

PROLES, FIDES AND SACRAMENTUM: THE “GREAT MYSTERY” OF MARRIAGE

Language matters, terminology matters, and precision is good. At the same time, it is easy to lose the forest for the trees when discussing certain topics. One of them is that of treating Christian marriage as a “great mystery” as described by Saint Paul. After quoting the passage from Genesis 2:24 about a man leaving his father and mother to be joined to his wife, Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:32: “This is a **great mystery**, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.” Why is marriage such a mystery? And how ought we to alter our initial sense of the word which conjures up for many people images of Perry Mason, Agatha Christie or, for old times’ sake, The Hardy Boys?

In his treatise on “On the Good of Marriage,” Saint Augustine called marriage “the first natural bond of human society.” He summarizes his teaching on marriage by means of three words to describe the threefold good of marriage: **proles, fides, and sacramentum**—procreation, fidelity, and the sacrament (*De bon. coni.* 28.) His theology of marriage intimately involved children, seen as a gift and a moral good; procreation, while considered a “good,” ought not to be sought as an end in itself. It is a “good” necessary for the sake of something else, namely a **well-ordered society**. Folks, he was 100% correct! Marriage contributes to societal stability.

Not surprisingly, Augustine is routinely criticized for his strong views about marriage and sexuality, but one must consider the context within which he wrote. As the late author Fr. John Hardon SJ wrote, Augustine “saw all around him, in the decadent Roman Empire, broken marriages, broken homes, broken promises, broken hopes, and broken hearts.” He specifically uses the word *sacramentum* to describe marriage as a mystery, which is all at once a **mystery**, a **covenant** and a **witness** to the world. To all our couples in Christian marriage, know that you are in my prayers each day and your **mutual fidelity and sacrifices** for your children provides powerful witness of God’s goodness.

My former teacher in Rome, Fr. Joseph Carola, S.J. noted that Augustine introduced the word *persona* to describe the union of the substances of body and soul, seen as analogous to that of the humanity and divinity in the one person of Jesus Christ. A **natural relationship** existed between **body and soul**, and he began to compare it to marriage. Echoing St. Paul, Augustine noted that “nobody hates his body.” In part, a response to those who denigrated the human body or in responding to the thought of Plato who wrote that the soul should flee the “prison” of the body, Augustine penned his Letter #140 (ca. 412 AD). There, he wrote of the “**sweet marriage bond** (dulce consortium) of body and soul.” Each **vocation has its challenges**. There are days in my own priestly ministry which would not exactly qualify as “sweet” but that is precisely the nature of commitment.

In another work entitled “On the Usefulness of Fasting,” Augustine **distanced himself** from any who tried to set up a false dichotomy between body and soul: “for no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and cares for it, just as Christ does for the Church.” The love of the soul for its flesh is good and natural; Augustine notes that “even the most body-denying ascetic will demonstrate this by closing his eyes when threatened by a blow.” Applied to marriage, the Church teaches that the **human body is good** and so too is the intimate union of husband and wife good and holy and part of God’s plan. But that’s the kicker- it is part of God’s plan. The Church does not denigrate sexuality but places this gift in its **proper context**, that of the permanent and public union of man and woman.

In truth, Augustine had the integrity to **reconsider some of his earliest views** about marriage and sexuality, always ready to **refine** his thought based upon his life experience, including as a bishop. Recall, Augustine had **tremendous struggles** of his own in this area and found freedom from his sinful habits in finally accepting Christ more deeply into his life through Baptism. His previous experience understandably informed his earlier writings. His teaching on marriage was both ahead of its time and **withstood the test** of time. Marriage is a mystery because God sustains and nourishes couples through all the seasons of their life with a special sacramental grace. (Next week—Marriage Tribunals).

- Due to combo plate of offering the Sunday 5:00 pm Mass, a family birthday dinner and a relative paucity of interest, by the time I tuned into the Super Bowl, the Chiefs were down 20-10. They **scored the next**

21 points in the 4th quarter. Apparently, I didn't miss much!

- A “Super” altar server? Did you know that **Chiefs** placekicker **Harrison Butker** still **serves Mass**— and in the *Extraordinary Form* Latin to boot? (Okay, **pun** intended.) He belongs to St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Independence, MO, the oldest parish in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. He was **4 for 4 in extra points** and kicked a 31-yard field goal in the Super Bowl. A college teammate of his at Georgia Tech **reinvigorated** his Catholic faith, bringing him along to **confession**. It clearly took. Now, that’s evangelization!
- Since the Vatican signed its confidential agreement with the government of China on September 22, 2018, **religious freedom** has diminished, not expanded. The eastern province of Zhejiang now **forbids any funeral rites** to take place outside of a church building. “Clerical personnel are not allowed to participate in funerals” at homes and “no more than 10 family members of the deceased are allowed to read scriptures or sing hymns in a low voice.” As many small villages lack churches, these new rules are devastating.
- **Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax**, a self-proclaimed Catholic, cast the **tie-breaking vote** to pass a much more **liberal abortion access bill** in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This **paves the way** for radically pro-choice Governor Ralph Northam (remember him?) to repeal the existing law requiring that women must be given “a full, reasonable and comprehensive medical explanation of the procedure,” as well as alternatives to abortion. In a recent *ad limina* visit, Pope Francis agreed with the U.S. bishops in “identifying the protection of the unborn as a preeminent priority.”
- Last week’s **procession** for the Feast of the Presentation was beautiful. I would love to introduce more such liturgical observances in the future. Such **traditional customs** add to the **richness** of our Catholic faith and help to make present the mysteries we celebrate. Special thanks to all who assisted.
- “There’s an App for that.” Or maybe not? I feel sorry for whomever developed the **Iowa Caucus App** that crashed and burned. What a **debacle**. Will this major breakdown affect the Hawkeye State and its “Iowa First” status (since 1972) in holding the first presidential nominating contest in 2024?

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector