The deviation from the initial idea can be seen in the underlying idea of marriage in Israel, even more than in particular individual transgressions. The principal involution is related to two basic points. The first is that marriage changes from being an end to being a means. Overall, the Old Testament considers marriage to be "a patriarchal structure of authority, primarily driven to the perpetuation of the clan. In this sense we must understand the institutions of the levirate (Deuteronomy 25:5-10), concubine (Genesis 16), and provisional polygamy." [2] The ideal of a communion of life between man and woman, founded on a reciprocal and personal relationship, is not forgotten, but becomes less important than the good of the offspring.

The second great deviation refers to the condition of women: She goes from being a companion of man, gifted with equal dignity, to appearing more and more subordinated to man and serving a function for man. This can be seen even in the famous eulogy of a woman in the Book of Proverbs: "Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies ..." (Proverbs 31:10) It is a eulogy of woman made completely in terms of man's needs. Its conclusion is: Happy the man that possesses such a woman! She weaves him beautiful clothes, honors his house, she allows him to walk with his head held high among his friends. I don't think that women today would be very excited about this eulogy.

The prophets played an important role by shedding light on God's initial plan for marriage, especially Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah. They posited the union of man and woman as a symbol of the covenant between God and his people. As a result of this, they once again shed light on the values of mutual love, fidelity and indissolubility that characterize God's love for Israel. All the phases and sufferings of spousal love are described and used in this regard: the beauty of love in the early stage of courtship (cf. Jeremiah 2:2), the fullness of joy on the wedding day (cf. Isaiah 62:5), the drama of separation (cf. Hosea 2:4) and finally the rebirth, full of hope, of the old bond (cf. Hosea 2:16, Isaiah 54:8).

Malachi shows the positive effect that the prophetic message could have on human marriage, and especially, on the condition of women. He writes:

"The Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth" (Malachi 2:14-15).

We have to read the Song of Songs in the light of this prophetic tradition. This represents a rebirth of the vision of marriage as eros, as attraction of the man to the woman (in this case, also of the woman to the man); it presents the oldest account of creation.

On the other hand, certain modern exegesis is mistaken when it tries to interpret the Song of Songs exclusively in terms of human love between a man and a woman. The author of Songs writes from within the religious history of his people, where human love was assumed by the prophets to be a metaphor for the covenant between God and his people. Hosea turned his own marital situation into a metaphor for the relations between God and Israel. How could we imagine that the author of Songs would leave all of that behind? The mystical interpretation of Songs, beloved in the tradition of Israel and the Church, is not a later imposition, but rather it is in some way implicit in the text. Far from detracting from human love, it confers upon it new beauty and splendor.

Part II

Marriage and Family in the New Testament

I. Christ's renewal of marriage

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St. Irenaeus explains the "recapitulation ('anakephalaiosis') of all things" performed by Christ (Ephesians 1:10) as a "taking things from the beginning to lead them to their fulfillment." The concept implies continuity and novelty at the same time and in this sense it is fulfilled in an exemplary way in Christ's work with regards to marriage.

a. The continuity

Chapter 19 of the Gospel of St. Matthew alone is enough to illustrate the two aspects of renewal. Let us see first of all how Jesus takes things anew from the beginning.

"Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?' 'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female," (Genesis 1:27) and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate"' (Matthew 19:3-6).

The adversaries move in the restricted confines of the case-based reasoning proper to different schools (is it licit to divorce the woman for any motive or is a specific and serious motive required); Jesus responds by tackling the problem at the root, going to the beginning. In his response, Jesus refers to the two accounts of the institution of marriage; he takes elements from both, but above all he highlights the aspects of the communion of persons present in both accounts.

What follows in the text, regarding the problem of divorce, also follows this same direction; in fact he confirms the fidelity and indissolubility of the marital bond above even the good of offspring, on the basis of which polygamy, levirate and divorce had been justified in the past.

"Then why did Moses command that a writ of dismissal should be given in cases of divorce?' He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted, that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but it was not like this from the beginning. Now I say this to you: anyone who divorces his wife -- I am not speaking of an illicit marriage -- and marries another, is guilty of adultery'" (Matthew 19:7-9).

The parallel text of Mark shows how also in the case of divorce, man and woman are on a level of absolute equality according to Jesus: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another is guilty of adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another she is guilty of adultery too" (Mark 10:11-12).

I will not spend time on the "illicit marriage" clause ("porneia"), which is absent in Mark's text and could be a later addition of Matthew to adapt the saying of Jesus to the situation of his community. Instead I want to emphasize the "implicit sacramental foundation of marriage" present in Jesus' response.[3] The words "What God has joined" say that marriage is not a purely secular reality, fruit of human will; there is a sacred aspect to marriage that is rooted in divine will.

The elevation of marriage to a "sacrament" therefore is not based solely on the weak argument of Jesus' presence at the wedding of Cana, nor in the text of Ephesians 5 alone. In a certain way it begins with the earthly Jesus and is part of his leading all things to the beginning. John Paul II is also right when he defines marriage as the "oldest sacrament." [4]

b. The novelty

Thus far we have focused on the continuity. What is the novelty? Paradoxically it consists in making marriage relative. Let's listen to the following text from Matthew:

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"The disciples said to him, 'If that is how things are between husband and wife, it is advisable not to marry. But he replied, 'It is not everyone who can accept what I have said, but only those to whom it is granted. There are eunuchs born so from their mother's womb, there are eunuchs made so by human agency and there are eunuchs who have made themselves so for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let anyone accept this who can'" (Matthew 19:10-12).

With these words Jesus institutes a second state of life, justifying it by the coming to earth of the Kingdom of Heaven. It does not eliminate the other possibility, marriage, but it makes it relative. What happens to it is similar to the idea of the state in the political sphere: It is not abolished, but rather radically limited by the revelation of the contemporary presence, within history, of the Kingdom of God.

Therefore, voluntary continence does not need to deny or despise marriage so that its own validity can be recognized. (Some ancient authors made this mistake in some of their writings on virginity). What's more, it derives its meaning from none other than contemporary affirmation of the goodness of marriage. The institution of celibacy and virginity for the Kingdom ennobles marriage in the sense that it becomes a choice, a vocation, and not just simply a moral duty to which it was impossible not to submit oneself in Israel without exposure to the accusation of trespassing God's commandment.

It's important to remember something which is easily forgotten. Celibacy and virginity mean renouncing marriage, not sexuality, which retains all the richness of its meaning, even though it is lived in a different way. The celibate person and the virgin also feel attraction, and therefore dependence on people of the opposite sex, and it is precisely this which gives meaning to their choice for chastity.

c. Jesus, an enemy of family?

Among the many theses posited in recent years in the so-called "Third Quest on the historical Jesus"; we find the idea that Jesus rejected the natural family and all parental bonds in the name of belonging to a different community, in which God is the father and the disciples are all brothers and sisters, proposing an itinerant life, as was lived in that time outside of Israel by the cynic philosophers.[5]

In effect, in the Gospels, Christ uses words that at first glance cause bewilderment. Jesus says: "Anyone who comes to me without hating father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Certainly harsh words, but the evangelist Matthew hurries to explain the sense of the word "hate" in this case: "No one who prefers father or mother to me is worthy of me. No one who prefers son or daughter to me is worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37). So Jesus does not ask us to hate our parents or children, but rather that we not love them to the point to which we refuse to follow him because of them.

Another episode causes confusion. "Another to whom he said, 'Follow me,' replied, 'Let me go and bury my father first.' But he answered, 'Leave the dead to bury their dead; your duty is to go and spread the news of the Kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:59). For some critics this is a scandalous request, among them the American rabbi Jacob Neusner, with whom Benedict XVI has a conversation in his book about Jesus of Nazareth.[6] It is disobedience to God, who orders that we take care of parents, a flagrant violation of filial duties.

What we have to give to Rabbi Neusner is that Christ's words, such as these, cannot be explained while we consider Christ a mere man, as exceptional as may be. Only God can ask that he be loved more than a parent, and to follow that up, to give up attending a burial. For the believers this is further proof that Jesus is God. For Neusner, it is the reason why he cannot be followed.

The confusion caused by these requests from Jesus also come from not keeping in mind the difference between what he asks all without distinction and what he asks of only some that are called to share in his life entirely dedicated to the Kingdom, as continues to happen today in the Church. The same should be said about

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the renunciation of marriage: He does not impose it, nor does he propose it to all without distinction, but rather only to those who accept to put themselves at the complete service of the Kingdom as he does (cf. Matthew 19:10-12).

All these doubts about the attitude of Jesus toward family and marriage fall apart if we keep in mind the other passages of the Gospel. Jesus is most rigorous regarding the indissolubility of marriage; he heavily stresses the commandment to honor father and mother, to the point of condemning the practice of excusing oneself from the duty to assist them under religious pretexts (Mark 7:11-13). How many miracles Jesus works precisely to step forward to meet parents in their suffering (Jairo, the father of the epileptic), mothers (the Canaanite, the widow of Naim), or of relatives (the sisters of Lazarus), therefore, to honor the family bonds. On more than one occasion he shares the pain of the relatives up to the point of crying with them.

In a moment such as the present, in which everything seems to be conspiring to weaken the bonds and values of the family, we would only need to oppose Jesus and the Gospel to them! Jesus has come to give marriage back its original beauty, to reinforce it, not to weaken it.

2. Marriage and family in the Apostolic Church

Just as we have done with God's original project, also concerning the renewal worked by Christ we intend to see how it was received and lived in the life and catechesis of the Church, limiting ourselves to the reality of the apostolic Church for the moment. Paul is our primary source of information, having had to dedicate himself to the problem in some of his letters, above all in the First Letter to the Corinthians.

The Apostle distinguishes between what comes directly from the Lord and the particular applications that he himself makes when required by the context in which he preaches the Gospel. The confirmation of the indissolubility of marriage is part of the first type: "To the married I give this ruling, and this is not mine but the Lord's: a wife must not be separated from her husband or if she has already left him, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband -- and a husband must not divorce his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:10-11); the guidance regarding marriage between believers and nonbelievers and the provisions regarding celibates and virgins is part of the second type of the Apostle's teaching: "I have no directions from the Lord, but I give my own opinion" (1 Corinthians 7:10;7:25).

The Church has received from Jesus also the element of novelty which consists, as we have seen, in the institution of a second state of life: celibacy and virginity for the Kingdom. To them, Paul, he himself not married, dedicates the final part of Chapter 7 of his letter. Based on the verse: "I should still like everyone to be as I am myself; but everyone has his own gift from God, one this kind and the next something different" (1 Corinthians 7:7), some think that the Apostle considers marriage and virginity as two charisms. But that is not accurate; virgins have received the charism of virginity, married people have other charisms (understood not that of virginity). It's meaningful that the Church's theology has always considered virginity a charism and not a sacrament, and marriage a sacrament and not a charism.

The text of the Letter to the Ephesians will have a noteworthy effect in the process that will bring about the recognition of the sacramentality of marriage: "This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and the two become one flesh. This mystery (in Latin, "sacramentum") has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the Church" (Ephesians 5:31-32). This is not an isolated occasional assertion, based on a loose translation of the word "mystery" ("mysterion") with the Latin "sacramentum." Marriage as a symbol of the relationship between Christ and the Church is based on a series of statements and parables in which Jesus applied the title of spouse to himself, attributed to God by the prophets.

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As the apostolic community grows and consolidates, we see how an entire familial pastoral practice and spirituality flower. The most meaningful texts in this regard are the letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians. Both of them show the two fundamental relationships that constitute family: the relationship between husband and wife and the relationship between parents and children. With regard to the first relationship, the Apostle writes:

"Submit to each other in the fear of Christ. Women to their husbands, as to the Lord ... As the Church is submissive to Christ, so also should wives submit to their husbands in all. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her."

Paul recommended that husbands "love" their wives (and this seems normal to us), but then he recommends that wives be "submissive" to their husbands, and this, in a society that is strongly (and rightfully) conscious of the equality of the sexes, seems unacceptable. On this point St. Paul is, at least in part, conditioned by the customs of his time. The difficulty, on the other hand, changes if we keep in mind the phrase from the beginning of the text: "Be submissive to one another in the fear of Christ," which establishes reciprocity in submission and in love.

With regard to the relationship between parents and children, Paul emphasizes the traditional advice of the wisdom books:

"Children, be obedient to your parents in the Lord -- that is what uprightness demands. The first commandment that has a promise attached to it is: Honor your father and your mother; and the promise is: so that you may have long life and prosper in the land. And parents, never drive your children to resentment but bring them up with correction and advice inspired by the Lord" (Ephesians 6:1-4).

The pastoral letters, especially the Letter to Titus, offer detailed rules for every category of person: women, spouses, bishops and priests, old people, young people, widows, owners and slaves (cf. Titus 2:1-9). In fact slaves were also part of the family in the broad understanding of the time.

In the early Church as well, the ideal of marriage that Jesus proposes will not be put into practice without shadows and resistance. In addition to the case of incest of Corinth (1 Corinthians 8:1), this is borne out by the need the apostles feel of insisting on this aspect of the early Christian life. But overall, the Christians presented the world a new family model that became one of the principal factors in evangelization.

The author of the letter to Diognetus, in the second century, says that the Christians "marry as every one else does and have children, but they do not abandon the newborns; they have a common table, but not a common bed" (V:6-7). In his Apology, Justin constructs an argument that we Christians of today should be able to make our own in dialogue with political authorities. In essence he says the following: You, Roman emperors, multiply the laws about family, which have proven to be incapable of stopping its dissolution. Come to see our families and you will be convinced Christians are your better allies in the reform of society, not your enemies. In the end, as is known, after three centuries of persecution, the Empire accepted the Christian family model in its own legislation.

Part III

What the Bible Teaches Us Today

Rereading the Bible in a conference like this one, which is not of biblical scholars, but rather of pastoral workers in the field of family care, cannot be limited to a simple reminder of revealed knowledge, but rather it should be able to enlighten current problems. "Scriptures, as St. Gregory the Great said, grow with the one that reads them" ("cum legentibus crescit"); they reveal new implications to the measure in which new

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questions are posed to them. And today there are many new and provocative questions.

1. Objection to the biblical ideal

We are confronted by a seemingly global objection to the biblical plan for sexuality, marriage and family. Monsignor Tony Anatrella's research, which was given to the speakers in preparation for this congress, provides a well-thought and highly useful summary of this subject.[7] How should we react in the face of this phenomenon?

The first error we should avoid, in my opinion, is spending the whole time fighting contrary theories, in the end giving them more importance than they deserve. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagita noted a long time ago that the exposition of one's truth is always more successful than rebutting the errors of others (Letter VI, in PG 3, 1077A). Another error is to focus all efforts on the laws of country to defend Christian values. The first Christians, as we have seen, changed the laws of the state through their lifestyle. We cannot do the contrary today, hoping to change lifestyles with the laws of the state.

The Council opened a new method, that of dialogue, not confrontation with the world: a method which does not even exclude self criticism. One of the Council documents said that the Church can benefit even from the criticism of those that attack it. I believe that we should apply this method also in discussing the problems of marriage and the family, as "Gaudium et Spes" did in its own time.

Applying this method of dialogue means trying to see if even behind the most radical attacks there is a positive request that we should welcome. It is the old Pauline method of examining everything and keeping the good (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:21). This is what happened with Marxism, which motivated the Church to develop its own social doctrine, and it could also happen with the gender revolution which, as Monsignor Anatrella observes in his research, presents more than a few similarities to Marxism and is probably destined to the same end.

The criticism of the traditional model of marriage and family, which have led to the current, unacceptable, proposals of deconstructionism, began with the Enlightenment and Romanticism. With different intentions, these two movements objected to traditional marriage, seen exclusively as its objective "ends" -- offspring, society, Church; and to little in itself -- in its subjective and interpersonal value. Everything was asked of the future spouses, except that they love each other and choose each other freely. Marriage as a pact (Enlightenment) and as a communion of love (Romanticism) between the spouses was proposed to contradict such a model.

But this criticism follows the original meaning of the Bible, it does not contradict it! The Second Vatican Council took in this request when it recognized as equally central to marriage both mutual love and support of the spouses. John Paul II, in a Wednesday catechesis said:

"The human body, with its sex, and its masculinity and femininity seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and procreation, as in the whole natural order. It includes right from the beginning the nuptial attribute, that is, the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift and -- by means of this gift -- fulfills the meaning of his being and existence." [8]

In his encyclical "Deus Caritas Est," Pope Benedict XVI has gone even farther, writing deep and new things with regards to eros in marriage and in the very relationship between God and man. "This close relationship between eros and marriage that the Bible presents has practically no parallel in literature outside itself." [9]

The unusually positive reaction to this papal encyclical shows to what degree a peaceful presentation of the Christian truth is more productive than rebutting the error of others, even though we should find room for this

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as well, at the proper time and place. We are far from agreeing with the consequences that some today draw from this premise: for example, that any type of eros is enough to constitute a marriage, even that between persons of the same sex; but this rejection gains greater strength and credibility if it is connected to the recognition of the underlying goodness of the request and as well with a healthy self criticism.

We cannot in effect silence the contribution that Christians made to the formation of that purely objectivist view of marriage. The authority of Augustine, reinforced on this point by Thomas Aquinas, ended up shedding a negative light on the carnal union of the spouses, considered the means of transmitting original sin and in itself sinful "at least venially." According to the doctor of Hippo, spouses should engage in the conjugal act with disgust and only because there was no other way of giving citizens to the state and members to the Church.

Another request we can make our own is that of the dignity of women in marriage. As we can see, it is at the very heart of God's original plan and Christ's thought, but it has almost always been neglected. God's word to Eve: "You will be drawn to you spouse and he will dominate you" has been tragically played out throughout history.

Among the representatives of the so-called gender revolution, this idea has led to crazy proposals, such as that of abolishing the distinction between sexes and substituting it with the more elastic and subjective distinction of "genders" (masculine, feminine, variable) or that of freeing women from the slavery of maternity, providing other means, invented by man, for the production of children. (It is not clear who would continue to have interest or desire at this point in having children.)

It is precisely through choosing to dialogue and engage in self criticism that we have the right to denounce these projects as "inhuman," in other words, contrary to not only God's will, but also to the good of humanity. If they were to become common practice on a large scale, they would lead to unforeseeable damages. The book and the movie "The Island of Dr. Moreau" by H. G. Wells could prove to be tragically prophetic, this time not only among animals but also among human beings.

Our only hope is that people's common sense, together with the "desire" for the other sex, with the need for maternity and paternity that God has written in human nature, resist these attempts to substitute God. They are inspired more by belated feelings of guilt in men than by genuine respect and love for women. (Those who propose these theories are almost all men!)

2. An ideal that must be rediscovered

Christians' task of rediscovering and fully living the biblical ideal of marriage and family is no less important than defending it. In this way it can be proposed again to the world with facts, more so than with words.

Let's read today the account of the creation of man and woman in the light of the revelation of the Trinity. Under this light, the phrase: "God created mankind in his image, in his image he created him, male and female he created them" finally reveals its meaning, which was mysterious and uncertain before Christ. What relation could there be between being "in the image of God" and being "male and female?" The God of the Bible does not have sexual connotations; he is neither male nor female.

The similarity is this: God is love and love demands communion, interpersonal exchange; it needs to have an "I" and a "you." There is no love that is not love for someone. Where there is only one subject there can be no love, only egotism and narcissism. Where God is thought of as Law and as absolute Power, there is no need for a plurality of persons. (Power can be exercised alone!). The God revealed by Jesus Christ, being love, is one and only, but he is not solitary; he is one and triune. In him coexist unity and distinction: unity of nature, of will, of intention, and distinction of characteristics and persons.

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Two people that love each other, and the case of man and woman in marriage is the strongest, reproduce something that happens in the Trinity. There two persons, the Father and the Son, loving each other, produce ("breathe") the Spirit that is the love that joins them. Someone once defined the Holy Spirit as the divine "Us," that is, not the "third person of the Trinity," but rather the first person plural.[10]

Precisely in this way the human couple is an image of God. Husband and wife are in effect a single flesh, a single heart, a single soul, even in the diversity of sex and personality. In the couple, unity and diversity reconcile themselves. The spouses face each other as an "I" and a "you", and face the rest of the world, beginning with their own children, as a "we," almost as if it was a single person, no longer singular but rather plural. "We," in other words, "your mother and I," "your father and I."

In light of this we discover the profound meaning of the prophets' message regarding human marriage, which is therefore a symbol and reflection of another love, God's love for his people. This doesn't involve overburdening a purely human reality with mystical meaning. It is not a question simply of symbolism; rather it involves revealing the true face and final purpose of the creation of man and woman: leaving one's own isolation and "egotism," opening up to the other, and through the temporal ecstasy of carnal union, elevating oneself to the desire for love and for happiness without end.

What's the reason for the incompleteness and dissatisfaction that sexual union leaves within and outside of marriage? Why does this impulse always fall over itself and why does this promise of infinity and eternity always end up disappointed? The ancients coined a phrase that paints this reality: "Post coitum animal triste": just like any other animal, man is sad after carnal union.

The pagan poet Lucretius left us a raw description of this frustration that accompanies each copulation, which should not be scandalous for us to hear at a congress for spouses and families:

"And mingle the slaver of their mouths, and breathe
Into each other, pressing teeth on mouths -
Yet to no purpose, since they're powerless
To rub off aught, or penetrate and pass
With body entire into body"[11]

The search for remedy to this frustration only increases it. Instead of modifying the quality of the act, the quantity is increased, moving from one partner to another. This is how God's gift of sexuality is ruined, in the trend of culture and society today.

As Christians, do we want to find an explanation once and for all for this devastating dysfunction? The explanation is that sexual union is not lived in the way and with the purpose in which God intended it. The purpose was, through this ecstasy and fusion of love, that man and woman would be elevated to the desire and have a certain taste for infinite love. They would remember from whence they came and where they were going.

Sin, beginning with the biblical sin of Adam and Eve, has gutted this plan; it has "profaned" this gesture, in other words, it has stripped it of its religious value. It has turned it into a gesture that is an end in itself, which finishes with itself, and is therefore "unsatisfactory." The symbol has been separated from the reality it symbolizes, bereft of its intrinsic dynamism and therefore mutilated. Never as much as in this case is St. Augustine's saying true: "You made us, Lord, for you and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Even couples that are believers, sometimes more than others, don't come to find this richness of the initial meaning of sexual union due to the idea of concupiscence and original sin associated with the act for so many centuries. Only in the witness of some couples that have had a renewing experience of the Holy Spirit and that

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live Christian life charismatically do we find something of that original meaning of the conjugal act. They have confided with wonder, to friends or a priest, that they unite praising God out loud, and even singing in tongues. It was a real experience of God's presence.

It is understandable why it is only possible to find this fullness of the marital vocation in the Holy Spirit. The constitutive act of marriage is reciprocal self-giving, making a gift of one's own body to the spouse (or, in the words of the Bible, of one's whole self). In being the sacrament of the gift, marriage is, by its nature, a sacrament that is open to the action of the Holy Spirit, who is the Gift par excellence, or better said, the reciprocal self-giving of the Father and the Son. It is the sanctifying presence of the Spirit that makes marriage not only a celebrated sacrament, but a lived sacrament.

The secret to getting access to these splendors of Christian love is to give Christ space within the life of the couple. In fact, the Holy Spirit that makes all things new, comes from him. A book by Fulton Sheen, popular in the 50s, reiterated this with its title: "Three to Get Married." [12]

We should not be afraid of proposing a very high goal to some especially prepared couples, who will be future Christian spouses: that of praying a while the wedding night, as Tobias and Sarah, and afterward giving God the Father the joy of seeing his initial plan realized anew, thanks to Christ, when Adam and Eve were nude in front of each other and both in front of God and they were not ashamed.

I end with some words taken once again from "The Satin Slipper" by Claudel. It is a dialogue between the woman of the drama and her guardian angel. The woman struggles between her fear and the desire to surrender herself to love:

- So, is this love of the creatures, one for another, allowed? Isn't God jealous?
- How could He be jealous of what He Himself made?
- But man, in the arms of the woman, forgets God...
- Can they forget Him when they are with Him, participating in the mystery of his creation? [13]

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[1] P. Claudel, *Le soulier de satin*, a.III. sc.8 (éd. La Pléiade, II, Paris 1956, p. 804) : «Cet orgueilleux, il n'y avait pas d'autre moyen de lui faire comprendre le prochain, de le lui entres dans la chair.

Il n'y avait pas d'autre moyen de lui faire comprendre la dépendance, la nécessité et le besoin, un autre sur lui, La loi sur lui de cet être différent pour aucune autre raison si ce n'est qu'il existe».

[2] B. Wannenwetsch, *Mariage*, in *Dictionnaire Critique de Théologie*, a cura di J.-Y. Lacoste, Parigi 1998, p. 700.

[3] Cf. G. Campanini, *Matrimonio*, in *Dizionario di Teologia*, Ed. San Paolo 2002, pp. 964 s.

[4] Giovanni Paolo II, *Uomo e donna lo creò. Catechesi sull'amore umano*, Rome 1985, p. 365.

[5] Cf. B. Griffin, *Was Jesus a Philosophical Cynic?* [<http://www-oxford.op.org/allen/html/acts.htm>]; C. Augias e M. Pesce, *Inchiesta su Gesù*, Mondadori, 2006, pp. 121 ss.

[6] E.P. Sanders, *Gesù e il giudaismo*, Marietti, 1992, pp.324 ss.; J. Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000, pp. 53-72.

[7] T. Anatrella, *Définitions des termes du Néo-langage de la philosophie du Constructivisme et du genre*, a cura del Pontificium Consilium pro Familia, Città del Vaticano Novembre 2008.

[8] John Paul II, *Discourse at the general audience of 16 January 1980* (*Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1980, p. 148).

[9] Benedict XVI, *Enc. Deus caritas est*, 11.

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[10] Cf. Cf. H. Mühlen, *Der Heilige Geist als Person. Ich -Du -Wir*, Muenster, in W. 1966.

[11] Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, IV,2 vv. 1104-1107.

[12] F. Sheen, *Three to Get Married*, Appleton-Century-Crofts 1951.

[13] P. Claudel, *Le soulier de satin*, a.III. sc.8 (éd. La Pléiade, II, Paris 1956, pp. 804):

- Dona Prouhèze. - -Eh quoi! Ainsi c'était permis? cet amour des créatures l'une pour l'autre, il est donc vrai que Dieu n'est pas jaloux ?

- L'Ange Gardien.- Comment serait-il jaloux de ce qu'il a fait ?...

- Dona Prouhèze. - L'homme entre les bras de la femme oublie Dieu.

- L'Ange Gardien.- Est-ce l'oublier que d'être avec lui ? est-ce ailleurs qu'avec lui d'être associé au mystère de sa création ?

[Translation by Thomas Daly]

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