

Family life in a post-conciliar pastoral agenda

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Abstract: *Vatican II preserved traditional teaching on Christian marriage and family life yet also enabled the emergence of a renewed ecclesial vision in which married couples and families are called forth in vocation and mission like never before. The author explores this development and argues that there is an alarming absence of engagement with it in pastoral agendas in the Australian church. Two factors hindering such an engagement are discussed: one stemming from the *Humanae Vitae* controversy, and the other relating to the baptismal paradigm which currently dominates discourse about the “lay” vocation. A closing reflection proposes a “nuptial” paradigm shift that would allow core issues of sexuality, intimacy and familial belonging to be better integrated into pastoral life and ministry.*

Key Words: Vatican II; Christian marriage; family ministry; marital spirituality; lay vocation; parish renewal; *Humanae Vitae*; *Familiaris Consortio*

While preserving the essential content of traditional church teaching on Christian marriage and family life, the Second Vatican Council opened up new understandings which have important implications, not only for marriage and family life but for the vocation of all Christ’s faithful. In this article I will identify what was new about its teaching and comment on its impact on the pastoral agenda of the church in Australia, particularly in terms of the parish setting. I will suggest that, despite an interpenetrating relationship between family and parish life, a robust engagement with the conciliar vision of marriage and family is alarmingly absent from most parish pastoral agendas. I will discuss two factors contributing to this situation: one stemming from the *Humanae Vitae* controversy that followed the Council and the other relating to the baptismal paradigm which currently dominates discourse about the “lay” vocation. Finally, I will propose a “nuptial” paradigm shift that would allow core issues of sexuality, intimacy, and familial belonging to be better integrated into pastoral life and ministry, and which would address the vocational journeys of all Christ’s faithful, including singles and celibates.

TRADITIONAL TEACHINGS, NEW INSIGHTS

A renewed vision of Christian marriage and family life was articulated in the conciliar documents *Gaudium et Spes* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, continued to find expression in Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and culminated thirteen years later in Pope John Paul II’s apostolic post-synodal exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*.¹ In keeping with the

¹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (7 December 1965); *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (18 November 1965); Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, Encyclical on the Regulation of Birth (25 July 1968); John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Christian Family in the Modern World (22 November 1981). References to Vatican documents in this article are from the Vatican website www.vatican.va.

constant tradition, the Second Vatican Council taught that “the Christian family springs from marriage.”² Marriage is described as a union between a man and a woman constituted by the will of God and the will of spouses. This divine-human partnership involves the free cooperation and fidelity of husband and wife in forging a life-long bond of intimacy which is exclusive and indissoluble, a reflection of the covenant between Christ and the church. In keeping with previous church teaching articulated in *Casti Connubii*,³ the Council affirmed the inherent goodness of conjugal life, the unity of spouses, and the ordering of the marriage bond to the procreation and the education of children. Like *Casti Connubii*, the Council taught the importance of marriage and family to society’s wellbeing, and the duty of all—including representatives of the state—to protect and foster them as a fundamental institution. As with previous teaching, it expressed grave concern about the destruction visited upon the society’s moral fabric through the effects of casual sexual relations, adultery, divorce, contraception and abortion.

Moving beyond previous teaching, however, Vatican II introduced a number of new ideas which I will describe under two headings: first, a holistic vision of marital love; and second, a mission-oriented view of the family.

(1) *Vision of marital love*

To appreciate the innovation of conciliar teaching with regard to marriage one needs to recall that, influenced by the Stoic ethic of classical antiquity, the previous Christian outlook subordinated the conjugal relationship to a “generative” priority and a judgment as to whether or not a behaviour was “according to nature.” In *Gaudium et Spes* neither concept reigns, and, followed a few years later by *Humanae Vitae*, a personalistic view is seen to influence church teaching.⁴ No longer is the married couple’s lovemaking deemed acceptable primarily because of its natural benefit of propagating the human race; now it is equally appreciated as a way of growing in a loving communion that reveals God’s design for humanity. No longer does the church teach that the primary end of marriage is procreation. Of no less importance is “that the mutual love of the spouses be embodied in a rightly ordered manner, that it grow and ripen.”⁵ As an intimate partnership that is fully human, total, faithful, exclusive and fecund,⁶ marriage calls for a reciprocal gift of self by which husband and wife reflect trinitarian love. Completely absent is any of the pre-conciliar language suggesting that the husband has “primacy” over his wife. Together they are “interpreters” in a divinely-ordained mission to witness to Christ before their family and the world. While procreation and the education of children remain integral to the marital vision, they do not eclipse the centrality of the spousal relationship. Rather, spousal unity and the capacity to co-create human life are presented as inseparable dimensions of a holistic reality. The unitive and the procreative meanings interpenetrate one another. Contraceptive methods that deliberately disrupt this unity are incompatible with the Christian vision. Hence we have the controversial statement that “each and every

² *Gaudium et Spes* 48 [henceforth GS].

³ Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, Encyclical on Christian Marriage (31 December 1930).

⁴ See Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (NY: Paulist Press, 1966), 235-239.

⁵ GS 50.

⁶ See *Humanae Vitae* 9 [henceforth HV]

marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life.”⁷

Authentic love requires significant human effort and personal investment. Here the “self discipline” and “ascetical practices” advocated refer to the self-mastery required for lovemaking which is truly other-centred, responsible, attentive to one’s spouse and to God’s designs, and not reduced to the pursuit of self-gratifying biological instincts.⁸ Family planning, for good reasons and by right means, is not only permissible but promoted as “responsible parenthood.”⁹ Husband and wife, working together and mindful of the designs of God, are the “interpreters” in this important task of discernment with respect to bringing new life into the world. Their deliberations must include their own wellbeing and that of their existing children, as well as the good of the society and church community surrounding them. “The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God.”¹⁰

Even with the well known controversies which ensued from Paul VI’s decision to maintain the traditional teaching on contraception despite the recommendation of the Majority Report, there is room for considerable agreement about the welcome advance made upon pre-conciliar magisterial statements. After centuries of teaching steeped in a naturalistic view of the destiny of biological faculties, Vatican II marked the turn towards a holistic and spiritual vision of marriage drawing on categories such as interpersonal spousal love as a way of holiness, the integration of body and spirit in a vision of the dignity of the human person, responsible spousal decision-making and its familial, social and ecclesial impact, and the formation of conscience according to God’s Word. In all this, the sacramental sign-value of Christian marriage becomes more apparent than in any previous church teaching.

(2) A mission-oriented view of the family

During the pontificate of John Paul II the conciliar teaching undergoes further development. This development flows logically from the assimilation of conciliar themes calling for the participation of the whole people of God in the life and mission of the church. Council documents contain succinct statements about the mission of the family as part of the lay apostolate,¹¹ however it is not until *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) that these missionary implications find comprehensive treatment.

The missionary language of *Familiaris Consortio* is striking, strong, and all-pervasive. Christian married couples and parents are described repeatedly as “witnesses” and “missionaries” (with the term “mission” appearing sixty-four times). Repeatedly the

⁷ HV 11. *Gaudium et Spes* left open the question of artificial contraception, simply stating that the faithful are “forbidden to use methods disapproved of by the teaching authority of the church” (51) without specifying what those forbidden methods were. Despite last minute pressure from some bishops at the Council to make a clear ruling against artificial contraceptives, Pope Paul VI deferred judgment pending consideration of the findings of the Study Commission that followed the Council.

⁸ See HV 21. Although conjugal chastity is a teaching of *Casti Connubii*, *Humanae Vitae* describes it from a personalistic view.

⁹ HV 10.

¹⁰ GS 50.

¹¹ For example, *Lumen Gentium* 35; *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 11.

Christian family is described in terms of “ecclesial service.” It is not merely “saved,” it is a “saving,” “evangelizing,” “witnessing” community. As “the first and vital cell of society” the Christian family is also the basic cell of ecclesial life. It is “the church in miniature,” the “domestic church” and as such, like the universal church, has all the marks of a priestly, prophetic calling to build up the kingdom of God in history. The family is “the most effective means for humanizing and personalizing society;” its contribution to the advancement of humanity is “original,” “irreplaceable,” utilizing “formidable energies.”¹²

The mission of parents as educators finds fresh emphasis. Parents are “first heralds of the gospel for their children.” Their role as educators, we are told, “is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it.” The family is described as “a school of deeper humanity,” “the first school of those social virtues which every society needs.” The family’s role in education has a critical place in organic pastoral work, calling for “a new form of cooperation” in the educative practices of the wider community.¹³

The mission of the family is extensive. According to *Familiaris Consortio* it does not stop with procreation and education but can and should impact upon manifold other social activities, especially in service to the poor. From the practice of hospitality to political intervention to forging a new theology of work, families are called to be protagonists in all areas of ecclesial and civic life. Their voices have every right and responsibility to be heard, for “the good of the family is an indispensable and essential value of the civil community.”¹⁴ Even references to family prayer take on a missionary flavour. Prayer is crucial to family life, not just because it leads to holiness, but because it fuels its central calling to transform the world in Christ.

To sum up, in our post-Vatican II era no longer are married couples and families to be viewed merely as dutiful recipients of the church’s pastoral care, lovingly guided by their pastors. Now they are called to be a proactive social and ecclesial force with global implications. Like their pastors they have a mission for which they must be called to account, for “the future of humanity passes by way of the family.”¹⁵ Thus in its elaboration of conciliar themes *Familiaris Consortio* calls for a degree of involvement and empowerment of families in the church’s pastoral agenda like never before. To rephrase this point in today’s popular terminology of lay ministries, it identifies a new kind of church minister: the married couple and the family.¹⁶

RENEWED TEACHINGS IN THE PARISH CONTEXT

To what extent has the church in Australia embraced this renewed vision of Christian marriage and family life? In the light of John Paul II’s oft-repeated statement that “no plan for organized pastoral work, at any level, must ever fail to take into consideration

¹² This paragraph quotes from *Familiaris Consortio* 2-43, 49, 52-53 [henceforth FC].

¹³ Quotations in this paragraph, respectively, are from FC 39, 36, 21, 36, 40.

¹⁴ FC 45.

¹⁵ FC 86.

¹⁶ This optimistic view sits alongside the contradictions which are an inevitable part of the human dynamics of an evolving church, such as the fact that at the actual meeting of the 1980 Synod on the Family the input of lay participants was only marginally included and only after its absence was raised by participating bishops.

the pastoral care of the family,”¹⁷ my observations will focus predominantly on organised pastoral agendas. The importance of including marriage and family as part of pastoral strategies becomes evident when we consider its organic relationship with another basic cell of communion and mission: the parish.

Commentators such as Joseph Komonchak have noted that one of the most significant ecclesiological contributions of Vatican II was its carefully nuanced expression of the relationship between the universal and particular dimensions of the church.¹⁸ While the local church (diocese) can only exist in the universal church, the universal church does not exist except in and out of the concrete, historical-cultural experiences of local church communities. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* identifies parish as the most important grouping by which the faithful experience the diocese—and therefore the universal church—in its visible, local manifestation.¹⁹ When we pause to consider the convergence of this perspective of the local church with the conciliar teaching on marriage as “the beginning and basis of human society,”²⁰ we are confronted by a reality that touches the heart of every pastoral vision: that is, family life and parish life—enmeshed as they are in the very ground of history, society and culture—are neither mere recipients nor convenient demarcations of the universal church; they are intrinsic to its very existence:

It is there [in the parish] that the Church is seen locally. In a certain sense it is the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters ... The parish is not principally a structure, a territory, or a building, but rather, “the family of God, a fellowship afire with a unifying spirit” (LG, 28), “a familial and welcoming home” (CT, 1979).²¹

Christian family life and parish life are deeply linked. Each is centred on sacramental communion: the married couple and the Eucharist respectively. As the starting point for human and spiritual generation and as fundamental cells of ecclesial communion, they represent one’s most immediate experiences of church. This is true of parish even in our age of mobility and personal preference. While schools and other kinds of communities may appear to provide equivalent opportunities for ecclesial belonging, in the final analysis it is a person’s local parish that bears the obligation of pastoral care. The parish is where people go to “find” the church when there is nowhere else to go. The parish is where milestone life events are celebrated, from baptism to funeral. It is through the parish that people ordinarily connect with their bishop and the workings of the diocese.

So how have parishes responded to the renewed teachings on family life ensuing from Vatican II? Admittedly, the question is an intimidating one for any parish leader, given that we live in an era of extraordinary social and technological change, from the way social networking technology is reshaping the experience of human relating, to the impact of reproductive technologies and the ethical issues that accompany them, to the calling

¹⁷ FC 70.

¹⁸ Joseph Komonchak, “Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” *Origins* 28:4 (22 April 1999): 763-768.

¹⁹ Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (4 December 1963), 42. See also *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 10.

²⁰ *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 11.

²¹ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World (30 December 1988), 26.

into question the most fundamental of traditional assumptions about the nature of marriage and family life. We can add to this a number of internal church debates relating to theological and pastoral issues concerning sexuality and marriage.

I acknowledge too that parishes have no shortage of people who display personal loving care and concern for families. In fact, a concern sometimes heard is that the church is *only* interested in families to the point where those who are unmarried and childless feel excluded. Curiously, however, close attention to pastoral council agendas, vision statements and planning documents reveals a different picture: despite its prevalence, centrality and vulnerability, “marriage and family” tend to feature as a low priority in parish life compared to myriad other explicitly stated concerns such as liturgy, social justice, ecumenism, women and youth. Where “the family” does appear, it is most often in terms of parenting issues rather than directly addressing the spousal relationship. In fact it is not uncommon to find the term “marriage” completely absent from parish vision and planning documents. Today it is possible to read comprehensive pastoral strategies for deepening spirituality, community and service in the local church with only scant reference to the specific contribution of married couples or familial bonds. Thus parishioners are encouraged to live out their “lay vocation” and their “baptismal vocation” but rarely their marital vocation. Where “family” does appear in pastoral strategy documents it is usually presented as a group in need rather than as a proactive contributor to the mission of the parish.

A similar absence can be observed in many parish ministry training programs which adopt a “one size fits all” approach to theology and spirituality, with little or no reference to church teaching on marriage and family; and this despite the fact that marriage and family life form the dominant vocational experience of the parishioners to whom they are being trained to minister.²² This absence is both interesting and alarming. When the most basic relational cell of church and society escapes prioritization in pastoral planning and ministry training, one wonders how any deep-seated pastoral agenda can proceed.

Another observation: where marriage and family do appear among ministries of a parish they are usually fuelled by a source beyond the parish. That is, while it is not uncommon to find parishioners initiating a parish social justice group, or a youth group, or a bible study, it is highly unusual for parishioners to start a “marriage ministry” in the parish. Involvement would normally be by way of contact with an ecclesial movement such as Marriage Encounter or a marriage preparation course of the diocesan agency. While there is nothing wrong with this “outsourcing” approach in itself, the absence of direct parish initiative concerning its most vital cell of communion and mission calls for reflection.

We can, of course, point to a number of encouraging signs of assimilation of conciliar teaching in the church at large. We now have ecclesial movements (though small in number) that promote marital spirituality. Some of these movements have in turn produced a range of pastoral resources by which couples and families share their gifts

²² The 2006 National Church Life Survey reveals a picture of Australian Catholic parish life where 68% of Mass attenders are married, and another 15% have previously been in a marital relationship (currently separated, divorced or widowed); http://www.ppo.catholic.org.au/pdf/ExtendedProfile_2006.pdf (accessed 5 April 2011).

with the wider church community. They also feature “couple to couple” ministry whereby “married couples themselves by the leadership they offer ... become apostles to other married couples.”²³ This “like to like” ministry is also visible in ministries that address single-parent families. The mission of the wounded healer has a crucial place in family ministry.²⁴ Some empowerment of the “apostolate in homes”²⁵ has occurred through the growth of home-based ministries such as the 1970s/1980s promotion of “small group” gatherings, as well as ministries such as Passionist Family Groups. In some cases this has extended to dividing parishes into smaller geographical units based on household groupings that create a “family of families” vision of parish community. Regarding the educative mission, parents today are readily acknowledged as “prime educators” in collaboration with schools. In many parishes this attitude extends to family-based sacramental programs, a model which could be extended to other kinds of parish programs.²⁶ The gradual emergence of diocesan offices devoted specifically to marriage and family issues began in the 1990s.

In terms of Australian Catholic Bishops’ statements two contributions stand out. *When Dreams Die* (1985) was a well-received attempt to acknowledge the situation of divorced women and men, including their gifted contribution to their communities. *Families: our Hidden Treasure*, published in the lead-up to the 1994 International Year of the Family and after a National Family Life Consultation in 1992, was an affirmation of the strengths and diversity of Australian families, and reflected the empowering tone of *Familiaris Consortio*. Perhaps the strongest “top down” promotion of the evangelizing dimension of family life can be identified in the 2005 recommendation of the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Committee for Family and for Life that “family councils” be established in each diocese. Important to note here is that the primary focus of each diocesan family council would be “to foster the gifts of families for the evangelizing mission of the Church.”²⁷ Although diocesan implementation is gradual, this proposal captures the essential insight and tone of *Familiaris Consortio* regarding the proactive role of families to the life and mission of the church. It reflected ten years of prior activity by a lay working group developing pastoral strategies as part of the work of the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference, with a focus on the family as an evangelizing community.²⁸

Still, despite these encouraging signs and the sustained efforts of those who enable them, it would be reasonable to say that the topic of “marriage and family” remains a relatively low priority on the organized pastoral agendas of most parishes. Put positively,

²³ HV 26.

²⁴ For example, *Rainbows and Seasons* (for adults and children affected by divorce), *Retrouvaille* (for couples in troubled marriages), *Walking in Love* and *Project Rachel* (for those affected by abortion), *The Beginning Experience*, and programs of Centacare and CatholicCare.

²⁵ HV 26.

²⁶ The Antioch youth movement in Australia is an example of a parish-based youth strategy that incorporates a vision of “domestic church” and a role for the witness of married couples.

²⁷ See Australian Catholic Marriage and Family Council, “A Proposal for the Establishment of Diocesan Family Councils” (2005); http://www.catholic.org.au/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=49&Itemid=184&limitstart=10.

²⁸ Australia-wide strategies have included educative material for parishes, a strategy for families with disabilities, and the convening of national family gatherings. Documents developed include a Common Marriage Policy that was adopted by all Australian dioceses and two pastoral guides: *Marriage in the Catholic Church – Frequently Asked Questions* and *Divorce and the Catholic Church – Frequently Asked Questions*.

it is an exceptional parish whose strategies for community and mission are consciously shaped by the missionary potential of spousal and familial bonds. The reasons for this are of course complex. What I wish to raise here are specific difficulties manifest at the very outset of the teachings in question, by which they were unable to receive an adequate hearing from the moment they were issued. In the case of the mission-orientation of the family, the widespread preoccupation with trying to define the term “laity” in an all-encompassing way (a term and task that dominates the conciliar documents themselves) had the effect of overshadowing the specific “marital” and “familial” dimensions of vocation. In the case of *Humanae Vitae* the document was immediately plunged into a controversy which effectively reduced it to a debate over a single sentence about birth control, a debate so volatile and all-consuming that the rest of the document was largely ignored.

This latter point deserves particular attention, for it was with *Humanae Vitae* that post-conciliar public discussion about church teaching on marriage and family began in earnest. As we know, the conversation started very badly. In fact, so badly that it could be said that parishes never really recovered. In 1968, what might have been the opportunity for the discovery of a holistic vision of marital love—one which, given the deeply personal and sensitive nature of the topic, called for gentle healing steps and gradual progress—instead became an all-or-nothing “test” of one’s orthodoxy (or, alternatively, one’s “progressiveness”). A tragic mix of pastoral mishandling, human pain, hardening of positions, and an enormous amount of media-driven ignorance led to a situation where the beginning of a discussion became its closure. Pastors and people made up their mind one way or another, and when the dust settled an uneasy truce of silence prevailed which continues to this day. Like a family that finds a degree of peace by avoiding contentious topics, the silence surrounding *Humanae Vitae* allows for a kind of harmonious functioning in day to day parish life, but it does nothing to advance understanding on a topic of vital relevance to most parishioners: how one’s most intimate relationship is to be lived as a pathway of holiness and as a mission to the world. While theologians debate the technicalities of moral complexities and battles are fought at the level of public policy, the parish pastoral agenda for its part is silent and disconnected.

Of course, during the five decades since the Council the contraception question has been engulfed by a tsunami of further challenges to church teaching on sexuality and marriage. But it is worth pausing to consider the *Humanae Vitae* controversy, for important reasons. Not only was it the first popular discussion on sexuality in the post-conciliar church, but at a personal level it represents a fundamental ethical question facing a man and woman entering into a sexual relationship. How a couple answers that basic question has consequences for further questions and decisions, for the answer reflects and shapes deep-seated attitudes towards relationship, fertility, human responsibility, and so on. In fact the contraception question encapsulates a critical principle to which so many other ethical dilemmas are related, namely the idea that in the schema of love there exists a kind of human ecology whereby one’s bodily generative powers cannot simply be “extracted” from their proper relational and spiritual context without compromising human dignity.

A factor exacerbating the *Humanae Vitae* controversy was the lack of practical resources available to support the actual living out of the vision it espoused. In Australian

parishes of 1968 the psychology of human relationships was seen to have little relevance to religious observance, “marital spirituality” was virtually unheard of, and the only form of natural family planning widely available was the unreliable Rhythm Method. Effectively this meant that in an era of immense social upheaval a teaching which touched the most sensitive area of couples’ personal lives, a teaching which was little understood and which had life-changing practical consequences, was promulgated without any effective pastoral strategies (beyond the existing counselling skills of priests) to facilitate either its understanding or its application. Theological debates aside, the pastoral complexities were under-estimated with dire consequences.²⁹

Today we find ourselves in a vastly different situation, in ways both hopeful and discouraging. On the one hand, the Rhythm Method has long been superseded by natural family planning methods with reliability levels comparable to, and even exceeding, those of popular artificial methods.³⁰ Surprisingly, certain societal shifts would appear to resonate with natural methods of family planning: an ecological awareness, chemical-free approaches to the body, a climate of open discussion about human relationships and gender equality. Most importantly, today we have a number of Catholic apostolates that introduce people to marital spirituality, the ground in which application of the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* is planted—presentations which are intellectually reasonable, practical and attractively communicated.³¹

Still, despite the relative success of these initiatives, use of natural family planning methods remains drastically low.³² Unlike 1968 when parishioners paused to hear the magisterium speak on birth control (even if to reject it), in the twenty-first century few would appear to be listening. Meanwhile, the decimation of traditional ethical and social assumptions in society proceeds at an astonishing pace. The challenges faced by a handful of church ministries competing with the avalanche of opposing messages from the surrounding secular culture is a David and Goliath scene of epic proportions.

Although the lack of practice of natural family planning among Catholic couples is often viewed as “rejection” of church teaching, it is reasonable to ask whether it more likely reflects the lack of opportunity (and lack of interest) to engage with an adequate communication of the teaching. Almost fifty years of post-conciliar preaching and catechesis in parishes have seen many aspects of conciliar teaching addressed, yet by and large marriage and sexuality remain in the too-difficult basket, left to the agendas of organizations beyond the parish. Indeed, the very thought of parish strategies inviting

²⁹ Three statements on *Humanae Vitae* were issued by the Australian Catholic Bishops during this tumultuous period. The first two (August 1968, August 1972) focused on doctrinal clarity. The third (September 1974) addressed pastoral application, urging pastors to use “the psychological insight, pastoral care and human understanding that good confessors have always used.” See *Australian Catholic Bishops’ Statements Since Vatican II*, Nicholas Kerr (ed.) (Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1985), 148-155.

³⁰ Contemporary natural methods in Australia with recognized effectiveness include the Billings Ovulation Method, the Sympto-Thermal Method and the Creighton Method. For a summary of statistical data see Francine and Byron Pirola, *A Total Gift of Self* (Sydney: LivingWell Media, 2008), 20-22.

³¹ For example, *Teams, Marriage Encounter, Engaged Encounter, Couples for Christ, Celebrate Love* and *Embrace* all promote relational skills within a sacramental vision of marriage. A range of educational initiatives have arisen from organisations that promote Pope John Paul II’s “theology of the body.”

³² At time of writing the most recent research of the Guttmacher Institute showed that among married Catholic women in the USA only 3% practice natural family planning. R. Jones and J Dreweke, “Countering Conventional Wisdom: New Evidence on Religion and Contraceptive Use” (13 April 2011); at www.guttmacher.org.

parishioners to consider their faith from the standpoint of their sexuality and most intimate relationships may appear the equivalent of kicking a hornet's nest. But that is the point. They are sensitive topics because in these areas lie experiences touching the core of human existence, identity, wellbeing and happiness. If we are serious about deep-seated conversion, these areas can't be sidelined. Nor can they wait for theologians to resolve their differences. In parish life there is an essential discussion waiting to be opened; one that calls for acute sensitivity, humility, courage, intellectual rigour and compassionate leadership. Such a discussion requires the development of "safe" forums (with appropriate privacy parameters) for reflection to occur at cascading levels: between spouses, among couples, and among the wider parish community. As difficult as this task is, silence is not a viable option, for by default it leaves parishioners to enter the conversation in countless other forums provided by secular society.

Here we can note that since the 1990s, beyond the parish setting, valuable conversations have been opened up around John Paul II's "theology of the body." The Melbourne-based John Paul II Institute represents an academic expression of this engagement, while the popularized catechetical tools of Christopher West have had relative success at reaching grassroots audiences including youth. While aspects of this theology will be debated, experience would suggest that popular presentations of John Paul II's "theology of the body" are an excellent starting point for organized parish catechesis where they make it on to the parish agenda.

A renewed attempt to break open the topic of marital sexuality requires from all participants an enormous amount of patient, compassionate listening. It requires an honest acknowledgment of how "family" can become a symbol of one's "conservative" or "liberal" socio-political leanings rather than a response to the gospel. The readiness in some church quarters to label fellow-Catholics "dissenters"—and in others to categorically dismiss "the right wing"—does nothing to help the situation. That the most intimate aspect of a person's sexual life should become the symbol of an ideological battlefield is a kind of violence that is the very antithesis of the gospel and the spirit of the Council. Here we must acknowledge that use of the phrase "intrinsically evil"³³ with regard to contraception, while technically justifiable, is confusing in the pastoral context and distracts from the overall tone of *Humanae Vitae* which appeals to a positive vision rather than being coercive, is compassionate rather than judgemental. At the end of the day, Vatican II has given rise to a holistic vision of life and love, couched in a communicative tone of empowerment and collaboration,³⁴ which has prophetic implications in an Australian society bereft of any coherent vision of human sexuality. Like all church teachings it requires pastoral application and its formulation will evolve over time. But for now it is the best we have, and even where opinions differ on specific interpretations and lived practices, it is a teaching that offers a solid starting point for parishioner reflections. For instance: In our journey through our marital life what does it mean to live as "one," to be open to divine love, to work together to make responsible parenting decisions, to give and receive life, to affirm and empower one another as man/woman, to form our children

³³ HV 14 uses the Latin *intrinsece inhonestum*, usually translated as "intrinsically wrong" or "intrinsically dishonest."

³⁴ John O'Malley has drawn attention to the significance of the *form* of church documents, arguing that choice of tone and language can be as indicative of magisterial development as much as a document's actual content. See John W. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" in David Schultenover (ed.), *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* (NY/London: Continuum, 2007), 52-91.

in love, to open our home in a gospel spirit, to share our domestic resources with others (especially the poor), to offer our services to the parish community in “couple to couple” and “like to like” ministry? These are just a few of the searching questions with which church teaching invites engagement, even before the contraception issue is raised. And yet so often, because of a single issue of disagreement, the entire teaching is ignored.

TOWARDS A “NUPTIAL” VISION OF PARISH

Despite the interpenetrating relationship between family and parish, I have identified a certain absence of marriage and family from parish pastoral agendas. Even in parish and diocesan renewal efforts, discourse about “the laity” and discourse about “the family” tend to travel on parallel tracks as if they are distinct pastoral realities or only marginally linked. This absence likely reflects a disconnection in the conciliar documents themselves where preoccupation with the terms “laity” and “lay apostolate” distracts from the primacy of marital and familial bonds in the lives of the faithful. The quest for a conceptual framework and terminology that applies to all lay people results in a focus on baptism, confirmation, eucharist and the common priesthood, while the sacrament of marriage is either absent or relegated to a relatively small “family” section.³⁵ A better integration of a marital-familial mindset into a vocational vision of the faithful (including celibates) would have far-reaching implications for parish communities.

Since the Second Vatican Council the dominant paradigm for viewing ecclesial relationships has been moving from a clerical view drawing on hierarchical and celibate categories to a baptismal paradigm. Transposed to a parish setting we might say that whereas once the pastoral agenda revolved around “Father”, now we try to include “everyone” as baptised members of the body of Christ. While the strengths of this paradigm shift are obvious, we can wonder whether the church might be better served by adopting a variety of sacramental paradigms for understanding church membership. We already have the baptismal perspective, often accompanied by an awareness of confirmation, of the faithful as a community of Spirit-filled charisms. A eucharistic paradigm brings another set of strengths. We are well aware of a paradigm shaped by a referent of holy orders. We could also imagine an ecclesial paradigm based on the sacraments of reconciliation and anointing of the sick whereby the faithful are viewed in terms of their calling to be “wounded healers,” a perspective which tempers triumphalism in the church as well as being inclusive of its most vulnerable members. What interests us here, however, is the contribution of a “nuptial” paradigm to an understanding of the vocation of Christ’s faithful. To this proposal I now turn.

What do we mean by a “nuptial” paradigm? Certainly it does not infer an exclusive focus on married couples. Rather, it invokes marriage as the sacramental starting point for perceiving ecclesial communion and mission. In so doing it highlights a vocational instinct for intimacy and generativity at the core of every human person and which underpins

³⁵ *Christifideles Laici* perpetuates this difficulty yet also contains occasional signs of a newly emerging integration, such as this statement: “The Pastors, therefore, ought to acknowledge and foster the ministries, the offices and roles of the lay faithful that find their *foundation in the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation*, indeed, for a good many of them, *in the Sacrament of Matrimony*” (CL 23).

every human effort to create community and to give life.³⁶ Add to this the fact that every person owes their existence and their most formative influences (for good or for ill) to familial bonds and the nuptial perspective is seen to have all-encompassing relevance.

Applied to parish life, a nuptial perspective calls for a significant shift in emphasis: from the church and presbytery to the home and domestic arena as the focus of spirituality, communion and mission. Interpersonal relationships, sexuality, the gift and formation of children, the meal table, everyday rituals of familial intimacy, the sharing of personal and domestic resources within neighbourhoods... these categories become the “filter” through which we perceive holiness, community and service.³⁷ Celibates and singles—the whole people of God—are included in this “nuptial” ecclesial perspective.

The impact of a nuptial paradigm is potentially far-reaching. By bringing marital sexual intimacy centre-stage there is no place for the insidious gnostic tendencies that have long plagued Christianity. We become attentive to the fact that some of the loftiest spiritual imagery in the great tradition, such as the “motherhood” of the church and the bride/bridegroom imagery, is unimaginable without the real, earthly thing – the experience of sexual attraction, falling in love, lovemaking couples, pregnant women, noisy infants and so on. These earthly experiences are not there to “beautify” our doctrines with colourful language. Rather they provide the grist for reflection by which we come to know God and know ourselves as beloved of God.

Understandably, a nuptial paradigm can raise concerns about excluding people. After all, not everyone is married. Yet the reasonableness of this paradigm shift lies in recognizing that the very question of marriage and family life is a central one in every Christian’s life journey. This is not to say that all will marry or will even want to marry. But the possibility of marriage—even if consciously rejected or painfully absent, even if simply part of one’s dreams for one’s children—will loom large in every personal journey. In fact, peaceful resolution of the “marriage” question one way or another is fundamental to human and spiritual wellbeing. Rather than excluding the unmarried, the nuptial paradigm allows for a new kind of inclusiveness of those intimacies and family-like relationships which fall outside the traditional model of family life. For, compared to other paradigms, the nuptial paradigm brings into sharper focus the role of particular love in ecclesial communion. Starting from the referent that marriage involves two unique persons, neither of who can be “interchanged” for another, the nuptial ecclesial paradigm highlights the importance of specific commitments of personal loving friendship which, even if not carrying the exclusivity or intensity of marital intimacy, are nonetheless authentic expressions of fidelity and freedom, permanence and fruitfulness. Unless a person is loving someone in a way that gives rise to stable, lifegiving community life, is it really possible to love anyone? The nuptial paradigm creates space for considering the contribution made to communion and mission by lifelong friendships, “soul mates”, flatmates, carers, godparents, the dynamics of many kinds of household living arrangements, boyfriend-girlfriend relating, and so on.

³⁶ The “nuptial meaning of the body” is a concept at the heart of John Paul II’s theological reflections on sexuality.

³⁷ Judaism speaks to the resilience of this approach. Through centuries of adverse conditions the Jewish people have survived largely through religious observance focused in the home, especially the weekly Sabbath meal and the annual Passover celebration at the family dining table.

Taking its lead from the sacramental referent of marriage, a nuptial paradigm highlights the instinct for intimacy and generativity that is part of every person's vocational story, thus creating a "space" for the voices of singles and celibates as they seek God without benefit of marriage. For like their marital counterparts they too must find sustaining family-like intimacies beyond their original blood family. They too are called to engage their sexual giftedness—albeit in ways chaste and befitting their vocation. Paradoxically, a nuptial paradigm may allow for a more wholesome pastoral arena for including parishioners with homosexual tendencies. Too often the only time parishioners with same-sex attraction find their issues on the pastoral agenda is when the church is engaged in public debate of a theological or political nature. By contrast, in a nuptial paradigm issues of sexual intimacy and familial belonging are an integral part of pastoral life and ministry. The nuptial paradigm does not instantly resolve ethical controversies, but it does present a fresh way of engaging them.

Of course, a nuptial paradigm is open to distortion as much as any other. It could mutate into a new elite—not clergy but married couples, thus making everybody else second-class citizens. In this vein we can detect a serious weakness with *Familiaris Consortio* and much of church discourse about "family." For while naming a universal experience (family) *Familiaris Consortio* clearly addresses itself to a narrower target audience of married couples with young families. A small section is devoted to priests and religious who are praised for their celibate witness, but without mention of their familial or familial-like relationships. The familial role of the single person who is not a parent receives even less attention. In a document of over 34,000 words, *Familiaris Consortio* devotes just one sentence to this family member, and as an afterthought (see 16). One must ask of *Familiaris Consortio* and of apostolates that embody its message: if the church's teaching on marriage and family has so little to "say" to the life experience of a committed, faithful, chaste single or celibate person, how on earth can it expect to be heard by those living in all kinds of complex relationships at odds with church teaching? Surely this is a critical point of resistance to church teaching on marriage and family: simply that it is perceived as talking about "somebody else;" somebody else who is married (or happily married), or heterosexual, or who has a child. Some of this disassociation may be unwarranted, for *Familiaris Consortio* does address those who are separated, divorced or widowed, and its strong parenthood themes have relevance to a wide range of people. Still, the dominant pitch suggests that this is a document where certain family members are invisible.

Indeed, one of the appealing aspects of the baptismal paradigm is that it appears inclusive and egalitarian. It avoids all the mess and chaos of human relationships, being simpler to discuss and much less controversial. The baptismal paradigm undoubtedly has strength and coherence, but on its own it won't bring parishes to confront the core issues of human sexuality which are fundamental to communion and mission. It will not equip us to respond to the kinds of questions secular culture is demanding that we answer, nor address the terrifying extent of loneliness in people's lives. And it will not bring us to the deep solutions required for the renewal of celibacy in the life of the church.

Nearly fifty years after Vatican II, the renewed vision of marriage and family life opened up by the Council calls for fresh engagement, not only in how it affects the lives of

couples and young families but how it can reshape an ecclesial vision that addresses central vocational issues in the lives of all Christ's faithful.

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