

“God’s plan for man and woman in the sacrament of marriage”. The nuptial mystery and contemporary culture

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+ Angelo Cardinal Scola

Patriarch of Venice

Before approaching the theme that the conference organizers have given me, which concerns God’s plan regarding the relation between man and woman in the sacrament of marriage, I would like to greet each one of you most warmly and thank His Excellence Monsignor Anders Arborelius who invited me at the end of June 2008 to take part in this meeting for families.

I would also like to thank the permanent deacon Göran Fäldt who has been in contact with me throughout the period leading up to the conference and Mrs Antonella Larsson who has done her utmost to make my trip to Sweden go as smoothly as possible.

My presence here can be traced back to two reasons on a personal level.

The first reason is related to the beauty and the necessity that an exchange of communion within the Churches be sought with ever-increasing tenacity. The communion of the baptized is a telling sign of the unity that is necessary so that “the world may believe” (Jn 17, 21).

The second reason is a conviction which was strongly underscored by Benedict XVI during the ad limina Visit of the Bishops of the Scandinavian countries, in which he referred to this Congress. The Pope spoke of the “centrality of the family for the life of a healthy society” which implies a deepening and a broadening of “the institution of marriage and the Christian understanding of human sexuality”[1]. Man today – the so-called post-modern man – is, at the same time, confused and thirsting. That is why modern man needs to meet men and women who are able to witness to their enthusiasm originated by the unique beauty of the sacrament of matrimony.

I now need to make another brief premise to the question we are about to approach. My lecture will, as I think the title shows, provide an anthropological framework that is intended as a foundation. For that reason it will not address individual ethical and legal problems in detail, which will be addressed in other talks or during the study groups. Also, it would actually not make sense to go into issues that sometimes present themselves very differently in the countries of northern Europe compared with Italy.

There is a third preliminary point to be made. There are some difficulties linked to the theme in my lecture. I sincerely hope that you will work on these difficulties in the study groups, and subsequently, perhaps in groups back home in your parishes, on the text.

1. Love, marriage and family put to the test.

To begin with we should start from the reality of the Euro-Atlantic society we find ourselves in. The current cultural climate is now often classified as post-modern. Obviously, this concept includes a variety of meanings and we cannot summarize them all here. But I believe that some of its features are quite easily observable.

First we find ourselves in a situation of advanced secularization. Clearly, secularization is not the same in all countries. You cannot establish immediate parallels between your countries and, for example, Italy. Or even between Italy and France and Germany. I think, however, that a common core of the secularization of all Euro-Atlantic societies lies in what the Canadian philosopher Taylor defines the third sense of secularization. This consists in considering faith in God as one option among others. In other words, we have gone from a society in which it was “virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer this is one human possibility among others”[2].

The second characteristic of post-modernity, linked to the first, is that man today risks emphasizing individual freedom of choice so far as to consider it as constituting the whole of freedom. In this way, it has no link with any objective good.

The third aspect is the unique combination that has been achieved over the past two centuries between science and technology, especially in biology and increasingly in the neurosciences. This has brought about a major change in the vision of reality. Truth is no longer given by the correspondence between the intellect and the “thing” (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*), sometimes not even by what is empirically observable. Truth is reduced to what is technically feasible. This ends up by establishing a dangerous equation: “you can, so you must”[3] (technological imperative).

The interweaving of these factors has also radically changed the way in which man sees himself, giving rise to new situations and changes also within the ambit of love and the family. Divorce, unmarried couples, same-sex unions, the reality of living single, contraception, abortion, medically assisted reproduction, the possibility of pre-natal or pre-implantation diagnosis, cloning, as well as homosexuality, have produced a series of separations in the sphere of love, marriage and the family: between the couple and being parents, between parenting and procreation, between the couple-family and sexual difference[4]. These mutations do not stop at the private sphere, but invade civilian life in the same way. In fact, the legislature, in varying degrees in the different countries of the Euro-Atlantic area, is increasingly open to ensuring the rule of law to any “desire” of the citizen-subject, which, moreover, can be extended through the undefined possibilities of technoscience.

From this context we derive a series of questions: should sexual difference, love and fertility be considered contingent facts that can be overcome nowadays – or perhaps already have been – or do they have an absolute value? Are these three factors, taken together, really essential for the experience of marriage and the family? Does their unity deserve to be maintained and consciously pursued as something that calls for the freedom of every person to choose what is good in view of his own good? Is the family founded on a man and a woman’s marriage that is faithful, public and open to life really the appropriate way to develop the whole person? Coming to your countries and considering the plurality of worldviews in them, starting from the difference between believers and non-believers, and considering the various ecclesial and religious affiliations that give rise to a large number of mixed and interreligious marriages, one might ask: how can this plurality of visions be lived in a positive way within the family itself?

Do not all these burning questions urgently propose another question, which summarizes all the previous ones, and which each of us is now called upon to answer, at least implicitly: who or what does the man of the third millennium want to be? Until the fall of the walls between political systems and ideologies, we witnessed a dispute over being human (John Paul II). At the time, the question in dispute – man himself – was somehow identifiable. Today, on the other hand, so much has been lost in the understanding of who man really is.

There are two roads along which post-modern man seeks an answer. Travelling along the first road he wants to be “only his own experiment”, an expression used by a German philosopher of science. Enough of the talk about the person and personal dignity understood as absolute and universal principles!

The second road leads instead to reconsidering these fundamentals from the perspective of the relational nature of the person and of his faculty to be in communion with other human beings.

If man in today's world is at this crossroads, we need to emphasize, as our meeting will confirm, that the Church is called to a new evangelization. The new proclamation of the Gospel must let Jesus Christ, the *Lumen gentium*, Light of the peoples, shine through its face. Evangelization must by its very nature show how the event of Jesus Christ is contemporary with man of all times in His unity of soul and body (*corpore et anima unus*, GS 14.) Then all the human aspects associated with the nuptial experience, such as affection, love, marriage, family, motherhood, fatherhood, brotherhood, friendship, but also consecrated virginity and celibacy, are channels through which the Church, mother and teacher devotes herself at the present historical juncture, to care for men and women, communities and peoples.

But there is also another reason, perhaps less obvious at first glance, but equally decisive, which indicates that nuptiality is rooted in the essence of the Church. The proof is in the nuptial language used in Scripture, by the Fathers, by Holy Doctors of the Church and more generally by the whole tradition of Christian thought when it describes, varying in terms of intensity and emphasis, the highest mysteries of our faith. Starting from the Sacrament of the Eucharist, in which Christ's Body is given and his Blood poured out, we are redeemed and made fully brothers and sisters; to Baptism in which we are incorporated into Christ in the Church (the theme of the body emerges again) and made children of God in the Son (here the unbreakable bond between nuptiality and the parental relation emerges); and finally to Christ's relationship with His Church as expressed in the letter to the Ephesians, where he uses the imagery of marriage.

If we just scroll through the list of these themes we can easily realize that what is at stake here is not only the substance of our everyday life, even in its more intimate aspects, but also, at the same time, the understanding of our faith and our belonging to the Church.

2. The nuptial mystery of sexual difference, self-giving, fecundity

The most appropriate way to deal with the problems described above is to read through the lens of the nuptial mystery in its three inextricably linked dimensions: sexual difference, self-giving, fecundity. Indeed, the expression nuptial mystery reveals the profound nature of love because by showing how the self, others and the unity of the two act together, it leads to the heart of elementary human experience[5], common to all persons, in every time and place. The fact that it is a mystery does not indicate that we are unable to know anything about it. It only suggests that since it is one of the dimensions through which every man's personal freedom enters into a relationship with the infinite, it cannot be totally defined within one definition. In this regard, Evdokimov writes: "None of the poets and thinkers has found the answer to the question: "What is love? "[...] Do you want to trap light? It will escape through your fingers"[6].

Let us therefore briefly examine the three components constituting the nuptial mystery but never forget that they can never be separated. Each one always puts the other two into play.

a) Sexual Difference

The theme of sexual difference, the first dimension of the nuptial mystery, was developed by the Magisterium of John Paul II to deepen the prophetic strength of *Humanae Vitae* starting from his Catechesis on Human Love[7]. This theme was recently taken up again by Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est*[8].

Taking as his starting point the two stories of Genesis on the creation of man (Gen 1:27 and Gen 2:18-25), Pope Wojtyla identifies the gendered nature of human beings as a constitutive dimension of anthropology. The individual exists always and only as male or female. What does this fact suggest? It suggests that no human being can constitute the whole of man by him or herself, because he or she will always be faced with the other way to be human. Man cannot exist "alone" (Gen 2:18), but is always in a relation. In this way, he is aware of his or her finite nature, and discovers at the same time the vocation to be open to another. It is important to emphasize that sexual difference is not accidental in nature. It is an integral part of man's image and likeness of God. Indeed, Pope John Paul II says that "man has become the image and likeness of God, not only by his humanity, but also through the communion of persons that man and woman form right from the start[9]."

The relation between male and female therefore requires consideration simultaneously through the categories of identity and difference. While the former can be easily led back to the personal nature of human beings and the resulting equal dignity between man and woman (both equally human beings), the

latter is not without problems, as one can clearly understand from the obvious difficulties of contemporary culture to think in terms of sexual difference.

Difference does not refer to a simple question of roles, nor can it be reduced to a complementarity in view of the recovery of a lost identity (lost because of a jealous god: through the merging of the two halves, as imagined by Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium). On the other hand, it does not concern only the relationship between husband and wife, but all the relations in which the self is immersed, those between brother and sister, between mother and child, father and daughter and so on. Sexual difference, fully understood, is revealed as the primary mode by which the individual, one in body and soul, comes into contact with reality. Awareness of one's being which is always situated in sexual difference creates a constant openness to others and shows a path to self-knowledge. From here you can see that the difference[10] (differre – to take the same or something elsewhere) can never be abolished. It is an unrivalled dimension of the personal self.

b) Being open to the other as gift of self

It is precisely in sexual difference adequately lived that opening oneself to another can take the form of self-giving. Starting from this fact we can better understand the link between the nuptial mystery and the sacrament of marriage, whose ultimate justification builds on the nuptial language of the Bible[11].

The theological tradition offers us a way of thinking within the framework of the text of Ephesians 5:21-33. In this text the human experience of love between spouses, based on sexual difference, is illuminated by the analogy with the spousal love of Jesus Christ for the Church, which by virtue of the sacrament of marriage involves the Christian spouses. Let me be clear: the sacrament is not an addition to the natural fact, but it is what explains it in depth. That is why St. Paul invites the spouses to know that love must be total, personal, redemptive and fecund. And this is a fact that also applies to spouses who are baptized members of different Christian traditions, because, " by means of baptism, man and woman are definitively placed within the new and eternal covenant, in the spousal covenant of Christ with the Church [...]and by their right intention, they have accepted God's plan regarding marriage[12]."

To live its vocation fully, the union between man and woman, which is rooted in sexual difference, must be faithful and open to life. This is shown in the Catechism of the Catholic Church when it speaks of the goods and requirements of marriage[13]. In this matter it is of decisive importance to overcome a serious misunderstanding. These goods and requirements are not properties that are added to the love between man and woman. They are part of the essence of love. Where there is no faithfulness and fruitfulness there never has actually been love, in its proper sense[14]. They are not precepts of the Church which have been added, almost to put a certain restraint on the free expression of love. They are the goods – assets – which emerge from the profound nature of human love. Since they are essential to love, even though they are radically challenged by contemporary culture and customs, they are always able to show their relevance to the present day.

Let us see briefly how.

In one of his last books, the great Catholic philosopher Jean Guitton describes with much self-irony his death, his funeral and God's judgement on his life. He imagines his soul, separated from the body, conversing with philosophers, poets, popes, politicians. In the dialogue about love, where Guitton speaks with his wife and the poet Dante, we find this brilliant statement: "Some get married because they love each other, others end up loving each other because they have married. It is a good thing that there should be both the one and the other in a marriage. – "Why do people end up loving each other, once married?" – "Perhaps because we needed to keep the direction we had taken?" Guitton suggested. His wife replied: "There must be something else, if it is love." – "Marie-Louise, what is this other thing?" – "It must relate to time and eternity"[15]. There is no love that does not mean the desire of "forever". The phenomenon of falling in love, when heard in all its seriousness, tells us the same thing. Part of the experience of those who love, is to want to give all of themselves without time limits. And it is precisely the experience of those who are loved that they want the love that embraces them to never end. In my task as a pastor, I always say to young people: "If you are truly in love, I challenge you to say it without adding "forever" ". The "forever" is an essential part of love. Shakespeare's genius expressed it as he angrily bursts out in a verse of a sonnet: "Love is not love/ which alters when it alteration finds/, or bends with the remover to remove./ O no, it is an ever fixed mark"[16].

If this is true for every experience of sincere falling in love, forever should be all the more present in the love of those who marry, and of Christian spouses. The call of the Epistle to the Ephesians, “as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed Himself for her to make her holy by washing her in cleansing water with a form of words, so that when he took the Church to himself she would be glorious with no spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and faultless” (Eph. 5: 25-27, Jerusalem Bible). This call makes love “for a time” unthinkable. Not only because the gift of Christ leads as far as the sacrifice of himself on Golgotha, but also primarily because the duty that “husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies; for a man to love his wife is for him to love himself” (Eph 5:28, Jerusalem Bible) is based on the fact that “a man never hates his own body, but he feeds it and looks after it” (Eph 5:29, *ibid*). Within the sphere of love, time loses its disintegrating power and becomes an anticipation of eternity. The fidelity of spouses is a wonderful example of Jesus’ call to lose one’s own life in order to find it. Life is given to us to be given in turn. The cross-check of this is that if you don’t give your life, time steals it from you.

From the above we understand better what is meant when the Church repeats the Lord’s injunction “what therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder” (Mt 19:6). The verse points out that the human decision to love enacts the will to continue the work of God who created us male and female. In contrast to what contemporary culture seems to suggest, the union forever is not a burden imposed on our freedom, but a condition for being able to implement it. The indissolubility represents the possibility that freedom can be fulfilled and similarly that the desire to be loved and to love actually helps to make the original plan of the Father on the marriage transparent. This is not the result of a higher ethical capacity in the spouses. This fullness is only possible if husband and wife live their daily relationship as a sacrament, as a concrete form of their being a domestic Church. At this level we understand the importance of the spouses living an intense sacramental life which will be a continuing revival of the awareness of their baptism and of belonging to Christ. And around this centre, a great opportunity of mutual commitment is freely given through the experience of forgiveness[17].

c) Fecundity (Fruitfulness)

To find out where love ultimately leads us, seen in all its aspects, we shall have to return to its origin. To understand the third factor of the nuptial mystery, fertility – which is the outcome following the gift of self – we must start from the first factor: sexual difference.

We first remember that the person “I” is structurally related to the person “you”. Openness to the other is constitutive of the identity of the person. In giving themselves to one another by virtue of sexual difference, the bride and groom become one flesh and thereby open themselves completely to the procreation of a child. Precisely because even within the marital union the two do not merge into a unity that encompasses them, but continue to be different people in pure and full communion, they make place for a third person.

Considering the conception of a third person, the great Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar quite ingeniously said that “the act of union of two persons in the one flesh and the fruit of this union should be considered together, skipping over the factor of distance in time.[18] This statement is an argument for the prophetic power of *Humanae Vitae*. The procreation of children, which involves the fascinating adventure of education, expresses the full meaning of marriage[19].

I would add, incidentally, that a deep experience of conjugal love can be established even in interfaith marriages, if the spouses are made aware of the difficulties and fully respect the canon.

3. The nuptial mystery is an answer to the question of man’s love in the post-modern age.

When we meditate on marriage through the category of the nuptial mystery we can fully grasp God’s plan for man and woman. It reveals the correspondence between the three dimensions of sexual difference, self-giving and fruitfulness with the desire for happiness, which properly belongs to every human being.

In this light we can clearly see how the objections of contemporary thinking to the Christian vision and to Church teaching on the theme of human love in fact seek a reduction of man’s asking for fulfilment (“if you wish to be perfect”, Matthew 19:21), which lies in every human being’s heart. The objections stem from separating the desire from the task which is inevitably implied in every desire. What suffers as a consequence is human freedom which is no longer lived as a way to realize man’s stretching out to the

infinite, but as the illusion that one can respond to this by satisfying momentarily an indefinite series of finite desires. The result of this for love is what the genius of Albert Camus had already understood: “men and women either tear each other apart in what is called the act of love or force themselves into an enduring habit for both of them” (La Peste, 1947). A union between man and woman which renounces even just one of love’s constitutive dimensions is likely to end up reducing the other person to a mere instrument of pleasure. The outcome cannot but be boredom. Only where love is recognized in its entirety, that is, as participation in God’s free plan which calls human freedom, can the Christian response to the dominant objections of today show that it has good reasons to offer. It is only on the strength of full love that we can affirm the beauty of chastity, as well as the illicitness of contraception; or the fact that life from conception cannot be disposed of, even when the life was not wanted, or is affected by malformations which do not correspond to the parents’ expectations; or the dignity of human life even when struck by serious illnesses or marked by extreme old age.

But the labour that we are living through in the present historical moment also tells us something else. At first sight, and in every way, human frailty seems to contradict the possibility of a “forever”. It seems to deny sacrifices as something good, and leads one to think of a child in terms of a “product” rather than as fruit. But seen in its depth, human frailty certifies the very truth of love. As is shown in the teaching of John Paul II, if one recognizes its own disproportion to living fidelity and exclusive love, but one remains open forever, open to sacrifice to the point of forgiveness, and open to children, then one is led to discover that desire achieves its aim only through the exercise of a task. That moves one to want love to be definitive through a duty. It is the wanting of love that leads one to decide in favour of the duty of fidelity. It is the gap between the greatness of the vocation to which one is called, and one’s incapacity to fulfil it with one’s own strength which convinces spouses – through the oath they exchange to love until death separates them – to lean their mutual fidelity on God, who is faithful love (cf 1 Jn 4: 16, Jerusalem Bible).

4. The family, a privileged place of the nuptial mystery

What we have said so far on the nuptial mystery and its dimensions is brought about and becomes understandable in family life. Family life is based on the intertwining of two kinds of relationships – one between spouses and one between generations, each with a specific way of expressing love. A person’s identity is directly related to each of these, and it is through these two types of relations that the person can live the relationship between the ‘I’ and a ‘you’ which encourages balanced growth.

The strength of the family lies in its being a privileged way for every person to develop their personal identity. Benedict XVI recently said so on the occasion of the visit ad Limina of the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of the Scandinavian countries: “Children have the right to be conceived and carried in the womb, brought into the world and brought up within marriage: it is through the secure and recognized relationship to their own parents that they can discover their identity and achieve their proper human development”.^[20]

Who we are and what we think of ourselves, the trust we have in our selves, in a word the value of our individual person is rooted largely in our experience of belonging to a family body, which is inserted in the chain of generations. The basic trust of a child towards life, his awareness of being a subject worthy of love and capable of love, is born and grows within the family context. It is within the family relationships that the child can experience the promise of what is good and the happiness that his coming into the world brings. It was strongly sensed by Friedrich Hölderlin in his famous poem “The Rhine”: “It all depends on birth, on the ray of light the newborn meets”^[21].

The truth of these claims becomes evident in extreme situations which give rise to a child’s question about his or her origin. Let’s think of a critical situation that involves an increasing number of children throughout Europe: the separation or divorce of parents. What is hardest to accept for their children, apart from the difficulty to adapt personally to the new situation in which their parents are also involved, is the loss of the sense of the pair bonding from which they originated. The most rigorous and thorough analyses of this phenomenon indicate that the strongest obstacle to children’s education is not so much the level of conflict to which they may have been exposed in the process of the separation of parents, as by the loss of a fundamental certainty tied to the original union of the parents. A child is aware of the fact that his existence came about through his parents and cannot adapt to the idea that this union may fail at some point without great suffering.

In the family, man discovers and sees his nature as a relational being exalted: this is why families are the place where generations care for each other. They are the first school where the person has the experience of good relationships and virtuous practices which can be extended to the Christian community and civil life. So for children, the family is the basic environment of education, and for the elderly, an irreplaceable environment of solidarity.

As the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church affirms (number 238): “The family is a community of love and solidarity that is uniquely suited to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, social, spiritual and religious values, essential for the development and well-being of its members and of society”. The family in fact transmits almost by osmosis the elementary moral experience. It is the society in which everyone, through the basic good constituted by loving relationships is “recognized” as a person, with an openness to a future “promising happiness” which also demands a task to be undertaken in relationships with other people. Before coming into contact with the other primary social institutions (community, neighbourhood, school, city) the person is raised in a family who has seen him or her being born to life. Indeed, it is through the family that man makes contact with society. From the existential point of view, and also from the purely temporal view, man is first a father, a mother, a son, a brother or a sister, and only later a citizen.

But the family, particularly by virtue of the increased longevity of people living in the northern hemisphere, is increasingly called upon to take care of older members of the family and of those who are no longer self-sufficient due to specific illnesses. Taking care of these people finds its *raison d'être* in the cycle of life that goes through generations, which represents another form of gratuitous love which cannot be easily replaced by other institutions, which are called to rediscover the exceptional value of the family. In the following words, Benedict XVI emphasized: “Since the family is the first and indispensable teacher of peace, the most reliable promoter of social cohesion and the best school of the virtues of good citizenship, it is in everyone’s interest, particularly that of governments, to defend and promote a stable family life”[22].

5. Bearing witness

In marriage and the family, men and women experience the nuptial mystery whose source is that splendour of love of the living God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The nuptial mystery, however, is not comprehensible as long as it is abstract. To understand and communicate the meaning of the nuptial mystery, it is necessary to show how “advantageous” the encounter with the Risen Lord is for human existence. This event of Jesus Christ needs to be announced by individual Christians in families, and by families as a whole. To have an answer to the questions raised by the practices of post-modernity, even declarations of sound doctrine made with conviction will not be sufficient. Communicating that doctrine can be put into practice will require personal experience.

For a Christian, bearing witness consists in following Jesus with the courage to acknowledge him before the world, as he did. When called to trial by Pilate, he said: “I was born for this, I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice” (Jn 18:37, Jerusalem Bible).

Only testimony that is worthy of faith can actually move the freedom of other people, inviting them strongly to make decisions. As Benedict XVI pointed out “We become witnesses when, through our actions, words and way of being, Another makes himself present.

When we bear witness, “the truth of God’s love comes to men and women in history, inviting them to accept freely this radical newness.” Through witness, God lays himself open, one might say, to the risk of human freedom.” (Sacramentum caritatis, 85).