

“Promoting and Sustaining Marriage as a Community of Life and Love”
A Colloquium of Social Scientists and Theologians
October 24-25, 2005

MARRIAGE AS A “SCHOOL OF LOVE”
Wendy M. Wright, Ph.D.
Creighton University

God is love and anyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in him.
(1 John 4: 16b)

Introductory Comments

It is indeed a “sign of the times” to be asked and honored to contribute an essay on the “spirituality of marriage” at this 2005 colloquium of the USCCB ‘s Secretariat for Family Laity , Women and Youth, “Promoting and Sustaining Marriage as a Community of Life and Love.” I write as an historian of the Christian spiritual traditions, a spiritual director and a wife and mother of three young adult children. In terms of the latter identity, I would have to locate myself in the sixth stage of the marriage life cycle that Sr. Markey has presented us with: well into the transition to “empty nest.” As a spiritual director, I open my part of this discussion with the phrase that I often use in my work with directees or in retreat settings: “God cannot find you where you think you *ought* to be, God can only find you where you *are*.” What this means is that, from the point of view of spiritual practice, in speaking about marriage and family, we have to be honest about both our gifts and goodness and our weaknesses and failures. We have to begin in the *real*, where we are, no matter what ideals we aspire to. Ideals fuel our imaginations, and provide us with a vision of the possible. But ideals can sometimes impede our spiritual maturity: we may assume that we can never find God if our lived experience doesn’t match our ideal. We forget that *God finds us*, that simply our willingness to open our hearts and minds allows space for the Spirit to work in and through us.

As an historian of the Christian spiritual traditions, I am keenly aware that for the better part of our cumulative Catholic tradition marriage has not been viewed as a fertile seedbed for the cultivation of spiritual maturity. This of course has changed. Over the

centuries the change has been gradual but it has accelerated since the Second Vatican Council. In the early church, with some exceptions and a few theological arguments to the contrary (which lost out), celibacy was the “perfect life,” the preferred (and often only) context in which the deep and searing transformation which characterizes the life lived under the influence of the Holy Spirit, was thought to be best effected.¹ The gradual expansion of the meaning of marriage over the centuries – as a Sacrament or even as a vocation, as a union of mutual sanctification as much as a union justified by procreative activity, as a personal relationship as well as a core social institution – this expanded understanding has been encouraged, intentionally or not, by the Church as well as by secular society.² In Catholic circles today, books, journals, programs and workshops designed to encourage the deepening of marriage and family life are prevalent. The majority of these are pastoral in orientation but a number have made significant theological contributions.³ The spiritual possibilities of marriage and family life are recognized: there is something of a (fragile) consensus that the human drama of longing for intimacy God can in fact be played out on the domestic stage. To put it

¹ A definition of the term “spirituality” is in order here. The one above is a classic, theological understanding: spirituality refers to all aspects of human life and experience as they are influenced by the third person of the Trinity. Today, the term is used much more loosely and often very vaguely. Often, it makes no reference to the divine or to Christian understandings. Sometimes it is used in opposition to the term religious (meaning especially formal religious institutions, doctrines and practices). In Catholic, Christian circles it also has an anthropological definition as well as a theological one. Thus, for example, Canadian Ronald Rohlheiser in his *The Holy Longing: the Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999) defines spirituality as what human beings do with the innate fire or erotic energy with which they are endowed. And biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders in “The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline” in *Minding the Spirit: the Study of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Elizabeth A. Dryer and Mark Burrows (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2005) defines spirituality as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.” I am assuming *both* that inbuilt in the human person – creatures originally created in the divine image and likeness – there is a longing for and capacity (even if fragile and wounded) for integration towards an ultimate horizon (God) *and* that this longing is “met” by God’s grace in the movement and working of the Holy Spirit.

² Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (Viking, 2005).

³ Among these are the INTAMS review published by the International Academy for Marital Spirituality in Belgium.

Michael G. Lawler, *Secular Marriage, Christian Sacrament* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985) and *Marriage and Sacrament: a Theology of Christian Marriage* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993); Florence Caffrey Bourg, *Where Two or Three are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Churches* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); Richard Gaillardetz, *A Daring Promise: a Spirituality of Christian Marriage* (New York: Crossroad, 2002); *Marriage in the Catholic Tradition: Scripture, Tradition and Experience*, Todd Salzman, Thomas Kelly, John O’Keefe, editors (New York: Crossroad, 2004); Julia Hanlon Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003)

another way, the idea of the family and of marriage as the “domestic church” is *au current*. Yet much remains to be said and much remains to be explored.

Marriage and Family as Vocation and Spiritual Journey

All Christians, by virtue of their baptisms, have a call or vocation to *practice* (not simply profess) the Christian life. They are thus invited into the adventure of a life lived intentionally and consciously attuned and responsive to the movement of God’s Spirit.⁴ They are summoned to embark on a journey of radical discovery of the complex interplay of self, other, world and God. In addition, they are called to practice that Christian life adapted to particular settings, “states of life,” livelihoods and relational networks. Married life is one of the “states of life.” However, it is not a static state but a radically fluid experience that changes over the course of the life cycle. It is also not a generic state, even if generalities about marriage can be posited. Rather, a marriage is shaped by the unique individuals, with their differing histories and personalities, who marry. Within marriage there may be varied secondary “calls within a call” depending on the differing circumstances, personalities, and stages of the lifecycle of each person, couple and family.

I would like to contribute to this ongoing development of Catholic thought in my own modest way by considering marriage as a “School of Love.” The phrase you will recognize as one that echoes another familiar phrase, the “Civilization of Love,” first used by Pope Paul VI and a touchstone of John Paul II’s thought, as well as one that recalls the Rule of Saint Benedict, that classic expression of western Christian spirituality, which proclaims the monastery as a “School for the Service of the Lord.” The latter classic phrase suggests that there is something formative, something that leads to transformation, in the very structure and practices of the monastic community. I would like to suggest the same about marriage and family life. John Paul II’s oft used phrase has an eschatological thrust to it as well as a formative one. For him, especially as he enunciated it in *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) and *Letter to Families* (1994), the family, as the community on which society is founded, is organically linked to the civilization of love. That civilization is distinguished by personalism, which “moves the person to

⁴ See note #1.

become a gift for others and to discover joy in giving himself.”⁵ The hallmark of the civilization of love is a mature humanity which finds full realization in the unreserved giving of the whole of one’s human person. For John Paul, this civilization of love, of which the Christian family must be the microcosm, is a counterbalance to the present prevailing “culture of death” and the Christian clarion call in the new millennium.

Yet, with great respect for the late pope’s profound vision and the richness of his theological thought, I find myself both edified and yet not fully satisfied with his characterization of the family as the harbinger of the civilization of love. This is because I find myself wanting to say *more* about the nature of love than does the late pontiff. Perhaps because so much of John Paul’s beautiful reflections on the family are nurtured by his own devotion to the Holy Family, there is a certain idealization and romanticizing, indeed a certain vagueness, about family life in his thought, as if the relationships of Jesus, Mary and Joseph as intuited within the collective prayerful imagination of the Church community sum up the universal way that families do and should operate.⁶ The earthly trinity was, for the late pope, “a model family in which all the families of the world can find their sure ideal and the secret of their vitality.”⁷ His Holy Family is an “eloquent and living image”⁸ of “the eternal loving communion of the three persons of the Most High Trinity.”⁹

⁵ *Letter to Families*, n.14

⁶ The Holy Family devotion, which is a-historical in its assumptions, came to the fore in the early modern period and, until the mid-twentieth century, paralleled the ongoing theological reflection on marriage and family. I do not wish to denigrate nor underplay the importance of religious reflection done in this traditional manner – a sort of *midrashic* approach, or the application of *lectio divina* to the figures that inhabit the Catholic devotional universe. Indeed, I find these sorts of reflections very beautiful and consoling. The problem comes when their didactic value takes precedence over their value as edification. The Holy Family that John Paul inherited and evoked for the contemporary world was one in which in which chastity, and the practice of the virtues, especially obedience is cultivated.

⁷ John Paul II, “The Christian Family is a vocation to love,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng ed, (6 January, 1993), 9.

⁸ John Paul II, “Yours must be a witness of love,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. Ed. (12 Oct 1994), 2. While John Paul’s thoughts on the Holy Family have a contemporary tinge – for example he saw them as experiencing the poverty, dislocation and social upheaval of so many of the world’s families – one does have to wonder at the oddness of a couple presumed to be celibate with only one very singular child being seen as *a literal model* for ordinary families. I think of the quip about the Virgin attributed to an overburdened Irish mother: “Ah, her with only one and him so good.”

⁹ *The Wisdom of John Paul II: the Pope on Life’s Most Vital Questions*, compiled by Nick Bakalar and Richard Balkin (San Francisco: Harpers, 1995), 32. I have relied very heavily in this section on Joseph F. Chorpennig, OSFS, “Icon of the Family and Religious Life: The Historical Development of the Holy

I am not going to reject John Paul's touching characterization of this family (about which, from a historical-critical perspective we in fact know very little), nor challenge the value of cultivating mutual self-giving. What I want to do is to be more nuanced about what "love" might mean beyond simply "total self-giving" and what the arts of living into love might look like in family. I do have to qualify my remarks by saying that I am speaking primarily from a contemporary, North American Catholic perspective and thus my remarks may not always fully account for the varying cultural, ethnic variables of family life as practiced in the world-wide Catholic community. Nevertheless, I trust that they will give us some place to start.

Marriage and Family as School

I want to start with the idea of the family as a school. No one would contest the idea that the family is an essential community in which the young are nurtured in every imaginable way, including in faith. Parents are the first teachers of their children. Parents teach not only by instruction but by example and by deed. To learn love a child must *be* loved. But this is not all. Marriage and family are not simply schools for offspring. Just as the Benedictine monastery is a school, a place of radical formation, because of what is practiced there, so too the marriage and family are a school – they change persons. They are the schools, in the profoundly formative sense, of *all* members of the family. In contrast to the monastery, however, it is not mainly the rhythmic, habituated entry into prayer, the focused cultivation of the vertical love relationship (me and God) and the medium of silence that forms one. In marriage the learning is in the midst of busyness, caretaking, the noise and stuff of daily life with its arrhythmic, changing patterns. The cultivation of love relationships there has both horizontal and vertical expressions. In marriage and family we are met by grace and drawn by the Spirit both in the silence of our own hearts *and* in our hearts as they beat together. We are offered opportunities to grow in all the virtues; we are propelled by the messy, joy-filled factuality of marriage into the ecstatic and kenotic energy of the Christ life: the dying and rising, the forgiving and being forgiven, the wild ride into the mystery at the core of creation. In other settings

Family Devotion," in *The Holy Family as Prototype of the Civilization of Love: Images from the Viceregal Americas* (Philadelphia: Saint Josephs' University Press, 1996), 3-40.

I have described a few of the formative elements of marriage and family life which allow married persons to cultivate the “charisms” of family life.¹⁰ Among these charisms are: the capacity to welcome and let go, cultivation of a flexible and discerning heart, the ability to work toward reconciliation and the arts of widening the circles of care. All of these are part of the arts of love.

Indeed, the marriage relationship is most emphatically a school in the sense of being an environment in which the arts of love are learned. In school we not only learn *about* things, we learn to *do* them. We not only learn that there are subjects called reading and writing and arithmetic, we *practice* reading and writing and doing sums. We become proficient in the course of having to actualize and make these arts our own. We have to make mistakes, discovering in the process how little we truly know and how much we have to learn. Marriage and family are schools of love in that practical sense. We can’t *be* loving if we don’t practice loving.

The pastoral and theological implications of the idea that marriage and family are a school are significant. Some of these implications are: 1) The *experience* (indeed the various experiences) of being married itself is an all important context for pastoral and theological decision-making and reflection. This implies that spirituality, the concrete experience of the activity of the Holy Spirit, is not simply the application of abstract principles to human life. Rather, Catholic teaching is in dialogue with, informs and enriches experience. But human experience, in concrete instances, may or may not always confirm abstract principles. In addition, experience may add to and increase the rich fund of the tradition’s collective wisdom, 2) Our schooling with its practice always takes place with specific and unique persons. Thus being schooled in love is never a generic process. It is the enactment of love in very concrete, specific circumstances; it is love tailored to the particular person in a particular moment and, in its particularity, it is the exploration of the many modalities and facets of love itself. Way back in the 17th century Saint Francis de Sales coined a term, *l’univers* (unity in diversity), to refer to the amazing varieties of persons and created entities whose commonality was found not

¹⁰ See my *Sacred Dwelling: a Spirituality of Family Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1989/ Leavenworth, Kansas: Forest of Peace, 1994/ London: Darton, Longman Todd, forthcoming) , *Seasons of a Family’s Life: Cultivating the Contemplative Spirit at Home* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003), and “The Charism of Parenting” in *Retrieving Charisms for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Doris Donnelly (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 85-102.

in rigid uniformity or conformity but in the myriad ways that Love Itself was incarnated in the world. It is in this spirit that I want then to honor both experience in marriage and the unity found in the precious diversity of married persons, marriages and stages of married life.

The Four Loves

I will come back to this idea of marriage and family life as a school but let me say more about love itself. As generations of Catholic spiritual writers have done, I am going to hearken back to our classical forebears and let them teach us that the word “love,” (which we have recently impoverished to refer mainly to the “making” of the act of intercourse or to the sentimental bumper-sticker red heart “I love my ...you fill in the blank),” is actually a very rich and multifaceted concept. I draw here upon many others who have Christianized the ancients’ thinking, especially the 12th century Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx, the 17th century French-speaking Savoyard, Saint Francis de Sales and more recently M.C. Darcy and C.S. Lewis.¹¹ Of the many ways we could parse out the tradition’s understanding of the term love, I’ll follow Lewis who chose in his *The Four Loves* to give close consideration to *Storge* (Affection), *Eros* (Romantic love), *Philia* (Friendship) and *Agape* (Charity) as exemplary of the many facets of a larger reality, Love itself. (I will differ with Lewis on some fundamental issues but he is a useful starting point).¹² Unlike Lewis, but in agreement with de Sales, Aelred and Darcy and like others in the Catholic tradition who have considered the varieties of love, I assume that all the loves, when rightly directed, come from and return to God: they simultaneously point to, are pathways into, and participate in the divine life itself. Divine

¹¹ See Aelred of Rievaulx’s *Treatise on Spiritual Friendship* and Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life* and his *Treatise on the Love of God*. A great debate about the antithetical or compatible nature of the divine and human loves was carried on by Protestant Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953) and M.C. Darcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947) and Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and Forms of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968). Nygren echoed the strain in the past that felt that *agape* was the outgoing selfless reaching of God for man which was fundamentally different from all other forms of love. For Nygren *eros* (man’s striving toward God) was the best human love as it strives for high values and for the most sublime human satisfactions. Catholic Darcy presented an alternative perspective. Darcy’s thought echoed St Francis de Sales and others in the tradition in seeing the loves as more intimately related and as all flowing from divine love itself.

¹² I will disagree especially with Lewis in his assumption that *storge*, *philia* and *eros* are the “natural” loves and that they are, by definition, in opposition to the supernatural *agape*.

love, the creative, redemptive and sanctifying power that is stronger than death itself, is at the root of all the modalities of Love. This means that I would claim it is inaccurate to say that love of God and love of particular others are *necessarily* in conflict or that human and divine loves are by definition mutually exclusive. For example, of a fully realized friendship, it is incorrect to say that he or she is “just a friend” and hence not loved. Rather, love has many forms which, if explored carefully and consciously as coming from and leading to the fullness of Love, can indeed be spiritually formative in the fullest sense. To paraphrase Saint Francis de Sales on this point: We don’t have two hearts, one that loves God and one that loves human beings, we have only one heart which loves.

These four loves can be defined the following way.

Storge or affection is, as Lewis suggests, the most “domestic” of the loves. It is most visibly manifest in the deep affection of parent to child and child to parent. It is in some sense the most “natural” of loves in that it is the love that can (in most instances) be expected to emerge in the natural course of care-giving or receiving care.

Eros is experienced as “being in love.” It is the aspect of love that propels us out of ourselves, that sweeps us away out of ourselves into a delighted preoccupation with the beloved. Eros is likewise the love that propels us outside of ourselves in pursuit of the true and the good or in awestruck appreciation of the beautiful.

Philia or friendship is the most mutual and equal of the loves. Friendship is the love experienced between two (or more) persons whose horizons of thought and desire mirror each another. While there may be many relationships that mimic friendship, a true friendship (in both the classical and Christian sense) involves more than companionship or shared interests. It is the bond forged between persons who each hold the Good and/or God up-most in mind and heart. The bond exists for the mutual growth and goodness of the friends and has at its core a shared love of something greater than the bond itself.

Agape or charity is the out-going, selfless and unconditional love. In Christian thought, this is the shape of divine love given flesh in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. *Agape*’s partial image is also uncovered in our own efforts to love the unlovable, the stranger, and the enemy. The majority of past thinkers

have characterized agape as the most “Christian” of loves.¹³ Often agape is frequently characterized as the “supernatural” love and the other loves as “natural.” But, in a particular strain of Christian thought which I am following, the dividing line between nature and super-nature is not so sharply drawn: all of the loves participate, from origin to end, in Love Itself.

Marriage and Family Life as a School of Love

It is commonplace in our culture to think of marriage as having primarily to do with *eros* or romantic love. We have focused on the experience of “falling in love,” being swept away, and drawn to another person in an almost ineffable way. What do we learn as we enter into the currents of *eros*’ dynamic sway? It is precisely the capacity of *eros* to propel us over the walls of self-hood, set aside individualized self-interest and plant the interest of the other at the core of our being that is its formative gift. *Eros* teaches us to yearn toward union and communion. The self-giving of *eros* is not primarily sacrificial in character. Rather it is expanding and ultimately generative. *Eros* teaches us to joy in intimacy with another human creature. At its best, it strips us of false self-consciousness and leaves us naked and vulnerable. As Lewis suggests, it obliterates the distinction between giving and receiving. Finally, *eros* is profoundly creative: it is the love that draws a couple together to form new life, it is the love that animates an artist to create a masterwork, the love that fires the imagination and fuels the energies of all who dream of a beautiful and just world, the love inbuilt in us that fires our insatiable longing for God. In terms of marriage, *eros* is both the dynamism that bonds a couple together and that initiates them into the fuller, more ecstatic reality that is only possible when isolation gives way to communion. Anyone who has loved a partner well will know that erotic love forms and changes one; that one is never the same after having been drawn out of one’s protected, isolated shell. Caryll Houselander, the mid-20th century English Catholic spiritual writer, got it right when she said of her love for Sydney Reilley, the man whom

¹³ The exception to this is Aelred of Rievaulx who finds friendship most Christian because it is the most particular - i.e. incarnational - and responsible of the loves.

she never married but with whom she was deeply *in love*, “Because I loved that man, I have loved many other people, animals and things.”¹⁴

It also seems that in our culture we focus a great deal on the power of physical attraction and sexual activity, at least our media portrays us that way. Both romantic love and sexual passion are a part of *eros* but simple lust, without the radical self-transcendence that *eros* implies, because it has merely to do with self-gratification and little to do with the beloved, cannot be included here. Lewis puts this well when he says that *eros* makes a man want, not a woman, but a *particular* woman. He also aptly remarks that without *eros* sexual enthrallment is a fact about ourselves but with *eros* it is a fact about the beloved.

Eros in its classical sense refers not simply to romantic or sexual attraction between human beings but can refer to a love of beauty or the good. One can be swept away and drawn inexorably toward these as well. I don’t want to ignore the possibly dangerous power of *eros*: indeed, the Greeks and all subsequent Christian generations have been vividly aware that unruly passion can become obsession. It can also become idolatrous if it endows the beloved with god-like status. It can also turn in on itself and fester. There are myriad cautions in our tradition against being carried away by *eros*, as if the real danger in marriage to love of God is being swept away by sensuality and made hostage to the passions which, much of the ancient spiritual tradition warns, is the opposite of the *apatheia* (disinterestedness) prized as the goal crown of the spiritual life. I’m with Lewis when he counters this fear with the caution that the temptation of marriage is not sensuality but avarice: the distractions of domesticity and the tendency to hoard for one’s own to the neglect of the needs of others.

In contemporary Catholic circles, the firing up of *eros* is sometimes seen as the best way to cement and sustain a marriage. This is exemplified in books or in programs that aim to enhance a couple’s sexual pleasure and prowess as a way of keeping the marriage alive. This is, of course, important: sexual intimacy is one of the great gifts of marriage and dysfunction in this arena can impede a couple’s growth together. But this should not be assumed to be all that marriage is about. It is also commonplace in our Catholic culture, among those who would be skeptical about a long term endeavor like

¹⁴ *Letters of Caryl Houselander: Her Spiritual Legacy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 109.

marriage being based on the quixotic ways of *eros*, to emphasize that love in marriage is a choice, that simply sticking it out through thick and thin, braving the years of difficulty even though they are arid, has more to do with love than the infatuation of romantic love. In this perspective, fidelity at all costs is the chief virtue and the call to “duty” the imperative that makes a marriage work.

There is nothing wrong with either of these approaches and, as it is said, “If it works, go for it.” But I have to admit that I find the view of love in marriage as either exclusively the realization of romantic love or sexual passion as well as the view of marital love as simply a determination to stick it out, not very fruitful. Instead, I would characterize the marriage relationship as potentially an environment in which Love Itself, explored through all the four modalities of love come into play and may be practiced, learned, explored, experienced in various degrees and depths. Erotic love is not an end in itself or the sum of all of marital love. Neither is duty or sacrificial love.

Affection or *Storge*

C.S. Lewis has lovely things to say about *storge*, affection or domestic love. But he focuses mainly on affection’s capacity to let us find the loveable in persons or things that are familiar or close to us. The love of home or homeland itself he would also characterize as *storge*, the most natural love. In his own pithy way, Lewis makes this observation: “The especial glory of Affection is that it can unite those who most emphatically, even comically, are not [made for one another]; people who, if they had not found themselves put down by fate in the same household or community, would have had nothing to do with each other.”¹⁵ This is all fine and good but I think Lewis really undervalues the spiritual potential of domestic love. Ernest Boyer in his book, *Finding God in Family* aptly dedicates an entire chapter to what he called “the sacrament of the care of others.” His title is highly appropriate. “Courage and persistence,” he writes, “these are the elements of the sacrament of the care of others”. It is persistence that keeps a person working at a life expressing love when the rewards of such a life are no longer

¹⁵ C.S.Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Harper Collins, 1960), 45.

clear, and it is courage that dares such commitment.”¹⁶ I think not only of the care of children but of the care of a spouse, especially in sickness or difficulty as well as the care of aging parents and other family members. A marriage is not merely a relationship of two people; it is the conjoining of two extended family systems, whether or not the couple intends this.

The experience of caring for another is profoundly self-expanding in a different way than is erotic attraction. Tenderness and compassion, deep sensitivity to the fragility and beauty of human life can be generated. As Christian ethicist Christine Gudorf has pointed out, this sort of domestic love can be generative and nurturing of the person doing the care-giving as well as for the one cared for.¹⁷ It can draw forth one’s gifts as healer and nurturer. Just as the arts of gardening can make one carefully attentive to the special needs of a garden’s ecosystem, alert to the subtle changes of season and composition of soils in order to allow a garden to flourish, so caretaking in family can be a means by which sensitivities to the mystery and wonder of human life are encouraged. With children, the caretaking looks forward to growth and the future. Caring for another at the end of life can be equally self-expanding. There is something about having attended to another in this affectionate way that bonds one to them in an ineffable way. You are initiated into a detailed, specific sort of love relationship based less on the vaulting draw of romantic or sexual passion than the intimate acts of caretaking.

Friendship or *Philia*

I am certainly not the first to explore *philia*, the love of friendship, as an essential component of marriage. My colleagues Michael Lawler and Todd Salzman have both written eloquently on the subject.¹⁸ Friendship is, in some views (Aelred of Rielvaux comes to mind) the most sublime and “spiritual” of loves because it is the most particular and responsible thus the most incarnational of loves.

¹⁶ Ernest Boyer, Jr., *A Way in the World: Family Life as Spiritual Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 64. The book was later published as *Finding God at Home*.

¹⁷ Christine E. Gudorf, “Sacrificial and Parental Spiritualities,” in *Religion, Feminism and the Family* (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 294-309.

¹⁸ Cf. Todd Salzman, “Friendship, Sacrament, and Marriage: The Distinction Between Christian Marital Friendship and Non-Christian Marital Friendship,” in *Marriage in the Catholic Tradition*, 115-24 and Michael G. Lawler, *Marriage and the Catholic Church: Disputed Questions* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), especially chapter 4.

If *eros* in marriage can be imaged as a man and woman turned toward one another and entering into the mystery of love discovered face to face, friendship can be imaged as a man and woman standing side by side, facing out. The secure platform of their shared love provides the setting for their engaging together in the search for the good as discovered around them. True friendship encourages growth toward the good in each of the partners. It is the relationship in which the full range of the virtue is most consciously cultivated. It entails consolation and encouragement as well as loving challenge. A friend calls one to be one's best self, provides a foil for one's efforts to expand life in the direction of the good, in the direction of God. A marital friendship is one that seeks mutual sanctification. It hopes not only for the flourishing of the marriage union but for the flourishing of each of the spouses. In a Christian understanding (Francis de Sales is the appropriate spokesperson here) a spiritual friendship is one that has as its essential content the love of God and the desire to grow together in God.

Additionally, I tend to think of *philia* as the primary love that fuels the larger social mission of the family.¹⁹ While marriages need to be tended internally, they also need to have a broader context in which they can flourish. They need to be about more than just their own preservation. The care and rearing of children can create a deep bond between a man and a woman but children grow up. The world in which the marriage exists does not go away and spouses who see themselves as sharing in the larger task of world renewal are bound by a good greater than themselves. This sense of social mission may take many forms: it may be centered in the local parish or see the global village as its stage. Either way, friends grow in virtue and toward the good by nurturing it in each other and by standing side by side to nurture the wider common good.

One comment I have to make, however, is that the idea of marriage as friendship must have a particular context in which to flourish. Since *philia* is, by definition, a love that must be both mutual and equal, a married man and woman must be able to see and deal with one another as equals to be friends. They must both share a horizon against which they view the world. Classical authors assumed that friendship could only take place among male friends as women were not privy to the intellectual and social lives in

¹⁹ On the social mission of the family see Thomas M. Kelly, "Sacramentality and Social Mission: a New Way to Imagine Marriage," in *Marriage in the Catholic Tradition*, 144-154.

which men moved. Even C.S. Lewis, writing in Britain in the mid-20th century, makes this assumption. He thought women should form their own friendly networks. If women are assumed to be inferiors, or if their educational opportunities are limited or if they are denied access to realms where men hold exclusive power, it is unlikely that genuine friendships, based on a shared love of the good and a desire for the enhancement of the good in the other, can occur. There might be sentimental friendships, based on a sense of being cared for by another, but the full blown, profoundly formative friendship is unlikely.

I have some doubts about the ability of a theology of *complementarity* between the genders to facilitate the love of friends *if* this assumes that all men and all women have fixed essential characteristic which inexorably define their natures, their roles and the male-female relationship.²⁰ Cooperation and collaboration do not depend on the roles and natures of the genders being rigidly defined. I also have a difficult time seeing how *philia* can flourish in a theological environment in which the husband, by virtue of his maleness, is assumed to be spiritual head of the family. My understanding of the way the Spirit works in most contexts, familial or not, is first through each of us. Thus husbands and wives are called to practice the arts of *mutual discernment*, paying attention to the ways the Spirit draws each individual as well as the way the Spirit seems to be prompting the couple together. Discernment is one of the great spiritual arts. It seems to me that in our individualized culture, we overemphasize the needs and desires of the individual when we make decisions. The antidote to this is, however, is not to assume that discernment is a matter only for husbands and that wives are being faithful by simply being obedient to their spouse. Fidelity in marriage is a matter of profound mutual respect, respect not only for the person of the other but for the gifts of discernment and God-leaning that each of the couple has. The delicate and deeply challenging art of practicing mutual discernment seems to me to be a significant part of the love of friends.

Agape

²⁰ I do not assume here that women and men are simply clones of one another. Equality does not imply a sort of neutered humanity. There are sexual differences between men and women and some generalizable qualities that men and women (at least in our majority culture) seem to exhibit. But genders are culturally determined. My concern is the stereotyping, subordinating and rigid role assignment that stereotypes can lead to.

One of the oldest objections to marriage being a context for spiritual growth is the objection that the love of another person is necessarily a rival to love of God. C.S. Lewis would have a “supernatural” charity or *agape* come to the rescue of the other, merely “natural” loves. I have no doubt that erotic obsession, single-focused domesticity fueled by acquisitiveness or self-absorption, or overbearing friendships can become idols. But these loves are not intrinsically so. Each of the loves, in its own way, can allow us to experience some facet of Love Itself. The practice of any of the loves pries us open and makes us vulnerable. Thus we can be pried open wider and wider, to love in new and ever more expansive ways.

Agape is the radical love which extends itself unconditionally toward all. It is the love that seems not to concern itself so much with love returned as with love poured out. It is thus, strangely enough, the least personal of loves. It is also the love that continues to operate even when least deserved. For most thinkers, the model for this love is the redemptive love of God expressed through Jesus the Christ. Divine *agape* is often linked with the notion of sacrifice. This is appropriate. But it is not the only way to look at *agape*. It depends on how you view God. It is possible to view the nature of Divine Love as intrinsically generative: Love to be Love cannot help but overflow in dynamic, creative and redemptive abundance. (Francis de Sales again is my guide in this). Love in this view is not diminished by giving but expresses its own generative, plentiful nature. At the same time *agape* is a distinctive type of love. I will not be foolish enough to try to explore *agape* as the love that best describes divine love but I will attempt to suggest that human beings can in some small measure participate in this love through their own loving.

To participate in this *agapic* love one must love the stranger, the enemy, the forgotten and the unlovable. To love this way is to get a glimpse of the way God might love even when we fail to so miserably to love one other. To love this way presumes that we have attempted to cultivate a new kind of seeing, what I would term contemplative awareness.²¹ Within marriage this might mean loving the unlovable in spouse, in-laws and children. From the window of the marriage as the couple looks out onto the world, *agape* sees the wider community, from local neighborhood to the global community, with

²¹ I have developed this idea in more detail in my *Seasons of a Family's Life*.

altered perspective. I'm not merely talking about sentimentality here: the generous empathetic response to disabled children or disaster victims is laudable (and I hope instinctive to Christians) but seeing with the contemplative eye goes deeper. It is important to remember that this type of love is not dependent on liking someone, or approving of them, or condoning questionable or violent behavior. Rather, contemplative awareness seeks for what Thomas Merton called the "hidden ground of love" that undergirds all that is. It is the sort of love that risks embarking on the journey of forgiveness, that struggles to effect reconciliation rather than retribution, that strives to heal and repair rather than hold others bound in the chains of fear, hatred and prejudice. It is the love that seeks peace not conflict, that works for a world and for relationships that that, in some small way, hint at the kingdom Jesus proclaimed. The Christian spiritual journey conceived as contemplative awareness may be many things but at its core it is the adventure that lets the Word take root in the heart; it is the adventure of allowing space for the transformative influx of the Spirit. In this contemplative awareness, reality is not approached primarily as a problem to be solved, a cipher to be decoded or data meant to be analyzed and controlled but as a mystery to be plumbed, an astonishment etching its meaning on our hearts. Contemplative awareness invites vision that is constantly expanding. It encourages the radical opening of self to be changed by a reality beyond our own. It creates an emerging spaciousness of self, helping us to become broad and wide and empty enough to hold the vast and magnificent and excruciating paradoxes of created life in the crucible of love. *Agape* is this sort of love.

Marriage, both as a personal relationship and as a community of persons offers countless opportunities for the cultivation of a contemplative awareness, a seeing into the hidden ground of love, which invites each and all of us the unconditional, redemptive, restorative, healing experience of *agape*. All the other loves – *eros*, *storge*, *philia* - in some small measure, prepare in us a capacity for *agape* by teaching us to practice the concrete arts of love.

Married Love and the Ecclesial Community

Marriage is a School of Love. It is one "state in life" in which the wider vocation to the Christian life, and hence the spiritual journey, may be practiced. It is a school of

great significance for the entire Church. As I have suggested, specific teachings within the Church, and certainly pastoral practice, about marital intimacy, child rearing, and roles within family are best measured against the extent to which they actually, in a given concrete situation not only theoretically, allow love in its many modalities to flourish. Like any spiritual discernment, the fruits looked for are long term, not necessarily immediate. The real experience of married couples in creative dialogue with the often more idealized principles that give shape to Catholic teaching as well as edifying examples of devotion, say of the Holy Family is, I believe, an important resource for the Church. I am not suggesting that there is no tension between the larger society's often unconsidered and even deleterious views of marriage, human sexuality and love and what the Church holds up as a Sacramental union. In fact that tension is often keen. Nor am I suggesting that there is no role for holding up an ideal of marriage and of family. But I am suggesting that the conscious, informed experiences of real couples engaged in the spiritual journey should be part of the theological and pastoral life of the church. Couples themselves from varied economic, educational, cultural and ethnic backgrounds must be consulted about what, in a given situation or at a given stage of the life cycle, allows love to grow. I am also suggesting that couples vary and that even a given couple will find their discernments evolving over the course of a lifetime. There will be "calls within a call" that may alter the way a couple practices the Christian life within the family. There must be an acknowledgement of this and of the complex vicissitudes of the human lifecycle and of the ongoing inspiration of the Spirit which often blows where it will. This does not, I believe, threaten to subvert or weaken the important guiding role of normative Catholic teaching. Rather, it takes seriously the role of the Spirit as it enlivens all parts of the Church, Christ's Mystical Body. But when principles enacted in faith reduce or tear away the fabric of love within a specific marriage or family, those principles should be balanced with a pastoral view that commits itself to love's flourishing. With this in mind, it seems that marital love cannot be conceived solely as mutual self-giving, especially if self-gift is defined only as self-sacrifice or as the full and unrestricted expression of sexual intimacy. Love is, as we have seen, a many-faceted reality.

To conclude: I have suggested that marriage is indeed a school of love in the fullest sense and thus a formative environment for spiritual growth. In the complex union that is the marital bond with its extended network of relationships, love in all its modalities can be practiced. Through *eros*, romantic love, the confines of the narrow self are breached, lover and beloved become one and the rigid boundaries between giving and receiving are relaxed. *Eros* allows for the possibility of a larger, more generous self with a more spacious capacity to love. Through the passion of *eros*, love also bears generative fruit. Through the practice of *storge*, affectionate love, new modalities of love are discovered. A deep and tender compassion for the needs and fragility of one's fellow creatures may emerge. "The sacrament of the care of others" can become a sacred practice that allows one to become more generous and nurturing of God's creation. Through *philia* (friendship) the otherness of the spouse is respected. The unique gift of each of the partners is honored. The love of friends makes mutual discernment possible. Side by side a couple learns to love and work together both for the good of the other and for the greater good. Finally, *agapic* love flows out of the practice of the other loves. One learns to love a little like God loves, unconditionally: the unlovable in one's partner, the recalcitrance of a child, the impossible in-law and eventually the stranger, even the undeserving. One works then assiduously for the repair and restoration of love torn and broken by seeking forgiveness and reconciliation.

This deep and immensely spacious *agapic* love may ultimately be grace and gift but it is prepared for by the practice of the other loves. At any given stage of a couple's marriage, one of the loves may predominate. But all of them are potentially available to the couple. Marriage is not all romance and passion nor is it merely dutiful endurance. Day in and day out, amid the unglamorous and tedious routine that is most people's lives, the marriage relationship slowly remakes us into the image in which we were first created. It can be a school of love, a place of spiritual practice if we would let it be. Part ecstasy, part sorrow, part delight, part profound suffering, part challenge, part consolation, part receiving, part giving, gritty and grace-filled, sometimes tenuous, sometimes solid, marriage offers companionship in and a seedbed for the adventure of the spiritual journey: a journey into the mystery of Love itself.

My dear people, since God has loved us so much, we too should love one another. No one has ever seen God but as long as we love one another God will live in us and his love will be complete in us. We can know we are living in him and he is living in us because he lets us share his Spirit. (I John 4:10-13)