

Holy Communion: Eucharistic and Marital

By John F. Kippley July 20-22, 2008

Introduction

In some of the contemporary (2008) writing that supports the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, there is considerable emphasis on the beautiful and very complete “Theology of the Body” (TOB) developed by Pope John Paul II. There is a special emphasis on the belief that the marriage act ought to entail a genuine gift of self to the other. In fact, some of the writing so connects this concept with the papal TOB that it gives the impression that that the self-gift concept of the marriage act was not developed prior to the papal lectures that constitute the “Theology of the Body.” That is not historically accurate. I would like to call attention to the fact that the following article first appeared as an article in *Ave Maria*, 25 February 1967. That was 17 months before *Humanae Vitae* and more than 12 years before the start of the TOB lectures in the fall of 1978. Further, it was actually written a year previous to publication. It was the first piece I wrote about the birth control issue, and I clearly remember what prompted me to write. I was living in Santa Clara, CA, and on a winter Saturday early in 1966, I attended a workshop on the birth control issue held in a church hall somewhere up the peninsula, probably in Palo Alto. The speaker was Michael Novak who was then teaching at Stanford. He was also making a name for himself as a leading lay spokesman for those who thought the Church could and should change its teaching to allow contraception, and he held true to form in that workshop. I can’t recall what he said, but I can remember my reaction. I thought his case specious, and I was angry—not just mad, but angry—and I was determined to respond. Considering what I wrote, I suspect that Novak had been using the very soft love-talk that has been traditionally used by dissenters from authentic Christian teaching on love and sexuality. So I responded by drawing a five-fold analogy between the conditions necessary for a worthy reception of the Eucharist and a worthy marriage . In short, Christian love is tough love, both Eucharistic and marital.

What still amazes me is the ease and speed with which I wrote that original article. I made a few handwritten notes on a half piece of paper, probably the five points of the analogy, and then started typing—the rest of Saturday afternoon and most of Sunday. I showed it to a couple of theologians in the summer of 1966, made just a few changes, and sent it off to *Ave Maria*.

I wish I could write with equal ease today! A healthy anger was my great aid at the time, but as error and evil have become ever so much more widespread and commonplace, it is correspondingly more difficult to get charged up by a healthy anger that moves one from inertia to action.

A personal note: The *Ave Maria* article drew some letters pro and con. One priest praised the article, and another accused me of blasphemy for daring to associate the Eucharistic and the sexual communions. Thus it was satisfying to see the Holy Father make the same association on 25 September 1982 to an organization that planned to study marriage in the light of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. It was also gratifying to learn that

Michael Novak as the publisher of *Crisis* recanted his dissent in his editorial for June, 1989.

What follows is the original article except for a few minor changes for clarity. The article plus a similar introduction constitutes Chapter 4 in *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality* published by Ignatius Press and published here with permission.

* * *

With an increasing emphasis being given to the personalist values of sexual intercourse in marriage, additional light can be gained from comparing the marriage act with another very personal type of intercourse, that of the encounter with Christ in the reception of Holy Communion. Both communions take place within the context of communities that are creations of God—the Church and matrimony, and these communities are so closely linked that St. Paul explains the community of marriage in terms of the Church (Eph. 5:21-33). Both are meant to be truly personal communions; both are meant to be a simultaneous giving and receiving; both are meant to lead men and women to lives of holiness.

Everyone is agreed today that of itself the act of sexual intercourse is a good and that in marriage it can be a means of expressing married love and be conducive to true Christian holiness. In marriage it is meant to be a true communion of persons whose bodily actions represent the communion of the total persons. Because this communion is likewise meant to lead the couple to holiness, it can very aptly be called a holy communion.

Result of sacraments

There are a number of marked similarities between these two communions—Eucharistic and matrimonial. First of all, they are both the result of sacraments given us by Christ for our salvation. If it isn't just word-picking, I think we usually refer to the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Our Lord as the "Holy Eucharist" as He becomes present to us through the consecration. Then when the faithful actually receive Him in the sacrament, we usually refer to this reception as "Holy Communion." The sacrament of Matrimony is likewise a sacrament establishing a new and sacred union between husband and wife and making it morally good to express this union in the communion of sexual intercourse.

Sacrificial offerings

Secondly, both of these communions come about as a result of a sacrificial offering. In the case of Holy Communion we have the offering of Christ to his Father, an offering at the Last Supper which looked forward to and included the fullness of giving in his death on the cross the next day. "This is my body which is given up for you" (Luke 22:19). In the case of the holy communion of matrimony we likewise have a delivering of the bodies of husband and wife to each other. As they confer the sacrament upon each other, they deliver themselves to each other without respect to circumstances, i.e., for poorer, sickness and worse as well as for richer, health and better. This is an explicit and formal recognition that in the giving of themselves to each other they are making a sacrifice.

Here we can use the word sacrifice in its common connotation of enduring difficulty or of giving up something, or we can look upon it in its etymological meaning of making holy. Perhaps the best way to take it here is that husband and wife will each grow in holiness according to the measure in which they give of self in trying to build up the other person. St. Paul is explicit in his instruction to the husband to sanctify his wife as Christ gave of Himself to sanctify the Church. The current emphasis on reform in the Church is an embodiment of the Church's belief that she must always seek to be ever faithful and true to her head and savior, Christ. Likewise are wives instructed in this spirit of obedience to a loving spouse who does not selfishly seek his own benefit but rather that of their mutual union. It is, then, this sacramental offering of self to each other, this true sacrificial offering, that makes morally good and humanly meaningful their subsequent communion in sexual intercourse.

Bodily gift of self

A third similarity is found in the expression of love through a bodily giving of self. Christ's love for men was incarnate and anything but angelistic: throughout his public life we see Him performing bodily good works among men as well as the spiritual healing of forgiving sins. Did this cost Him something? Certainly his weariness at Jacob's well shows his personal human expense. However, the example that Christ called our attention to was his giving up of his life in order to save men and in order to establish once again a union between God and men: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). This is also the example to which St. Paul points in his marriage discourse in which he directs husbands, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her . . ." (Eph. 5:25-26).

In the act of sexual intercourse in marriage we likewise have the possibility of a bodily expression of love which represents a real giving of self in order to increase the union between husband and wife. This possibility is not realized in every act of sexual intercourse, even that which is morally permissible in marriage. Of itself, looked at on the lowest level, it is simply a union of two bodies. As to the human value of this union, we will have an unfortunately large range . . . the gross outrage of rape, the commercial use of prostitution, adultery and fornication (in both of which the level of affection can be very high while still lacking utterly the total meaning of human love) and the various meanings of sexual intercourse within marriage. For within marriage, there is still a range of human significance of the sexual union sometimes paralleling those outside of marriage: the act which is little more than an act of legalized rape in which there is no affection, to say nothing of love; the acts which positively exclude a real acceptance of the other person in the sense of accepting further responsibility for that person or any other person; acts which embody total acceptance of the other person and of the responsibilities which their mutual love entails; and finally that act which, as a real embodiment of their mutual self-giving love, consciously seeks to personify this love in a third person, as the communitarian love of the Father and the Son is personified in the third person of the Holy Spirit.

At this highest level, we have a love which seeks to love in the image and likeness of God, to be freely creative, a love which is Christian for it incarnates itself, not shrinking from the self-sacrifice which will undoubtedly follow from this “incarnation,” this expression of their love through a bodily giving of self. What must be understood in all of this is that the marital act is meant to be the bodily expression of the personal love between the two persons, an expression of their union with each other through a mutual giving of self.

Covenant renewal

The mutual self-giving in the communion of intercourse can be seen likewise in a fourth similarity between it and Holy Communion, the aspect of the covenant. In the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass, the New Covenant is constantly renewed. The person who worships devoutly at Mass and receives Holy Communion worthily is at least implicitly renewing on his part the covenant which Jesus established at the Last Supper. On the part of Christ there is no need for renewal of this covenant because as God’s Son his sacrifice was perfect, and God’s love as expressed in this covenant remains constant. However, on the part of man, who is constantly changing—growing closer to God or growing away from him—there is the constant need to renew our covenant, our pledge of fidelity to the Father in and through the Son and with the help of the Holy Spirit. When the worthy communicant receives the Body of Christ and says “Amen,” he is in effect also saying, “I’m with you, too, all the way. If any sacrifice is demanded of me in order to be faithful to you, I am ready and willing to make it with your help.”

Sexual intercourse in marriage should likewise be a renewal of the covenant the couple first made as they exchanged their promises to be faithful to each other under all circumstances. When they commune with each other in this way, they can once again renew their pledge, their covenant, to take each other completely, regardless of the consequences, be they wealth and health or poorness and sickness. Thus, sexual intercourse which is at least an implicit renewal of the marriage covenant is likewise a simultaneous giving and receiving, just as is the Holy Communion of the Eucharist.

Not every person who receives Holy Communion has these thoughts on his mind, nor is it necessary that the couples be thinking in these terms. Both of these are actions, and certain actions have a meaning in themselves and retain this meaning at the subjective level unless the human persons involved directly contradict it. For example, for the communicant’s reception of the Eucharist to be a Holy Communion, he must fulfill certain conditions at least negatively, lest what is meant to be a means of holiness for him becomes in fact a means of condemnation. He must be in the state of sanctifying grace, a friend of God, and have at the least nothing in his life which marks him as unwilling to give himself to God in any serious matter. To be opposed to God in any serious matter is to expel God from one’s heart, to lose the state of sanctifying grace. The more open to God that he is, the more he will receive in Holy Communion, but at the bare minimum he cannot have any deliberate obstacles to a true communion with God, a true willingness to give himself all the way to God in any serious matter.

For the communion of sexual intercourse to be a true renewal of the covenant, and therefore a true means of growing in holiness for each other, it likewise must fulfill those conditions laid down at the time of the first covenant of their wedding day. If it is to be a truly meaningful and personal encounter with all the connotations of meetings between persons and not just bodies, if it is to be a simultaneous giving and taking, then it must involve that mutual pledge of giving to each other and acceptance of the other in this act without regard for the consequences. As with the reception of the Holy Eucharist, at the bare minimum, there can be no deliberate obstacles to this giving and receiving, lest what is meant to be a holy communion of spouses be turned into something considerably less than sacred and even sacrilegious.

A current [when first written in 1966] emphasis in the theology of Holy Communion is on the disposition of the person receiving the sacrament. While not negating the minimum requirements for a valid reception of the Eucharist, increasing stress is laid upon the fact that the growth in holiness of the person, which is the intended effect of the sacrament, is not something which Christ will automatically produce even though he is infallibly present to the person in the sacrament. It is clear that his historic presence during his public life did not automatically create a state of holiness within those about Him—witness Judas, for example. Likewise today, although the grace of Christ is infinite, personal growth in grace depends not just upon the physical reception of the sacraments, but also upon the degree to which the person has responded to the actual grace of God in opening his heart to God and neighbor. And this is far from a sweet and pietistic desire to want to receive Jesus in one's heart. The Eucharist was given us at the Last Supper in order to strengthen and nourish us to keep another gift of the Last Supper: the commandment to love one another as Christ loved us.

It would be a shame if today, during a time of development in the theology of marriage, undue emphasis were placed on either a merely valid sexual marital act or on purely subjective considerations, for this would run counter to the well-balanced emphasis now taking place in the other areas of sacramental theology.

The aspect of covenant helps to maintain a balance between the subjective and the objective elements by calling to mind that objectively, the act itself must be free from deliberate and positive exclusion of its natural effects or purposes, just as the original marriage covenant or contract. It also calls to mind that subjectively, the more the act is a renewal of the love that called forth the original marriage promises, the more holy a communion it becomes.

The aspect of covenant also offers an answer to one of the perennial mysteries of married love: How can an act which both parties enjoy so much, out of which each person can gain so much personal satisfaction at the sensual, psychological and deepest levels of being—how can such an act be at the same time one of self-giving love? How if the persons are “getting” so much can they at the same time be giving of themselves? It should be noted first of all that many mature married people undoubtedly find great satisfaction from the fact that they have contributed to the pleasure of the other. In such

cases, it seems that the communion of intercourse is a culmination of the real communion of their lives.

But even deeper than that, it is because their act is a renewal of their marriage covenant that they engage in a simultaneous giving and receiving. As the couple start out upon marriage, it is precisely because they have given of themselves without reservations to the other that they can now receive the beloved. And throughout their married life, it will be precisely because they have each given of themselves, even denied themselves, on behalf of the other that they will reach that state of personal development which is the immediate goal of human life, a state of true inner freedom in regard both to oneself and to other things, a freedom which frees the person for unselfish service towards God and neighbor.

Thus, just as the truly Holy Communion with Christ in the Eucharist is the result of complete openness to all that the covenant with Him demands, likewise the truly holy communion of marital intercourse is that which is truly a renewal of the marriage covenant, open to all the demands of Christian marriage, an acceptance of each other and the consequences without reservation.

Sealing of the covenant

A fifth similarity [between the Eucharistic and marital communions] can be urged by looking at the way in which the covenant is sealed. The New Covenant made by Christ is sealed in his own blood the next day on Calvary. On his part there was a complete giving of self, an act of complete obedience, a perfect compliance with the will of the Father without regard to his own inconvenience and suffering. The matrimonial covenant is sealed by sexual intercourse which, if it symbolizes anything, symbolizes a complete mutual giving of self and acceptance of the other. In this aspect of the seal of the covenant we can see the full force of the marriage discourse of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Wives are to be subject to a loving husband. Husbands are to love their wives in the same way that Christ loved the Church: He gave up his life to sanctify the Church. Likewise, the husband should not be seeking his own benefit but must be willing to sacrifice, to achieve a higher union with his spouse, through the giving of himself. In marriage as in all other phases of life, the words of Christ have new bearing: "He who seeks his life will lose it; he who loses his life for my sake will gain it."

The covenant of marriage is to sacramentalize the covenant of Christ with his Church. That is, it is to be the same reality only under difference appearances. The New Covenant was sealed by the death of him who in this way sanctified the Church, his body. The covenant of Matrimony must be sealed likewise by the death to self in order to help the spouse, now joined in a unique oneness, to attain a life of holiness.

Conditions for validity

The similarities of these two types of personal communions are likewise helpful in reaching conclusions about the conditions for a truly valid encounter in the marital communion. For the worthy reception of the Eucharist, for a Holy Communion, the communicant at the minimum must be free from mortal sin. And what does this mean? It

means that he must not be set against the covenant, that he must not be opposed to any sacrifice that might be demanded from him in order to remain true to his covenant with his Savior. For the communion of sexual intercourse to be a means of holiness or, at the least, not a means of unholiness, the spouses must likewise be free from any obstacles that will deny the covenant that they have made before God. If they have taken each other for better or for worse, their renewal of their marriage covenant must likewise be for better or for worse. Just as when they pledged to give themselves and to receive the other regardless of the consequences, so also must their subsequent communion in the marriage act be free from any denial of this covenant.

In the reception of the Holy Eucharist, it is not enough to be “generally” turned toward God. A person in a state of sin may not look back to last year (when faced with fewer temptations he was not in a state of sin) and receive the Eucharist on the basis of last year’s state. His present state is all-important. Nor may he look forward to the unknown future and, under an intention to leave the state of sin sometime in the future when conditions are less pressing, receive the Eucharist in his present state of sin. The worthiness of his Communion depends upon his present state of soul, his present willingness to give of himself in following Christ. In other words, he may not play a percentage morality and state that since most of the time he is open to the sacrifice required by Christian life, he may therefore worthily receive Communion at any time even though he be temporarily alienated from God and unwilling to live the life of love as his circumstances demand it. What he must avoid in this particular example is the false application of what might be called a principle of totality.

One of the current [mid-1960s] questions concerning marriage and sexual intercourse is whether it is not sufficient to have the marriage as a whole open to the service of life but permissible to exclude positively that openness to life in the expression of mutual love in sexual intercourse. It renews again the conflict between the purposes of marriage—procreation and mutual development. Or to state it positively, would it not be permissible to positively preclude the possibility of conception through direct contraception? According to some, a principle of totality, under which the marriage as a whole is open and generous in the service of life, would be sufficient; but it would not be necessary for each and every act of married sexual love to reflect that openness even in a minimal way, i.e., at least open to the remote possibility though not intending procreation.¹

Personally, I find the approach very attractive, especially when I imagine some family burdened by a severe health problem on the part of the woman which makes pregnancy extremely dangerous, and whose openness to the service of life is witnessed by the adoption of other children. Because of these hardships, it is all the more important that the question be clearly answered: Is marriage itself and the overall generosity and openness to life the only sacred reality involved, or is the act of married sexual intercourse something sacred of itself—something whose sacred character must be respected in every instance regardless of circumstances? Or to put the question in terms of today’s ethical theories, is the sacred character of the married sexual act something absolute or is it conditioned by the situation of the married couple?

Conclusion

It is the task of anyone who hopes to shed light on a problem not to construct a theory to support his sympathies but rather to show by reason, example and analogy the inner unity of the entire Christian faith. Thus it is that this analogy between the Holy Communion of the Eucharist and the holy communion of married intercourse must reach its conclusion, namely, that in order for marital sexual intercourse to be a valid expression of marital love and thus a means toward growth in holiness, it must at least be free from abortive, sterilizing and contraceptive impediments to the transmission of life.

The comparison has been made that the two communions are similar because they are both the results of sacraments, both the result of sacrificial love, both an expression of bodily love, both a renewal of the covenant, both covenants sealed with a death to self. Because of this, just as each reception of the Eucharist is in itself a sacred reality signifying complete acceptance of the covenant, likewise each act of married sexual love is a sacred reality. It entails a renewal of the marriage covenant, an acceptance of each other regardless of the circumstances, even if this renewal should lead to sickness or to poorness or even to death itself. That degree of self-giving is certainly going to require a supernatural faith, a deep and abiding realization that only he who loses his life for the sake of Christ will find it, and that he who seeks his life will lose it.

The Christian must come to realize that it is only through a constant, ever-increasing gift of himself to God and neighbor that he can arrive at the true development of himself. The married couple must come to realize that their desire to increase their mutual love and self-development can be fulfilled only through the self-giving which they signified through their exchange of marriage promises.

In this manner, with every act of intercourse a renewal of the marriage covenant in which they pledged undying fidelity to each other regardless of the situation, the married couple enter into a truly holy communion, a true source of grace and the occasion of the fullness of married love.

1. Pope Paul VI thoroughly rejected the totality thesis in *Humanae Vitae*. He concluded his argument against the “totality” argument in this way: “Consequently it is an error to think that a conjugal act which is deliberately made infecund and so is intrinsically dishonest could be made honest and right by the ensemble of a fecund conjugal life” (n.14).

Comment by Fr. Virtue: “When I was consultor to Bishop Myers in Peoria I recommended every seminarian read John’s book [*Sex and the Marriage Covenant*], and the Bishop gave copies to them to read so that as future parish priests they would appreciate Holy Matrimony. It is significant that John was ahead or at least in line with two other major theologians of our time — John Paul II on the theology of the body, and Scott Hahn on the theology of the covenant — and that John has synthetically brought these two lines of doctrine together and in his application of them to the sacraments of Holy Matrimony and its relation to the Holy Eucharist. This is one of the major developments of the theology of Matrimony in the history of theology.” June 4, 2007