

*A Particle of the Christ-Church Mystery*1. The mystery hidden for ages is revealed

God has a secret plan for mankind, a plan that has been kept hidden in the mind God from all ages (Ephesians 3:9), hidden even from the principalities and powers – that's the heavenly beings that we call the angels (Eph 3:10). Well, that plan is starting to be revealed, and the principalities and powers stand dumbfounded – dumbfounded at the astonishing and completely unforeseen thing that God is doing with mankind. While the angels stand around the throne of God, worshipping Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we little human beings are destined to be taken up into this Trinity of Divine Persons, destined to become part of the eternal Son by being made members of his body. This is what St Paul calls the mystery "kept hidden in God through all the ages" that he says is now being made known (Ephesians 3:9). We now know that we were chosen for this from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). The Eternal Father destined us to be his sons and daughters "through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will." (Eph 1:5).

And yet in another sense it has not been hidden from all ages. God placed something in the world right at the beginning of creation to give a hint of this secret plan for mankind. What could it be? In Cycle A (Original Man) I described how the Creator had written into the natural world all sorts of reflections of himself: The Creation of Light as a symbol of God himself, The Rising of the Sun that speaks of Christ's glorious resurrection, the stars in the sky that speak of our future participation in his glory and our heavenly homeland, and finally the pinnacle of creation the human body: the spousal meaning written into the human body as maleness and femaleness that speaks of self-gift – God's personal signature inscribed in the human body of his desire to give himself to mankind. But now we're talking about something that God has placed in the world as a reflection of this amazing plan for mankind that he has kept close to his heart from all eternity. It's the conjugal union between a man and a woman: the self-gift of a man to a woman in marriage, the reciprocal self-gift of the woman to the man, and the consummation of that conjugal union in which they become one flesh. This is what God has placed in his creation as a reflection of mankind's ultimate destiny in the secret plan of God. It's a reflection of this plan for mankind because in it we glimpse some future consummation of the union between Christ and the Church. Christ is the Bridegroom; the Church is his Bride. This Christ-Church union is a union in which Christ gives himself to his bride the Church and in which the Church gives herself as Bride to Christ, and the two become one. This is a heavenly reality, the way God has ordained things to be in eternity. Now, if God wanted to project this heavenly Christ-Church reality into the visible world to communicate it to men, what form would it take? Answer: the conjugal union between man and woman. Marriage isn't just a human institution; it's an image or sign of what is to come. It's a sign of the future union between Christ and the Church. Not only is it a sign of this, it is the best possible sign that God could have chosen, the most perfect possible image.

## 2. Marriage a Sacrament of union with God

So, the conjugal union between man and woman is a sign of Christ's union with the Church. It points to Christ's self-gift to the Church and the Church's self-gift to Christ and the union that comes about in this mutual self-giving. Not only is it a sign, it is the best and clearest possible sign. But there's something more. Not only is it the best possible sign of Christ's union with the Church; it actually contains something of the reality of the Christ-Church union itself. John Paul says it contains a "particle" of the union between Christ and the Church, and in fact has done since God instituted marriage at the beginning of creation. You could say that the union between Christ and his Church is projected back into the beginning of man's history and in fact back into man's prehistory, back to the Beginning, into man's original situation. And not only projected back as an image, but projected back so that the conjugal union between man and woman contains something of the future reality. "The Mystery hidden from eternity in God...became a *visible reality through the union* of the first man and the first woman..." (TB97). So marriage is a making visible in this world even from the beginning the plan that he had for mankind – the mystery hidden in God from eternity. You know what this means? It means that marriage was from the beginning not just a sign of Christ's union with the Church; it was from the beginning a sacrament of Christ's union with the Church, and is so today. It not only points ahead to Christ's union with the Church, but actually makes it present, a present reality.

You may recall in Cycle A (Original Man) that we saw something of this already. The man and the woman giving themselves to one another in conjugal union was a choice that they made as free human subjects. But behind that subjective choice was the giving hand of God of each to each other. Their free subjective choice was an act of cooperation with God's will to give them to each other, a free response to the Spirit of God at work in their hearts drawing them to one another and inviting them to give themselves to one another in an embrace of conjugal love. You may also recall that at a deeper level still this was the original way, the way in the original situation, in which God chose to give himself to them. The man giving himself to the woman in conjugal union was the way that God gave himself to the woman in the original situation. The woman giving herself to the man in conjugal union was the way that God himself to the man. This is why John Paul was able to call that original union between man and woman The Primordial Sacrament. It was a sign of union with God but it was also the reality. It was a sign that transferred into the world the reality it signified.

So marriage has from the beginning been a sacrament of union with God, a union with God that in the beginning took the form of conjugal union between man and woman, a union with God that in the fullness of time is now taking on the more explicitly Christological form of Christ's spousal union with the Church. (TB95a)

## 3. Ephesians 5 and the Ethos of Marriage

In marriage you're caught up in something bigger than you perhaps realize. Not only is your marriage an image of Christ's union with his Church; it's a sacrament of this union. It is the union between Christ and his Church made visible. Recognising this

should have a profound effect on how husband and wife live their conjugal union. It means that married couples are called to model their lives on the union between Christ and the Church. In fact, the correspondence between the Christ-Church union and the husband-wife union sheds light in two directions. The husband-wife union helps us to understand the mystery of Christ's union with the Church. The Christ-Church union, the love he bestows upon the Church, the selfless service, the self-giving to the point of death – all this constitutes the model of selfless love that husband should show towards his wife, and the reciprocal love that she bestows upon him. It follows from this that there is undoubtedly a duty to image the love between Christ and his Church since they are a visible embodiment of this mystery. But with the duty and obligation comes also the awe of the Christ-Church mystery that inspires them with its truth and beauty to try to image that union, to reproduce that union in their own conjugal life.

This means that there is an ethos of marriage, a way of living conjugal union, that derives from being a sacrament of the Christ-Church union. This ethos is spelt out by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. He begins by calling husband and wife to be subject to one another: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). So there is an equality here, a symmetry in their mutual submission, and it's out of “reverence for Christ”. We are all called to make ourselves subject to Christ, but the way in which husband and wife make themselves subject to Christ is by making themselves subject to one another. Being subject to Christ means allowing him to serve us, for he did not come to be served but to serve. It means allowing him to fill us with his love, allowing him to give his life for us. So in marriage, being subject to one another means being open to the love and service of your husband or wife.

So there is an equality between husband and wife. But there is also a distinction. Listen to the rest of the text: (Ephesians 5:22-24). We can't now read this without feeling some indignation at what we take to be a sexual discrimination, particularly the opening words: “Wives, be subject to your husbands”. But this is because we have a completely upside-down understanding of what it means for a wife to be subject to her husband. Not surprising – authority, leadership, subjection have been unremittingly misused throughout the history of humankind. We cannot now recreate the original situation in which the subjection of the wife to the husband was completely *innocens*. What we are looking at here is simply two different manifestations of love, two distinct ways of giving oneself to one's spouse, two complementary ways of living the spousal meaning of the body, each appropriate to the proper sex. To be subject to another has come to mean being subservient. The meaning John Paul gives to it is the exact opposite and recovers the true meaning of subjection in the vision of the Original Union. For a woman to be subject to her husband means to be on the receiving end of his love and his self-giving service. Remember Christ's words: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28). “I am among you as one who serves.” (Luke 22:27). Husbands in their love for their wives are conversely called to model their love on Christ's love for the Church (TB92); not just because it is a good model and example but because the union between husband and wife is the sacrament of the Christ-Church union: Ephesians 5:25 “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” The husband is *the one who loves* and the wife by contrast is *the one who is loved*. The wife's “subjection” to the husband, understood in the context of the whole of Ephesians 5, means above all “the

experiencing of love” (TB92), on every level of maleness and femaleness in their reciprocal self-giving, and above all in the marital act,. What wife would say No to this? What wife would reject this understanding of what it means to be subject to her husband: the total selflessness of his love? Perhaps the clearest expression of this subjection in the Gospels is at the foot washing before the last supper. Peter’s subjection to Christ meant allowing him to wash his feet. Peter objects initially because he still hasn’t got the picture. Jesus is Lord, so he’s come to be served? No. “If I do not wash you, you have no part with me” (John 13:8) and elsewhere “I came not to be served but to serve”. Only then did he begin to understand that subjection to the Lord meant being on the receiving end of his selfless love. This is the sense in which wives are called to be subject to their husbands. All this is within the context of the mutual subjection that Paul recommends with his opening words “out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21)

The ethos of marriage, the principles on which they establish their conjugal lives, are a reflection of Christ’s self-giving love for the Church, not just because their conjugal union is a sign of this, but because they are the visible embodiment of this in the visible world. Their conjugal union is a sacrament of the Christ-Church union and should therefore reflect something of that union. It’s a high calling, and is impossible to achieve unaided. But the conjugal union is not unaided. As a sacrament of the Christ-Church union it lives within the sacramental grace of this union, it lives from the sacramental grace of this union. This is an objective fact. Keeping their sights then fixed on the Christ-Church model, their awe at the transcendent beauty of this model and their desire to reproduce this model in their own conjugal lives is the way in which they cooperate subjectively with this objective grace. (TB 90). Not only is there a desire to reproduce Christ’s union with the Church. Paul’s words to the Ephesians that we’ve read make it clear that there is an obligation to do so. This is where John Paul draws this conclusion from, that “to be able to recommend [the existence of] such an obligation one must admit that the very essence of marriage contains a *particle of the same mystery.*” (TB 90)

#### 4. Redemption and Sanctification

The spousal union between Christ and the Church has two phases. First, the redemption and sanctification of the Church that is happening here and now among us since Christ’s passion and death; second, some future consummation of this spousal union spoken about in the Book of Revelation as the Wedding Feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

The first effect of Christ’s spousal love for the Church is her *sanctification*. By giving himself for her in his passion and death she becomes holy. At the beginning of this sanctification stands *Baptism*, the first fruit of Christ’s gift of himself for the Church. (TB91). The spousal love of Christ is applied to the Church every time a single person receives in her the fundamental purification of Baptism. The one who receives Baptism becomes at that moment – by virtue of the redemptive love of Christ – a participant in his spousal love for the Church. Baptism is the beginning, the purification of the Church, the preparation of the Bride for her Bridegroom. “Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word...” (Eph 5:25-27). Thereafter,

the sanctification of the Church is an ongoing process that begins with Baptism and deepens under the influence of the ongoing spousal love of Christ. *On the basis of Christ's spousal love* for the Church, the sacrament of redemption [a power (daily) at work in the life of the Christian, fruitful, lifegiving] becomes a *permanent dimension of the life of the Church herself*, a lifegiving dimension. (TB97).

If marriage contains a particle of the Christ-Church union, if marriage is the visible manifestation of this union, the sacramental realization of this union, then the conjugal union between a man and a woman must itself be sanctifying and redemptive. Marriage must be a sacramental participation in the (spousal) redemptive love of Christ for the Church. In other words marriage is the place where Christ's work of redemption takes place. This means that the husband plays an essential role in the redemption and sanctification of his wife. The wife plays an essential role in the redemption and sanctification of her husband. Marriage really is a sacramental participation in Christ's redemptive love for the Church. One obvious way in which this is carried out in practice: TB92: Love obliges the husband to be solicitous for the good of his wife (or vice versa) in the same way that Christ is solicitous for the good of the Church. The good that the lover creates with his love in the beloved is like a test of that same love. Only in this way can the husband's love for his wife properly image or reflect the sanctifying love of Christ for the Church. It's a clear way in which the sacramentality of marriage consists in "manifesting" the Christ-Church mystery, in a sign that serves not only to proclaim the mystery but also *to accomplish it* in man. (TB93).

Christ's redemption of the Church, and his redemptive love of the Church, John Paul says, is spousal. (TB94). To be more precise, he says it "gains the features of a spousal gift of self". His redemption of the Church is not accomplished from afar, like a man throwing out a life-ring to a drowning man in turbulent seas. Christ accomplishes our redemption by coming down to us, coming down to our level, and taking us to himself. The grace of redemption was released in the Paschal Mystery, Christ's death and resurrection, the total emptying of himself to assume our condition. But he prepared our hearts to open to the grace of the redemption by coming among us, walking among us, and speaking to our hearts, appealing to the human heart, awakening in the human heart the yearning to be set free from sin and specifically from the constraint of concupiscence. (cf Cycle B Historical Man). Christ's appeal to the human heart was foreseen by the Prophet Hosea speaking about Israel as the bride of God who had turned away from her husband: "I am going to lure her and lead her out into the wilderness and speak to her heart" (Hosea 2:16). And Hosea foresees her response: "I will go back to my first husband, I was happier then than I am today" (Hosea 2:15). These two factors: the objective grace released in Christ's Passion and Death, and Christ's appeal to the human heart during his public ministry are both part of Christ's work of redemption. (TB99). Both involve coming down to our level, into the human situation, speaking to the human heart and taking us to himself. This is the way in which the redemption takes on a spousal character. This is the spousal and redemptive love that husband and wife are called to image and reflect in their conjugal union.

## 5. Failure of the Original Covenant

The Original Covenant, the way in which God gave himself to man in the original situation, was through the mutual self-giving of man and wife in conjugal union. It was the original sacrament, JP calls it the primordial sacrament, of God's self-gift to man. With the fall marriage continues to be a sign (albeit disfigured by concupiscence) of God's self-gift to man (through the spousal meaning of the body), but no longer a sacrament of God's self-giving. The Spirit is no longer free to operate in the human heart inspiring the mutual self-giving of conjugal union. The union, irrespective of the degree to which it is constituted by self-gift or by the appropriation of concupiscence, is no longer a realisation of the self-giving love of God. And if the conjugal union is no longer guided and governed in the human heart by the Spirit it cannot be a sacramental participation in God's self-giving as it was prior to the fall. We're talking about the failure of the Original covenant.

What we're now seeing is that the new covenant between God and man, the spousal and redemptive union between Christ and the Church, replaces this original covenant, but that in replacing the original covenant of conjugal union it assumes its form. "The sacrament of redemption clothes itself in the figure and form of the primordial sacrament." (TB97). Marriage in the original situation was the primordial sacrament of God's self-gift to man. This is superseded by the new sacrament of God's self-gift to man, the spousal union between Christ and his Church. The Christ-Church spousal union becomes the new and eternal covenant between God and Man, begun in this present age and continuing into eternity. "The primordial sacrament of God's self-gift to man is assumed [as antetype] and inserted into the integral structure [prototype] of the new sacramental economy that arises from redemption." (TB98). This progression from the primordial sacrament of marriage to the sacrament of the Christ-Church union is the fulfilment of the secret plan for mankind hidden from all ages in the mind of God. TB97: "The Mystery hidden from eternity in God... became a *visible reality through the union* of the first man and the first woman. ...[It] becomes in the sacrament of redemption a *visible reality in the indissoluble union of Christ with the Church.*" It's the new way of the mystery of God's union with man becoming visible in the world, the new mode of visibility of the invisible.

And with the sacrament of redemption in the spousal union between Christ and his Church, marriage between a man and a woman becomes once again, no longer a mere sign, but a sacrament of God's union with man. The particle of the future Christ-Church union lost in the fall is regained with the realisation of the Christ-Church union in time and the dawning of the Christian dispensation. The grace of the Christ-Church union is a spousal grace that is now re-presented sacramentally in the new Christian sacrament of Marriage. The Holy Spirit given by Christ to the Church in his spousal union with the Church is once again operative in the hearts of husband and wife, guiding and governing their acts of mutual self-giving, and creating once again in the conjugal union of bodies a sacramental realisation of God's own self-gift to man. Marriage in the new Christian dispensation becomes an integral factor, or an integral player in Christ's work of redemption and sanctification, the spouses redeeming and sanctifying each other with the spousal love of Christ. Their sights fixed on the model of Christ's self-giving love to the Church, they set out to image and reproduce this in their everyday lives of self-giving, and in the consummation of their mutual self-giving in the marital act. In so doing they establish in their conjugal lives a true ethos of marriage and cooperate with the grace of redemption.

## 6. The hope of every day

This seems to be an impossibly high ideal that John Paul is holding up for marriage: for the husband and wife to reproduce Christ's love for the Church in their mutual self-giving and in the consummation of their union. It seems impossibly high especially when we look back to Cycle A, Original Man, when the original union between husband and wife really did image the future union between Christ and the Church, when every impulse towards each other was completely gift, when every act of self-giving was completely uncontaminated by the grasping of concupiscence or the slightest shadow of self-interest, when their hearts were entirely surrendered to the Holy Spirit so that every thought and action between them was entirely in accordance with the will of God and at the same time entirely an expression of their deepest desires. But this is what the redemption is all about. Christ has come to set us free from the constraint that concupiscence places on our hearts. He has come to set us free so that we can once again live according to the promptings of the Spirit and according to the deepest desires of our hearts which are always in accordance with the mind of God, so that we can once again live with the freedom of the sons of God, so that the perfect freedom of the Gift can once again find expression in human conjugal love.

The first question is, Do we have a desire for this beautiful ideal to become a reality in our married lives? And if so, Secondly, is it possible? One reason I'm sure why John Paul II wrote the Theology of the Body was to hold up the beauty of the ideal of married life, so that in glimpsing the beauty we might desire to attain it, or something of it. But it isn't just John Paul's ideal. He is simply presenting to us the ideal for marriage that is held up for us in the New Testament. It is in fact an ideal held up as an obligation for married couples to strive towards, but it is also held up as something to draw married couples by its truth and beauty.

But is it possible? The question hinges on the reality of the Redemption. Remember from Cycle B on Historical Man the relationship between Original Sin and Original Innocence. Yes, we have inherited Original Sin. It takes the form of concupiscence in the heart, an occupying power that shouldn't be there, that makes us appropriate for ourselves what is not offered, thus repeating throughout history the original sin that precipitated the fall. But at a deeper level, at the level that man is most truly himself, is the inheritance of "The Beginning", the inheritance of Original Innocence, which is deeper than the sinfulness inherited. Redemption is the setting free of man's heart, and the reawakening of the deepest yearnings of the heart that are always in accordance with the will of God. It's like the reawakening of Sleeping Beauty. The Redemption is a real power at work in the world, not just to bring about a new world order at the end of time, but a power at work every day in our lives, if we let it, working day by day to set us free.

Our response to this is what John Paul calls the "hope of every day" (TB101). We can choose to despair and say "The ideal is too high beyond our reach", or "The reality of the human condition, the sheer messiness of our lives makes it impossible to even consider." Or, we can place our hope in The Redemption, a real power actively at work in our lives, a hope that we can renew each day. It's a response that opens the

human heart to the working of Christ's redemption and allows it to get to work in its gradual, day-by-day, often/usually imperceptible way. It's the "hope of every day". Not expecting a miracle each day, but a confident openness to the reality of the redemption and its power in our lives. Confidently expecting however that over the course of a lifetime the miracle of a remarkable likeness of our married love to the conjugal love of Christ and the Church will have taken place. TB99: "The redemption of the body" is not only a great expectation, but also a permanent source of hope of being "set free from the slavery of corruption to enter into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21)

## 7. Motivation towards the ideal

Recognition of the fact that the Sacrament of Marriage is a sacramental participation in Christ's redemptive love for the Church places an obligation on husband and wife to strive for this ideal. But it also provides an inspiration to the married couple to reproduce the beauty and goodness of the model in their own conjugal life.

There is also what John Paul calls the "*sacrum*" of the person. (TB100). Christ assigns to each person his or her own dignity, *the "sacrum" of the person, specifically with respect to the person's maleness or femaleness, with respect to the body*. There is something sacred about the maleness of the human body, something sacred about the femaleness of the human body. This is in addition to the sacredness of the human person. In fact it's God's personal signature on the human body:

God created man in the image of himself,  
in the image of God he created him,  
male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)

This deepening sense of the woman's dignity in the man's heart and of the man's dignity in the woman's heart is the fruit of *mastery over concupiscence*. (TB101). As man gains mastery over the concupiscence in his heart with the grace of the redemption, he gains an ever clearer vision of the dignity of the woman in her personhood and in her femaleness. This in turn, the clearer vision of her dignity, becomes a motivating force for an ever greater mastery over concupiscence and an ever closer striving to reproduce in his love the purity of Christ's love for his bride the Church.

And the spousal meaning of the body. With the daily victory over concupiscence and the incidence of redemptive grace, the spousal meaning of the body begins to reappear. This is the signature of God inscribed in the human body in its maleness and femaleness that speaks of Gift. It speaks of the self-gift of man to woman and woman to man in conjugal union, and it speaks of God's self-gift in and through the human body. This concept of the spousal meaning of the body was something seen with total clarity in the Beginning in the situation of Original Innocence, and entirely obscured to fallen man. But with the redemption comes the real possibility of recognising in an experiential way once again the spousal meaning of the body, and with this comes the motivation to live the conjugal life according to its spousal meaning.

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