

A Mysterious Intertwining of Nature and Grace

January 17, 2016

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Isaiah 62.1-5;
1 Corinthians 12.4-11;
John 2.1-11By **D. C. Schindler**

In his recent book, *The World Beyond Your Head*, Matthew Crawford recounts some conversations with craftsmen at a shop in Virginia that makes church organs. Speaking as if what he says would be altogether obvious, one of the shop workers explained his thought-process as he worked on the crucial task of voicing the pipes in the organ the company produced for the Yale University chapel: “From the voicing standpoint, I had to think to myself, What can I really get away with here, and *what will the results of my actions be four hundred years from now?* If that Yale organ is still in that chapel four hundred years from now, and we assume it will be, then what is going to have happened to the voicing I did?”

The comment shocks because it presumes a sense of the world and of our place in it that we no longer recognize so readily. If we think of the long-term consequences of our actions, we rarely go beyond envisioning how our actions will affect our own existence a decade or two down the line.

The reason for this disinclination to think with more “largesse,” it seems to me, is that we take for granted a conception of human nature that is the modern legacy. In this modern conception we are, at our core, isolated individuals, inhabiting a kind of self-enclosed sphere of subjectivity from which we emerge, as it were, episodically, making contact with the outside world and other “monads” like ourselves only through discrete acts of mind and will. And because these contacts have their basis in our deliberate acts of consciousness, they tend to have little substance of their own, lasting only as long as the attention we are able to give to them. Contemporary phenomena such as the social media epidemic reinforce habits of inattentiveness, and so weaken whatever bonds form among persons. This is something so evident that no argument here is required.

Crawford wrote his book because he took this state of affairs to be a crisis, a profound threat to meaningful human existence, which he diagnosed above all in patterns of work and leisure. But one reality escapes Crawford’s cultural reflections, and it arguably represents not only a paradigm of the crisis in its current condition but also perhaps the best hope for a response: *marriage*.

Believing in Marriage

If the crisis we are talking about concerns a reduction of persons to mere agents of choice and consumption who represent nothing beyond themselves in their isolated individuality, the threat will make itself felt in a particular way in the ancient human institution of marriage. The very essence of marriage, after all, is *connection*: it joins two individuals to form a single reality, and, through this unity-of-two, it further joins families, and indeed generations, extending from an immemorial past into the open horizon of the future.

To “believe in marriage,” that is, to recognize the deep importance of this institution, is not only to appreciate some traditional “value,” but also to recognize a particular feature of human nature that runs athwart the dominant contemporary view. The reality of marriage is itself a statement that we do not belong to ourselves alone; we are of our very essence a “part” of something bigger than our individual existence. Our particular talents, as St. Paul says, are specifically *gifts*, which means they are ours for the sake of the whole to which we belong: “to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Cor 12.7).

If we lack the ability to conceive of ourselves as part of something bigger, then marriage in its traditional sense will become simply unintelligible for us. We will be inclined instead to think of marriage as no more than a lifestyle choice, the content of which will change with the times like all other matters of style. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, hardly a lover of “traditional values” himself, “when society cannot affirm itself as a whole, down to the most distant generations, then marriage has altogether no meaning. Modern marriage has lost its meaning – consequently one abolishes it.”

But what is at stake in the question of marriage is more than just society’s self-affirmation, more than just the continuity of generations and the conception of man as a member of the “human family.” In the Judeo-Christian tradition, marriage concerns in a profound and mysterious way man’s relation to God. As is well known, nuptial imagery abounds in the Old Testament. From the drama of betrothal and betrayal in Hosea, to the mystical marriage of the Song of Songs, the Jewish people have expressed their unique relationship to God in terms of marriage. We see this relationship expressed in the beautiful language of the great prophet Isaiah:

As a young man marries a young woman,
so will your Builder marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you. (Is 62.5)

This “representation” runs deeper than one might initially think; it is more than mere metaphor. God chose Israel from among the diverse peoples of the earth. He prepared them and made a covenant with them, pledging himself definitively, in a way that remains impervious to the vagaries of Israel’s own freedom. Marriage is especially fitting to convey the relationship to God because it is all-encompassing, involving the whole person, body and soul: it is a natural relation that is at the same time freely chosen, and it is a relation based on freedom, but more than a mere contract, because it represents a total gift of self.

The Primordial Sacrament

The coming of Christ – God’s *bodily* gift of self – fulfills the promise of the first covenant in a way that exceeds all expectations. At the same time, his coming universalizes the scope of the covenant, insofar as it brings to light what was God’s plan from the beginning, inscribed in the human heart in creation. Perhaps no one in history has reflected more profoundly on this dimension of marriage, its mysterious intertwining of nature and grace, than St. John Paul II. According to the late pope, if the sacraments are the natural mediation of supernatural grace, then marriage, which was instituted in creation, ought to be seen as the “primordial sacrament.”

Drawing on the Church’s tradition, beginning with St. Paul (Eph 5), John Paul II interprets Adam and Eve, in their being made for each other, as having been created in view of, as a prefiguration of, and in some sense as already sharing in, the “mega mystery” (*mega mysterion*) of Christ and the Church, the union which is the source of all other sacraments. What we celebrate in marriage is the joy of finding oneself in losing oneself, the dense meaningfulness of an existence bound in its root to an other – and others. Marriage represents, we might say, the paradigmatic place wherein human existence *wholly naturally* opens up beyond itself: the natural otherness in the sexual difference between man and woman is a sign, in the body, of the transcendence of man’s relation to God, and the fruitfulness of this difference in the responsibility-laden gift of children is a reinforcement of one’s dependence on God.

Because of the *natural* character of the openness to God in marriage, John Paul II insisted so wisely on what has always been essentially the Church’s tradition: the consent to the natural goods of marriage, even without any explicitly theological intention, already in itself suffices in the baptized for this wholly human reality to become a genuine sacrament, a mediation of divine grace.

Marriage is not only a symbol of man’s belonging to the greater human family, beyond the discrete moment of his individual existence in history, but also represents a sort of “hinge” between heaven and earth. And so the crisis in which the institution finds itself today, in which fewer people are marrying in the Church or indeed marrying at all, takes on an infinite weight. But at the same time, it opens a deeper resource for hope.

If marriage is the “primordial sacrament,” as John Paul II said, then the significance the Catholic tradition has come to see in it belongs to it *by nature*; it is not dependent on our explicit awareness or recognition. This deep significance, in other words, is not simply a “message,” a more or less arbitrary teaching that one has to learn or else one is lost, that one may remember or one may forget. Instead, it represents the truth of human desire that lies deeper than any possible misuse of freedom. There is always hope because the openness to the gospel remains as close as our own nature.

The Wedding at Cana

In light of John Paul II’s profound insight into the salvific impulse “built into” marriage “from the beginning,” we can appreciate today’s reading on the wedding at Cana. The first of the seven great signs (Jn 2.11) that John recounts in his gospel is performed at a wedding. Here Jesus enters into his public ministry, not, as one might expect, by *proclaiming a message* and calling for repentance from the height of a mountaintop. Instead, he responds to what we might describe as the more gratuitous need for the joyful celebration of an altogether human reality: he changes water into wine so that the wedding feast, which he found already underway, might continue, and indeed in an elevated fashion: “you have kept the good wine until now” (Jn 2.10).

As the Fathers of the Church keenly observed, this transformation is a prefiguration of the Eucharistic sacrifice, founded in the absolutely unique event of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Significantly, this introduction to the great Christian mystery occurs not by tearing man away from a natural reality. Instead, it carries man more deeply into that reality: the anticipation of Christ’s redemptive work lies in a beautifully hidden way in the miraculous provision of wine, to gladden the hearts of men.

About the Author

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FOR FURTHER READING

John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio, available at:

http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents

John Paul II, Address to the Roman Rota (February 1, 2001), available at:

<https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches>

John Paul II, Address to the Roman Rota (January 30, 2003), available at:

<https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches>

IN SHORT . . .

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- ***If we lack the ability to conceive of ourselves as part of something bigger, then marriage in its traditional sense will become simply unintelligible for us.***
- ***We will be inclined instead to think of marriage as no more than a lifestyle choice, the content of which will change with the times like all other matters of style.***
- ***In the Judeo-Christian tradition, marriage concerns in a profound and mysterious way man’s relation to God.***
- ***Marriage involves the whole person, body and soul: it is natural but freely chosen, and more than a mere contract, because it is a total gift of self.***
- ***The sacraments are the natural mediation of supernatural grace, and so marriage, which was instituted in creation, ought to be seen as the “primordial sacrament.”***