

Marriage as Temporal Experience. Sacramental versus Contractual Constitution of the Meaning of the Spousal Community

El matrimonio como experiencia temporal: La constitución sacramental versus la constitución contractual del significado de la comunidad conyugal

Mátyás Szalay
Instituto de Filosofía Edith Stein, España
szalayster@gmail.com

Abstract

Within a Christian context, the sacred meaning of temporality is clearly exemplified by marital life. It is possible to argue on both the theological and philosophical levels that reflecting on marriage—the strongest and highest interhuman relationship—can provide us with essential insights into how the experience of temporality is interpersonally co-constituted.

I will offer a brief phenomenological analysis of the temporal experience of marital life by elaborating on the differences between the secular and sacred perspectives on the past, present and future. The aim of these paper is to find a way to interpret the experience of temporality that is shaped by marriage, i.e., co-constituted by the relationship with the beloved, in order to unify the fragmented life.

Keywords: marriage, phenomenology, relationality, sacramental logic, temporality.

Resumen

En un contexto cristiano, el significado sagrado de la temporalidad está claramente ejemplificado por la vida marital. Es posible argumentar tanto en el nivel teológico como en el filosófico que reflexionar sobre el matrimonio (que es la relación interhumana más alta y fuerte) puede proveernos de intuiciones esenciales sobre cómo la experiencia de la temporalidad está co-constituida interpersonalmente.

En este trabajo ofrezco un breve análisis fenomenológico de la experiencia temporal de la vida conyugal, desarrollando las diferencias entre las perspectivas seculares y sagradas sobre el pasado, el presente y el futuro. El objetivo de este trabajo es encontrar una manera de interpretar la experiencia de la temporalidad moldeada por el matrimonio, i.e., co-constituida por la relación con el amado, con la finalidad de unificar la vida fragmentada.

Palabras clave: Fenomenología; lógica sacramental; matrimonio; temporalidad; relacionalidad.

The title of the 7th International Conference «Beyond Secular Faith» in Granada was “Sacramental versus Secular Logic”. First, let me briefly make a general comment on the title, for it allows us to better understand the point I would like to raise concerning a specific issue which exemplifies the relationship between sacramental and secular logic.

The main claim suggested by the title is as follows: Although there is a major difference, and even a contradiction, between secular and sacramental logic, there are no two equally strong realities; they are not simply «opposed to each other», and they certainly do not exclude each other.¹ Using the expression of Romano Guardini, one can rather call this complex relationship a «polar opposition»² in which there is a tension between sacramental and secular logic, thereby establishing a field in which the corresponding phenomena are formed according to their relation to these poles. Yet, in spite of the collaboration between secular and sacramental logic in the

1 The relationship between sacramental and secular logic is certainly rooted in being, i.e. how things really are, and how the sacramental reality, the supernatural, is related to the natural. Claiming that there is no separate and autonomous reality of the natural (*natura pura*), and all that implies, has been convincingly argued on both the theological and philosophical levels. Our so-called «purely secular relations» are still formed and transformed by the supernatural, for, according to the wise words of Henri de Lubac (which were affirmed by the Second Vatican Council): The natural naturally desires the supernatural. See Hollon (2009).

The fact that the natural human desire of the beatific vision transcends the proximate natural ends towards a supernatural object also reveals that all *natura pura* has its supernatural origin. In this short essay, I strongly rely on this tradition by pointing out the elements within the temporal experience of marriage that point to a supernatural origin and correspond to a desire which transcends natural ends.

2 Here we must recall the classic distinction between contrary (*Gegensatz*) and contradiction (*Widerspruch*). The supernatural and the natural are clearly distinct from each other and, in certain ways or concerning certain aspects of reality, this difference can be manifested in concepts that are contrary to each other. Being contrary is part of a dialectic that brings about a fruitful tension and should obviously not be confounded with exclusive contradictions. See more about this distinction in Guardini (1965). For more about the contemporary relevance of this issue see Borghesi (2018).

formation of current social phenomena, ontologically speaking, one can talk only in a limited sense about secular logic. The latter is to be regarded rather as derivation of sacramental logic. The secular is the externalization and the temporalization of the sacred, but when it presents itself as an autonomous reality with its own logic, it can only be a deviation from or a deformation of «sacramental logic». Secular logic as logic in this sense, i.e. as a structured and functioning autonomous and independent reality, subsists only in a parasitic way by precisely opposing itself to its very origin and foundation.

I understand «secular logic» not as the proper logic of the natural reality as it is derived from the supernatural, but rather as a way of conceiving of and perceiving social and political realities in a broad sense, as it is primarily derived from *a certain experience and interpretation of temporality*. This rather peculiar interpretation is supported by secular culture, by which I mean the post-modern outcome of re-thinking Illustration. This is certainly a quite general definition, and this paper points out it by explaining the nature of the specific experience of temporality that gives rise to thinking in terms of «secular logic» more precisely.

The nature of a culture is essentially characterized by how it establishes the categories of time (and space) with special regard to transcendence.³ It is highly questionable that there are purely secular categories of time; yet, there is a special consideration of how high times or sacred times as opposed to low or profane times are understood and what the specific relationship between these two basic categories is.⁴

3 See Fejős (2000), Gell (1998: 9-24), Geertz (1973: 391-398), Bloch (1977: 278-292).

4 I will not discuss in this paper how time and space are related to each other; I simply take it for granted that it is more adequate to talk about time-space than about space-time. To our human existence (and even to the created world around us), temporality is more decisive than space. Moreover, the spatial existence of things is due to an event that brought time into existence, namely, creation. Therefore, the dramatic nature of human existence is temporal rather than connected to space and extension, i.e., being human is about a limited earthly life that exists in tension with our eternal vocation of responding to an everlasting love.

Within a Christian context, the sacred meaning of temporality is clearly exemplified by marital life. It is not just theologically but also philosophically arguable that reflecting on marriage —this being the strongest and highest interhuman relationship— can provide us with essential insights into how the experience of temporality is interpersonally co-constituted. Marriage is not just an analogous reality to how Christ loved the Church and how therefore the supernatural transforms natural reality, it is by the same token also the best example of how the person, and thereby one's inner perception of time, is transformed by the strong link to the other and to the community of the beloved.

In what follows, in this article, I will offer a brief phenomenological analysis fleshing out the most important features of the transformation of internal time-perception within marriage. These elements allow for a renewed vision of reality, discovering its sacramental origin, principle, and vocation.

Marital Life as Temporal Experience

All married men could testify that marital life conveys a radically different experience of temporality when compared to premarital or single life. I would like to argue first that the radical change in our perception of temporality due to marriage is not caused by a homogeneous experience; rather, it is a conflux of two different types of perceptions of temporality. Secondly, I assume that the relationship between these two types results in a paradox that fundamentally characterizes marital life.

- a) On the one hand, it is a widely acknowledged social fact that the marital bond by which one becomes part of a wider social network, with its specific rules, responsibilities and rights, reduces the free time available for personal use. Married people, and increasingly so, married people with a large family, simply do not possess (enough) free time, mainly because the time devoted to

recreation or other activities is limited by several time-consuming duties that parents and relatives owe to each other.

- b) On the other hand —and this is perhaps more difficult to see— within a (happy) marriage it feels that there is only «real time» within this bond; compared to pre-marital life, marriage feels like the «real thing», that which one has been preparing for. Time within a strong and loving community of people is usually considered to be «quality time», time that has meaning notwithstanding any consideration of personal achievements. Time spent in marriage, and especially activities for the sake of marriage, is regarded as a good in and for itself. Time spent with the family, i.e. the specific «dwelling» within the community, has an incomparably positive character.

The paradox of marriage as temporal experience can be resumed as follows: In marriage there is no time, but for those who are married, only in marriage is there «real time».

Although married people do not have enough time, the scarcity of time does not only stem from the fact that there is less free time for individual or arbitrary activities, but primarily from a higher consciousness of temporality, i.e. the acknowledgment that time is given in order to spend it in the service of others. Behind the paradox of having no time and yet living temporality as an intense and meaningful reality (dwelling), there is a «change of fundamental attitude» and the challenge of acquiring a «form of being» proper to marriage (and *mutatis mutandis* to any real vocation): «living for others». The specific experience of temporality in this sense includes a «radical reconsideration of one's temporal existence in relation to the other person». This will be spelled out in the following paragraphs.

The Realness of the Experience

The time within the marital bond strikes us as «real time». What is meant here by the term «real» shall be briefly outlined by introducing three aspects:

- a) *Comparative realness*: Certain «realness» is attached to the experiences of temporality within marriage when compared with the life that came before it, for all decisions now have an immediate effect on the lives of other people. This increased influence on the life-world is part of the «realness» that characterizes marriage.
- b) *Self-referential realness*: Another element of this perception considers our relationship with ourselves: The potential of being a good wife or husband and, in some cases, a good mother or father is fully realized within marriage. Time feels more real because the experiences that convey temporality qualify as a higher realization of one's unique and essential potential and vocation. Marriage, in the sense of being responsible for somebody else and especially in the sense of nurturing new life, requires and brings all of our intellectual, bodily, spiritual, etc. capacities to a certain fulfilment.
- c) *Participatory realness*: The third and most important element of realness, which, at the same time, underlies and supersedes the two former aspects, comes from the act of participating in a higher reality. Realness in this sense is understood in relation to the transcendent object of the very relationship that constitutes «my own self» as a married person. This aspect involves a radical change of perspective. What the two former points regarded as the *fundamentum inconcussum*, namely the «ego» from which reality is judged, here becomes the other pole of the relationship: That which is confronted with the exigency of a higher reality by participating in it.

The experienced «realness» of temporality within marital life has these three aspects that are not only united, but also display a dynamic process of assuming the new horizon of life given through marriage. The process goes from comparing the experience of temporality to what was known before, to considering it as it relates to «us», and finally, by undergoing a radical change of perspective, it reaches the point of reconsidering ourselves by the light of what is revealed as a challenging context.

The famous image of the cave in Plato's Republic has already metaphorically described how an encounter with a higher reality in general has a complex structure that includes several distinct steps; these include moments of penetrating into reality (going down into and coming up from the cave) as well as a moment of a new awareness of reality which is due to a turning around (*metanoia*). *Mutatis mutandis*, this is true concerning the discovery of reality transmitted through marriage: The fundamental aspect that Plato has not sufficiently taken into account, and is specific to the Christian heritage, consists of the constitutive role of the other person in transmitting the higher reality by realizing that the idea of the good actually corresponds to what the incarnated *divine person reveals to us as the triune person*.

It is the *imago Dei*, the other person as husband or wife, with his or her most unique nature, that transmits the higher and even the highest reality in its most *personal nature* to us. Encountering the other as husband or wife thus means an intense confrontation and engagement with signs and expressions of his or her transcendent vocation (call and mission), whereas one's personal vocation is formed by elements of eternity within temporality personally encountered and assumed.

Relational Temporality

The corresponding openness of a deep and intense engagement with the destiny of the beloved prompts and triggers a new and radically relational perception of temporality. The process follows a similar structure described above as *steps of encountering a higher reality*:

a) Past: The first step in recognizing reality as «more» real than what has already been experienced draws our attention to the past. Encountering the other within the marital bond, however, does not let the past appear only in a negative way, as something that is less real and therefore somehow less valuable than the present, which is glorified through the community made with the beloved. There is transcendence even in the realm of memory; there are hidden contents to be discovered that emerge thanks to the newly encountered superabundant meaning of community with the other. The transformation of one's temporal experiences happens through the other; it is partially provoked by this radical revision of the past, but especially occurs due to the discovery of its hidden relations and contents: Events that we dispatched in consciousness as meaningless regain their significance, while others thought of in high terms lose their importance.

This process of *deepening the past* and thereby rediscovering the person one really has been (*Gewesenheit*) is all the more intense, for the role of the beloved is not reduced to simply being the object of desire; he or she collaborates in co-constituting and co-interpreting past experiences. For the beloved, through his or her life-experiences, interests and wisdom, introduces relevant insights that help develop a new self-knowledge as well as to fulfil the desire of building a new community. This requires harmonizing the pasts of the couple, i.e. discovering signs in the past that had predicted the fulfilment of the loving community actually existing in the consciousness of both partners. The past reinterpreted somehow as a common past, in light of the desire and reality of this community, is discovered and created through elements of the memories of both people.

Loving the other person means going along with the most righteous, magnanimous (i.e. lovely) interpretation of their past while also implying a radical openness towards the hidden truths in one's own past. It requires a certain «vigilance» towards one's own past as well as caring for the memories of others that are an important source of morality concerning the relationship with each other. This

vigilance culminates in the grateful acknowledgement of what one owes to the beloved and to the grace working throughout history, for it mysteriously prepared and guided the beloveds in order to encounter each other.

The past is *relationally reconstituted* because married people vigilantly work on each other's memories, motivated by a gratefulness for each other's presence and community.

b) Present: Not just the past, but also the meaning of the present, «my own self as present» becomes radically co-constituted due to the increasing conscious awareness of the marital bond. The different rites of the wedding ceremony in many cultures symbolize the rupture and the radical new beginning implied by the marital bond. Those becoming husband and wife are not defined by the past and their relationship to the past anymore (more specifically, to their origins, their father and mother), but rather, are redefined by their new bonds with their political family and common new friends, which are an extension of the love towards the beloved person. In the Christian tradition, marriage is considered as a sacramental bond, among other things, in order to acknowledge the substantial change marriage brings about in one's self-awareness. Rather than just adding a new role to play, once married, our self- and world perception need a fundamental revision. This happens primarily on the temporal level, and, concerning the present, it requires a principal modification of the way one «handles time».

This revision firstly concerns the attitude towards temporal stances. This includes getting rid of all phony nostalgia: The new bond calls us to give priority to the present over the past. Thus, as argued above, the past needs to be reinterpreted in light of the present bond, which leads to the re-forming one's own identity.

Another principal change affects the perception of presence in as much as it becomes radically co-constituted by and through the bond with the beloved. The nature of the relationship, namely, considering oneself as belonging to the other, requires a certain renunciation

of one's control or lordship over one's own time. Whatever the appearances might be, the exclusiveness of marriage implies that the very concept of «one's private time» becomes morally unfounded. Although one continues to live his or her own life in a unique and inalienable way while responding to his or her own questions on the meaning of life, because of the loving devotion to each other within the bond that requires complete self-giving, there is no «private time», although the love and care for the other certainly implies free time or leisure at times without the beloved. However, in those moments of solitude, or in the company of others (friends), the beloved, even though not actually present, does not disappear from what the phenomenological tradition, including St. John Paul II, called *lateral consciousness*.⁵ Even though the beloved does not appear in the frontal or thematic consciousness, his or her presence is notable not only for co-constituting the meaning of any conscious object, but also for positively determining whatever is relevant within the field of perception. Thereby, the relation to the beloved somehow directs our attention to objects from behind (*auf dem Rücken*) and collaborates in perceiving and interpreting whatever phenomena appears within consciousness. There is nothing that would not concern the people who became husband and wife through marriage precisely because of their status as such.

Since temporality is co-constituted by one's relation to his or her own body, it is noteworthy in this respect that this relation is fundamentally changed through bodily unity with the other person. Sexual unity, as well as the care for each other's bodily wellbeing (nurturing him/her, etc.), reveals what the body is truly made for,

5 Dietrich von Hildebrand uses this expression in his book *Die Umgestaltung in Christus* (1971) where he observes the crucial difference between the conscious awareness of mental acts versus that of objects. Only concerning this latter, we can rightfully say: Being aware of something. Our mental activity is deployed in two realms: The first is the intentional reference to those objects that are grasped in their meaningfulness and reveal their specific nature and characteristics. The consciousness of cognitive and emotional acts is clearly different; here, we do not have a conscious object but rather a process taking part in us, through and by which we manifest ourselves to ourselves. An example of this might be «being happy about something», which is a certain attitude that —by mentally taking a second step— can certainly become an object of reflection.

i.e. helps us to acknowledge aspects of our body that are made for the loving service and for the good of the beloved person; it enables us to feel and to appreciate all kinds of expressions of one's loving devotion.⁶ Through bodily unity and all those loving bodily interactions, the beloved becomes «interiorized», or even, to a certain extent, «embodied», due to an expansion and sensibilization of the whole phenomenological field of perception. The present is relationally lived thanks to the collateral consciousness of the beloved and one's altered (extended and sensibilized and sensualized) bodily perception (of my own self and the world).⁷

c) The future: The participation in a higher reality corresponds to an explicitly *relational attitude towards the future*. There is certainly a transcendence to be recognized in all temporal tenses; however, the attitude towards the future is uniquely decisive in this respect, for everything comes from the future to be encountered in the present and then to be recalled from the past. Although some cultures might stress the importance of the (mythical) past, in which all of the important things that explain our existence here happened, and others focus rather on the present with the attitude of *carpe diem*, arguing that the present is reality's only mode of manifestation (all from the past is gone and the future is not here yet), there is a fundamental future-orientation which characterizes human nature.⁸ The natural tendency

6 The fact that no man is self-sufficient is a salient point of human nature. Our dependency on each other (which occurs to a significantly higher degree than with any other mammal) turns out to be a radically positive feature that allows for more complex social organisation and a higher knowledge, of thus specialized in this or that form of service, when viewed from the experience of loving each other and collaborating in the service of others, rather than something negative.

7 Michel Henry's interpretation of the Galileo-Descartes tradition is of decisive importance, for it traces the trajectory the discovering of the differences between the objective and the subjective notion of the body, i.e. internal bodily perception. See his famous essay: Henry (2000: 13-35). On the relevance of the other in one's bodily self-perception, see Levinas (1961), especially Section IV, "Au-delà du visage" in the chapter entitled: "Phénoménologie de l'éros".

8 See §§ 46, 48, and 52 of Heidegger (1977).

to form expectations for the future is a sign of the general openness (which is independent of the will) towards the reality that awaits us. Any happy moment experienced in the past or lived in the present evokes and intensifies the desire of what the future might hold for the given person. Human existence, stretched out between the «not yet» and the «already», desires the plenitude of the future that nobody knows and could foretell, i.e., the future of complete transcendence.

This general orientation is even more developed in marriage, since here the desire also implies the happiness of the beloved as well as of «us» as a couple. The future-orientation becomes the constitutive force of forming a community through shifting the desire for one's own happiness towards the awareness that happiness is impossible without knowing that the beloved is happy as well; finally, our desire turns towards the *fundamental attitude* of prioritizing the happiness of the beloved. This relational attitude towards the future can thus be manifested on different levels.

What here I would like to call the *relational future, the future experienced with and through the beloved*, manifests itself through the desire to spend the rest of one's life together with the other, leading one to imagine a more intense and happier community. An act referring to the future, such as desiring, imagining or planning the future together, requires considering the beloved person's desires and predictions.

On this level, i.e. as a reference point for these social acts, the future is considered only in a reduced sense, along the lines of «something we are heading to». Such a limited consideration of the future allows for dualistic misconceptions of it to occur; for example, anything that happens against our interests or our plan is interpreted in terms of «accidents» to be avoided. This rather ego-centric (morally speaking) and dualistic (ontologically speaking) approach towards the future implies a radical limitation of the establishment of a flourishing community with the beloved, not only because whatever (spiritual, intellectual or material) goods we might possess is threatened all the time by a nameless, future danger, but also because the

beloved will inevitably fall under the same narrow categories applied to the future that, ultimately speaking, place conditions on love: For he or she might also be part of what appears under different negative evaluations (accidents, etc.)

Thus, there is an immediate relationship between openness towards the future and the extent to which the beloved can be recognized for and in themselves. The link here is provided by the *fundamental attitude* manifested both with respect to the beloved on the one hand and the future on the other, and, to combine the two, to *the future of the beloved*.

It is easy to see how an ego-centric attitude could be a determining factor in these cases. On the contrary, an open attitude towards the future –overcoming ego-centrism– could recognize that the future cannot be judged completely on this bilateral basis, for it brings radical novelties not yet thought of: Events that thus appear truly transcendent compared with the past and present state of things. Acknowledging this transcendence within the future is a prerequisite for developing a deep interest in the destiny of the beloved, beyond knowledge or expectations, and allows for credit to be given to him or her: It enables us to hope for the best and to trust the beloved (who, being human, naturally disappoints us) beyond what the former negative experiences would enable us to do.

Unconditional love as a principle for living the marital bond can only exist when the future is considered based on a general judgment acknowledging the original and absolute goodness of being – and vice versa, it is the concrete experience of unconditional love that can account for a principle judgment on the positivity of being. Ethical and ontological aspects of love concerning marriage are so intertwined that welcoming the beloved in whatever future state requires trust that goes far beyond the personal and even the general anthropological limits of him or her and concerns the fundamental ontological structure of being. Yet it is the beloved person, the most beautiful, lovely being, «made for me», that most clearly and personally transmits —even in a fragmented and rather fragile way— the vocation of being, what being is actually called to become in the future. Therefore, the «yes» pronounced to the beloved logically

implies—even if it is not made explicitly or does not reach a theoretical awareness—a general judgment on being as such precisely because it manifests a certain attitude towards the future: The other shall not die (as Gabriel Marcel put it) and being is blessed and thus, shall eternally be preserved.

Ultimately speaking, since this radically positive attitude concerning the future by breaking down the walls of ego-centrism and overcoming the limitations of the ontological dichotomy (according to which being is both good and bad), also implies a recognition of the future not as something we are approaching, but rather as something we as a *loving community are open to living through together*.

The future that «we as a community» are exposed to might certainly entail negative elements, inevitably some suffering, even death, but it cannot in principal go against the unity of the loving community that is experienced as the most precious thing in it. The future in which we participate in this respect is recognized is the origin of all time and, most significantly, as the origin of our common past and our actual community. Whatever future events will hit us, the key to deciphering their actual meaning, i.e. the meaning for our community, is given by what has been manifesting itself as our most meaningful experience: The gift of the relationship with the beloved that transcends this community. What I would call «the future» in relational terms manifests itself through this type of hermeneutic approach, i.e. a radical disposition to interpreting the future through the concrete experience of love. Living temporality in this way allows one to care for the other as a radically free being as they meet his or her own future, i.e. his or her own way of living (in this case) the marital vocation (free of any determination of the past, etc.) The role of the beloved in co-constituting this way of living temporality is to help the other to preserve their liberty and their freedom of being, at the disposal of whatever appears in terms of the *call and mission*⁹ of the future which approaches us.

9 See Balthasar (1966) and Chrétien (2004).

The Specific Sacramental Relationality of Time within Christian Marriage

Marriage, as a uniquely devoted loving relationship to the other, allows us to experience temporality and temporal tenses in their relational character to some extent. Time, human life, reveals itself as co-constituted by the beloved in ontological, epistemological and ethical terms when it is understood through love. Considering and reconsidering the past, present and future through the lens of marital life as a precious gift is and was accessible to open hearts throughout all of history. Yet, there are radically new dimensions of life (and especially marital life) that have been opened through Christian revelation for all those who would take another step on this road that starts under the Cross of the Crucified and will be continued until the coming of the eschatological reality lived in Him.

Although the complete transformation of the person and the transformation of temporal consciousness which follows are only given to those who have mystical experiences, there is a specifically philosophical task to discover at least some basic elements of the process of how marital life in Christ as a temporal experience gradually overcomes and even radically supersedes what was described above as a «relational transformation of temporality». For some part of this transformation is certainly phenomenologically accessible, at least as a concrete possibility or invitation offered by faith to interpret temporality. Especially deserving of our attention here are those elements that are a further development or logical continuity of a transformation through love. I would like to reduce my analysis to these examples of how the past, present and future within marriage can be transformed when lived through and interpreted by Christian revelation, i.e. in relation to Jesus, the Lord of all time Who is both eternal and incarnate in history:

- a) Past: As noted above, there are some basic relational elements of the past that can be realized in an incomparably higher (i.e., absolute) dimension when the past is lived through in a marriage (understood in sacramental terms). The discovering of the hidden elements of the past is sustained by the fact (stressed

by Christian revelation) that time and the past are logical, i.e. filled with the logos (Christ), in and through which everything was created. One's personal past experiences as well as the experiences of the couple appear in this sense as part of a story that started at the very beginning of time, the absolute origin of which is an outpouring of unconditional love within the divine persons of the Holy Trinity. Marriage understood as a stable and in some way absolute meaning-horizon for interpreting one's life allows us to discover relational time: The presupposition to be affirmed here in concrete detail is that *there is a common story of love filled with utterly personal meaning even prior to the actual relationship.*

The past of the other, when interpreted with this assumption, is truly filled with treasures of divine love that make sense in all cases *per definitionem* and which are waiting to be discovered underneath stones of suffering and broken hearts. If the story in which one's fragmented life is included has a radically good beginning, a principle of transformative divine love and an absolute positive outcome, it invites us to make a magnanimous and radically benevolent interpretation of the beloved's life, whatever secrets, sins, crime, or pain he or she might have in their past.

The application of benevolence and magnanimity in interpreting the beloved's past means radical truthfulness and absolute realism. Marriage is often a process of knowing the other person in which impersonal and fake illusions and fantasies are replaced by the sincere hope for the other's continuous conversion. Only those who are capable of seeing us as someone who is participating in a divine-human love-story that encompasses our entire life, no matter our insufficient response to creative divine love, can truly embrace us with our lamentable failures and limitations.

Embracing the beloved, although it happens in the present, certainly includes the past as well. That our present relationship has a solid basis and that we are somehow made for each other is a fact that needs to be acknowledged and confirmed before our common past. As has been stated above, loving the adult we are today implies

extending our community towards the child that one has been. Yet, *the sacramental community of marriage applies this extension back to the creation of the universe*, to the very first moment of not just one's own life, but the existence of life as such. The acceptance, and what is more, the absolute unconditional gratitude for the other and the community with him or her becomes a community with the whole of creation, both as an original act and as re-created in Christ. The actual community with the other thus has an open horizon, not just towards the foreign past of the other, but towards the past as such. The past that we have never lived through personally, but that has been given to us through bonds with others —with other generations, with the history of our nations, and the histories of other nations— awaits our responsible affirmation as a story that is somehow ours as well for the fact that we belong to the human family. This increasing openness towards *the foreign past of the other*, and then of all other people, culminates in the sacramental community and reaches its absolute dimension: One is called to respond to the entire past and to creation. One can give a mythical reading to this dimension of the past from the very beginning in order to account for the radically positive fundamental attitude towards being that is required. Yet, to give such absolute recognition of the positivity of the past, history and, ultimately speaking, of being as such is almost impossible without making any reference to a past event in which all sins, failures, imperfections and negative aspects of existence have been defeated once and for all in a total victory of the good over the bad. Relational temporality, i.e. living the past in sacramental terms, precisely requires this reference to be made explicit and fully re-enacted, or even better, celebrated as present. This crucial past event, our redemption and re-creation in Jesus, makes Christ the Lord of the entire past, and therefore, *all past events must be recalled and reaffirmed in reference to Him*.

Marriage offers us a continuous opportunity to affirm the other in a radically positive way and, through the past of the other, to affirm the past as such in light of the crucial historical event that made the redemption of all things possible. Moreover, marriage as an intense involvement with the life of the other is a unique opportunity

to witness how this crucial event frees us from the burden of the past, for it gives us a new beginning.

- b) Present: Despite the accusations of late modernity (Feuerbach and Marx) concerning the escapism of a Christian faith that supposedly despises the present with all its existential and social problems and suffers for the sake of a glorified future, Christianity in general and the Christian understanding of marriage go hand in hand with a full and unrestricted appreciation of the present, of the *hic et nunc* of history, free of nostalgia for a glorious past and false illusions about the future.

Sacramentality, i.e. the actual presence of the supernatural amidst and in the natural reality, appears for the consciousness as a spiritual and moral call to become fully present within the world as a place of mission. This call, to fully live reality right now, since it is the present that offers a more intense and truly real connection with the divine, has a specifically paradoxical nature, for it is at the same time an obligation and a liberation. What appears intellectually to be a paradox reveals itself to be a dramatic unity when lived experientially: Freedom means a free response to the supernatural call to become fully real precisely by participating in the higher reality.

Marriage, once again, is the bond that is rightly characterized as a constant appeal to enter an interpersonal relationship and to get entirely involved in it, to become fully «present» in the life of the other by representing and enacting the divine love in a concrete and personal way within the context of the dramatic life of the other, i.e. by becoming a present, real gift for the other.¹⁰ This infinitely intense process of «becoming present» in the life of the other is never an achievement due to individual efforts; it has a clearly participative and highly receptive character: One becomes present by partaking in the presence of the utmost reality, i.e. the divine and eternal sacrament manifested in history. The sacramental nature of marriage means, among other things, that the relationship (as well

¹⁰ Concerning the complex concept of drama, see Tischner (1998).

as its constituent members) is to be understood in the light of this illuminative divine presence amidst finite temporality.

Future: In a sacramental marriage, the future is understood in paradoxical terms: An eternal presence as a promise to be fulfilled. Its sacramental character stems from the divine presence, the presence of the eternal «Thou» that is prior to any interpersonal relationships among humans. Acknowledging this presence, however, is only possible because the loving self-gift to the other is limited in time; any act of love is thus a sign of a promise and a hope that whatever community is achieved here is going to be completed in the eschatological reality. This paradoxical future tense, or the pre-taste of a future that is more present than any human actuality, is rightly called the *eschatological future*. Given this tension within the phenomenon of the future, there is a specific temptation to think about marriage as a vocation with only a temporal experience. Instead of talking about temptation, let me put it positively: Marriage invites us to continuously revisit our tendency to make the future deducible from any known past. It is all the more difficult because one important limit of the human imagination is its necessary orientation to the past. Even the most vivid human fantasies are composed by elements of ordinary reality, however modified, and the logic of their combination —although it might be perverted— relies heavily on the logic of the past. However, reality always hits us as a surprise, overcoming our expectations. Even disappointing experiences supersede all expectations in coherence and intensity. Thus, deducing any future from the past would seriously limit the horizon of our expectations. Yet the past event *par excellence*, the life of Christ, although completely unprecedented, appears as a fulfilment of our expectations: It is and can be a full completion of our deepest human desires precisely because it is a radical novelty. The eschatological future in this sense is not to be imagined through the lens of already appropriated past experiences; it is not something we somehow progressively approach in order to for it to be realized. The future, in its original sense, is full and real before any act of realization, and thus, it approaches and overcomes us rather than the other way around. The impossible desire of wanting to control the future is certainly

the most common experience, not just for married people and parents with many children, but also for anybody whose destiny is exposed and offered up by loving someone in an act of metaphysical generosity. In marriage, the future is rightly thematized in terms of *being at the disposal of the other, of being free to respond to those demands that are proposed to us by a more real and a fuller community.*

Fragmentation and Plenitude in Marriage

Yet, the socio-cultural situation of families in the 21st century and the specific difficulties of marriage are expressions of how difficult it is for human beings in general to live a meaningful and unified life. Both our post-Christian culture and the vocation of marriage are only circumstances of the *conditio humana* in times of the *vigilia Christi*, in times of *not yet, but already.*

The cultural and spiritual situation today requires overcoming not just secular reason, but also secular faith, which has been mutilated by the general dualistic tendency of not only distinguishing but also separating the supernatural from the natural. Families are the first victims of this theological, philosophical and cultural disaster, but they are also the first line of resistance, of real (i.e. bodily and spiritual) resistance. To that end, living in a faithful Christian family implies a distinctive temporal experience and an awareness of temporality that allows for perceiving the graceful touch of the eternal within a fleeting moment (for the Christian identity is based on the story that goes from the beginning till the end of time and offers us the possibility of understanding death as a liberation that allows us to enter into our eternal community). All relationships that occur in time and the specific economy of love within the family are truly and really given their meaning within the context of the Trinitarian relationship.¹¹

The creativity of marital love and the radiating out of the love cultivated by the members of the family towards humanity in all of

11 See Aldana (2005), especially chapter V, entitled "Familia"; as well as Hadjadj (2015).

those apparently fragmented moments of family life is only possible if any moment of true self-gift —however limited and, ultimately speaking, radically unproportionate— is a real manifestation of the unity and fullness of all time, since through this very moment, one participates in what was originally wanted and ordered by God bringing being into temporality and thus, inviting us, in our temporal being, to rejoice in His eternal presence. In short: It is marriage and family life that teach us how sacramental logic overcomes secular logic whenever our temporal and fragmented existence, thanks to loving family communities, is raised to an awareness of temporality as a divine feast.

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