

## *Thomas Aquinas on Marriage, Fruitfulness, and Faithful Love*

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✱ IN THIS ESSAY, I WISH TO PRESENT Thomas Aquinas's teachings about love and matrimony as a background for the teachings of *Humanae vitae*. First, though, let us consider why this is necessary, and to this end, let us review the current status of matrimony in the popular culture.

### **What the Popular Culture Thinks of Matrimony**

According to a widely held view, the love of a man and a woman is not a commitment of the will to the true good of another person, but a feeling or an emotion. Although couples may still employ the traditional marriage vows, the promise to love each other is scarcely taken seriously, because no one can promise to have a feeling. Although marriage is still viewed as requiring mutual consent, divorce is not; each party is deemed to have a unilateral right to spousal repudiation. Some people insist that the words "until death do us part" refer to the death of the relationship, not the death of the parties. In any case, what the partners really intend is that they will stay married "until things shall stop working out." Even now, married persons sometimes describe themselves as bonded, but they seem to be thinking less of a weld, which makes two pieces of metal into one, and more of Velcro.

Essentially, then, what the culture calls matrimony is cohabitation with formalities. Like cohabiting couples—or cohabiting threesomes or what have you—a married couple may speak of having a committed relationship, but commitment in the traditional sense is just what they do not have. Although they may use the language of sharing of lives, they mean no more than living in the same household and having sexual intercourse. Typical is the reaction of a young woman to a talk which I gave at a nominally Christian college. Among the points I had emphasized was that in matrimony, the husband and wife give themselves mutually to each other. She raised her hand during the discussion to say, "If that's what marriage really is, you're pushing me away from it more and more." I don't think the young woman meant that she had a call to consecrated celibacy. What she meant was that she owned herself utterly and intended to go on doing so.

In her opinion, marriage was no more than an arrangement of convenience between two autonomous individuals.

Although in most cases—not all—sexual intercourse is still expected in matrimony, the parties would consider the idea that their bodies are no longer their own as absurd. Moreover, the view that intercourse may have a purpose beyond feelings of pleasure and excitement is viewed as too obvious for discussion. A Valentine’s Day greeting card which I came across in a stationery store illustrated this view of things by featuring a photograph of bare buttocks with coarse sayings sprayed across them in red paint. Sexual intercourse is not viewed as suggestive of the possibility of new life; neither is having children viewed as requiring intercourse, because these days there are labs for that. Though even in this day of plummeting birth rates, children may still be desired, adults tend to view them as a lifestyle enhancement, something like a home entertainment center, but more expensive. And, of course the enhancement is available to singles and unmarried couples too, although they are more likely to choose abortion.

Though having a few children may still be regarded favorably, having more than a few is commonly looked upon as strange because children consume resources, use up disposable income, and require a great deal of care. Increasing these costs is the fact that although parents do not think they owe it to their children to stay together, or to guard and nourish the children’s virtues, they do think they owe it to them to provide them with entertainment. Thus, they might decline to have a second child if it would prevent them from taking a family trip to Disney World. Many couples decline to have any children at all, considering what is sometimes called the “childfree” lifestyle superior because it leaves them more at liberty to engage in activities which they consider worthwhile. A puzzled writer who is not quite so extreme as to condemn all childbearing says nevertheless, “I don’t have the answer to the origin of the longing for children that many experience. It’s almost certainly due to a complex mixture of biological and social factors. It might even be an evolutionary trick.”<sup>1</sup>

### How Pope Paul Responds

In *Humanae vitae*,<sup>2</sup> Pope Paul VI presents a view of matrimony, its purpose, and its meaning which is very much at odds with the views we have just considered. Although marital nihilism was not nearly so far advanced at the time he writes as it is now, he perceives the direction in which things are going. He also seems to be aware of a certain caricature of the traditional Catholic view, which makes this view difficult to defend. As I read the encyclical, he is reaching for a better way to explain and defend the doctrine, which has always been held, and perhaps develop certain aspects of it more fully. As in most papal encyclicals, its

1 Bernadette Young, “Parenthood and Effective Altruism,” *Effective Altruism Forum* 14 (April 2014), [http://effective-altruism.com/ea/66/parenthood\\_and\\_effective\\_altruism](http://effective-altruism.com/ea/66/parenthood_and_effective_altruism).

2 Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae vitae* (July 25, 1968), <http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals.index.html>.

language is stiff and ponderous, not readily accessible to most readers. Yet, its insights are not stiff at all.

Paul VI emphasizes that the love between the husband and wife is not primarily a matter of instinct or emotion but an act of free will by which the spouses give themselves to each other mutually, totally, indissolubly, and exclusively. Each spouse loves the other for the other's own sake. Through this gift, they attain genuinely human fulfillment. Although they respect their bodies, they are not reduced to them; although they render to each other their mutual duties, they are not reduced to transactors "paying up."

From this, one might think that their love would be angelic and non-bodily, limited to their tenderness and sharing with each other. On the contrary, their love is fruitful, for it strives to bring about new life: to give birth to children, to raise them, and to bring them up. In fact, this marital project of bearing fruit is not something distinct from their tenderness and sharing. On the contrary, opening themselves to such a possibility is the most beautiful way that they do give themselves to each other, and the very basis of their love. This partnership in procreation is not just a subjective idea they may or may not have, for it pertains to the objective meaning and purpose of matrimony. Its meaning and purpose are not a mere product of their will but a matter of natural law, for they arise from the ground plan of the human person, who is a body-soul unity. And yet, the spouses' wills are crucial too, because they must freely and deliberately align themselves *with* their design, taking this design in both the biological and spiritual sense.

Certain things follow from these premises. First, the procreative and unitive meanings of the matrimonial act cannot be severed. It is not just that they should not be severed; they *cannot* be severed. On one hand, the loving union of the spouses is *naturally directed* to offspring, even if the procreative partners do not care to procreate. On the other hand, the good of the offspring *naturally requires* the loving union of their parents, even if they neglect their parental responsibilities. To miss these points is to misunderstand their shared life in a radical way, for conjugal love is *precisely this kind* of love. An association just for sex is not matrimony. Neither is an association just for companionship with no sex. Matrimony is a friendship built around the possibility of a great good, which is new life.

A second thing which follows from Paul VI's premises is that by honoring the laws of our biological functions, we, in no way, dehumanize, depersonalize, or diminish ourselves. True, we are more than the other animals, for we are rational and spiritual. Yet, to say that we are rational and spiritual does not give us a reason to imagine that we are *not* animals, for we are animals with a rational and spiritual difference. The angels are disembodied persons, but we are embodied persons, and our embodiment has *personal* meaning because it is an aspect of who and what we are. So, when we say that the sexual powers have a procreative purpose, we are not treating ourselves as mere means to impersonal ends and denying that we are ends in ourselves. Rather, we acknowledge *what kinds of ends in ourselves we are*. We are beings whose biological functions are not shackles but constitutive properties of our embodied personhood. They are inheritances, not encumbrances; enrichments, not impoverishments. They are not things to be

struggled against but things to be cherished as gifts. Since the laws of our bodies are aspects of our being, we do not diminish ourselves by honoring them. We would alienate ourselves by *not* honoring them.

The third thing that follows from the premises is that there are no excuses for violating these laws, for example, by using contraception. As Paul VI knows, some thinkers had argued that it would be permissible to use contraception sometimes, so long as we did not use the totality of the time—or even that we could use contraception *all* the time, so long as it somehow made life better as a whole. Their excuse was what Pius XII had called the “principle of totality,”<sup>3</sup> according to which, just to the degree that something is a part of a greater whole, the whole, in its own interest, can dispose of the part. Paul VI showed that although the principle of totality is true, these thinkers were gravely misinterpreting it. It is as though they had pretended that there is no difference between extracting diseased teeth, which can no longer perform their function, and extracting perfectly healthy teeth, just because we would rather draw our food through straws. The former respects our totality. The latter violates and insults it.

### Where Is St. Thomas Aquinas in All of This?

Where is St. Thomas Aquinas in all this? I do not suppose that anyone would be surprised by the suggestion that some of the seeds of Paul VI’s doctrine are present in the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas. To make that sort of suggestion, it would be enough to collate each of Paul VI’s principal claims with some corresponding claim in St. Thomas, pointing out that both St. Thomas and Paul VI say P, that both St. Thomas and Paul VI say Q, and so on.

But I want to say more than that. It seems to me that Paul VI’s themes are all present in St. Thomas’s doctrine, either explicitly or implicitly. Some might consider this suggestion extreme. To show why it is not, I must present the thought of St. Thomas more fully and systematically, concluding with a correction of some of the common misunderstandings and caricatures of his thought.

3 See Pope Pius XII, *The Moral Limits of Medical Research and Treatment: Address to the First International Congress on the Histopathology of the Nervous System* (September 14, 1952), Section 13, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius12/p12psych.htm>. The full quote is: “As for the patient, he is not absolute master of himself, of his body or of his soul. He cannot, therefore, freely dispose of himself as he pleases. Even the reason for which he acts is of itself neither sufficient nor determining. The patient is bound to the immanent teleology laid down by nature. He has the right of use, limited by natural finality, of the faculties and powers of his human nature. Because he is a user and not a proprietor, he does not have unlimited power to destroy or mutilate his body and its functions. Nevertheless, by virtue of the principle of totality, by virtue of his right to use the services of his organism as a whole, the patient can allow individual parts to be destroyed or mutilated when and to the extent necessary for the good of his being as a whole. He may do so to ensure his being’s existence and to avoid or, naturally, to repair serious and lasting damage which cannot otherwise be avoided or repaired.” Pius XII also notes: “The principle of totality itself affirms only this: where the relationship of a whole to its part holds good, and in the exact measure it holds good, the part is subordinated to the whole and the whole, in its own interest, can dispose of the part. Too often, unfortunately, in invoking the principle of totality, people leave these considerations aside, not only in the field of theoretical study and the field of application of law, sociology, physics, biology and medicine, but also of logic, psychology and metaphysics.” Section 35.

Setting aside a few details of canon law, the greatest differences between St. Thomas and Paul VI concern neither the content of the doctrine of matrimony nor its foundations in natural law, but *how it is explained*. And it is primarily because of these differences in the mode of explanation that a discussion like this one is necessary.

Briefly, St. Thomas always begins with procreation and explains marital union in the context of the procreative partnership. He is also very practical, considering the significance of matrimony for all sorts of other things too, such as inheritance. Paul VI leaves out some of these practical considerations, and sometimes, his explanations move in the other direction. What I mean is that here and there, instead of explaining marital union in a procreative light, he explains marital procreation in a unitive light—a path which John Paul II was later to follow still more vigorously.

But this is an expository difference, not a theoretical difference. Anyone who seeks to explain difficult points must begin with his best guess about “where people are,” about what the people whom we are trying to persuade find easier to grasp. Even today, when what people call “matrimony” seems to have so little to do with unity, people feel its absence as a lack. Even as they act against unity, they long for it. The unitive may sometimes be first in the order of discovery, and in these cases, it should be first in the order of explanation. But Paul VI does not deny that the procreative good is first in essence. Without the procreative good, the marital kind of unity would not even exist (although other kinds would). And so, what Paul VI hints at, and what John Paul II develops more fully, is that the procreative good is implicit in the natural meaning of the unitive good—something St. Thomas also thoroughly believes—and that therefore, one may be able to lead resistant people to the procreative good by beginning the discussion with the unitive good.

The upshot is that, rather than turning St. Thomas on his head, as some people might think, these twentieth-century popes really are Thomist, just as they claimed. St. Thomas may not explain things quite as they do, but he thinks of things exactly as they do.

To show how this is true, let us consider some of the themes of St. Thomas’s writings on matrimony.

### What Matrimony Is

Although we carelessly use the terms “marriage” and “matrimony” as synonyms, they are not the same thing. Matrimony is the union itself—what civil law calls a “status.” Marriage is the *act of entering into* this union (“getting married”).

To understand what marriage is according to St. Thomas, we must consider its cause, its essence, and its effect. Its *cause* is the *lawful consent* of two persons to be joined in the matrimonial kind of partnership. Its *essence* is the *indissoluble union* between them for the sake of its purpose, which is procreation. Its *effect* is a *common life* in family matters, because of which it must be regulated by Divine and human laws.<sup>4</sup>

4 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, hereafter ST, trans. Dominican Fathers, *Supplementum*, q. 44, art. 3, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>. It should be noted that the *Supplementum* is a text that was pre-

“In matrimony there is a joining in respect of which we speak of husband and wife; and this joining, through being directed to some one thing [procreation], is matrimony; while the joining together of bodies and minds is a *result* of matrimony.”<sup>5</sup> We see in this passage four different aspects of the matrimonial union. Their union in having and raising children, and their union in a shared family life, have to do with the *essential character* of matrimony. Their union in the joining of their bodies, and their union in the joining of their minds, are things that result *from* its essential character.

One of the complications of understanding all this is that marriage is directed not only by natural law, but also by religious law and civil law. Another is that, as always, even the natural law must be considered in the context of salvation history: creation, the Fall, and redemption. Our nature does not change. However, the condition in which we find our nature does change.

Natural law *as such* shapes matrimony in matters concerned with having and raising children. Natural law *after the Fall* shapes matrimony so that its natural purposes are not unraveled by the wound of sin, which tempts people to engage in intercourse in ways that forestall the formation of families and undermine their good order. The law of Moses, which St. Thomas calls the “Old Law,” shapes matrimony by spelling out who can be married and who is ineligible; these are *applications*<sup>6</sup> of the general principles of the natural law to concrete situations. The law of the Gospel, which St. Thomas calls the “New Law,” shapes matrimony so that the union of husband and wife can represent and make present the mystery of Christ’s union with the Church. Finally, the civil law shapes matrimony with respect to “other advantages resulting from matrimony, such as the friendship and mutual service which husband and wife render one another.” Examples of such regulations might be those concerned with inheritance and spousal support.

We can say, then, that natural law institutes marriage in one way, religious law institutes it in another, and civil law institutes it in still another. These various “institutions” or origins “are not of the same thing in the same respect” according to St. Thomas.<sup>7</sup> However, they are all linked. Thus, for the civil law to treat marriage as something contrary to what it is by nature would be profoundly wrong; any such so-called civil marriage would not be marriage at all.

### The Three Marital Goods

According to St. Thomas, matrimony is directed to three different goods, two of them natural, one of them supernatural. The first of these goods, he says, is

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pared by St. Thomas after his death by one or more members of his religious orders, compiling materials that Thomas had written previously into the format of the *Summa*. Nevertheless, we will treat the teaching on marriage of the Supplementum as essentially that of Thomas for the purposes of this essay.

5 *ST, Supp.*, q. 44, art. 1, emphasis added.

6 *determinatio*

7 *ST, Supp.*, q. 42, art. 2 and ad 3.

“the birth of children and the educating of them to the worship of God.”<sup>8</sup> If I ask my students to identify the purpose of the sexual powers, they usually reply “pleasure.” If, on the other hand, I focus their attention on our natural teleology by asking them to identify the purpose of the eye, the purpose of the ear, the purpose of the capacity for anger, and so on, and *then* ask them to identify the purpose of the sexual powers, they say, instead, “reproduction,” which is not bad. However, procreation means much more. Reproduction merely means turning out new humans by one means or another. If this were the only purpose of the sexual powers, there wouldn’t matter whether the partners were united. In fact, it wouldn’t matter if there were any partners. We could dispense with parents altogether, gestating children in flasks and raising them in state-run institutions, as they do in Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Procreation, by contrast, is the loving act by which posterity is generated. It means conceiving children in the embrace of their father and mother; it means not only having them together but nurturing them together, so that they can become virtuous adults; and it means forming families, thereby forging new links between dimmest antiquity and remotest futurity. Any guppy can reproduce. We have the privilege of procreating.

Just now, I spoke of nurturing the children so that they can become virtuous adults. Instead, St. Thomas speaks of educating them “to the worship of God.” That may seem narrower, but as he often does, he is using the figure of speech called metonymy, in which a part represents a whole. The statement that parents educate children to the worship of God does not mean that they educate them *only* to the worship of God, any more than the commandment against bearing false witness forbids *only* lying while giving legal testimony. Rather, just as the gravest sort of lie is used as a placeholder for all lying, so the gravest responsibility of educating children is used as a placeholder for their entire upbringing. If parents teach their children reading, writing, arithmetic, good manners, the art of conversation, and how to sing, well and good, but even with all this, if they do not teach them to worship God, they have failed. In saying this, by the way, we are still within the realm of natural law. According to St. Thomas, even the pagans knew that deity is to be worshipped, and paying God the reverence that is due to him is an aspect of the natural virtue of justice.

The second matrimonial good, he says, is the *mutual faithfulness* of husband and wife—

“that fidelity which one must render to the other.”<sup>9</sup> This is another metonymy. He does not express his thought by saying that the second matrimonial good is union; rather he uses the most important aspect of their union to represent everything about their union. Faithfulness is the most important because if they are not faithful to each other, then they cannot be faithful to their duties of parental love and care. Now just insofar as matrimony is a union, it resembles other forms of union, such as the union of friends. Indeed, St. Thomas does say that the spouses

8 Thomas Aquinas, *De articulis fidei* (*Explanation of the Faith*), hereafter *AF*, Part 2, trans. Joseph Collins, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/DeArticulisFidei.htm>.

9 Thomas Aquinas, *AF*, Part 2.

are friends. But matrimony is not just any friendship. It is a *particular* kind of friendship, which derives all of its special characteristics from its procreative purpose. According to St. Thomas, “the entire communion of works” in which matrimonial unity consists is directed to having and raising children, should God so bless the spouses in this way. So important is this fact that if we view procreation and unity as *entirely distinct* goods of matrimony, we are making a profound mistake. Rather, the “principal end” of marriage is offspring, but this end “includes” the education of the offspring, and their education *requires* a special kind of friendship between the parents, which becomes a second good of matrimony.<sup>10</sup>

We will return to this point. For now, suffice it to say that in our day, the point is denied. Far from viewing the matrimonial union as deriving its meaning from the possibility of new life, sometimes, people even say that it will be enhanced by *preventing* possibility of new life. Even among people who do intend to have children, one often hears the remark, “We are putting off children so that we can enjoy each other first.” This view is contradicted by experience. According to the inherited wisdom of the human race, if we seek to enhance matrimonial unity by refusing the gift of children, we merely turn a pair of selfish *MEs* into a single selfish *US*. Insofar as it can confirm or disconfirm this sort of thing, sociology concurs. For example, new children do not reduce matrimonial stability; on the contrary, each new child reduces a married couple’s risk of divorce by twenty percent.<sup>11</sup> If you are ready for marriage, you are ready for children. If you are not ready for children, you are not ready for marriage.

The third good of matrimony is sacramental: “In other words,” St. Thomas says, “the indivisibility of matrimony which shows forth the indivisible union of Christ and His Church.”<sup>12</sup> Notice here how the unitive and the sacramental good are connected, for it is *because* of the indivisible union of the husband and wife that God can use it to represent and make present the indivisible union of Christ and His Church. As the man and woman are espoused, so Christ and the Church are espoused. And as the union of their bodies makes the spouses biologically fruitful, so the sacrament makes their union spiritually fruitful, for they pass on their faith to their children and display it to the world.

In this article, I focus primarily on the procreative and unitive goods of marriage rather than the sacramental good. These three goods of marriage, however, are tightly linked. Among humans, biological fruitfulness requires faithful union; God makes use of faithful union to manifest the sacrament; and the sacrament is spiritually fruitful, for the husband and wife are bound by the same love which binds Christ with the Church, and they raise their own children in the faith. According to St. Thomas, procreation pertains to marriage insofar as man is an animal; faithfulness pertains to marriage insofar as he is a man; and the sacrament pertains to marriage insofar as he is a believer. This is because all animals procreate; humans,

10 *ST, Supp.*, q. 49, art. 2, ad 1.

11 Hillard S. Kaplan, Jane B. Lancaster, and Kermyt G. Anderson, “Human Parental Investment and Fertility: The Life Histories of Men in Albuquerque,” in *Men in Families*, ed. Alan Booth and Ann Crouter (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Press, 1998).

12 Thomas Aquinas, *AF*, Part 2.

who are *rational* animals, procreate in a rational and indivisible partnership; and believers enjoy the supernatural elevation of this partnership by grace.<sup>13</sup>

### The Procreative Good Considered in Itself

Considering our nature alone, what is so special about the marital union? For example, why is it indissoluble, and why should it be between one man and woman? In reply, St. Thomas distinguishes among three categories of animal. Among some of the beasts, the female is capable not only of giving birth to the offspring but also of training them without help from the male. In such species, intercourse is “random and indiscriminate.” Among other beasts, the female needs assistance, so the male cooperates with the female in caring for them. This requires that he recognize the offspring, that he possess a natural inclination to care for them, and that a definite male be joined to a definite female. In such species, the male and female cooperate until the children are grown. “But above all in the human species,” St. Thomas says—above all in *rational* animals—“the male is required for the education of the offspring, which are attended to not only regarding bodily nourishment, but to a greater degree regarding the nourishment of the soul.” He reminds us of Hebrews 12:9, which says, “We have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them.”<sup>14</sup> This is from his *Commentary on St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians*, but he develops the argument even more fully in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, where he writes,

[W]e must consider that in the human species offspring require not only nourishment for the body, as in the case of other animals, but also education for the soul. For other animals naturally possess their own kinds of prudence whereby they are enabled to take care of themselves. But a man lives by reason, which he must develop by lengthy temporal experience so that he may achieve prudence. Hence, children must be instructed by parents who are already experienced people. Nor are they able to receive such instruction as soon as they are born, but after a long time, and especially after they have reached the age of discretion. Moreover, a long time is needed for this instruction.<sup>15</sup>

He adds, “Then, too, because of the impulsion of the passions, through which prudent judgment is vitiated, they require not merely instruction but correction,” and the father, he deems, is more suited to correction than the mother.<sup>16</sup>

13 *ST, Supp.*, q. 65, art. 1.

14 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians*, chap. 7, lecture 1, referring to 1 Cor 7:1–9, trans. Fabian Larcher, <http://dhspritory.org/thomas/english/SS1Cor.htm>; quote appears at <https://dhspritory.org/thomas/english/SS1Cor.htm#71>.

15 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, chap. 122, <https://dhspritory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles3b.htm#122>. Hereafter *SCG*.

16 Thomas Aquinas, *SCG*, III, chap. 122; quote appears at <https://dhspritory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles3b.htm#122>.

Today, anyone who says that a child needs both a mother and a father is likely to be roundly criticized. I was surprised one semester by the intensity of a classroom full of law students who thought that giving preference in adoption to couples over singles violates a basic human right. What they wanted to protect was the so-called autonomous decision of an adult to adopt a child if he wants to. By contrast, St. Thomas is thinking of the natural right of the child to be well raised. The child is not just a feature of someone else's life; the child *is* a life. There is no right to act against the well-being of children.

Indeed, sociological research shows that family structure is the strongest predictor—an even stronger indicator than poverty—of whether a child will have behavioral, psychological, or health problems.<sup>17</sup> One social scientist comments that “Reams of social science and medical research convincingly show that children who are raised by their married, biological parents enjoy better physical, cognitive, and emotional outcomes, on average, than children who are raised in other circumstances.”<sup>18</sup> For example, children raised in fractured families are much more likely to drop out of high school,<sup>19</sup> to get into trouble with the law,<sup>20</sup> to be physically or sexually abused,<sup>21</sup> to have out-of-wedlock children,<sup>22</sup>

17 Sara McLanahan, “Parent Absence or Poverty: Which Matters More?” in *Consequences of Growing Up Poor*, ed. Greg Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997).

18 David C. Ribar, “Why Marriage Matters for Child Wellbeing,” in *The Future of Children: Marriage and Child Wellbeing Revisited*, ed. Sara McLanahan and Isabel Sawhill, special issue, 25, no. 2 (Fall 2015); 22. Recent comprehensive reviews of the research on this subject include Paul Amato, “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation,” *Future of Children* 15, no. 2 (2005): 75–96; Susan Brown, “Marriage and Child Well-Being: Research and Policy Perspectives,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 5 (2010): 1059–1077; Sara McLanahan, Laura Tach, and Daniel Schneider, “The Causal Effects of Father Absence,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (2013): 399–427; David C. Ribar, “What Do Social Scientists Know about the Benefits of Marriage? A Review of Quantitative Methodologies,” IZA Discussion Paper 998 (January 2004); Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000); and W. Bradford Wilcox, Jared R. Anderson, William Doherty, David Eggebeen, Christopher G. Ellison, William Galston, Neil Gilbert, John Gottman, and Ron Haskins, more... *Why Marriage Matters, Third Edition: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2011).

19 “Living in a single-parent family doubles the risk that a child will become a high-school dropout.” Waite and Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage*, 133.

20 “Both divorced and unwed parenting dramatically increase the risk that a child will get into trouble with the law. Even after researchers control for factors such as neighborhood characteristics, race, mother’s education, and cognitive ability, boys raised in single-parent homes are twice as likely (and boys raised in stepfamilies, three times as likely) to have committed a crime that leads to incarceration by the time they reach their early thirties.” Waite and Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage*, 134.

21 “Living without both parents not only increases the risk that a child will commit a crime, but it increases the likelihood he or she will be the victim of a crime as well, especially the devastating crime of being abused in your own home. . . . Stepfathers and mothers’ boyfriends are disproportionately likely to sexually and otherwise abuse children.” Indeed, a large body of research confirmed that as Martin Daly and Margo Wilson put it, “[S]tepchildren constituted an enormously higher proportion of child abuse victims in the United States than their numbers in the population-at-large would warrant.” Waite and Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage*, 135.

22 “Young women whose parents divorced . . . were more than three times as likely to have an out-of-wedlock child as were women whose parents stayed married.” Waite and Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage*, 136.

and, interestingly, to get divorced themselves.<sup>23</sup> Through interviews with adults whose parents divorced, one writer concludes that the pain of parental divorce continues into adulthood even when the divorce was amicable.<sup>24</sup>

The care of not just the mother but both parents is not a temporary but a permanent need according to St. Thomas: “The child requires the father’s direction for a long time.”<sup>25</sup> In the first place, the education and development of the child continue “until it reach[es] the perfect state of man as man, and that is the state of virtue.”<sup>26</sup> In the second place, even after the children attain maturity and virtue, their parents are needed to help them to establish their own new families. Thus:

By the intention of nature marriage is directed to the rearing of the offspring, *not merely for a time, but throughout its whole life*. Hence it is of natural law that parents should lay up for their children, and that children should be their parents’ heirs. Therefore, since the offspring is the common good of husband and wife, the dictate of the natural law requires the latter to live together for ever *inseparably*: and so the indissolubility of marriage is of natural law.<sup>27</sup>

Someone might object that in some cases the child might *not* need a mother and father. For example, the mother might be so wealthy that she can “outsource” the paternal contribution to the child’s education and discipline. We may well doubt whether this is really true; a father is not the same thing as a paid tutor. But suppose that in some case it really were true. This would not matter, because according to St. Thomas, the precepts of the natural law are not based on exceptions. He explains, “Nor, indeed, is the fact that a woman may be able by means of her own wealth to care for the child by herself an obstacle to this argument. For natural rectitude in human acts is not dependent on things accidentally possible in the case of one individual, but, rather, on those conditions which accompany the entire species.”<sup>28</sup> Paul VI agrees. “[T]here are certain limits, beyond which it is wrong to go, to the power of man over his own body and its natural functions—limits, let it be said, which no one, whether as a private individual or as a public authority, can lawfully exceed.”<sup>29</sup> Yes, the natural law steers us away from bad consequences, but this does not permit us to make exceptions to the provisions of nature just because we think we have found some other way to prevent

23 All studies agree about the increased risk; one study calculates it as 60% for women and 35% for men. Norval D. Glen and Beth Ann Shelton, “Pre-Adult Background Variables and Divorce: A Note of Caution about Overreliance on Explained Variance,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 45, no. 2 (1983): 405–410.

24 Leila Miller, *Primal Loss: The Now-Adult Children of Divorce Speak* (Phoenix: LCB Publishing, 2017).

25 Thomas Aquinas, SCG, chap. 123.

26 *ST, Supp.*, q. 41, art. 1.

27 *ST, Supp.*, q. 67, art. 1, emphasis added.

28 Thomas Aquinas, SCG, III, chap. 122.

29 Pope Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, 17.

bad consequences. Only the creator and enactor of nature could do that, as when God tolerated polygamy among the patriarchs.<sup>30</sup>

The same principle applies in the case of contraception. Some argue that chastity is no longer required, because now, even the unchaste can prevent births. All children will have mothers and fathers, because in cases where there would not be mothers and fathers, children will not come into being. What this argument overlooks is that nuptial partnership is the law of our design, and we are not free to invent another arrangement for ourselves. In fact, even the attempt to outwit natural consequences has natural consequences. Although contraception was commonly expected to abolish unwed motherhood, it led to such far-reaching changes in sexual behavior that unwed motherhood has soared.

### The Unitive Good Considered in Itself

St. Thomas teaches that the union of the husband and wife is threefold. The first aspect of their union, he says, “is through the devotion of their love,” which is so strong that they both leave their parents behind. “[T]his is natural,” he says, “for natural desires fit in harmoniously with actions that must be performed.” The second aspect of their union is the sharing of their life. Here he quotes the book of Sirach, “With three things my spirit is pleased, which are approved before God and men: the concord of brethren, and the love of neighbors, and man and wife that agree well together.” The third aspect of marital union is the bodily joining of the husband and wife: “They shall be two in one flesh, that is, in their carnal intercourse . . . the male and female become . . . only one and the same body” with respect to the function of bringing about new life.<sup>31</sup> “After an injury inflicted upon a man in his own person,” St. Thomas says, “none is so grave as that which is inflicted upon a person with whom one is joined.” This is why the Decalogue prohibits adultery immediately after it prohibits murder.<sup>32</sup>

It is most interesting that even though cooperation in procreation underlies all three aspects of union, St. Thomas lists the “devotion of the love” of the husband and wife before listing the sharing of their life and even before their joining in one flesh. Much of what St. Thomas teaches about the devotion of love of the husband and wife emerges not from his discussion of marriage itself but from his discussion of the love of God or the love of friends. Needless to say, each of these loves has its own characteristics. However, whatever St. Thomas says about

30 “Now the law prescribing the one wife was framed not by man but by God, nor was it ever given by word or in writing, but was imprinted on the heart, like other things belonging in any way to the natural law. Consequently, a dispensation in this matter could be granted by God alone, through an inward inspiration, vouchsafed originally to the holy patriarchs, and by their example continued to others, at a time when it behooved the aforesaid precept not to be observed, in order to ensure the multiplication of the offspring to be brought up in the worship of God.” *ST, Supp.*, q. 65, art. 2.

31 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians*, trans. Matthew D. Lamb, chap. 5, lecture 10, referring to Eph. 5:31, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/Eph5.htm>. The internal reference is to Sir (Eccl) 25:1–2 (DRA).

32 Thomas Aquinas, *Collationes de decem praeceptis (Explanation of the Ten Commandments)*, hereafter *CDP*, trans. Joseph Collins, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/TenCommandments.htm>.

all love is necessarily true of each particular love, including marital love. From his discussion of the love of God, for example, we find that all love whatsoever is an act of the will, which is intrinsically directed to another person—in the case of marital love, this means the love of the husband for the wife, and the love of the wife for the husband.

We often say we love something when we mean only we desire it. Considered closely, however, love is far more than desire. To desire something is to will some good to ourselves, but to love someone is to will good to the beloved. St. Thomas distinguishes a number of features of this will to love:

- \* As we have seen, the lover wills the good of the beloved.
- \* Moreover, he wills the good of the beloved *as his own* good. St. Thomas writes that this is why someone whom we love is called “another self” and why St. Augustine says, “Well did one say to his friend: Thou half of my soul.”<sup>33</sup>
- \* He wills the beloved’s good this way because it is the good of someone *with whom he is united*.
- \* He seeks the *perfection, or completion*, of this union.
- \* The more closely he approaches union, and the more complete his union becomes once it is attained, the more intense his love becomes.<sup>34</sup>

“Indeed,” St. Thomas writes, “a person is loved in himself when the lover wishes the good for him, even if the lover may receive nothing from him.”<sup>35</sup> Normally, of course, the spouses receive a great deal from each other.

We have spoken of three aspects of union, but there are also three kinds of union.

The first is the kind of union which *causes* love. For example, because the lover is already one with himself, he loves himself. The second is the kind of union which *is the same thing* as love. For example, because the lover has a bond of affection with the beloved, he comes to have the same relation to her that he has to himself. But finally, there is the kind of union which *is caused* by love. For example, the bond of affection causes the lover and beloved to seek the real union of matrimony. After getting married they live together, speak together, share the life of their household, share the joining of their bodies, and work together in bringing up their children.<sup>36</sup>

Although feelings by themselves are not love, strong feelings result from love. As St. Thomas puts it, “in the hearts of those who love there are four feelings that

33 ST, I-II, q. 28, art. 1.

34 Thomas Aquinas, SCG, I, chap. 91.

35 Thomas Aquinas, SCG, III, chap. 153.

36 ST, I-II, q. 28, art. 1, ad 2.

usually arise from the good works which the lovers accomplish,” four that normally result from the lovers’ freely willed partnership in a good life.

- \* The lovers experience *confidence* that what has begun well will get better.
- \* They experience *glory* because each one glories in the good of the other.
- \* They are *consoled* because through delight in the good they share, each one possesses a remedy against sadness.
- \* They experience *exuberant joy* because not only is sadness absorbed, but their exuberance “overcomes every tribulation.”<sup>37</sup>

In a cynical age like ours, such thoughts may seem naïve and excessively idealistic. On the contrary, St. Thomas never loses sight of down-to-earth realities of marital union, including its difficulties and temptations. For example, rather than arguing that the husband and wife stay together because they are so much in love, he argues that they love each other more *precisely because they stay together*:

For thus, when they know that they are indivisibly united, the love of one spouse for the other will be more faithful. Also, both will be more solicitous in their care for domestic possessions when they keep in mind that they will remain continually in possession of these same things. As a result of this, the sources of disagreements which would have to come up between a man and his wife’s relatives, if he could put away his wife, are removed, and a more solid affection is established among the relatives. Removed, also, are the occasions for adultery which are presented when a man is permitted to send away his wife, or the converse. In fact, by this practice an easier way of arranging marriage with those outside the family circle is provided.<sup>38</sup>

Again, rather than saying that if the husband and wife are good friends, then the husband will be content with one wife and she with one husband, St. Thomas argues in the other direction: If the husband does content himself with one wife and she with one husband, *then they will be better friends*:

Strong friendship is not possible in regard to many people. . . . Therefore, if a wife has but one husband, but the husband has several wives, the friendship will not be equal on both sides. So, the friendship will not be free, but servile in some way. The status of the wife should not be like that of a servant.<sup>39</sup>

In the same passage, notice the emphasis on the *equality* of this friendship. St. Thomas does not believe the wife and husband are equal in all respects. In any compound made up of different elements, one element must set the direction; two persons cannot settle disagreements by voting. Thus, although the wife rules

37 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians*, chap. 7, lecture 1, referring to 2 Cor 7:4, trans. Fabian Larcher, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/SS2Cor.htm>.

38 Thomas Aquinas, SCG, III, chap. 123.

39 Thomas Aquinas, SCG, III, chap. 123.

the household, the husband rules the wife. Considered as friends, on the other hand, the wife and husband are equal. She is not his servant, and St. Thomas makes plain, as St. Paul made plain before him, that he is to exercise his presidency for his wife's sake, with care and tenderness, rather than for himself. Therefore, even though she submits herself to his governance, he submits himself to her needs.

Although St. Thomas never overlooks the inequality of husband and wife regarding rulership, neither does he overlook their equality regarding friendship. For example, he has no patience with the double standard: offenses against purity and faithfulness are equally wrong regardless of which spouse is at fault. Consider St. Thomas's discussion of the Decalogue. First, he speaks of an unfaithful wife, remarking that an adulteress is triply guilty. She is guilty of sacrilege, because she violates God's command; of treachery, because she betrays her husband; and of theft, because she expends her hereditary property upon children that are not his. One can imagine husbands nodding as they read these lines. But, then, St. Thomas brings husbands up short: "Husbands, however, do not sin any less than wives, *although they sometimes may save themselves to the contrary*."<sup>40</sup> In contemporary language, male infidelity is equally wicked, *although some husbands comfort themselves by pretending otherwise*.

Another aspect of the equality of the marital friendship is that the husband and wife have equal rights with respect to sexual intercourse. With due consideration for his wife's feelings, the husband may request it, but with due consideration for her husband's feelings, so may the wife request it. The fact that they are "one flesh" means more than that they have intercourse with each other. It means that they are really one. Each spouse belongs equally to the other and acquires equal privileges and duties as a result. Yes, consideration includes not suggesting intercourse when one's spouse is not feeling well. Apparently, though, it also includes not refusing the suggestion for intercourse just because one doesn't care for it much. In fact, according to St. Thomas intimacy may be requested in two ways: "First, explicitly, as when they ask one another by words; secondly, implicitly, when namely the husband knows by certain signs that the wife would wish [intercourse], but is silent through shame. And so even though she does not ask for [intercourse] explicitly in words, the husband is bound to [offer] it, whenever his wife shows signs of wishing him to do so."<sup>41</sup>

One of the interesting things about marital unity is that it balances the other kinds of unity in society. Today, it is widely assumed that the only reason for the prohibition of incest is that inbreeding concentrates genetic abnormalities. St. Thomas gives a fascinating but entirely different reason, for "in human society it is most necessary that there be friendship among many people. But, friendship is increased among men when unrelated persons are bound together by matrimony. Therefore, it was proper for it to be prescribed by laws that matrimony

40 Thomas Aquinas, *CDP*, emphasis added.

41 *ST, Supp.*, q. 64, art. 2. These are references to the marital "debt," the explicit discussion of which is deferred until later in the essay. Here, I am avoiding the term just to avoid distraction.

should be contracted with persons outside one's family and not with relatives."<sup>42</sup> For any form of association produces temptations to reject all friendship with persons who do not belong to the association. In blood relationships, the temptation is so strong that the noun "clan" has given rise to the pejorative adjective "clannish," meaning insular and unfriendly to outsiders. Yet, we see much the same sort of insularity in married couples who are so focused on each other that they have no other friends. But just because marriage must be outside the clan, relation by marriage and relation by blood balance each other, each moderating the other's cliquishness.

Concerning this point, notice how great a contrast there is between St. Thomas and some utopians. Both he and they want human friendship to extend broadly. The utopians think the way to broaden friendship is to ban all particularistic relationships; they want the entire community to be one big family and one big marriage. Unfortunately, rather than extending friendship, this strategy abolishes it, for to say that everyone is family is really to say that there is no family, and to say that everyone is married to everyone else is really to say that no one is married to anyone. By contrast, St. Thomas thinks the way to extend human friendship more broadly is to *multiply* particularistic relationships. Marriage outside the clan keeps people related by blood from walling themselves off; the extended family keeps married persons from walling themselves off.

It is quite amazing how far St. Thomas is willing to go in describing the quality of loving union. He says, for example, that the lover and the beloved mutually indwell each other. "The beloved is contained in the lover, by being impressed on his heart" and becoming the object of his affections; the lover, in turn, "is contained in the beloved, inasmuch as the lover penetrates, so to speak, into the beloved." Or, take the idea that the lover "loves to love." In our day, we associate such language with soupy sentimentalism and the lavish use of emojis, but St. Thomas gives diamond-hard meaning to it. The power of will, he explains, is directed to the good. Love is a spontaneous act of the will, directed to the good of the beloved. But, since to will is itself a good, man can will himself to will. For this reason, love, by its own nature, "is capable of reflecting on itself." "Wherefore," says the Angelic Doctor, "from the moment a man loves, he loves himself to love."<sup>43</sup> This does not mean that he is infatuated with his feelings. It means that with all his heart, he *concurs* with the direction of his will. His attitude toward the beloved might be expressed, "I exult that you exist in this world, I seek all good for you, *and I know it is good that I do.*"

Yet, we must never think that we can genuinely have such loving unity by shutting ourselves off from what makes marriage possible. For joining in marriage is not like joining in the writing of a book, the starting of a business, or the enjoyment of a garden. Only marriage is joining in the hope of new life. Another way to explain is to say that marriage is true only if it is complete in both form and purpose. Thus, not only has marriage the form of an "inseparable

42 Thomas Aquinas, *SCG*, III, chap. 125.

43 *ST*, II-II, q. 25, art. 2.

union of souls, by which husband and wife are pledged by a bond of mutual affection that cannot be sundered” but it has the purpose of having and bringing up offspring.<sup>44</sup> Does this imply that a husband and wife are not truly married, if through no act of their own, they are unable to conceive children? Not at all. What it does imply is that the rock from which the meaning of marriage rises is in their willingness to cherish and rear the children whom God does offer them.

### Caricature and Misunderstanding

St. Thomas Aquinas’s doctrine of marriage, fruitfulness, and faithful love is often caricatured. According to this distortion, he considers matrimony merely a necessary evil, a reluctant concession to the sinfulness of human beings, and the need to continue the human race. Pleasure is bad too. It is something to be endured, not enjoyed. One version of the burlesque has it that the only justification for the spouses to have sexual intercourse is that they are trying to make babies. Another has it that there is a second justification as well, for a wife should submit grimly to intercourse just so that her husband will not be tempted to seek sex elsewhere. Neither of these two views allows love to be a part of the picture.

The caricature is seductive, because sometimes, it borrows sentences and phrases from St. Thomas’s own writing, for example, when he speaks of things which “excuse” marriage (as though it were something shameful!), of marriage as a “remedy for sin” (as though it were nothing more!), and of “paying the marriage debt” (as though sexual intercourse was merely something given to the mortgage holder to avoid being foreclosed upon!).

Yet, all of this is dreadfully mistaken. In this article, I am not concerned with how the parody came about, but I do want to show how radically it distorts St. Thomas’s actual teachings.

Just by discussing St. Thomas’s doctrine of marital union, we have already dispelled part of the caricature. Love is very much part of his picture of matrimony. Although he considers procreation to *underlie* the marital union as its end, or natural purpose, the love of the husband and wife which is the *form* of this union is profoundly important in its own right—and surprisingly, he says far more about union than about procreation itself. True, much of what he says about union comes in the context of his discussion of other kinds of love, as we have seen (the love of God, the love among friends, etc.). But each of his observations about love in general applies equally to the loving union of the husband and wife, although matrimony has additional characteristics.

As to the idea that blessings are necessary to “excuse” marriage, we must remember that he is *replying to objections*, and that he is defending *both* marriage *and* consecrated celibacy against their detractors. Just as some people thought nothing could excuse celibacy because the human race needs to continue, some people thought nothing could excuse marriage because consecrated celibacy is better. In reply to the objectors, St. Thomas uses their language. Celibacy is

allowable because, in order for the human race to continue, *not everyone* needs to turn the wheel of the generations, and marriage is allowable because, even though undistracted devotion to God is better, *some* need to turn the wheel of the generations. The fact that consecrated celibacy is better does not make marriage bad. Each state of life is very good for those who are called to it.<sup>45</sup>

As to whether marital intercourse is wrong unless the husband and wife are trying to make babies, St. Thomas does say that intercourse is wrong if it is not *rightly related* to its procreative purpose, but there is a difference between saying that it must be rightly related to procreation and saying that the motive must always be procreation. How so? We can understand the matter better by comparing temperance in sex with temperance in food.

We eat because food is necessary. However, St. Thomas points out that necessity can mean two different things. In the first sense, food is necessary because we require it for life and health. In this sense food is necessary to all animals. But, in the second sense, he says, food is necessary because without it we cannot live *becomingly*. The beasts know nothing of this, but we rational animals do. The reason we eat and drink more on festive occasions than at other times is not simply to live and be healthy, but to live *becomingly*. Obviously, God endorses this motive, after all, at the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus turned water into wine. Even at feasts, eating and drinking must still be rightly ordered to life and health, but right order does not require that we eat and drink just for life and health. Rather, it allows us to enjoy the blessings of food and drink “so long as they are not prejudicial” to life and health.<sup>46</sup> It would of course be prejudicial to life and health if we ate as much as we could and then purged so that we could eat still more, but it is not prejudicial to life and health to toast the married couple with wine.

The distinction between the two senses of necessity applies to sexual intercourse too. Remember that the husband and wife are joined in a procreative partnership. In the first sense of necessity, then, sexual intercourse is necessary simply so that they may be fruitful. In this sense, sexual intercourse is necessary to all animals. But in the second sense, sexual intercourse is necessary so that the husband and wife may enjoy their procreative partnership *becomingly*, so that they may *celebrate* it. Even celebratory intercourse must still be rightly ordered to procreation, but right order does not require that the spouses enjoy intercourse just for making babies. Rather, it allows them to enjoy intercourse so long as they do nothing to *thwart* the procreative possibility of their action. For example, just as they may fast from food for a time, so they may fast from sexual intercourse for a time. However, just as they may not insult the nutritive order of their bodies

45 Concerning the mistaken condemnation of consecrated celibacy, see esp. Thomas Aquinas, *SCG*, III, chap. 136–137, as well as *De perfectione spiritualis vitae* (*On the Perfection of the Spiritual Life*). Concerning the mistaken condemnation of marriage, see esp. *ST, Supp.*, q. 49, art. 1, as well as *Commentary on St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chap. 7, lecture 1, *ibid.* St. Thomas remarks, “it should be noted that in their dislike for fornication, against which [St. Paul] had just spoken, some, whose zeal for God was not accompanied by wisdom, arrived at a point where they even condemned marriage. Hence, it says in 1 Tm (4:2–3): ‘Through the hypocrisy of liars who forbid marriage.’”

46 *ST*, II-II, q. 141, art. 6 and ad 2.

by deliberately purging during meals, so they may not violate the procreative order of their bodies by depriving coition of its fertility.

By clearing up the two senses of necessity, we clear up another point too. What does St. Thomas mean using the Pauline language of requesting the “payment” of the “marriage debt”?<sup>47</sup> It means just this: that one spouse proposes sexual intercourse to the other, just for the enjoyment of their union. Yes, they must always honor the procreative possibility of the act, after all, their union is a *procreative* partnership. Yet, procreation need not be their motive at the time.

The payment of the marriage debt is not an aspect of the husband’s authority. Indeed, St. Thomas insists that in proposing sexual intercourse, the husband and wife are utterly equal; either may propose intercourse to the other.<sup>48</sup> Neither does proposing it mean disregarding the feelings or well-being of the other spouse; St. Thomas always reminds husbands to be considerate to their wives.<sup>49</sup> Why on earth then does St. Thomas use the language of a “debt” at all? For that matter, why does St. Paul? If to us, this language seems to diminish the loving unity of marriage, reducing intercourse to a cold transaction, we are missing the point. The point is to *emphasize* its loving unity and *deny* that it is a cold transaction. Do we really believe that the husband and wife become one? Do we really believe that in marriage, they give themselves to each other? Then we must believe that they are *not* coldly separate, autonomous beings, who merely happen to have worked out an arrangement of convenience. *With respect to the joining of their bodies, they are one.* Just because they really are united, each spouse owes it to the other to act as though they are united. This is a real duty, a real owing, a real debt. To force oneself upon one’s spouse is wrong—but so is to withhold intercourse out of spite or indifference.

From this point of view, the mutual debt which the spouses owe to each other is like the duty of loving care which each person owes to himself, a point which St. Paul also emphasizes when he says, “Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.”<sup>50</sup> St. Thomas comments on this verse, “Just as a man sins against nature in hating himself, so does he who hates his wife.”<sup>51</sup> *They should be enjoying each other.*

What then of St. Thomas’s language of marriage as a “remedy” for sin?<sup>52</sup> This description is merely realistic. Marriage would have existed even had

47 *ST, Supp.*, q. 64.

48 *ST, Supp.*, q. 64, art. 5.

49 For example, in explaining 1 Thes 4:4–6, where St. Paul instructs men “that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God,” St. Thomas quotes 1 Pt 3:7, “Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered.” *Commentary on St. Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians*, chap. 4, lecture 1, trans. Michael Duffy, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/SS1Thes.htm>.

50 Eph 5:28 (RSV-CE).

51 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians*, chap. 5, lecture 9, trans. Duffy.

52 *ST, Supp.*, q. 42, art. 1.

there been no need for a remedy (even if there had never been a Fall).<sup>53</sup> After the Fall, though, the procreative and unitive significance of marriage are colored by the fact that our desires are disordered. Sexual desire is good in itself; God provided it to direct us into a procreative partnership. However, in our fallen condition the desire become so strong that we are tempted to indulge it in ways which are detrimental to the procreative partnership. The results are all too clear: to mention but one, fatherless and motherless children who are passed from stepparent, to stepparent, to stepparent. Although marriage makes sexual desire even stronger (for any impulse which is exercised becomes stronger), marriage now takes on a second significance it would not have had before the Fall, for it provides a way for the desire to be satisfied without sin.

But marriage is not *only*, or even *primarily*, a remedy for sin. There is a difference between saying that conjugal intercourse remedies the temptation to sin, which is obviously true, and saying that one may request intercourse only because otherwise, one might sin. In fact, there *should* always be more to the desire for sexual intercourse than that: if a husband proposed coition to his wife in the same spirit in which he would propose it to a concubine or a prostitute, something would be wrong.<sup>54</sup>

This brings us to the final misunderstanding. Does St. Thomas think that pleasure in marital intercourse is bad? Not at all. His true view is that “since the desires of good actions are good, and of evil actions, evil; much more are the pleasures of good actions good, and those of evil actions evil.”<sup>55</sup> As to the pleasure of sexual intercourse itself, the Author of nature *made* it pleasurable so that there would be a motive to engage in it: “the end which nature intends in sexual union is the begetting and rearing of the offspring. *And that this good might be sought after, it attached pleasure to the union.*”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, God has made everything which should sometimes be done pleasurable. Sometimes I need more oxygen, and it is pleasurable to yawn. Sometimes I should eat, and it is pleasurable to have a meal. Sometimes I need to stretch my muscles, and it is pleasurable to take a walk. Knowledge, friendship, worship, all these good things are also delightful.

St. Thomas even argues that had it not been for the Fall, the pleasure of sexual intercourse would have been *greater than it is now*. Beasts, he points out, cannot reason. A man who cannot use his reason to regulate his sexual desire becomes like them. However,

53 *ST, Supp.*, q. 42, art. 2.

54 “Accordingly to make use of sexual intercourse on account of its inherent pleasure, without reference to the end for which nature intended it, is to act against nature, as also is it if the intercourse be not such as may fittingly be directed to that end . . . [T]he name of concubine is expressive of that union where sexual intercourse is sought after for its own sake.” *ST, Supp.*, q. 65, art. 3. See also below, concerning the four possible motives for marital intercourse.

55 *ST, I-II*, q. 34, art. 1.

56 *ST, Supp.*, q. 65, art. 3, emphasis added.

In the state of innocence nothing of this kind would have happened that was not regulated by reason, not because delight of sense was *less*, as some say (rather indeed would sensible delight have been the *greater* in proportion to the greater purity of nature and the greater sensibility of the body), but because the force of concupiscence would not have so inordinately thrown itself into such pleasure, being curbed by reason.<sup>57</sup>

The office of reason, he says, is “not to lessen sensual pleasure,” but to prevent the force of desire from clinging to pleasure unreasonably. A sober person does not take less pleasure in food than a glutton, and in the same way, a temperate person does not take less pleasure in sexual intercourse than a lustful one. However, one’s desire does not “linger” in such pleasures.<sup>58</sup> Reason masters them.

If we had not fallen, then, our pleasures would have been even stronger, but they would not have disordered our thinking. Our minds would obey God, and our passions and desires would obey our minds. Today it is different. Unregulated sexual desire not only obstructs the mind in itself, but it also disorders the will, which is mind-guided desire.<sup>59</sup> St. Thomas distinguishes eight ways in which this happens, calling them the “daughters of lust.” As to the mind in itself, lust first obstructs simple understanding that an act is good, then it obstructs the counsel, judgment, and command of reason about what is to be done for the sake of the good. As to the will, lust works by disordering the desire for our ultimate purpose: first through self-love, because we desire pleasure too much; then through hatred of God, because He forbids the desired pleasure; then through love of this world, because it contains the desire pleasure; and finally, through abhorrence or despair of the future world, because we come to consider spiritual pleasure distasteful.<sup>60</sup> It is as though we were ignitable, filled with combustible material which tends to go up in flames at the least spark. St. Thomas calls this ignitability the *fomes* of sin, using the Latin word which refers to tinder or kindling wood.<sup>61</sup>

Yet, St. Thomas teaches that just as it is possible for a person to desire sexual pleasure too much, *so it is possible to desire it too little*: “And so, to abstain from all sexual pleasures, without a reason [such as consecrated celibacy], is called the vice of insensibility.”<sup>62</sup> Husbands and wives *should* enjoy sexual pleasure properly.

Ah, but what is it to enjoy it properly? Finally, we come to one of the most commonly misunderstood elements of St. Thomas’s teaching.

In at least four places, St. Thomas distinguishes among four possible motives which may lead the husband and wife to join their bodies in sexual intercourse.

57 ST, I, q. 98, art. 2, ad 3, emphasis added.

58 ST, I, q. 98, art. 2, ad 3, emphasis added.

59 “The will is a rational appetite.” ST, I-II, q. 8, art. 1.

60 ST, II-II, q. 153, art. 5.

61 See esp. ST, I-II, q. 74, art. 3, ad 2, and q. 91, art. 6. One wonders whether the developers of the Tinder sexual hookup app knew Latin.

62 Thomas Aquinas, SCG, III, chap. 136.

For simplicity, let us speak in terms of the husband's motivation, although all this applies equally to the wife's. First are two good and innocent motives: he might approach her for the sake of having children, or he might approach her because of the "marital debt." Next are two bad and impure motives: he may seek pleasure with his wife merely for pleasure, but with such an attitude that he would not turn to anyone else for it, or he may seek pleasure with her merely for pleasure, but with such an attitude that any woman might do<sup>63</sup>—perhaps even with such an attitude that another woman might do even better.<sup>64</sup> Of the two impure motives, the first is a venial sin, the second is mortal.

The passages in which St. Thomas calls attention to these motives are often mistakenly viewed as though he were saying (1) that the only pure motives for agreeing to sexual intercourse are either to have children or to comply with a cold demand, and (2) that it is categorically wrong for the husband and wife to desire sexual pleasure. This view could not be correct, because as we have seen, St. Thomas says that God made sexual intercourse pleasurable *precisely to give* the two spouses a motive to engage in it. But where does the error lie?

Actually, there are two errors. In the first place, bearing in mind what we said above about the so-called debt, to honor the marital debt is to agree to sexual intercourse not as compliance with a cold demand but precisely as an expression of the spouses' loving unity. Thus, it is good and pure for the two procreative partners to join their bodies to enjoy either the procreative *or the unitive* aspect of their marital friendship, and this is the correct interpretation of the two licit motives for marital intercourse.

Just now, I spoke of "enjoying" these aspects of their marital friendship, and I use this language advisedly. It is *right* to enjoy them; the spouses may, and should, seek pleasure in them. But when they do so, they should seek it *precisely as* the enjoyment of fruitfulness or loving union. To enjoy pleasure in procreation or in love, and to enjoy pleasure for its own sake, are entirely different things. If all the husband wants in his wife is genital stimulation leading to release, then he is not enjoying her, but merely making carnal use of her, and, likewise, if that is all she seeks in her husband.

What St. Thomas is really criticizing, then, is not the interest in sexual pleasure, but the hedonistic error about it. We may think about the matter like this. The husband ought to cherish his union with his wife as good in itself; but just because it *is* good in itself, it is also pleasurable, for pleasure, says St. Thomas, is the *repose* of the soul in the good. Notice that pleasure is not the main thing, but the enjoyment of the main thing. It is not the good itself, but the delight of experiencing the good.<sup>65</sup>

63 *ST, Supp.*, q. 49, art. 6; see also *ST, Supp.*, q. 65, art. 3, *De malo*, q. 15, art. 2, and *Commentary on St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians*.

64 "But when this takes place outside the bonds of marriage, the action becomes a mortal sin; and this happens when he would perform the action, even if she were not his wife, *and more willingly* with another woman." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians*.

65 See *ST, I-II*, q. 31, art. 8; q. 33, art. 4; q. 34, art. 1; and q. 38, art. 1.

Hedonists get this backward. Rather than viewing pleasure as repose in whatever is good, they view pleasure itself as the good, as the only good there is. From this point of view, one does not really cherish one's wife for her own sake; he cherishes only the resulting pleasure. It follows from this theory that if there were a way to have the pleasure of one's wife without one's wife, then that would be just as good, or even better. Never mind marriage—let us just arrange to have electrodes implanted, to stimulate the pleasure centers of our brains. Why experience pleasure indirectly, when one can experience it directly?

St. Thomas is pointing out that I should not treat my wife as that electrode. *She herself* is what I should cherish, experiencing the pleasure of that cherishing. What she and I enjoy, in both the procreative and unitive aspects of our marital friendship, is delightful. It is delightful to rest in the hope of new life; it is delightful to rest in our mutual love, as partners in this hope. But if I say “never mind our hope of children, never mind our mutual love, I just want pleasure,” then I am missing the point. I understand neither children, nor love, nor delight.

### Conclusion

St. Thomas and Paul VI are on the very same trajectory. Their doctrinal conclusions are identical, and they have compatible views of natural law. However, the two thinkers differ in the objections to which they responded, in the framework they use for explanation, and finally, in where they placed their theoretical emphasis. The last difference suggests new and interesting lines of development which St. Thomas did not explore.

#### *Differences in Objections*

Among the objections to which St. Thomas is forced to respond are that no one at all should marry, that *everyone* should marry, and that sexual intercourse is permissible outside marriage. In each case, his replies take for granted marriage concerns procreation. For him, this is not so much a conclusion as an obvious premise. To my knowledge, none of his hypothetical objectors seriously maintains that the sexual powers may be used without regard to procreation.

By contrast, Paul VI is concerned precisely with the anti-procreative objection. The dissenters reason as though somehow the invention of chemical contraception had repealed those precepts of natural law which have to do with sexuality. These dissidents believe that the procreative and unitive goods of marriage have been severed. Openness to new life, they think, is optional. Unity no longer refers to the procreative partnership of husband and wife but only to their mutual enjoyment of sexual pleasure. Not only does Paul VI seek to reply, but in his warnings about the decline of moral standards, he hints that new objections are coming up over the horizon. Why should this be? Because the dissidents' view opens the possibility that marriage itself is optional. For if sexual intercourse can be non-procreative, then why shouldn't anyone enjoy sexual pleasure? Why not

casual friends? Why not strangers? Why must there be only two of them, and why must they be of opposite and complementary sex?

Although Paul VI does not respond to these possible future objections, he does respond to another actual objection: that the Church's traditional emphasis on procreation is obsessed with the body and reduces persons to biological organisms. Having insisted that human beings are body-soul unities so that every human act is done *jointly* by body and soul, St. Thomas would have found this protest ridiculous. Thus, even though the objection itself is novel, the elements of the reply are not novel. When Paul VI argues that the procreative union has not only biological but also spiritual significance, he is following in St. Thomas's footsteps.

### *Differences in Mode of Explanation*

The most obvious point of difference between the modes of explanation used by St. Thomas and Paul VI is that St. Thomas employs Aristotle's fourfold framework of "causes": everything that comes into being has a material, formal, final, and efficient cause. Today, since the term "cause" is usually used only for efficient causes, we might instead call these the four necessary aspects of explaining why a thing is the thing it is. The material cause is what it consists of; the formal cause is its pattern; the final cause is its underlying purpose; and the efficient cause is that which brings it into being and maintains it in being. Thus, marriage consists of the husband and wife, each of them a composite of body and soul; its pattern is their lifelong union; its underlying purpose is procreation; and what brings it into being and maintains it in being is their love.

Although Paul VI does not explicitly use this fourfold explanatory framework, obviously he accepts all four propositions. For this reason, I take this difference between the two thinkers as purely expository and implying no theoretical disagreement. It makes sense for St. Thomas to use the fourfold framework of explanation, because in his day everyone used it. Even though it remains in the background of Paul VI's thought too, it may be prudent for Paul VI not to dwell upon it, because in his day even many specialists in this area are unfamiliar with this kind of explanation.

### *Theoretical Emphases and Possibilities of Development*

Finally, St. Thomas and Paul VI differ in theoretical emphasis. The difference lies in how they describe the marital union. I do not wish to overstate this difference, for both thinkers view the marital union as not only objective but also subjective. It is objective in that it is a feature of real existence, not just in the eye of the beholder. It is subjective, not in the sense that "what's true for you is not true for me," but in the sense that it is experienced by human persons—and they experience it not just in their outward relations, but in the interior of their being. Persons are aware of their own essential reality; they can reflect on themselves and know that they are reflecting. A fly is not aware that he has an interior, or even that he is a being. A person is.<sup>66</sup>

66 "Person' signifies what is most perfect in all nature—that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature." *ST*, I, q. 29, art. 3.

St. Thomas and Paul VI also agree that the personal, subjective experience of the marital union has a certain intrinsic structure, intrinsic in the sense that it is natural to us. As we have seen, St. Thomas has a great deal to say about this structure. For example, he says that the lover loves the beloved for the beloved's sake, that he regards the beloved's good as his own, and that the lover and the beloved are "contained" in each other, in the sense that the beloved is impressed on the lover's heart, and the lover penetrates into the beloved's.

Paul VI uses very similar language, but there is a difference. He places such features of union in the context of what he calls the mutual gift of self. As he explains, "husband and wife, through that mutual gift of themselves, which is specific and exclusive to them alone, develop that union of two persons in which they perfect one another, cooperating with God in the generation and rearing of new lives."<sup>67</sup> Again, he remarks that "[w]hoever really loves his partner loves not only for what he receives, but loves that partner for the partner's own sake, content to be able to enrich the other with the gift of himself."<sup>68</sup>

This difference is subtle, but it matters. It is not that St. Thomas says nothing about gifts. For example, he speaks of marriage itself as a gift; he speaks of grace as a gift which makes marital faithfulness possible; and he speaks of husband and wife giving their bodies to each other. Since both of them are body-soul unities, the mutual gift of their bodies certainly *implies* a mutual gift of their persons or selves. However, St. Thomas never speaks of the gift of self *per se*.

A related difference of emphasis—this one even more subtle—is that although St. Thomas often refers to the underlying procreative "purpose" of marriage to the reason why God intended it, Paul VI joins this word "purpose" with the word "meaning": as he writes, "to use this divine gift while depriving it, even if only partially, of its *meaning and purpose*, is equally repugnant to the nature of man and of woman, and is consequently in opposition to the plan of God and His holy will."<sup>69</sup>

This pairing makes a difference, because purpose and meaning are not the same thing. One of them concerns the outward or objective character of a thing; the other, its inward or subjective character. A purpose is what something is *for*, its proper work. A meaning is what a thing *signifies* to a rational being. Ideally, purposes in things and meanings in minds are correlated. For example, the purpose of the eyes is to see, and there is something wrong if the only thing they mean to us is sensitive spots on our heads. But, although meaning is *properly correlated* with purpose, it is more than just the recognition of purpose, because it *builds* on purpose. Thus, eyes signify more to us than seeing: indeed, we think of them as windows of the soul. One reason is that they are so expressive. Another is that they are portals by which the truth of external things reveals itself to the mind.

It is the same way with the sexual organs. Again, purpose and meaning are correlated, for their purpose is procreation, and there is something wrong if we

67 Pope Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, 8.

68 Pope Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, 9.

69 Pope Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, 13, emphasis added.

view them only as sources of interesting sensations. Yet, they signify more than procreation. For example, because one organ enters the other, they speak to us of how the beloved is impressed on the lover's heart and the lover penetrates into the beloved's. Because their joining in one flesh makes new life possible, it speaks to us of how the creator of all invites us to imitate and join in His work.

Although Paul VI does not explore the possibilities of this line of thought, they are already latent in his pairing of purpose with meaning. As we now know, John Paul II later takes up the invitation and runs with it. He continues Paul VI's argument by pointing out that the meaning of union is inseparably bonded to the powers which bring union about. We join ourselves by means of what? By means of an act which is intrinsically open to the possibility of new life. Therefore, whenever we give ourselves sexually, we are doing something that *cannot help but mean* that happy chance. If we deny that meaning and attempt to overwrite it with other meanings, *then we are not truly giving ourselves to each other.*

Do these differences of language and emphasis between St. Thomas and Paul VI reflect doctrinal differences? No. Do they signal incompatibilities in theory? Certainly not. But do they point to the possibility of a further unfolding of doctrine, an organic development of our understanding of these things? Yes. We are seeing it now.

Paul VI's argument against contraception is straightforwardly teleological: by rendering infertile an act which could otherwise be fertile, contraception violates the procreative good of marriage. St. Thomas plainly agrees: "That the emission of semen under conditions in which offspring cannot follow is illicit is quite clear," he says, not only from Scripture, but also from nature. "Hence, after the sin of homicide whereby a human nature already in existence is destroyed, this type of sin appears to take next place, for by it the generation of human nature is precluded."<sup>70</sup>

Paul VI, however, goes one step further, showing that although contraception is directly contrary only to the procreative good, it is indirectly contrary to the unitive good as well. How so? The methods of Natural Family Planning require a degree of restraint because for at least several days of the month the partners must abstain from intercourse. By contrast, contraception encourages the attitude that even this moderate degree of restraint is too much to expect of mere flesh and blood. But how could it be too much, unless we view the passions as irresistible forces, burning monsters, which demand to be fed at the least movement of impulse? And if we do view them this way, then how is it possible for the spouses to show respect for each other? Such an attitude is especially injurious for women, because just as Paul VI predicted, not only do men in our day see no reason for restraint whatsoever, but they demand that their wives have essentially male patterns of sexual response. If their wives are less than eager to leap into bed at any time, they consider themselves unjustly deprived. From this point of view, far from departing from St. Thomas's thought, Paul VI deepens and extends it.

70 Thomas Aquinas, SCG, III, chap. 122.

What then should we think of contraception? By now, the answer should be plain. Not only does contraception throw sand in the axle on which the great wheel of the generations turns, but it also discredits temperance, restraint, and the mutual reverence and tenderness of the spouses. By resisting the natural goods of marriage, it cannot help but resist its supernatural good as well. The sacrament of marriage declares that Christ and His Church are espoused in the same way as a faithful husband and wife. Do we really wish to compare the union of Christ and the Church with a marriage which frustrates and defies the purposes for which marriage was created? Surely, our Creator and Redeemer intends for us a greater joy than that.