

## **Fifth International INTAMS Summer Seminar 2004**

### **What is Marital Spirituality? An Interdisciplinary Investigation**

Living out a truly marital spirituality is a challenge for couples today; yet, do we really know what it means? The subject of much scholarly and pastoral reflection, marital spirituality may be said to designate the deepest, most intimate quality of the bond between married people, the ultimate meaning of their union for their own inner lives and for the benefit of the wider community. The field of spirituality has undergone great transformations in recent decades, and the academic study of spirituality in a multi-disciplinary framework has likewise blossomed. Specialists in philosophy, ethics, social science, literature, history, social work, and the health care professions are finding it essential to take account of the spiritual implications of their subjects. Spirituality, while rooted in theology, is being recognised as a dimension of all human experience. Formerly it was common to speak of different schools of spirituality, usually associated with a great teacher or founder of a religious order, such as Benedictine, Franciscan, Ignatian, Lutheran, or Quaker spirituality. The 20th century saw a sea-change in various faith communities. Both in books and from pulpits, in prayer and meditative practice, in theological reflection and pastoral ministry, a distinctively lay spirituality of 'daily life' has emerged, rooted in everyday experience and in our closest relationships. A major proportion of lay people is married and engaged in building a family. This dimension of their lives has often been overlooked when speaking of their spirituality. Yet our society has begun to recognise that the conjugal union is a foundational element in the way married people relate to the transcendent. If spirituality is about openness to the divine and to the other, then it must be a current that runs through marital and family bonds and provides their ultimate meaning. Marital spirituality can therefore be sought at the intersection of our intimate relationships and our longing for the divine at the heart of our inner lives. Recent work in this new field has begun to uncover the ways in which spirituality is embodied and expressed in the life of the couple. It gives a distinct texture to the spiritual journey of individual spouses, and has far-reaching effects on the spiritual health of entire families – children, parents, siblings. The dialogue amongst spirituality, theology, and the human sciences fostered in this Seminar will examine the way in which these new directions in the study of spirituality can be applied to the understanding and enrichment of the spirituality of marriage.

#### **Faculty**

- **Stijn Van Den Bossche** (*Dogmatic Theology*)

Professor, Catholic University of Leuven (KUL), Belgium and Catholic Theological University, Utrecht, Netherlands

- **Donna Orsuto** (*Spirituality*)

Professor, Pontifical Gregorian University & Director of the Lay Center at Foyer Unitas, Rome, Italy

- **James M. Day** (*Developmental & Clinical Psychology*)

Professor, Catholic University of Louvain (UCL), Belgium & Anglican clergyman

- **Ines Weber** (*Church History*)

Lecturer, Department of Church History, Faculty of Catholic Theology, University of Tübingen, Germany

• **Monica Sandor** (*History of Spirituality*)  
INTAMS Staff Member, Seminar Coordinator

## Report

This year's seminar addressed the fundamental question "What is Marital Spirituality?" through an interdisciplinary investigation of contemporary spirituality of marriage. Four professors from four different fields took part: Spirituality was taught by Dr. Donna Orsuto of the Pontifical Gregorian University and director of the Lay Center at Foyer Unitas (Rome); Theology by Dr. Stijn Van den Bossche, Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University of Leuven and Catholic Theological University, Utrecht; History by Dr. Ines Weber of the Church History Department in the faculty of Catholic Theology of Tübingen University; and Psychology by the Revd. Dr. James M. Day, Anglican priest and psychologist at the Catholic University of Louvain. The 24 participants came from 12 countries and included 7 clergy and 17 lay people. The majority were professionals and practitioners working in social or pastoral services with couples and families, as well as a number of educators and graduate students.

Following a professional development model, the seminar combined several different modes of learning, engaging the participants fully in the process. The lecturers provided input in the mornings. The afternoons were taken up by small group discussions of the material covered in the lectures and assigned readings and by interdisciplinary panel sessions bringing instructors and participants together around the topic of the day. Further opportunities for interaction were provided during meals and indeed occurred spontaneously at other moments in the day. As one walked the corridors or hovered by the coffee pots, the subject of one or other lecture or panel session could be heard under discussion. All this, despite the range of diverse approaches and emphases, in the most cordial and supportive fashion!

The seminar dipped into some of the wide range of literature and concepts about just what a spirituality of and for marriage might look like, where some of its sources may be found, and how a genuine spirituality of marriage – not simply a derivative of a monastic or clerical ideal but specific to married Christians – might better serve both the Church and society.

In order to progress fairly systematically through the complex question at hand, each day was given its own sub-topic: on the first day we asked "What is Spirituality?" and on the second enquired about "The Challenges Facing Marriage Today". Having looked separately at each component of the term "marital spirituality", the third day was devoted to "Patterns of Marital Spirituality in Our Traditions", examining the ways marital spirituality has evolved over time and in a diversity of contexts, though our focus was mainly on the (western) Christian traditions. Finally, we asked the lecturers to conclude with reflections towards "A Marital Spirituality for the 21st Century".

## The Nature of Spirituality

Dr. Donna Orsuto surveyed some of the many definitions of spirituality, giving an overview of some current discussions about both the practice and the academic study of spirituality. She took some soundings in the various ways that spirituality is understood by some of the key specialists and noted that there are at least four "non-negotiable" pillars in any sound spirituality (following some suggestions by Ronald Rolheiser in *A Holy Longing*): (1) private prayer and moral integrity, (2) care for the poor/social justice, (3) what Gustavo Gutiérrez calls "mellowness of heart", (4) community living (which might take the form of marriage, family life, or a religious community, the parish, a lay association, etc.). She stressed that in marital spirituality we are no longer speaking exclusively of the individual before God but of spouses living together and finding their identity in God.

Dr. James Day's introduction to the insights of psychology on the question of spirituality drew on William James's study of the varieties of religious experience and its implications for classifying and understanding the spiritual life. Psychology of religion studies phenomena associated with spirituality, such as experiences of personal enlightenment or revelation, the way we conceive of the divine or transcendent, and the influence of our religious convictions upon behaviour.

Focusing on the way the historian teases out information about spirituality from a variety of sources, Dr. Ines Weber showed that we are not limited to looking only at the classic "treatises" on spirituality. Rather, the tools of the contemporary church historian, just like those of social and cultural historians in general, include a wide range of texts such as laws and customs, penitentials, court proceedings, popular sermons, advice literature, and handbooks on running a Christian household. Spirituality thus understood is essentially the way of living Christian faith, both in its ideals and in its struggles.

Dr. Stijn Van den Bossche surveyed the biblical foundations of a theology and spirituality of marriage. He argued that in a sense the whole Bible is about marriage, since the foundational image is that of the covenant, reflected most perfectly in the union of husband and wife. Thus marriage is more even than an image of God, for marriage as institution, at least in paradise, is very the icon of God. Commenting on the two Genesis accounts of creation and on some of Jesus' words about marriage, he noted that a biblical spirituality of marriage is one of complete mutual givenness to each other. For it is in the being "of the other" that the human being finds him/herself, peace, and God.

## The Challenges for Marriage Today

Turning to the situation of marriage today, each lecturer perceived a number of challenges. Comparative historical analysis shows that postmodern society (at least in the west) has undergone a significant time of transition since World War II. Ines Weber traced the impact of individualisation, secularisation, and globalization on the criteria for partner choice, the reasons for marrying, the organisation of family life, and the relations between generations.

A sacramental spirituality was the focus of Donna Orsuto's lecture, taking up the implications of speaking of marriage as a sacrament. For if marriage is a universal human institution, she noted, it is also a prophetic symbol, revealing and celebrating the communion between God and God's people. Sacrament requires an outward, visible sign, and in marriage that externality is lived out in the ups and downs of daily life together. In this way, the spouses become sacrament to one another, visible signs of God's grace. The same physicality is also celebrated in the sexual relationship, which in the marital context has itself a sacramental dimension.

The psychology of human development tells us much about the capacity today of people to enter into and sustain healthy marital relationships. James Day noted that psychology is increasingly taking account of our relational natures, for we always act in relation to others. The stage of moral and spiritual development one has reached will have an impact on the way he or she enters into a marriage and develops within the marriage. Following Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of the stages of moral development, he raised the question as to how our capacity for relationship formation varies through the different stages of the life-cycle.

Stijn Van den Bossche considered that one of the chief challenges today is to retrieve the meaning of marriage for our era. He spoke of marriage as an institution and a sacrament of the "highest signification". Marriage obliges the Church to look beyond the current context to situate the foundations of marriage and to think through what marriage says about our very being. Human marriage, understood as the "encounter with the other", has been given with creation as a way of making love visible. The theological task is to reinfuse marriage with the rich notion of covenant, resisting the tendency to rationalise it as mere contract.

#### Patterns of Marital Spirituality in our Traditions

Turning specifically to marital spirituality, each lecturer reflected on how a spirituality of marriage has developed and shifted in western Christian traditions. Stijn Van den Bossche presented a theological consideration of love as giving and revealing itself definitively in marriage. To explore this vision of a spirituality of self-giving marital love, he drew on the insights of the contemporary philosopher Jean-Luc Marion in his recent work *Le phénomène érotique*. He showed that Marion's efforts to redress the lack of an adequate philosophical discourse about love enriches our theological and spiritual understanding of love as a revelation of the God whose "Christian name is love".

Ines Weber drew on diverse historical sources for insight into the texture of married and family life in the first millennium of the Christian Church, when matrimony was negotiated among temporal, personal, and ecclesiastical considerations. She revealed that there is much to be learned from the way a society regulates marriage and relations within a family and a household. To the extent that women's equal dignity was affirmed in this largely patriarchal society, this can be attributed to the influence of the Christian message implicit in the Genesis creation accounts.

The course of Christian spirituality shows a paradigm shift, according to Donna Orsuto. From the days of the early Church there was a gradual move away from a spirituality of discipleship (in the New Testament) to a spirituality of the "two ways" (of the commandments, of perfection) and only recently has there been a shift back to an appreciation of the universal call to holiness. The term "laity" is not a biblical one at all, she noted, for there is but a single Gospel spirituality for all the baptised. She traced the impact of this principle on marital spirituality from the primitive Church to the post-Vatican II period, which has seen a new appreciation of marriage as (also) a way to union with God.

The study of psychology, James Day argued, can help us to gauge the development of some virtues associated with marriage (generosity, altruism, patience, etc.) and find ways to foster them. In particular, he addressed gender differences in perceptions of the moral and spiritual life, based on empirical studies and the insights of Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*. Psychologists have noted that men and women differ in the relative value they attach to justice, care, autonomy, and the way they perceive these as the bases for their identity. The differences in upbringing, social context, and religious socialisation have significant repercussions for the way men and women live out their married lives.

#### A Marital Spirituality for the 21st Century?

Psychology is concerned with the mental health of individuals and societies. James Day showed that "attachment theory" can shed light on the ways our capacity to develop relationships to others and to God is shaped in very early life by the way we form attachments. A healthy spirituality presupposes psychological health, and thus the pastoral care of married persons should be attentive to both the psychological and the spiritual needs of the spouses.

Looking at future patterns of marital spirituality from a theological perspective, Stijn Van den Bossche stressed the significance of the personalistic approach to marriage. He noted that despite the lofty ideals of marriage as reflecting Trinitarian unity and celestial harmony, couples must also be prepared to pass through the cross, for in a sense every marriage will experience the cross as it falls short of expectations and hopes. Thus he pointed also to the need to develop a spirituality for finding meaning in the very real experiences of failure and breakdown.

History is not, of course, accustomed to prescribing or predicting anything for the future, being concerned with analysing the past. Nevertheless, a historian can offer personal reflections based on an understanding of past changes, and Ines Weber led us to ponder the fact that social practice and the Christian teaching on marriage have been in a constant state of evolution in the past two millennia. Thus we should not be shocked at current changes but instead read the signs of the times to ensure we can present a Christian vision of marital spirituality that is meaningful and pertinent to couples today.

Donna Orsuto concluded the sessions by elaborating some features of an adequate spirituality of marriage for the coming years. Drawing out the paschal dimension of marital spirituality, she observed that as Christian life inevitably involves many moments of dying and rising again, so a

marriage experiences these two poles of the paschal mystery. Expounding on the meaning of each day of the Triduum, she noted that the moment most often overlooked is Holy Saturday, the "in-between" time, the waiting, the hoping, the emptiness. A marriage that can live with this "holy longing" is truly an ascetical vocation – involving poverty, chastity, and obedience – no more but no less than any other traditional spiritual way.

In reflecting on the diverse forms of marital spirituality, a few points grew clearer in the course of the seminar. First, that it is essential to listen to the insights of the faithful who are married. It is no longer possible to speak of marital spirituality deductively, starting from abstract principles and then trying to derive from them some practical norms or guidelines. Marital spirituality, like many other fields that have rediscovered the value of "daily life" experience, has to be developed inductively, from a starting point firmly rooted in the flesh and blood experience of husbands and wives

Other themes that emerged frequently were the need for a revalorisation of sexual union within marriage, a spirituality of sacrament that takes full account of our fleshly natures and our longing for meaning, and a mode of personal faith development that allows us to escape individualism and find our identity through our relationships. Through their differences in nuance and approach, all those present made a contribution to tracing the contours of a new, integrative, and relational spirituality of marriage.