

WITH THE SECOND ISSUE OF THIS YEAR, we complete the 30th volume of our INTAMS journal, *Marriage, Families & Spirituality*. Thirty years of theological reflection on marriage and marriage-related issues! Admittedly, thirty years of theological thinking about marriage seems like a tiny moment in the history of Christianity. Certainly, marriage has always been and will continue to be an important and essential part of the lives of most Christians. But “developing a theology of”, in other words “theologizing”, marriage has only been a brief endeavor in the long history of the church. A good example is St. Augustine in the early church, who held up marriage as the sole and exclusive framework for sexual relations – a remarkable and groundbreaking vision in the society of his time, which, together with a procreative focus and a pessimistic view of sexuality, has shaped the theology of marriage and remained the undisputed conviction of the church for centuries. Something similar happened in the Middle Ages when marriage was first elevated to the rank of a sacrament – since then marriage has been considered and widely accepted as one of the seven sacraments. The Council of Trent sharpened the theology of marriage by affirming the indissolubility of the spousal union at a time when the Reformers had refused the sacramental value of marriage. What we learn from this brief, sketchy overview is that a “theology of marriage” has never been a major and prevailing subject in the history of church and theology. We have to wait until the Second Vatican Council to see a theology of marriage emerge, find its way, and evolve. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World “revolutionized” the vision of marriage in 1965, saying no to pre-conciliar vestiges and describing marriage as an “intimate partnership of life and love” (GS 48). Sixty years after its promulgation, we are still paying tribute to the personalist vision of Vatican II – a vision proposed by the Council Fathers at the time, but sometimes neglected and ignored in the years that followed, and which today still needs to be implemented. This, in a nutshell, is the situation we find ourselves in after thirty years of reflection and publication in our INTAMS journal. Its main purpose was and still is twofold: first, to retrieve and then to eliminate pre-conciliar relics that have survived in post-conciliar times; and second, to develop further a theology of marriage that responds in a critical-constructive way to the experiences of contemporary spouses, to the diversity of lived realities, and to the pastoral challenges of today. The following articles contribute to this vision in different ways.

*T. Derrick Witherington* begins this issue with an article on homosexual relationships – a subject that was largely unknown at the time of Vatican II, but which has recently gained new insights in the human sciences. In several previous documents, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had strongly disapproved of homosexual acts as “intrinsically disordered”. The newly restructured Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, however, has slightly modified this

perspective by allowing same-sex couples and others in “irregular” situations to be blessed. Recalling the 2023 Declaration *Fiducia supplicans*, Witherington provides a critical reading of two texts for the blessing of same-sex couples issued before the DDF statement: one approved by the Flemish bishops and one developed in Germany as a response to the Synodal Way.

A group of scholars currently working in the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Bonn has selected the Roman Catholic doctrine of marriage as a litmus test of Catholic identity. Insights from biblical, patristic, systematic, and canonical studies tell us that the Catholic church has always engaged in a reciprocal process of exclusion and inclusion, but “the fierce debate about what is Catholic and who can be considered Catholic, in which marriage questions are often in play, shows that Catholicism has entered another phase in the process of discovering the ambiguity of Catholic identities”, namely with Pope Francis’s *Amoris laetitia*, in a creative process of integrating ambiguous interventions.

Calling marriage a “vocation” has never been a beloved and appealing topic in Christian life. Prominent theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar have seen marriage not as a path to salvation but rather as an obstacle to it. *Tim Zeelen* appreciates Vatican II’s view that all the faithful are universally called to holiness, but he reminds us that it still needs to be applied in the context in which we find ourselves today: seeing a vocation to marriage can only be a promising approach if human freedom and the responsible agency of the spouses, individually and communally, are recognized and respected. *Kevin Schembri* and *Carlo Calleja* agree that “good sexual morality” is “frequently limited to isolated actions labelled simply as right or wrong or are conveyed through idealistic language that feels detached from reality, making the guidance seem unreachable and irrelevant to the daily lives of many well-meaning couples”. The authors propose an alternative, seeing in Christ’s behavior during the Last Supper an exemplary model of spousal sexual intimacy. The question of how best to behave when getting married was also being asked when the first Christians gathered together. *Tanja Forderer* revisits the marriage passage in Ephesians 5,21-33, one of the later texts in the New Testament, in which the relationship between husband and wife is linked in a surprising way to Christ and his church. Forderer warns that the authentic meaning of the Ephesians passage must be distinguished from its subsequent *Wirkungsgeschichte*. So it is good to keep in mind that marriage was simply assumed to be a “normal” way of life and avoid any temptation to identify what is the “right” way of life.

Indissolubility has been seen as one of the significant characteristics of marriage since the origin of Christianity. With the increasing number of divorces, the term and the concept have lost much of their plausibility and reliability. In his article, *Christian Mignonat*, who has been involved for many years in pastoral care of separated, divorced, and remarried people, is not primarily interested in proposing a pastoral accompaniment for those whose marriage has failed; what he does is to take seriously what the Code of Canon Law says about indissolubility. His conclusion is both surprising and annoying, because the canonical definitions of indissoluble marriage are full of incomprehension and inconsistencies. The closing article by *Holger Dörnemann* brings us back to the theological subject of “salvation”, a term that also resonates in some of the other contributions to this issue. Following Thomas Aquinas’s assumption that “friendship” with God can be

regarded as the most convenient and most fitting way of salvation itself, the idea suggests itself that conjugal love can best be described as the “greatest” of human friendships.

In the section “Notices” we publish a document of the English Catholic charity *Marriage Care*. The document is the fruit of a journey which began with Pope Francis’s invitation to contribute to the synodal process. It found its expression also in the National Synthesis Document for England and Wales in June 2022 and culminated in a reflection paper designed to continue the synodal conversation and to seek ways in which synodality might be better embedded in today’s context.

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