

Second International INTAMS Summer Seminar 2001

For Love's Sake? Rethinking the Basis of Marriage

Theme

The second Vatican Council's definition of the marital relationship as a "covenant of love" was welcomed by many Christians as a real breakthrough. Recognizing that the marital relationship is more than an agreement about property rights, theological teaching quickly moved away from a narrow contractual concept of marriage and towards an integration of its interpersonal and emotional dimensions.

Today people in the Western world are getting married, as they say almost unanimously, "for love". Love, however, is an ambiguous and complex phenomenon. While probably only with modernity love and personal choice have come to be seen as the primary motive for marriage, people nowadays enter into numerous forms of intimate personal relationships other than marriage with that same motivation. Moreover, there is psychological and sociological evidence that popular idealizations of romantic love put too much strain on long-lasting relationships between two constantly changing individuals.

These and other findings suggest the need to re-examine our understanding of love as the basis of marriage. How can the bond between the spouses be rethought in a way which takes seriously the various forms and meanings that love entails in different life cycles of the marital relationship? Would it not be beneficial for the community of married couples if some institutional or even contractual elements were integrated which would genuinely support the loving relationship? What about other concepts such as friendship, justice, reciprocity, responsibility and others to which some today give preference over a too individualistic model of love relationships?

Christian faith attributes a central role to love in its teaching about God, about God's relationship to humankind and about Christian living. How does it contribute to reconsidering the marital relationship today and to developing a genuine marital spirituality? If authentic love is never individualistic, but always a response to someone else's self-giving love, can the meaning of marriage as a love relationship today be enriched by a Trinitarian deepening? What are the fruits of these suggestions for spouses as well as for society and the Church?

Faculty

- **Rüdiger Schnell** (*History of Literature*)

Professor of Medieval Literature at the University of Basel, Switzerland

- **Adrian Thatcher** (*Theology*)

Professor of Applied Theology at the University College of St. Mark and St. John, Plymouth, UK

- **Paul Moyaert** (*Philosophy*)

Professor of Philosophical Anthropology and Moral Philosophy at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium

- **Kieran Sullivan** (*Psychology*)

Assistant Professor of Psychology at Santa Clara University, California, USA

- **Walter Kirchschräger** (*Theology*)

Professor of New Testament studies at the University of Lucerne, Switzerland

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

Assistant Professor of lay spirituality at the Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome, Italy and Director of the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas Institute, Rome

Report

Our purpose, as the title indicates, was to study the role of love as a basis for marriage. In the west, we often imagine that love is the sole basis for marriage. Since love is also the motivating factor in relationships other than marriage, both heterosexual and homosexual, it seems that getting married and staying married requires something more than merely love, if marriage is to be seen as something more than simple cohabitation. Sociological studies show that increasingly the primary motive for getting married is the desire for children. The uniqueness of marital love and the relationship between love and marriage is particularly problematic today and is a question that the course sought to explore.

Is there something special about marital love (beyond its relationship to having children) that allows this sort of love, unlike other forms of love, to be understood in the Catholic tradition as forming a sacramental bond between the couple? How can we understand marital love without on the one hand overburdening it with unrealistic romantic ideals and without on the other hand reducing it to a mere contractual relationship? How does the daily experience of love in marriage bear witness to the Christian conviction that this love has its source in God who is love itself (cf. 1 John 4,7-8)? In approaching these questions, the course sought to illuminate the complexity of the concept "love", a concept that is often understood as univocally applicable to diverse human relationships. It tried to come to a Christian understanding of the relationship between love and marriage with the help of various human sciences.

Postgraduates with various backgrounds and professional interests met near Brussels to discuss this question from 26 August to 6 September. They came from Australia, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Holland, Ireland, Norway, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the USA. Six professors from five different disciplines offered lectures and seminars on the theme from the perspective of their own field of study. The participants interacted with one another during discussions and colloquia dedicated to interdisciplinary exchange.

Rüdiger Schnell, Professor of Medieval Literature at the University of Basel in Switzerland showed how the link between marriage and love was already forged in ancient times, presenting examples of literature and philosophy from ancient and medieval sources. His initial presentation argued that what we call by the single word "love" is actually a complex reality, embracing both feeling and behavior. In the wake of the linguistic turn in philosophy, Schnell sees that linguistic testimonies and other cultural factors so influence our feelings that they can be said to construct them. What we experience as love is shaped by what love is said to be in what we hear and read about. The assertions and demands concerning marital love made in ancient and medieval texts (cf. also Eph 5,25) primarily understand love as a way of behaving

rather than as a feeling to experience.

Schnell indicated relevant points for the understanding of marriage today in the texts he presented. Ovid's *Metamorphosis* shows the lasting reliance of spouses on one another in the myth of Philemon and Baucis. Ideal reciprocity, equality, and mutual affection is found in both Catullus and Jean de Meun. While Ovid's *Ars amatoria* depicts erotic love as unsustainable in marriage, other authors see love, eroticism, and married life as inseparable (Catullus, Heinrich von Veldeke) or as signifying the highest happiness only if they exist together (Reinfried von Braunschweig).

The application of the Aristotelian concept of friendship to marriage in the middle ages influenced the understanding of marriage as a partnership. Some writers even concluded that the friendship of the spouses is increased through pleasure (this is echoed in Thomas Aquinas, Maistre Nicole Oresme, and others). Other medieval writers emphasized that marriage should be useful and produce virtue, excluding pleasure from the goods of marriage (Albert the Great, Johannes Rieder, Ulrich von Poddenstein).

Medieval sermons often reflected a concern for marital harmony above all else. They stressed that peacefully living together taught the couples to love each other, the emotional bond becoming stronger with time. This medieval concept of marriage as fulfilling a social role contrasts with the modern conception of marriage as a relationship of love and mutual enrichment. Schnell recommended that we recover some of this ancient and medieval concern for the proper behavior of couples toward one another.

Adrian Thatcher, Anglican Professor of Applied Theology at the University College of St. Mark and St. John in Plymouth, UK, began with an overview of the understanding of the role of love in marriage in Catholic teaching. Many factors have historically thwarted a positive understanding of marriage as a partnership of love: Paul's commendation of celibacy as a result of his expectation of the Kingdom; the early Church's suspicion of sexuality in its moral condemnation of the hedonistic society; philosophical soul-body dualism which reappears in sexual dualism; the spiritualization of love; and the legal systematization of marriage. Agreeing with Schnell, Thatcher indicated examples of theologians of the 11th and 12th centuries, such as Hugh of St. Victor, Peter Lombard, who understood marriage as based in love. In recent times, the importance of love in marriage was highlighted by Leo XIII. The Code of Canon Law of 1917, however, continued to use the scholastic formulation that depicted the main end of marriage as the procreation of children, the secondary end the reciprocal help that each gives the other and the *remedium concupiscentiae*. It was the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et spes* that first officially described love as essential to marriage. Thatcher argued that recent teachings insufficiently reflect upon the factors of power and gender difference because they ignore the social context of marriage. Thatcher held that in the western tradition (both secular and theological), the romantic understanding of love is the target of criticism and scepticism. Bataille and Breton offer elements that are helpful for a theological understanding of love: erotic passion and love are taken as evidence of transgressions that surpass the reasonable, the calculating, and the functional.

In later lectures Thatcher presented some theological sources of the understanding of marital love, reconstructing the relationship of man and woman in Ephesians 5 on the basis of an eschatological understanding of the equal submission of both to Christ. He thus transformed

gender imbalances into reciprocity such that the early Christian account of the position of women is revolutionarily transformed, despite appearances to the contrary. This revision must face the criticism that it is not without problems to read modern ideas and ideals into early texts.

Thatcher concluded by affirming current papal teaching that stresses the importance of understanding human love in marriage in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity. Marital love must be understood as a relationship of equality between persons who become one while at the same time retain their distinctiveness. Personalism understands love as a relation between persons rather than as a personal quality or character belonging to an isolated subject. These ideas enrich our understanding of the love of God such that we understand the persons of the Trinity not as possessing love but as being love in relation to one another. Marital love, as participating in divine love, can be described as a *communio personarum*. Marital love is the relationship that the two equally share. Gender hierarchies and androcentrism can be overcome and new impulses are given for a marital spirituality that overcomes the individualism of traditional spirituality.

Paul Moyaert, Professor of Philosophical Anthropology and Moral Philosophy at the Catholic University of Leuven, explored the philosophical meaning of love using mystical experience as a particularly clear example of different types of love. When one looks at the love experienced by the mystic solely from the perspective of its roots in human nature, it is evident that mystic love is motivated primarily by desire, by the movement towards the unreachable Other. The mystics themselves describe their life as a pilgrimage motivated not by self-denial and flight from the world but by pleasure: the continually increasing pleasure in the activity itself (e.g. prayer). Using the writings of John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila, Moyaert showed that in its beginning stages, mystic love is a pure form of the passionate love that we experience when we fall in love. It is a love inflamed by desire. Passionate love is not the least interested in the actual presence of the beloved or in a reciprocal relationship with them. Unlike marital love, it is nourished by desire itself. In the mystical self-emptying that leads to the absolute comfortlessness of the mystic night, desire must be abandoned and allowed to be transformed into dispassionate love, what Moyaert called pure mystic love. This type of love is experienced in daily life as neighborly love, the love for another without conditions or desire. In this type of neighborly love, the mystic attains an intimate union with God (also called spiritual marriage). Moyaert sees in this love the specifically Christian form of love.

Moyaert then sought to bring the philosophical background of the understanding of love to light. Love has a distinct object (thing, person, activity) such that the pure existence of the beloved gives pleasure (Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza). Love refers to a conformity between oneself and what is, here and now. The one who can continually love all that is and all that he does is in possession of the fullness of Being—that which was for Nietzsche the *amor fati* characteristic of the *Übermensch*. We attain this complete loving synchronicity in certain brief moments, in the cessation of all desires. These moments contain within themselves the seed of fear that the beauty of the moment will pass and the beloved will not remain the same. Without this sense of vulnerability, love is not love. Its transitoriness reawakens desire, a quality which uncovers a broader understanding of love: Love is attachment: love for the beloved means doing anything for them, caring about them, being concerned for them. In this

sense Moyaert argues against the current concern for marital equality and stresses the asymmetry of love relationships. Loving ones spouse means to value them above oneself. Love in this sense is dependent and jealous; no one can substitute for me in my love (unlike in neighborly love). Respect and glorification for what is greater than oneself are for Moyaert the only possible attitudes in marital love. This is also exemplified in the traditional understanding of the sacrament of marriage, according to Moyaert. Both partners approach the sacrament as submitting themselves to a reality greater than themselves.

Kieran Sullivan, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Santa Clara University, California, USA, presented various approaches of social psychology to couples' relationships. She described the nature of such psychological studies and discussed different ways of understanding the formation of close relationships, the nature of love, and the factors found to threaten marital stability. Three theories describe the development of close relationships. Social Penetration Theory holds self-disclosure responsible for marital satisfaction. Social Exchange Theory understands marital satisfaction as resulting from the relationship between experienced rewards (sexual satisfaction, support, etc.) and costs (sacrificing time, opportunities, etc.). Equity Theory sees an equal perception of fairness in the other's costs and benefits as productive of marital happiness.

Sullivan also discussed models for understanding the nature of love. Sternberg's triangular theory of love sees three basic components of love in tension with one another: commitment, intimacy, and passion. Different emphases on these components characterizes distinct types of love ranging from a pure sharing of life together to love based on pure decision: from companionate love down through romantic and fatuous love. An equal balance of all three is called consummate love. Attachment Theory sees distinct forms of intimate relationships resulting from the pattern of intimacy learned as an infant in relation to the primary care giver. Factors that can predict eventual divorce in unhappy couples are the object of study. Among the factors that drive couples apart are mutual criticism, negative retorts to negative criticisms, withdrawal (especially in men), and a preponderance of negative emotions in comparison to positive ones. Happy couples are by contrast more supportive, solve problems together, compensate for the negative moods of the partner, and have more positive emotions. Sullivan underlined that it is more efficient to work with couples preparing for marriage in order to teach them how to overcome problems that may arise rather than wait until their relationship is in crisis and offer them therapy then.

Sullivan also discussed four transitions that couples go through that affect marital satisfaction: transition to marriage, parenthood, parenting adolescent children, and the "empty nest syndrome". Finally, she proposed various models of couples therapy. Behavioral Couples Therapy seeks to correct concrete behaviors by teaching communication and problem-solving skills. Cognitive Behavioral Couples Therapy seeks to change problematic appraisals of our thoughts about the other. Integrative Couples Therapy seems to be the more effective. It begins for the concrete circumstances of the couple's relationship and teaches them to preserve the relationship through emotional acceptance, tolerance, and the facing of problems as a common enemy. In this way participation in group therapy can identify the problems in the relationship as well as best approach to therapy itself and thus the therapist can find the best treatment.

Walter Kirchschräger, Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of Lucern, Switzerland, sought to uncover the role of love in the biblical understanding of marriage. In the second creation narrative (Gen 2,4ff), God makes for Adam a "suitable partner" to assist him. Kirchschräger showed that in this text there is no subordination of woman to man implied but that woman and man are presented as equal. In the first creation narrative (Gen 1,26ff), the image of God in humanity is linked to human sexual differentiation and to the fertility by which humanity participates in God's creativity. Marriage is linked to covenant throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, especially its presentation of marriage as an image of the covenant between God and Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus presents his own giving of himself for others as joined to the covenant love of God. This covenant includes an explicit self-giving of oneself to the other. The covenant formula (I am God for you, you are a people for me) is echoed in the *verba solemnia* of the marriage rite (I take you . . .).

It is not surprising that the biblical reflection on covenant that makes marriage an analogy of the covenant relationship also uses the marital relationship as a way of understanding God. In an exegesis of Ephesians 5, Kirchschräger showed that in the Christian couple's married life, the holiness of the Kingdom of God in the Spirit is present. 1 Corinthians 7 presents marriage as a lived vocation based on the equality of the spouses. The letter as a whole presents marriage as a God-given spiritual gift, a charisma, which the spouses must live out in their daily married life in openness to the Church community. 1 Corinthians 13 shows that love is a foretaste of and a witness to participation in the love of God. From this reading of Paul, one can say that Christian marriage (and in its own way, celibacy also) manifests God's love.

The farewell discourse of John develops the understanding of Christian love as a sharing in Christ's love for the Father, and hence in the love of the Trinity. It is a prayer for unity in diversity, applicable to marriage as a particular way of living as Church.

In conclusion, Kirchschräger explored the meaning of the sacramentality of marriage based on biblical evidence. A sacrament is a reality in and through which God's healing action upon humanity is shown and experienced similar to the reality witnessed in the prophetic deeds of the Hebrew Scriptures and in the miracles of Jesus. Marriage can be understood as a sacrament that makes God's relationship to humanity evident. Marriage is a spiritual gift, revealing God's intent to give humans joy, happiness, and life. It constitutes a sacramental form of living by which those entering come to know something of God's relation to humanity, a relationship that is always full of fantasy and overflowing in commitment, assistance, patience, service, dedication, intimacy and love.

Donna Orsuto, Assistant Professor of Lay Spirituality at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, sought to weave a tapestry of spirituality from the various interdisciplinary reflections on love and marriage. She began by setting forth various characteristics of dialogue useful for interdisciplinary discussion: an attitude of listening, respect for the perspectives of the various disciplines, trust, a commitment to clarity, acknowledgment of legitimate diversity, and a desire for integration and unity.

Orsuto stressed that a spiritual interpretation of the relationship between love and marriage must keep in mind the ambiguity of the phenomena of love. The difficulties and problems involved in forging a marital relationship require a continual dying and rising to oneself, the

other, and God. Through this, marital love has some participation in the paschal mystery. Christian married couples must always accept the incompleteness of life, relinquish false messianic expectations, cultivate an inner strength and peace with oneself, and recognize that love is an ongoing process. All married people experience times of darkness in which their love must be renewed and transformed.

Friendship is an important aspect of marriage and, because it is connected to the relationship between God and humans (cf. John 15,15), sheds light upon marital spirituality. Friendship, according to Aristotle, is essentially linked to table fellowship, an important aspect of marital life. The image of God in human persons can be understood as Being-in-relation; the joining of a couple in marriage becomes a concrete manifestation of this image. Actions of kindness to others can be interpreted as a spiritual friendship, with its implications for marital behavior (Aelred of Rivaulx). Married love thus can be seen as exhibiting in its own way the sort of love God gives to all, a participation in Trinitarian love.

From the perspectives of the various disciplines, Orsuto drew out a key element for marital spirituality: Marriage is an expression of covenant; that is, a continual "yes" that one maintains throughout the darkness and betrayals of life. In marriage, covenant love is experienced as a gift to be shared that is rooted in the fidelity of Christ and filled with the love of God. Married love must include but also surpass passionate and romantic love. It is mutual dedication, being subject to one another, and openness to the wider community; it has elements of friendship and is a process of continual change. Marriage is a specific type of discipleship that has its own responsibilities. It is a vocation that every day is to become more and more the image of reciprocal divine love, continually enriched by the Spirit.