

Marriage: The True Environment For Sexual Love

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In What Sense 'Environment'

My first reaction on being given the title of this talk was to think that the notion of 'environment' was not all that helpful in explaining the meaning of marriage. I resisted the temptation unilaterally to change the subtitle, and decided to seek assistance from the Concise Oxford English Dictionary. The Dictionary identifies five meanings of the word 'environment':

1. the physical surroundings in which a person lives. 2. the area surrounding a place. 3. external conditions as affecting plant and animal life. 4. [From the field of computing]: the overall structure within which a user, computer or programme operates. 5. a structure designed to be experienced from inside as a work of art.

Evidently marriages are not physical surroundings of persons or places. Of the five senses of 'environment' the dictionary gives, the one that appeared to me to be the most illuminating for our purposes is the one taken from the field of computing: 'the overall structure within which a user, computer or program works'. This notion of 'environment' applied to marriage suggests that what we should be exploring is the idea of marriage as the overall structure within which a sexual relationship in some sense works.

Multiple Effects With Unity of Purpose

We are familiar with the idea of explaining structure in terms of function, both in the natural world and with human artefacts. The extraordinary structures of plants or animals are to be understood by reference to the ways in which they make possible the distinctive kinds of life of those plants or animals. The structure of a house is understood by the way it functions to accommodate the needs of a household; the structure of a church by the way it functions to facilitate the celebration of the liturgy. A good house or a good church will be so structured as to make possible a number of effects. A church for example should be so designed that the acoustics are suitable for liturgical music, natural light is focused to emphasise the centrality of the liturgical action, while also serving to create an atmosphere conducive to prayer. So a structure will often make possible a number of effects, but those effects are (if the structure is appropriately designed) held together in a unity by the coherent way in which the multiple effects serve the central purpose of the structure. These analogies are intended to give us some direction in exploring the idea of marriage as an 'environment', which I am taking to mean 'marriage as the overall structure within which a sexual relationship works'. A structure, we have just noted, may make

possible the realisation of a number of effects, but it will be a successful structure just in so far as those effects help realise the central purpose of the structure.

Distinctive Character Of Human Reproduction

Marriage as a structure for sexual relationships is best understood in terms of the central purpose or role of sex in human life. The role of sex in human life, as in other forms of animal life, is to produce offspring. Sexual organs are reproductive organs, part of what any biology textbook will tell you is the reproductive system. Human offspring, however, are in fundamental ways different from the offspring of other animals. It is what is distinctive of the nature of children which explains the distinctive structure that marriage gives to a human sexual relationship. Marriage exists for the good of children. Because children are such a fundamental good of human society – a good without which societies could not survive – we have the fundamental institution of marriage. Man is a political animal, Aristotle said – the kind of being who needs a civic community in order to flourish. Man is even more fundamentally a conjugal animal, St Thomas Aquinas added, since what he called “the domestic society of husband and wife” is ordered to meeting the most basic needs without which civil society would not exist – namely the begetting and rearing of children. You cannot make sense of marriage as an institution, as a structured relationship in society, unless you appreciate that its point and purpose is the begetting and rearing of children. If what I am saying is true then we should be able to get at an understanding of marriage by reflecting on what type of relationship should exist between a man and a woman for the purpose of begetting and rearing children. That purpose itself should not be understood in minimalist terms. It is nothing less, in St Augustine’s words, than the task of “receiving [children] lovingly, nourishing them humanely, and educating them religiously” [De Genesi ad litt. 9.7]

Marriage: A Relationship For Family And For Heaven

The first thing to be said about the marriage relationship is that it needs to be appropriate to the nature of the child. In thinking in this context about the nature of the child we should reflect in particular on two truths emphasised in Christian teaching. The first is the truth that each human soul is directly created by God in his own image. Our very existence is a gift of God in a quite distinctive sense. In the normal use of the term, a gift implies a recipient of the gift. If we think of the child himself then the gift of human existence has no prior recipient, for the gift of human life is what brings the child into existence. Each of us is radically dependent on God. But God’s creative activity in bringing each of us into existence is an activity in collaboration, so to speak, with our parents. So a child is entrusted to his or her parents as a gift which surpasses in its nature anything they are capable of producing by the mastery of materials. The second truth about the child is that God’s intention for each of us is that our fulfilment as human beings should be in union with the Persons of the Blessed Trinity. These two truths mean that each child possesses a connatural dignity – that is a dignity

which belongs to us simply in virtue of our existence as human beings – that is equal in significance to the connatural dignity of his or her parents. This equality is evidently not the equality in utility value of replaceable utility goods – as one Ford Fiesta or one Hotpoint Washing Machine is as valuable for your purposes as another. Human beings are not replaceable because each of us is created by God precisely as the individual each of us is for fulfilment in union with Him. All of us are equal in having that kind of awesome dignity, a dignity in virtue of which we are irreplaceable.

Exclusive And Lifelong Faithfulness

All this means that the relationship between a man and a woman in marriage should be conducive to treating the child as an irreplaceable gift of God equal in dignity to themselves. The relationship between a man and a woman which securely grounds that kind of relationship to their child is one which has two indispensable features (at this point I am beginning to define the distinctive 'structure' of marriage). The first is that the man and the woman are committed to treating each other as irreplaceable in the sexual relationship in which the child is begotten, in other words, they are committed to marriage as a lifelong commitment which, negatively, excludes other sexual relationships, and, positively, commits them to a shared life of mutual support. The commitment of husband and wife to an exclusive sexual relationship in which each seeks the good of the other realises that good of marriage which Catholic tradition calls 'fides' – the faithful commitment to be united in mind and body with one's spouse in that distinctive form of friendship which marriage is. This friendship can be realised only through a self-giving love on the part of each spouse. A marriage relationship shaped by that kind of commitment provides what one might call the 'moral ecology' the child needs. A couple who treat each other in their sexual relationship as irreplaceable and to be accepted and loved for just the persons they are convey to the child a sense of his own dignity as an irreplaceable human being who is cherished for just the person he is.

Intercourse That Is Truly Marital Is Open To Life

The second key feature – structural feature – of marriage, dictated by what is needed for the good of children, is that the sexual activity of the man and the woman should be consistent with their relationship being a marital relationship in which they are open to children for what they are – gifts of God. What is required if the sexual expression of a relationship is to be truly marital in this sense? What is required is that sexual intercourse should be normal marital intercourse which is both unitive and procreative in its significance. Pope Paul VI in his Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* taught: "there is an unbreakable connection between the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning [of the conjugal act] and both are inherent in the conjugal act". What the Church teaches is that intercourse does not unite a couple in an authentic way – does not truly unite them – if it does not retain its procreative significance. Let me first explain what is required for it to be the case that an act of intercourse has a procreative significance or meaning. Then I shall explain why that is important for the good of children and

why it is essential to the good of the couple. The Idea That Actions Have Inherent Meaning You may be unfamiliar with the idea of acts having meaning, or you may be inclined to think that if they do have meaning they will have a distinctive meaning on each occasion they are performed, depending on the individual's motives and intentions. Well, motives and intentions clearly do determine the full significance of what we choose to do. But there are types of act which have a built-in significance independent of our motives and intentions. Take eating, for example. You can eat because you are hungry, you can eat because you are greedy, you can eat to be polite to your hostess, you can eat to please your Jewish Momma ("What's wrong with my cooking, Moshe?"). But eating has a significance independent of any of these motives because of the role eating plays in human life – it nourishes the body. So we can say that as a type of act eating has nutritive significance – it is a nutritive type of act. It has this significance because of our physiology – because of biological facts about what standardly happens when we ingest food. Eating would not cease to be a nutritive type of act if on any given occasion it failed to nourish the body. My eating remains a nutritive type of act even if my duodenum is in such a dysfunctional condition that I fail to absorb nourishment. It would only cease to be a nutritive type of act if I did something to negate its nutritive significance, as the ancient Romans are reported to have done when they took emetics to provoke vomiting so that they could continue to enjoy the gustatory pleasures of eating. Having grasped the idea of types of act which possess a generic significance because of the role they play in human life we are better placed to understand what is meant by talking of the procreative significance of sexual intercourse. Normal intercourse is a generative or procreative type of act. It has that meaning because the fundamental role intercourse plays in human life is that of generating new human life. It does not have to result in generation on each occasion of intercourse to qualify as a generative type of act. And it remains a generative or procreative kind of act as long as those who engage in it do not do anything with the purpose of rendering it sterile when it might otherwise be fertile. Why is it important that intercourse retain its significance as a generative type of act? I have already suggested that the explanation refers both to the good of the child and the good of the couple. We Are What We Do

To appreciate the explanation it is important to grasp a quite general truth that our chosen actions shape our dispositions and attitudes – in other words, our characters. The dominant ethic of our culture – utilitarianism – obscures this truth. For utilitarianism characteristically evaluates chosen courses of action by reference to the external outcomes or results produced by the action. But my chosen actions do not merely bring about effects external to me – they shape my moral dispositions, that is, the dispositions I acquire that incline me to make one kind of choice rather than another. I become more disposed to lie by lying, more disposed to carry out abortions by carrying out an abortion, more disposed to prayer by praying, more disposed to generosity to the poor by acts of generosity to the poor. Now if I choose to make my intercourse sterile when it might otherwise be fertile in order to enjoy a non-generative act of intercourse I am in effect saying that it makes good sense to engage in intercourse to the exclusion

of its significance as generative activity. If people are disposed to think that is true then there is no reason why they should think that sexual activity should be confined to marriage. In breaking the link between sex and marriage contraception has destroyed in many the disposition to be open to the gift of a child precisely in and through their sexual activity. To preserve in oneself the sense that sexual activity is essentially generative activity is to preserve in oneself a sense that it belongs only in marriage, for it is only the marriage relationship that is adequate to fostering the good of the child

Contraception Undermines Marital Unity

Contraception is not merely hostile to the good of children in being deliberately non-generative but for the very same reason is destructive of the unity proper to marriage. There is no true marital unity which does not involve bodily unity. Our Lord in responding to the question of the Pharisees about the permissibility of divorce, recalled the text of Genesis (2: 24) which states God's primordial plan for marriage: "Some Pharisees approached him and to test him they said, 'Is it against the Law for a man to divorce his wife on any pretext whatever?' He answered, 'Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning made them male and female, and that he said: This is why a man must leave father and mother, and cling to his wife and the two become one body? They are no longer two therefore but one body. So then, what God has united, man must not divide.'" (Mt 19: 3-6) In what sense does sexual intercourse make a couple 'one body'? A sexual act which remains generative brings into being a unique kind of oneness. We exercise most of our natural capacities individually even if we depend on others to develop those capacities. I see by myself, think by myself, speak by myself. But a human individual's capacity to reproduce is, you might say, only half a capacity; it is radically incomplete: each needs the complementary capacity and activity of someone of the opposite sex in order to reproduce. It is in acting together in a way that is apt for reproduction that husband and wife form a quasi-organic unity – become in a sense 'one body'. It is not under their control that they actually conceive a child or that they are fertile. What is under their control is that they act in a way which, if they are fertile, leaves open the possibility that their conjoined powers of reproduction cooperate in the conception of a child

More Than A Biological Union

Unity at this level is absolutely necessary but not sufficient for marital unity. After all, as St Paul observed, "a man who goes with a prostitute is one body with her" (1 Cor 6: 16). Unity at the biological level must be the expression of marital commitment, of that self-giving love on the part of husband and wife which is open to the gift of children and bears fruit in a community of life through which each may transcend the confining egoisms to which we are prone. In this way the structure of marriage in working for the good of children simultaneously works for the good of the spouses in drawing them into an ever more generous love for each other and for the children God gives them. The attraction which draws us to another person of the opposite sex needs the structure of marriage if it is to

blossom into authentic sexual love. And the essential features of that structure as I have delineated them are:

- the commitment of each to treat the other as irreplaceable in their marital relationship; - the requirement that their sexual intercourse should remain of the generative or procreative kind if their unity is to be a unity in body, mind and spirit. There is an intrinsic connection between union in love and openness to procreation.

Marriage As Sacrament: More Than A Human Love

I began this talk from the idea of marriage as an environment, understanding by that a 'structure' within which sexual love works. The life that allows itself to be shaped by this structure is a life rooted in love. But human love is fragile, resistant to the demands of self-giving, apt to retreat from its challenges and to take refuge in various forms of self-gratification. The indispensable solution to our wounded condition as husbands and wives lies in the sacramental reality of marriage in the economy of our salvation. The fact that marriage is a sacrament means that the commitment of the spouses to living out their marriage vows itself signifies the reality of grace in their lives. Though Baptism brings to us in germ Christ's victory over death and sin, liberating us from the state of alienation from God consequent on original sin, we are nonetheless left wounded in our natural powers: often finding it hard to come by the understanding we need and prone to be suckers for the ideological claptrap of our age, weak of will, disordered in our sensuous desires, and inclined to excesses of either timidity or aggressivity. Any such weaknesses can make difficult a wholehearted living of the marriage vows. But spouses who are united to Christ through Baptism and the Eucharist and who have a lively faith in His power to heal them and overcome the deadly power of sin in their lives (more particularly through the Sacrament of Penance), will experience that transforming power in and through the difficulties and vicissitudes of marriage. For the power of the Resurrection comes precisely in and through the Cross. It is absolutely essential to marriage to have a sure-footed and down-to-earth faith in the power of the Cross. By that I mean the power of the Cross as it presents itself concretely in your life. For every marriage presents husband and wife with real crosses, uncongenial features of each other's temperament, sins against each other, the recalcitrance of children, the sins of children against one, tragic accidents, grave illness. All these involve suffering. We should not retreat into self-defence of our egos in face of such suffering. For the power of the Resurrection is available in and through our suffering to make possible acceptance of our suffering, forgiveness of those who wrong us, reconciliation and peace. Marriage which makes a man and a woman 'one body' is a 'mysterion' St Paul says, a 'sacramentum' pointing to its own fulfilment in the union of Christ and the Church. For the mystery of marriage receives its fulfilment precisely through husband and wife entering into and participating in the union of Christ and the Church. In this way their relationship

becomes a mode of realising the community created by the self-sacrificing and life-giving love of Jesus. The fruitfulness of marriage in children is a fruitfulness for the Kingdom. So the natural gestation of a child demands its mystical gestation in the waters of Baptism. The motherhood of the Church is the essential complement to natural motherhood

Openness To The Father Of Life And Of Love

The institution of marriage belongs to the primordial plan of God in creation. God willed a family which would recognise his loving Fatherhood, live by the wisdom of divine truth and enjoy his friendship. Our first parents swallowed the lie that God was the enemy of their freedom. The work of redemption has restored to us the possibility of discovering God as a loving Father in experiencing the Church as a mother. This discovery and experience are the basis on which chaste Christian marriages are founded for they make possible that living faith and trust in God's providence which sustains that self-giving love which welcomes the gift of the child. In having hearts that are essentially open and trusting in this way husband and wife will flourish as God meant them to flourish.