“The path of elective love: towards a Christian spirituality of the contemporary couple” Sylvie Barth

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For forty-five years, the life of couples and families has undergone profound mutations in the Western hemisphere. Under the cover of globalization, the models are also changing in the planetary megalopolises, and even in the most remote areas. Whether or not one should feel sorry or rejoice about it, this is a reality to be taken into account for a researcher today, inasmuch as it is an almost irreversible evolution. To be content with condemning this reality as a matter of principle is in any case ineffective when it comes to the hope of reconnecting with the present couples, who have become reluctant to injunctions of any kind.

Three reasons impel us to focus on this fact. 1. To invoke an alleged “golden age“ of genuine conjugality in the face of the current quests distorts reality. 2. Their past experience must be taken seriously so that a dialogue with the couples of our time may take place. 3. To help to embody at best the dream of starting a single family with the same partner, whose dream still belongs to the greatest number nowadays, makes sense. Hence this is the subject of our thesis published by LIT-Verlag in the collection INTAMS studies¹.

To appreciate the current dominant model, or “elective couple“, is a priority step, inasmuch as, according to our hypothesis, it is invested as a spiritual site by our contemporaries. The next step is to point out the features of the “co-elective spirituality” that emanates from it and presides over it, a concept that goes beyond the traditional frameworks. The new lighting received by couples, Churches and societies, as well as theology, is profoundly transforming the way in which interdisciplinary research is viewed in this field.

1. The “elective couple”, a new spiritual site

To relocate historically our approach is useful for grasping the novelty.

1.1 The construction of the notion of a couple in the West

The history of the couple, even if it remains to be completed, clearly shows in the West the gradual deployment of two convergent movements. The first tends to confer autonomy to the conjugal cell in the social body. The second colors the relationship between spouses in an intimately emotional way, and thus with the children who are born from it. Two currents of influences contribute mainly to it. That of Greco-Roman law and of the Church values marriage by mutual consent, whereas a social tradition and a literary tradition leave room, one to pluralism of the marital forms, the other to the love feeling. From the 12th century, the courteous literature, nourished by Oriental unitive visions of Christian inspiration, argues that to dedicate a lady a lasting chivalrous passion is not a downfall, even if it is platonic and out of wedlock. Theology and the pastoral care of marriage are influenced by them.

On the one hand, the ability by the couple, understood as the heterosexual social cell perpetuating the species, is being gradually acquired in order to self-determine - in the most traditional system, this cell

¹ S. BARTH, La voie de l’amour électif : une interpellation spirituelle pour notre temps [The path of elective love: a spiritual call to action for our time], préface Mgr Ph. Bordeyne, Zurich, Ed. LIT-Verlag, collection INTAMS Studies on marriage and spirituality, March 2018.
remained a simple cog-wheel mechanism within the group by imposing its views. On the other hand, a long-process link is being developed, governed by mutual loving-kindness, woven with desire, with face-to-face attentiveness and dedication (*eros-philia-agape*) intending to be reciprocal — whereas the Tridentine model advocated a hierarchical conjugal *affectio conjugalis*, distant and temperate.

Hence the model of the "elective couple" is thus defined today: 1. It *is chosen* freely out of love and for love. 2. It *gets re-chosen* daily in the name of love, which supposes an implication to last. 3. *It involves* at its own pace a community of roof, table and bed2. 4. *It decides* to get married in a civil marriage and / or in a Christian marriage3 as a set in action. 5. *It manages* its child project (timing, number), without vowing the woman to the only educational and domestic tasks. 6. *It entitles itself* to either continue or discontinue, based on its own criteria, and / or if one of the two partners changes his or her mind.7. If it discontinues, it often chooses to reconstitute itself as (a) new couple(s), their previous children having to adapt.

This paradigm prevails today and this, even in Christian marriages, as the Synod ascertains, leading to the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (2016). Let us remark that the inclusion of the child project in this model, though second (but not secondary), does not change result from a denominational approach, although in some respects it agrees with the Catholic view of the unitive and procreative conjoined meanings of sexual union: sociological studies show that this horizon is almost universal4. The revision of parentage linked to the recent “mariage pour tous” [“marriage for all”] in France is a clue of this affirmation; in view of the ethical complexity of the questions that we think are related to begetting, before any educational problem, and lack of competence, we do not study the case of same-sex couples, regardless of our total respect for them. How to understand the motivations for such a change and to measure what is at stake?

### 1.2 The protest of subjective love

Some people give an account of this evolution with its narcissistic, hedonistic, libertarian and immature tendency of the postmodern mentality.

The deficit in terms of adult commitment, the primary anti-institutionalism, the self-centered individualistic claim, or still yet the counter-dependent anti-conformism are being criticized. Woman emancipation, consumerism, media pressure and the modern lifestyles are mentioned as explanatory and / or aggravating factors. The consequences for the future of children and the social climate are often being deplored, if not the economic and political balance, along with housing and precariousness issues being associated with it. Many pastors of Christian Churches ultimately interpret the whole thing as lack of faith, of culture and religious practice, of obedience and will, in short, the deviation of freedom in a world ignorant of God.

We would be tempted to also apply to it a more positive etiology, hence a more positive hermeneutic. It is when the Church builds herself up, and then asserts herself in the social space, in the West, that figures of couples breaking away with family and social (pagan) customs, in the name of Christ, begin to

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2 The opposite is the figure of couples who remain voluntarily in separate homes without vital necessity (jobs, etc.), despite its increasing success, because it seldom includes a plan to have children (see 4.)

3 In this case, references to a Christian spirituality, including transcendence, are induced, but we still have to take into account the cultures and personal religious experiences of the spouses, always evolving.

emerge as apostolic collaborators, spouses in pastoral position, witnesses of the faith. In this, Tertullian celebrates the strength of unity of body, soul and spirit.

Vatican II conclusively recognizes the Christian marriage founded on conjugal love eros / philia / agape as a space where a spiritual experience in its own right is lived, whereas the views of dualistic agnosticism and patriarchal misogyny had long dissuaded Western theologians. The attention given to social and spiritual consistency of the conjugal cell, associated with a consensual dynamic translated into a humanizing link desired by God has prevailed here. Conjugal spirituality, a notion named and standardized in the milieu of the beginning Catholic Action, reflects this taking into account, where a creative project and economy of salvation are being articulated, in an eminently vocational approach. On the other hand, Protestantism, from the origins and then in its revivalist versions, insists on the spiritual worthiness valence of the marital union, although it denies its sacramental dimension.

It is within the framework of a form of secularization of Christian convictions and values that we must understand, undoubtedly, the strength of the expectations that our contemporaries project on the couple. A tendency to deify the fin 'Amor, or even to deviate the respect of the person in "everything to the ego", may certainly have occurred. Nevertheless, is it erroneous to consider the elective couple as a place to live the fundamental aspirations of self-fulfillment, the incarnate and authentic relationship to the other, or even the appropriation of an ethic of life breaking with materialistic pressures? Do these perspectives conflict with Christian dynamics as such? Why ignore them, or, worse, devalue them a principio, however stammering the contemporary elective project may appear to us?

1.3 The elective couple as a new spiritual site

If it is above all in the name of mutual love that governs it that the paradigm of the elective couple is affirmed -although this notion remains ambiguous- it is worth taking the road of the internal journey called forth here. It must be examined in its concrete dimensions, before concluding that, without marriage before men and before God, "Nothing is worth any more". Has the Christian thought in the West, especially Catholic, measured well enough until now the mutation that such a relationship implies, has it sufficiently located the dynamics at work in the construction of the "elective couple", with their societal consequences? The acquired knowledge from social sciences and humanities is enlightening on this point. To keep on repeating that getting married before men and/or before God suffices in and of itself to turn spouses into a “couple”, or even into a "Christian couple", in the whole sense of the word, can be ascribable to magical thinking, which Amoris Laetitia cautions about in its own way.

Furthermore, a conciliar theological acquired knowledge summons us strongly here about the assertion that the Holy Spirit works in every person of “good will”s. Whenever couples living with love strive to speak with each other and to build their common existence, to raise their children as best as possible, would not the God of love from which any human affection arises, care? Even if they strive, or even get themselves off-track, would they be deprived of any assistance on the part of the One who alone can "search the mind and test the hearts"? To truly love each other one's entire life without coercion is a considerable challenge and an exposed attitude. Let’s not lose sight of the fact that the Christian past has

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5 TERTULLIAN, Ad uxorem 2, 9, summary paragraph 1642, Catechism of the Catholic Church.
8 Gaudium et Spes, 22, 5; JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Redemptoris Missio (1990), 9 and 10; Declaration Dominus Iesus (2000), 20-22; Commentary of the notification concerning the book by J. Dupuis (March 12, 2001), 5; B. SESBOUE, Jésus-Christ l'Unique Médiateur, [Jesus Christ the Only Mediator], t-2 Les Récits du Salut [The Narratives of Salvation], Paris, Ed. Desclée, 1995, p. 344s, on Semina Verbi.
long sheltered a plurality of forms of unions and also, even in the sacramental marriage, harsh realities have sometimes been hidden.

This renewed point of view does not only encourage a benevolence in the face of the elective couples, without gauging them solely on the basis of ethical performances evaluated from the outside, in the face of a standard deemed ideal. It leads, also, to watch for the signs of the work of the Spirit in a mutation that knows, it is true, its aporias. It therefore encourages a wide mobilization to provide effective support, in the form of enlightenment and practical advice and help. Without having had in view the current pattern, the Christian legacy offers here resources to be reread at new expenses.

In fact, from the motivated elective couple emanates a lifestyle and a relationship that aims at being more than just better-being. Its intrinsic dimension of going the extra mile and of not only focusing on one’s self constitutes a spiritual place\textsuperscript{9}: a perception whose generalization is confirmed by authorized studies\textsuperscript{10}. The specialists underline the immanent, experiential, and subjective aspect, responding to a concern for orthodoxy, "just thought", orthopray "just action", and orthopathy "just felt\textsuperscript{11}" of the spiritual quests, especially projected in life as a couple. It combines the taste of the essential and the emotional, the attention paid to the affective, to the fulfillment of one’s self-flourishing in a preserved world, thus also the values of non-payment and pleasure. An increasing number of therapists, whether Christian or not, witness the way in which spiritual values of this type support couples, and want to integrate them into their practices, a significant evolution for the theology of the couple\textsuperscript{12}.

It is therefore necessary to innovate, even lexically, since, symptomatically, the French language has no adjectival form for the term couple. "Conjugal" refers to the Latin conjugium, "marriage", as is the English word marital. The Latin root copula, in French has a negative and inappropriate connotation - as copuler [copulating] means living a sexual relationship in a rather indecent and disrespectful way. Therefore it cannot be used, hence the neologism “co-elective spirituality”. “Spirituality” is to here be taken in the broad sense of the word; “Co” refers to the primer of the word couple, and to the francization of the Latin prefix cum, with the idea of co-operation; elective evokes the forms of choice present in the "elective" couple. “Co-elective” finally maintains a paronymic\textsuperscript{13} link with the collective dimension of a couple’s adventure and as a family, in its community valence, even societal, thus ecclesial, which is crucial in our research.

2. **The foundations of the co-elective spirituality**

A co-elective spirituality, as has been said, exceeds the only framework of faith. In fact, Christianity is characterized by pluralism: 1) The representations and motives of married spouses before God diverge, at the outset, and along the way 2) Some committed Christians are in a free union 3) Some spouses united sacramentally are not all that exemplary, and neither are some couples in a free union all "without faith or law".

To evaluate the spiritual valence of the long-term love experience, with its parental dimension, therefore becomes a priority work to be done. It is then important to identify the basic structure that gives it

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Y. LEDURE, *Si Dieu s’efface [If God Disappears]*, Paris. Ed. DDB, coll. Théorème, 1975, p. 11.
\end{itemize}
coherence. The dynamic of the gift helps to develop, in Christian vision, strong points of support to found a spirituality that is both adapted to a wide audience of couples, and specifiable for the believers. Thus, access to the Christian treasure is seen as being (re)open. Postmodernist preventions, in fact, too often divert a large audience, little to the fact of its actualization and all its riches.

2.1 The elective couple as a spiritual experience

To plan to love each other body, soul and spirit in a harmonious duo, to define one’s lifestyle and to give life to young beings deserving of respect and solicitude is the bearer of meaning and breath... Even better if the adventure as a couple has sixty years ahead of it! Here is being determined a personalized way of projecting oneself into values, with the way in which partners, whether married or not, relate to what is not them, their couple or nuclear family. However, these instituting processes leave no one unscathed.

In terms of values, the co-elective experience applies the freedom, indissolubility, fidelity and fertility of the marriage of Trent to the elective love. Freedom and fidelity (but in a diachronic meaning) are prioritized; fertility, not limited to procreation, is primarily the production of meaning. As far as this is concerned, reality denies the illusions of life as a duo into fusion romance, on a background of deification of feeling in love, with infantile self-centering, even unconscious fatalism... Do not be left without therapeutic help when the attachment is being torn apart! The elective couple is the scene of an unveiling, where eros interacts with philia and agape. Neither first stage of life as a duo, nor epiphenomenon of stable marital relationship, can this relationship, without perversion, sweeten into tenderness only, or be sublimed in pure agape\textsuperscript{13}.

The construction of any couple, whether married or not, is also done at the mercy of transformative stages. Mutual election follows unwritten laws, partly unconscious, with internal and external predeterminations of psychological, sociological and biological orders. It is supported by a personalized founding myth. The couple in construction, married or not, gets busy at the task: to outline the boundaries of the couple, to regulate the roles and to manage the interactions with regard to the outside; five marital styles and three main educational styles are the result\textsuperscript{14}. In addition, as a Mc Gyver on the lookout, the couple is fated to adapt creatively, since the here and now is the mark of the Spirit: the natural, embodied and personalized characters inherent in the elective dynamic are open to a pneumato-logical revival. This is also true when it comes to parenthood. By being postponed, the child project takes on a great consistency from the first pregnancy\textsuperscript{15} on. This is a testimony to the suffering when facing infertility. However, the contributions of medical aid to procreation are not ethically neutral; and this is a far cry from the dreamed of child to the real child, especially as the educational work makes strong demands. Staying parents of children reaching their majority still requires adjustments.

To make a couple and to make a family, in these words, is not only a gift given to each other, but also a long-drawn labor of love. It is useful to ask oneself, therefore, what motivates and underlies in depth such a project so common to humankind. Is it the first product of an option of spiritual order?

2.2 The fundamental structure of the co-elective dynamic: the gift

\textsuperscript{13} Refer to A. VERGOTE, “Eclairage psychologique sur le mariage d’amour et ses conditions de réussite” [“Psychological Lighting on Getting Married out of Love and its conditions for success”], in INTAMS Review 3 (1997), p. 178 s.

\textsuperscript{14} J.-H. DECHAUX, Sociologie de la famille, [Sociology of the family], Paris, ed. La Découverte, 2007, p. 35-38 and 53.

\textsuperscript{15} A couple who decides to launch its parental project seldom aborts, in the first or second instance (but for the third baby it depends of circumstances).
The contribution of the "trans-personalist psycho-sociology" by J.-C. Sagne\textsuperscript{16} seemed interesting to us in this regard. This researcher from Lyon highlights a fundamental innate relationship between the genesis of the personality and the functioning of the groups, in a Lacanian perspective finely revisited. Their interrelationship is manifested through the laws of language, the dynamics of desire, and the three figures of the alliance, namely the link to the mother, to the foster group, and then to the spouse (as an adult). Neither idealistic\textsuperscript{17}, nor utilitarian\textsuperscript{18}, this approach refers to desire as being similar to an innate "openness to the presence" of others, or even to the needs of others\textsuperscript{19}; the exchange including the counter-gift creates a "virtuous circle", included in the "preferential bond of man and woman" thus aired-out and vitalized\textsuperscript{20}.

Every human being originates therefore from a deep-seated Word, linked to the gift of life received from the parents and mediated in particular by the interactive exchange of feeding. Milk, here, is not presented as being a permanent nutritious flux passively received; infants take a certain amount of milk at the time of breastfeeding, then stop to let them digest, and for lactation to resume. The spacing between nursing is sweetened as the mother adds sweetness by touching and comforting words, until the next exchange when the infant’s mouth makes the effort to grasp the breast and suckle. Such an exchange thus introduces the infant to language. The infant is thus introduced to language.

As we can see, the gift of the Word is part of the relationship of filiation; if the baby cannot receive this original gift, the result is that disorders will occur, with personal and social impact. In other words, the alliance is part of the heart of being as a program of life to materialize on a background and horizon of plenitude. Spontaneous and universal, but encompassing our existence in a sense to be fulfilled, such a perspective turns out to be spiritual, without necessarily being religious, although one can attribute the original Word to a discreet Donor, God.

For the elective prism, this seems very enlightening to us, because the love relationship reactivates the oral expectation. Here, the filiation assumed as a gift returns to appease the potentially greedy relationship, by opening it « à l’attente discrète d’un nouveau don tout gratuit de la part de l’autre » ["to the discreet expectation of a new free gift on the part of the other"]:\textsuperscript{21} To put it another way, « aimer quelqu’un, c’est l’attendre » ["to love someone is to wait for him/her"]\textsuperscript{22}, and it is, at the same time, to let him/her sometimes wait, to inspire desire. The love conversation is thus turned into a milieu of life for the lovers, as a word of gratitude (a gift of birth to oneself), of confession (a gift of acknowledged failure), of promise (a gift of incarnation), and finally of forgiveness (a reiterated gift of the link beyond disappointment). The four "moments" of the couple’s life - constitution, fulfilment, maturity, resolution - respond to this sharing of gifts; the durability of the love bond, its fidelity, its fertility and its freedom prove to be less a duty than a gift, to receive and to be made together.

Another consequence, often unknown, seems to us to be major. The quality of the co-elective link depends here more on its openness to the ad extra interactions than on its internal "perfection", in the sense of total satisfaction of the concerned persons and/or the manifest absence of conflicts. To adjust

\textsuperscript{16} J.-C. SAGNE, \textit{La loi du don, les figures de l’alliance [The law of the gift, the figures of the alliance]}, Lyon, Ed. Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1997.
\textsuperscript{17} Unlike the stoic view of heroism of the unilateral gift (Seneca, the Treaty of Blessings), the Gospel presents human love as a response to the divine gift gratified in turn by a divine counter-gift (Mt 10, 30): The grantee gives back to others out of what overflows.
\textsuperscript{19} J.-C. SAGNE, \textit{La loi du don…, op. cit.}, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid}, p. 205-255.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid}, p. 215.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid}, p.128.
the “ayes[yes] and noes [no]”, if necessary with wise help from the outside, to get out from behind closed doors, to confront each other, to mutate, is a promising future.

How, from then on, does one disqualify the elective adventure on the grounds of its tribulations, as “‘aimer c’est [...] accepter sa pauvreté comme la condition du voyage qui conduit à l’intérieur de soi et de l’autre dans un lieu de parole où l’autre nous révèle à nous-mêmes par l’acte de nous accueillir ’” to love is [...] to accept one’s poverty as the condition of the journey that leads to one’s inner life and to the other’s in a place of speech where the other reveals us to ourselves by the act of welcoming us”23, which turns out to be an incomparable humanizing itinerary, and a nine on a scale of one to ten?

In a Christian regime, the way is royal. Gaudium and Spes hold that “man, the only creature on earth, whom God has wanted for itself, can only find his completion in the unselfish gift of him/herself.” (Gn 24, 3.). To get married sacramentally then becomes the equivalent of “receiving each other together from the Gift of God24; in fact, « seule une initiation au mouvement chrétien du don de soi, à la suite de Jésus, donne aux futurs mariés les moyens d’anticiper la nouveauté du statut matrimonial auquel ils aspirent [only an initiation to the Christian movement of the gift of oneself, following in Jesus’ footsteps, gives to the future spouses the means to anticipate the novelty of the marital status to which they aspire]”25. The path is made under the Spirit, which allows to welcome the fatherhood of God in Christ. Is it possible, however, for fiancés26, if not spouses, to ever grasp what the meaning of matrimonial vocation means, in theoretical and practical terms, including from the standpoint of fertility and parenthood, apart from the dynamics of the gift? It turns out that « dès lors que l’union entre l’homme et la femme [...] est reconnue comme mystérieusement donnée et que l’on peut y consentir, l’incertitude de l’avenir peut être envisagée avec confiance ”[“as soon as the union between man and woman [...] is recognized as mysteriously given and can be consented to, the uncertainty of the future can be considered with confidence ”].27 In the light of the Paschal mystery, each spouse can then only « consentir à sa propre vulnérabilité et, ce faisant, à accueillir le salut qui rend possible l’ouverture [...] à autrui et à Dieu” [“consent to his/her own vulnerability and, in doing so, to welcome the salvation that makes possible the opening [...] to others and to God”].28 No Christian spirituality here without the divine benevolence, patience and mercy which the New Testament echoes.

2.3 Elements of systematization with a human horizon and a Christian regime

The law of the gift is not received and lived as such by just anyone in this imperfect world. As far as this is concerned, it underlies the logic of love that desires to last. It is impossible to envision life as a couple only by using the other for oneself alone, the acceptance to exchange is a must. Indeed, any healthy contemporary couple, projecting itself somewhat in the future, get started on the faith of a promise of shared happiness. This promise is based on a partnership in the form of an alliance, formalized or not, between two partners who choose each other for an assured duration of time, out of love, with in the majority of cases, the desire to start a family together. The intimacy of the persons, in body, soul and spirit altogether, is the coronation as a place of pleasure, of unification and fertility. It is therefore

21 Ibid, p. 252.
24 J. SAGNE, L’itinéraire spiritual du couple [The spiritual itinerary of the couple], Volume 1, op. cit., p. 102.
26 It has been said that marriage is always a premature act, cf. L.-M. CHAUVET, “Le mariage, un défi...”, in: L.-M. CHAUVET (dir), Le mariage entre..., op. cit., p. 22.
28 Ibid, p. 57.
important that the partners in a couple take care of the three components so that this hope can take flesh. The founding alliance, in itself of "unlimited duration", still remains suspended in case of a possible failure, very painful. This is probably why people often start rebuilding another alliance, in case of first failure, because this type of relationship is nourishing and saving.

The "promise" of happiness thus comes from a certain quality of life as a couple (and by extension with the family), in which well-being together, security, visions and priorities of life are combined. "The alliance" refers to a privileged relationship: no third relationship benefits from the same status and investment. The circulation of the gift and the play of cross-implications are thus dialectically open. It is to share a happy life that the link develops; it is life in harmony that feeds the confident and complicit face to face. A kind of "space-time" something invested by mutual agreement, and by a link beyond the simple recreational and temporary sexual interaction is seen as being designed. Any elective couple then becomes a duo in love and working tandem (especially when the kids are there). The combined energies are consecrated to the quality of the link, but also devoted to the offspring and to the guests, not forgetting the external commitments, including professionals.

Trying to love everlastingly exposes, therefore, the fact that the gift is not a due to deliver on order or to monopolize, but to offer or receive freely, with creativity, without exact symmetry. It is a disservice for the fatalistic and spreading of irrereligious cultures, according to which chance, or abstract knowledge and religious rites do everything, to hold that it is futile to learn and practice concretely how to live out of love. At the Christian level, underpinning The Scriptures, the biblical Promise and Covenant, from "Annunciation to Annunciation" and "Visitation to Visitation", stage a generous and benevolent God eager to get closer to man, but confronted with an ever-reborn defiance. The scriptural foundations of freedom, indissolubility and fidelity (akin to the harmonics of the Covenant) and fertility (akin to the divine Promise), all point to a God of "the indissoluble Covenant", because unilaterally faithful, a Creator God who protects and assists concretely any righteous human being, without necessarily being welcomed or thanked. Near to the point of becoming a man in person, this God wants to bridge, at the Cross, the ditch dug by fear. Like any human creature, each couple therefore sees itself loved and visited, even without its knowledge. In this respect, it is the conduct of commitment, with the yardstick of love symbolized by the Divine Promise and Covenant, which gives a future to the created humanity, thus to the elective couple, in response to the gift of life. From then on therefore one sees better how the intimacy dimension of the couple can become a communio personarum. It has taken Western Christianity two thousand years to fully understand this: there is no loving union that is not offered by trinitarian Love, love-in-communion.

As an embodied reality, the co-elective intimacy implies inasmuch an inventive implication that confines the art of improvisation, in the form of variations around the theme of the embrace, the specific "moment" of the couple. The "bed community" steals from the lovebirds their own garment and space, making them the respective witnesses of the audacity of pleasure, of the eclipses of desire as physical marks of time, not to mention the pangs of "la mer [qui] efface sur le sable les pas des amants désunis [the sea [that] erases on the sand the steps of broken-up lovers"), for the individual who continues to love without return and must grieve the bond. It is this exposed intimacy that sometimes arouses a new beginning, that of the child, which places the intimacy between finitude and desire for eternity, fragility and power of creation, connivance and estrangement.

Perhaps ultimately, the paradoxical experience of elective intimacy does not cease to present to the lovers of body, soul and mind the elusive communion for which they get consumed, while the communion is stolen from them at the very moment when they think they are seizing it. Despite this, the elective

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29 In their biblical valence, we write them in capital letters.
30 Lyrics from the famous Chanson des Feuilles mortes [Song of the Dead Leaves].
intimacy sees itself being rewarded by moments of revelation, whereby in the uniting ecstasy is being lived the payment of the Lamb’s Nuptials. In this sense, the Christian revelation allows the elective love, if it is ready, to orient itself towards its source and its ultimate horizon, a plenary and eternal communion, graceful and satisfying.

Even seen with large strokes, one can have a glimpse of the scope of these support points for systematization.

These last considerations suggested to us the fourth pole: the definition of the contemporary couple as a "co-elective community", where the "social vocation of Love" is cultivated. Socially, the Swiss jurisprudential definition of cohabitation reiterates the traditional notion of table, roof and bed community, confirmed by the Latin etymology of the term (munus). It recognizes a possible spiritual dimension. However, the weakness of the sentiment itself is eluded, whatever the legal effort of the policy to protect the weakest may be.

As far as this is concerned, the social cell is not in and of itself united by a koinonia (communio) of spiritual essence. The above-mentioned dimension of walking the extra mile, however, already goes in this direction. The theology of marriage defines, for its part, since Vatican II, the couple and the family as a community united by communion, developing in particular the qualification of ecclesiola inherited from the Fathers of the Church.

It may have been said recently that the liturgy of Christian marriage similarly turns the couple into "the beginning of a new community, a community of equal disciples and partners, placed under the impulse and under the power of the Spirit". The epicentral elements of the Protestant nuptial blessing also place the couple in a community of life "under the Spirit". In this respect, the ecclesial commitment that gives it

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31 From the subtitle by Ph. BORDEYNE, L'éthique du mariage : La vocation sociale de l’amour, [Marriage ethics : the social vocation of love], Paris, Ed. DDB, 2010.

32 A community of life of a certain duration, even lasting, of two persons of the opposite sex or not, of exclusive character, which presents as well a spiritual, bodily and economic component, and can be defined as a community of table, roof and bed (Judgment of the Federal Court 118 II 235/JT 1994 I 33).

33 This emanates from the Canon Law of the 12th century, framing marital failure: G. LE BRAS, « Le mariage dans la théologie et le droit de l’Église du XIe au XIIIe s. » ["Marriage in the theology and the law of the Church from the 11th to 13th centuries"], in: Cahiers de civilisation médiévale [Notebooks on Medieval civilization], 11, 42 (1968), p. 191-292, here 201.


35 In the forms consortia, consortium, communitas, and communio personarum/totae vitae, see Gaudium et Spes, 48; Decree Apostolicam actuositatem, 11; Famililiaris consortio, 13; 43; CIC 1983, Canon 1055; Catechism of the Catholic Church, p. 349; Letter to families, 6-7; CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, "educational orientations on human love, traits of sex education", Rome, 1983.


form constitutes a sign, in our troubled times\textsuperscript{38}, whatever the degree of committed faith may be, which anyway is judged poorly from the outside.

The mystery that remains is how, gracefully, these stammering hesitancies and attempts, in good and evil, are finally transfigured and commuted into eternity by the will of God. But divine action does not economize human commitment. The future is designed to the extent of the capacities of the couples, societies and Churches to receive and invest this novelty, in what it has in terms of moving things around and of fecundity, and also to contribute to its effective incarnation, here and now.

3. **Issues and implications of co-elective spirituality**

Sharing innovative research always causes objections: the directions taken are rejected because of their incongruousness, and then their harmfulness. The final seal of the "obviousness" finally obscures the inventiveness initially manifested\textsuperscript{39}.

In our field, innovation is first the fact of the current couples, before being the subject of study. However, the elective audacity has been found to be displaced, even dangerous, inasmuch as failure is considered redhibitory, that is to say rendered useless, in the European culture. The objections denouncing the difficulties disqualify, in the same movement, any inclination for help, suspected of utopian complacency. As far as this is concerned, hoping to protect the stability of unions only through their institutionalization under the seal of duty and dedication, and a clear division of gender roles, is no longer enough. To remain passive, out of liberalism, denotes \textit{a contrario} a lack of awareness of the issues concerning an efficient aid allowing to limit the human and economic impact of the break-ups, both for adults and for the children concerned.

Such strategies are defended, if one measures the health of a society by the duration, whatever the price, of the adult unions that it encourages to contract publicly, or by the strict respect for personal liberties. They question whether the societal deployment is also related to the ability of its members to harmonize the relationships that unite them, for example between the sexes and between generations, even if it means to innovate when the protection of the most vulnerable becomes a political mission.

In this order of ideas, thinking about the know-how of the action, in the logic of the self-learning organizations, distinguishes the know-how of reflection from the know-how of investigation: the first consists of "assessing the way in which our mental models are built and how they influence our actions"; the second analyzes "our attitudes towards others, namely in the management of complex and conflicting problems"\textsuperscript{40}. Co-elective reality commands well a double exploration, in order to allow the opportunity it represents for society in search of humanization, that is to say of "sanctification", in the Christian vision, even in its most delicate challenges. How can we miss the potential of such a mutation, in the form of a


\textsuperscript{40} N. TEBOURBI, « Rendre l’organisation apprenante à travers la conception d’un outil de gestion au service de la complexité dynamique d’une pratique. Cas du conseil en gestion », ["To make the organization learn through the design of a management tool to serve the dynamic complexity of a practice. Case of management consulting"], Higher Institute of Management, Université de Versailles - Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, site www. strategie-aims.com, accessed 20. 03. 2015.
caesura in the history of mankind, under the pretext that it overflows from the previous frameworks? Do we still have, however, to deny its failures?

It is to be noted that therein, the holders of the expertise are the elective couples themselves, forging together this model under the eyes of those who assist them. Although not well-shared and formatted, this shared intelligence offers resources... Findings and good practices are already circulating, just waiting to be invested. It is useful to also develop a new approach that characterizes this recent reality in order to encourage and support more appropriate accompaniment. This is what motivates our work.

3.1 Shifts of Outlooks

In the first place we are called to review some false evidences.

1. Unlike agricultural societies, which are more predictable, the trajectories of modern subjects become kinetic and diversified, at a time when, in the co-elective prism, they must find how to converge and inter-regulate harmoniously.

Couples, if they do not stick to materialistic well-being, have to invent their reality, pilot it, interpret it in a dialogue. And the fusional reverie of the refuge-couple fizzles out: the gift sharing necessarily opens the project of the partners in a face to face relation to the wider environment, in concentric networks where multiple alliances are established; to make a couple becomes to this account an adventure as interesting as it is expensive and complex.

2) If in the face of difficulty, the couples tend to devalue themselves, they also often transfer their spite on their partner, two poorly functioning strategies. It has been understood that the elective couple suffers much from the deficient gift sharing within itself; the defensive reactivations of the oral stage are strong, difficult to identify as well as to appease for the persons concerned. This was less true in more distanced and hierarchical sexual relations. Doubting themselves while throwing back and forth at each other their frustrations in terms of mutual accusations does not help the elective couples. If necessary with adequate support, their duo is called instead to open to what comes from farther and goes beyond itself, to identify what is already healthy (saintly), and then to face "as allies" the inevitable lacks and shortcomings; there are ways out.

3) Neither a response to a single social imperative, nor a pure resolution of a narcissistic expectation, the "sustainable development of its love" obliges every couple to engage into a realistic community dynamic, ad intra and ad extra. The co-elective community thus turns itself into a laboratory of privileged learning for collaboration between differentiated peers, between generations (with parenthood), for and in a new world, with joined balance and solidarity. However, the vulnerability of the partners, accentuated by co-elective intimacy, leads to deconstructing the theoretical model of "the individual in full possession of his/her means". This fragility of nature increases with the unexpected and/or the initial genes, not imputable as such to the concerned persons if one distinguishes a limitation (of condition) and sin (by choice, up to a certain point). Developing a reductive "victimization" of the persons, by ignoring or denying opportunities to decide and move forward, is not any more effective either.

4) Giving reasonable chances to the co-elective adventure invites then to propose sustaining paths, by presenting them as paths to be explored at the pace of each person, with a support on demand, rather

41 Today, in daytime, a balanced member of the middle/upper classes between 18 and 45 years free of handicap and major disorders.
than designing ideals to honor without delay, by sheer strength. Indeed, it is between this man and this woman in their encounter here and now, and their past history(s), deployed in a singular future, to elaborate and discover as a duo, that love is unfolding. The tolerance thresholds for this or that lack vary according to the persons: impossible here to judge from the outside. Ultimately, the resilient processes, more frequent than we think, still depend on the protagonists, even if they can be favored by a supporting accompaniment. It is the responsibility of the respective partners of the couples to initiate the process without being able to exert restraint on each other; and besides, no therapy could make anyone go along other than freely. Nevertheless, fraternal closeness among peers represents a real resource.

Recent theoretical developments are illuminating in this regard. The economics of knowledge, defying approaches that are too denominational, are particularly confronted with the challenge of the interconnection of abilities. This economics of knowledge implies humility, flexibility, and hermeneutic prudence. The awareness of the interdependence between beings, and the indispensable mobilization of resources in networks are also gaining ground.

What locks people in, and here the couples, is therefore less the limitations and incapacities, than the reluctance or concrete impossibility to let themselves be helped. The lack of a common support group/entre-aid culture for the elective project accentuates the experienced distress, even though the eminently shared expertise could be better mobilized.

### 3.2 Implications for the couples

What then does the challenge of the eros/philia/agape love subsequently imply for the elective couples?

1) Spirituality, in the broad sense, of the "choice of love" invites the couples in the highest degree to elect adult love as a value and as a natural dynamic, with its logic of reciprocal gift, in some way a "treasure hunt" of the real encounter on a daily basis. An art of living, the elective link plays for this purpose what the verb "to love" means with its "languages of love" that are the gift, the intimate gestures, the moments of presence to each other, the service rendered, the valorizing word, the rapprochement after a disagreement. Deploying this link implies putting the egos at the service of the project (not the other way around), whereas the parenting mission is lived as the fruit of a thorough dialogue between spouses first, and with the children afterwards, as the seasons of life allow. The responsibility to put a framework rests with the two partners in solidarity, the tasks are to be shared in fairness, the Yes and the Nos to be adjusted together.

2) Approaching life this way as allies gives its chances to the elective alliance, in the face of the inevitable disappointments of the "promise".

Investing the confident and co-responsible collaboration can still prove to be a challenge for the anxious, defeatist or shy temperaments. Nevertheless, the self-decentralization is never servile; on the contrary, it is a matter of revisiting the values together and of making concerted choices. The gift of the unique and personalized relationship is, as such, served by the duration: what is ephemeral discourages involvement; it takes time to "for the crises to be expressed" in terms of respective rebuilding foundations and displacements; living as a couple and family optimizes of itself the life expectancy. The alliance is ultimately supposed to open up to other circles in order to get nourished and vivified, without neglecting the appointments for intimacy to be honored: this cannot be done in the blink of an eye.

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3) The corresponding spiritual invitations are numerous. Several particularly fruitful ones can be pointed out: to live the present moment in its intensity; to accept interdependency by letting go of (self) sufficiency, and to de-centralize oneself without a sense of devouring abnegation; to allow oneself to be changed with discernment; to conjugate the verb “to love” by living the "I", the "you", the "we"; ultimately to live in a "key of gift", in order to seize the kairos of the encounter, by remaining open to every good surprise. This implies giving oneself time to consult each other, to decide together, to revisit the moments lived and the difficulties, even if this means to argue, but in a constructive way - in short to take a step back.

For the parental tandem, it is a question of taking up (a) the challenge of the transmission of life, even to the point of its shattering unexpected circumstances; (b) the educational challenge, in the peaceful complicity, cohesiveness and coherence in the face of pressures of all kinds; (c) the challenge of inter-generational companionship, with the concern for the common good, in solidary fidelity, not without the possibility of being emotionally torn apart and wounded. Shortcomings and failures, inseparable from life as a couple and with a family, except for proven pathologies, are an invitation to walk the extra mile, rather than a death warrant of the relationship.

4) "To become a couple" is, ultimately, to agree to "cultivate one’s couple" throughout one’s shared life, to re-choose each other along with the repeated disappointments, to revisit one’s routines and to air out what is behind one’s closed doors, lastly to articulate one’s internal and external investment, one’s parental mission and loving duo, by agreeing with each other in order to decelerate and live pleasant and festive moments.

Clearly, the elective love is lived with flexibility and "without net", even if resources exist: training in human relations and communication, educational technics and other piloting tools. It is still a matter of practicing it seriously... And to exhibit momentum and courage by knowing how to laugh at oneself.

5) In a strictly Christian regime, a co-elective dynamic and a trinitarian structure are being met. The God of Jesus Christ, personal, good and thoughtful, desires to forge an eternal covenant with his creatures and his creation. The community of the couple’s disciples deploys their charisms humbly to the service of the Church and the world. As a couple, does one ever stop being received from the other while being received by the All-Other? New forms of Christian community life and commitment, reinforcing this call, deserve more consideration. A spiritual accompaniment thought of in a less individualistic way would help the couples, at last to bring a happy medium between the limitations to accept, and the common drifts to rectify.

6) An awareness of the elective dynamic awakens more to the way in which human and divine (personalized) initiatives, inspirations and gifts are being knitted, to reduce the fear of the future, a bad counsellor altogether. The fulfillment of the divine Promise becomes undeserved grace inviting to trust. A journey as a couple in elective love presents itself as a permanent discovery, where the Spirit works as much as the heart of man is invested in the quest for shared harmony.

In this regime, the co-elective adventure can make a powerful contribution to better announcing and receiving the Good News of salvation, both in the spiritualis locus of the amorous project and in the world in general.

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43 PRH, PPRI, CNV, Imago, "positive discipline" seem effective; others undoubtedly exist, to be discovered. This is not a "bric-a-brac" without much interest as J.-C and Y. BESIDA illustrate in their interesting book L’amour sauvé, mystère du mariage, [Love Saved, the mystery of marriage], Geneva, Ed. Ad Solem, 2014. See also the co-development (infra).

3.3. Implications for society

The "social vocation of love", as we perceive it, is inspiring for a better gift exchange, and co-elective and collective logics.

1) The elective couple, in its cooperative dynamic, responds in a large part to the fruitful logic of co-development⁴⁵, where the values of collaborative companionship predominate, as does the solidarity for the common good, including the weakest, in a spirit of fairness. The transformation carried out in everyone, on the basis of respect for the equilibrium of the entire world, which humanizes societies, begins at the level of the couple and the family, called to rely on efficient tools.

2) Taken seriously, the elective adventure brings an openness to alterity that discourages the tendency for the individual to close on him/herself, with a propensity to make his/her body a tool of enjoyment or staging of the self. This project calls for the choice of a travelling companion to love, a partner for the existential adventure, rather than a pretty sidekick source of reassurance; and this, within the framework of a partnership as fair, reciprocal and frank as possible, in the community of destinies, which is still to be won, and to be encouraged.

3) Love seems to be there a shared decision and masterpiece, requiring skills to be developed in apprenticeship, and creativity to be exercised day after day. Anything that allows to communicate and commune, that is to say, to express and listen to emotions, to manage conflicts, to invent, is a valuable contribution. In this sense, it is possible and desirable to allow “learning to love”, a new kind of social challenge, at the same title as corporal hygiene, and a balanced diet... To let oneself be helped is no longer an admission of weakness or incompetence, but a sign of maturity.

4) Becoming proactive in the couples’ domain must mobilize westernized societies, with the offer of open resources on the dimension of meaning, and of the collective, without focusing on the only personal comfort. In other words, the psychological must lead to the spiritual. It is important to leave sufficient time of intimacy for the couples and families without constantly increasing professional and consumerist pressure. It is a question of encouraging the link, rather than merely framing its rupture, by creating spaces for dialogue between the couples to formalize and share the expertise. This may involve developing an optional preparation for a civil marriage and civil union, as “Pacs”, the French that stands for “Pacte civil de solidarité”[Civil Pact of solidarity], and providing support after their conclusion, but also opening up places to form the dynamism of adult relationships, starting from the youth.

In fact, the therapists emphasize the valence of spiritual values for the resilience of couples, and therefore the health of families. The stakes of such an evolution seem decisive, with regard to the appeasement of global social violence, in the context of the collapse of the link. By preventing more successfully the abuses at all levels, a "pro-elective" orientation would furthermore optimize the efforts already agreed upon of teaching, of initiation to citizenship and social integration. However, the political and economic governance remains in charge, as is supposed to be, of a better

regulation of global relations among all, on the basis of just and responsible management of the resources, the logic of which exceeds the only family field.

3.4 Implications for the Churches

The "ecclesial vocation of love" seems to us to also invite changes, more decisive than one might think.

1) A cautious hermeneutic of the metaphor of Ephesians 5.
It seems delicate, in the light of the expectations of the elective couple, to make of the Christian marriage the perfect icon of the relationship between Christ and the Church, even to the extent, sometimes, of making a carbon copy of it, term to term, of the relationship between the Christian husband and wife. The tradition of negative theology, and the coherence of the operation of mental analogy incite here to the interpretative measure, notwithstanding that in the "penultimate" times, the unfinished creation remains in the process of being born. Indeed, to advance that grace would make in and of itself capable of such an exploit may imply that the relative failure inevitably falls within the lack of faith, will or obedience, if not piety; it seems that this postulate may have crushed many sincere couples. If required however, can we ever want to assume the place of Judge or Savior (James 4, 12), whatever the moral landmarks to be posed may be? To give up a thought too idealistic and rigorist is a corollary thereof, as Amoris Laetitia, 325 strongly reminds us.

A. Another look at the elective couples in general
According to the movement initiated at the Synod of the families in 2014-2015, the elective couple "of goodwill", called "irregular" is deemed to have something to say and bring something to the Churches. It is not only a counter-example to be rejected, rebellious, and reputedly abandoned by God. The co-elective charisms of couples who strive to love each other everlastingly in their soul and conscience, whatever the form of their union may be, can enrich the premises of the Church, even if the example of couples married before God and fulfilled is beneficial
Renouncing the overhanging self-reference, Christians, and especially Catholics, are then invited to give importance to a reality that was not only born under their aegis, as they cannot make a claim of it, even if the elective model owes them a lot. They are invited, additionally, to apply to themselves above all the demands that they may require, by realizing that they too are on the path where no one can claim that he is ahead of others, because the marriage of love that they advocate refers to fundamental requirements that are addressed to all.

B. Pastoral practices and ecclesial life
No new thought or intentions without concrete actions: this is a first lesson of co-elective spirituality...
To share the words of couples is a first imperative. It is important to give the floor to couples to take advantage of their diversified experience and to open up places for exchanges and dialogues between couples in the Churches, by listening to their voices.
Helping the couples then leads to a number of construction sites to open:
-To train the pastoral workers to a better knowledge of the dynamics is a first point.
-To develop resources for spiritual support, and not only for marital counseling, for the couples in demand, by forming and delegating some agents to this task, is required afterwards.
-To build a “After-Sale-Service” (in French: S.A.V) for the couples, in the form of a conjugal support and revitalization/training service, before, after marriage and/or during the pairing, becomes necessary by better articulating the psychological and the spiritual aspects.
It is a question of being able to propose and make accessible the use of diversified means (certain convincing, from civil society and compatible with Christian anthropology, and others drawn from one’s
tradition of faith) at the service of the everlasting deployment of love. The conjugal spiritual support must be co-joined (on demand).

Reaching more couples also implies promoting pastoral proposals adapted to a broad audience of couples, i.e.: to identify and evaluate existing initiatives, to multiply them, to create others to respect the various sensitivities, not without valuing the practices judged to be helpful by their beneficiaries.

Giving couples more of their place in the Church's mission further encourages to call on couples to a pastoral mission, to associate them with the places of pastoral development and Church decisions. It is also useful to recognize and promote movements of apostolate by couples, which form the couples to the taking of responsibility, without forgetting to confer a canonical status to apostolic community experiences that mix the states of life in a fecund manner.

From the point of view of governance in the Church, it would be worthwhile, at last, to let oneself be taught by the consultation practices, the management of power and conflict, the procedures of joint discernment in use in co-elected communities, to allow parity to truthfully take place within them. It is in a way to give priority to the work of the Spirit in the world, and to cooperate humbly with it.

3.5. Implications for research

At the confluence of numerous disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields, the co-elective reality and the spirituality that emanates from it and presides over it shift the thought to numerous titles.

1) From an anthropological point of view, it is important to consider man and woman in their joint itinerary of humanization, unifying more than ever before the dimensions of the body, soul and spirit. Recent approaches strengthen this direction of research. The incarnate dimension of the relationships, inscribed in the history of the beings and the global dynamics of what is created, also invites to rethink the soteriology in the perspective of the creative design.

Without reducing it only to the redemption of sins, nor enclosing it for the couples to the dimension of the sin of the flesh (which could not exhaust the range of spiritual encounters of the amorous duos inscribed in the duration), the question of salvation, of the limit and of sin resists simplifications. In the relationships of the couples and family as in life in general, this matter is difficult to restrict itself to a problem of discipline, or even apologetics.

2) The central concept of "gift" opens the practices of psychologies and therapies dedicated to the dimension of decentralization towards the other (partner, children, but also, further on, society, Church, and cosmos). At the same time, in the field of therapy and of following up the couples, this concept of gift, if it takes into account the dimensions of body, soul and spirit in a unitive way, dissuades from making elective progress only a matter of practice and/or religious belief. It does not further subtract it in the Christian context from the dynamics of following in Christ's footsteps.

It is here a matter of the dynamic of the gift exchange: the tools and approaches that stem from the research of the humanities practitioners and theorists are of interest, without wanting to close them on a perspective of sheer better-being. The religious resources are valuable and useful.

The law of the gift also invites the trinitarian theology, and, singularly, the pneumatology, to be deployed in connection with the world, to inform an ample spirituality of the action and the assumed investment of beings, of goods, and responsibilities.

3) The article of faith according to which the "Spirit of God blows wherever it pleases", affects jointly the theology of marriage, of grace, in a less ecclesio-referential and denominational manner. The weaving of *Eros/Philia* and *Agape*, and the reading of "Love instituting in the Spirit" invite to broaden the Catholic thought concerning the elective link, without limiting it to the only sacrament, by articulating better the experience of the intensity lived in the long-process love bond, and that of divine grace. Academic spiritual theology, in general, is called under this prism to be more interested in the spiritual valence of the "Journey into Love" experienced by the spouses, in itself as a way of authentic sanctification, even if the sacrament gives it unequaled dignity. These re-evaluations take place in an interdisciplinary framework, in a patent manner.

In total, the real novelty of the co-elective ambition, and of the research that deals with it, is just beginning to reveal its promises, in spite of and at the heart of trials and errors reflecting the challenges it carries. It is an exciting task to be able to make a claim by fully measuring what is at stake. Does it not deserve the interest of Christians, and with them, of their peers concerned about the future of our planet Earth, and its inhabitants, that is to say, creation of which, we believe, God entrusts to mankind the responsible and fraternal management?