

The background of the cover is a religious painting. At the top center, a white dove is depicted within a circular frame, surrounded by a halo of golden rays. Below this, a man in a red tunic and a woman in a blue and white robe are shown in a prayerful or reverent pose, with their hands clasped together. The scene is set against a warm, golden background with stylized plants and a horizon line at the bottom.

SIGNS

of

LOVE

Christian Liturgy in the
Everyday Life of the Family

Msgr. Renzo Bonetti

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Everyday Life of the Family



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Translated by Brent Orrell and Alessandro Sona

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Printed in the United States of America

Cover illustration: The Marriage Icon courtesy of Mistero Grande Foundation, used with permission.

Cover and page design by Strange Last Name

Page layout by PerfectType, Nashville, Tennessee

Bonetti, Renzo.

Signs of love : Christian liturgy in the everyday life of the family / Renzo Bonetti ; translated by Brent Orrell and Alessandro Sona. – Franklin, Tennessee : Seedbed Publishing, ©2017.

x, 146 pages : 21 cm.

Includes bibliographical references (pages 139-146)

Translation of: La liturgia della famiglia : la coppia sacramento dell'amore

ISBN 9781628244427 (paperback)

ISBN 9781628244434 (Mobi)

ISBN 9781628244441 (ePub)

ISBN 9781628244458 (uPDF)

“Through the iconography of ordinary marriages, Bonetti shows us how married love, the “great mystery” St. Paul writes about in Ephesians 5, can make us present to the very heart of the church itself. To understand the Trinity, he says, we should look to the lives of Christian couples as they reenact Jesus’ self-sacrifice at Calvary. Through its powerful examination of church sacraments – baptism, confirmation, forgiveness, Eucharistic union, and last rites – Signs of love shows us that these “outward, visible signs of inward visible grace” are not just for Sunday but, when incarnated in the life of the married couple, vital tools for discipleship and evangelization.”—Publisher.

1. Married people--Religious life. 2. Liturgics. 3. Sacraments. 4. Christian life--Catholic authors. 5. Spiritual formation. 6. Spiritual exercises. I. Title. II. La liturgia della famiglia : la coppia sacramento dell'amore. English.

BV4596.M3 B6616 2017

248.8

2017950157



SEEDBED PUBLISHING

Franklin, Tennessee

seedbed.com

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FOREWORD

Signs of Love is a translation of a book by Monsignor Renzo Bonetti, a Roman Catholic priest who lives near Verona in northern Italy. Originally published as *The Liturgy of the Family*, *Signs of Love* is an extended meditation on marriage as a living icon of God's love. In Bonetti's words, each marriage is "a book of God written in flesh" that instructs the couple and the world in the relationship of total self-giving that exists between the three Persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To see Jesus is to see the Father. To see a married couple is to be given a glimpse of the Trinitarian love that powers all existence and to be present to the very heart of the church itself.

Since 2012, Truro Anglican Church in Fairfax, Virginia (www.truroanglican.com), has partnered with Bonetti and the organization he leads, Mistero Grande (The Great Mystery, <http://www.misterogrande.org/>), to deepen our understanding of this teaching. We have learned that Bonetti's work is, above all, a theology of relationship. God, through his Son, is intimately connected to and identified with humanity. He entrusted Jesus to an earthly father and mother who cared for him as he grew up within an extended community of family and neighbors. In his teaching, Jesus expanded the scope of the family ("Who is my

mother, and who are my brothers?” [Matt. 12:46–50 esv]) to include his disciples and intimate friends. It is through this radical expansion of our concept of the family that Truro is learning how our own families can become, in don Renzo’s words, the “Trinitarian greenhouses” in which new faith is seeded, nurtured, and grown.

There are many how-to books for improving marriage. *Signs of Love* is not one of them. Rather, it is meditation to help Christians—single, married, divorced, widowed—explore God’s purposes in creating the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual pairing of male and female in a lifelong bond. In short, it is not a book about how to fix a marriage but rather how marriage can begin to fix us. At Truro, we are persuaded that the “profound mystery” St. Paul teaches in Ephesians 5 is a much grander and more serious and beautiful thing than we ever suspected. It is, quite literally, a primary means by which we share in the Father’s work to redeem and renew his creation. In this way, the sort of self-giving love embodied in the apostle Paul’s writing is inherently evangelical.

Monsignor Bonetti, or don Renzo as he is known to us, is fond of saying that the church without an evangelism strategy is nothing more than an ideology. And in a day and age where growing numbers of people have little or no Christian experience, the fact that the great mystery of marriage provides such a strategy is good news. In a changing culture, it is the family who stands on the frontier of evangelization. It is the family who reaches out as a living demonstration of the love of God to those who most often feel far from God. It is the family who mentors the young adult, who takes in the foster child, and the family who can reclaim the idea of the domestic church.

Early in my ministry, I was introduced to the writings of the polish priest Karol Wojtyla, the man who later became Pope John Paul II. His work, particularly his *Theology of the Body*, introduced me to a fuller understanding of Christ the Bridegroom who pursues his people—his bride. Scripture begins with a wedding in a garden. It likewise ends with a wedding in a garden. The middle

of the Bible (Song of Songs) is a nuptial song—the soundtrack of Scripture. And, of course, Jesus performs his first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee before entering Samaria to woo the woman at the well (a nuptial-type scene). The language of marriage is so prominent in Scripture that the whole of the Christian life must somehow be shaped by the great mystery. God first loved us—indeed, pursued and wooed us. Everything else stems from that first love.

It wasn't until I was introduced to Bonetti's work that I began seeing how I could lead our parish into living the theology of the body. *Signs of Love* shows how the sacraments of the faith offer a rhythm for family life. Some of us reading this book will be familiar with these sacraments and their purpose in the history of the Christian faith. Others will be introduced to the sacraments for the first time. Thus, a word of explanation is in order.

A *sacrament* is an outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible grace. And there is scriptural evidence that each of the seven were witnessed or practiced by Jesus. While the Protestant Reformers elevated baptism and Communion above the others with the Radical Reformers adding foot-washing to the list, each of these sacraments is practiced in some way by every stream of the Christian tradition. Each stream practices the Eucharist, Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion. Each stream also practices baptism. For streams of the Christian tradition who practice "believer baptism," the baptism itself serves as a confirmation of the believer's faith in Christ. Similarly, the acts of marriage, forgiveness, anointing of the sick, and the Word all have a prominent place in each stream of the Christian tradition, though understood or prized differently.

I've spent much of my life and ministry engaged in the work of reconciliation and peacemaking; and before something can be mended, we must first acknowledge a state of brokenness. In the broken places is where God's grace often shines the brightest. It is without question that much of the church today is in need of mending. It should be no secret that much of the brokenness

in the church is a direct result of the brokenness in the little domestic churches that make up the whole. Whole neighborhoods and communities are broken because the role of the family as the front line of the church's witness is missing.

But in Christ, there is always reason for hope. The reasons for the church's decline are what inspire hope. The body of Christ becomes strong in the broken place when domestic church is recovered as essential to the ecclesial church. The church recovers a way of life so that the pattern of our lives in Christ, sacramentally marked, becomes a means of grace to all who are touched by our people. Christianity ceases to be ideology and becomes life.

Publishing a work of this sort is only possible because of some very special early adopters. Brent Orrell from our parish and Alessandro Sona with Mistero Grande did the painstaking work of translation. Brent was the first to pilot a study group of the book in our parish. Brent's vision for the book is that it is best read and digested in community. To that end, Aaron Williams—a PhD student at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at Catholic University in Washington, DC, and a member of our parish—wrote the study guide for each chapter of the book with the aim of provoking discussion and action. Chaney Mullins, Hannah King, and Matthew Hemsley on our staff were early champions of the book and component parts of our project as our parish learns to love as God loves. Chris Backert and Gannon Sims with Fresh Expressions US caught the vision of domestic church as key to the re-evangelization of North America. This book is but a facet of a growing project that we hope will contribute in some way to that end.

We share it with you in excitement and gratitude!

—Reverend Dr. Tory Baucum
Rector, Truro Anglican Church
Fairfax, Virginia

THE LITURGY OF
THE CHURCH
and
THE LITURGY OF
THE FAMILY



THE LITURGY OF THE CHURCH

This book is a meditation on and prayer for the great mystery that spouses receive through the sacrament of marriage (see Ephesians 5:32). For marriage is more than the wedding ceremony itself. It is a mystery that endures throughout the life of the couple, a mystery that has its own liturgy and rites.

In this first chapter, we wish to rediscover the beauty of what the church celebrates and lives through the liturgy of the church and how the family—the little, or domestic, church—echoes, extends, and points us back to the church's larger liturgy.

We need to begin by deepening our understanding of *liturgy* as something far more than the religious ceremonies of the

church. To go deeper we must focus on the Person at the heart of liturgy, Jesus Christ.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches the centrality of Jesus this way: Christ is always present in his church, especially in her liturgical celebrations.¹ And again:

Seated at the right hand of the Father and pouring out the Holy Spirit on his body, which is the church, Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace . . . By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.²

Jesus acts through the church, but his actions are not entrusted to the goodwill or skill of people. Instead, his powerful action within the church is founded on the apostles' mandate. As the *Catechism* teaches:

Just as Christ was sent by the Father so also he sent the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit . . . so that the work of salvation which they preached should be set in train through the sacrifice and sacraments, around which the entire liturgical life revolves.³

Further on, it presents the other side of the liturgy:

Christ, indeed, always associates the Church with himself in [the liturgy] in which God is perfectly glorified and men are sanctified. The Church is his beloved Bride who calls to her Lord and through him offers worship to the eternal Father.⁴

Every church liturgy, then, has two dimensions: first, an *ascending* dimension, in which we give glory to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to praise, bless, and thank the Lord; second, a *descending* dimension, in which the Lord comes to meet us, sanctify us, and help us grow in his life.

We must emphasize that the *whole* church is involved in this action of praise, and the *whole* church benefits from the salvation that comes from the Father through the Son in the Holy

Spirit in *every* liturgical celebration. Even a small congregation—a few people, celebrating a single baptism—is joined by the whole church. When a single priest prays the Liturgy of the Hours, he celebrates with the church, and the church with him. In this way, the Christian is never alone. Through the Holy Spirit, we are all always part of one body that is the church.

During these liturgical unions, the Holy Spirit makes Jesus and the mystery of his love real, creating and sustaining the link between Jesus and each one of us. In the church, the Spirit forms and makes visible the body of Jesus. The *Catechism* expresses the mystery of Jesus' love, shown in the church's liturgy:

Christian liturgy not only recalls the events that saved us but actualizes them, makes them present. The Paschal mystery of Christ is celebrated, not repeated. It is the celebrations that are repeated, and in each celebration there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that makes the unique mystery present.⁵

The paschal mystery of Christ, the center of Christian life and faith, is beyond time and eternal. While it cannot be repeated, the liturgy makes it present to us. As the *Catechism* tells us, “The whole liturgical life of the church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments.”⁶ It further explains, “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church.”⁷

Through the liturgy, the mysteries lived by Jesus—his passion, death, and resurrection—are present to us. Entering the “eternal now” through the liturgy, we go to meet the living Jesus. The living Jesus we meet in the liturgy is the same for us now as he was for those Christians living in AD 1400. This same Jesus will meet his people in the liturgy when Christians gather a hundred years from now. Jesus is always present in the mystery of his salvation through the rites that join us to him. He saves us and joins us, the church, to himself to give praise to the Father.

THE LITURGY OF THE FAMILY: THE LITTLE CHURCH

We now turn to the liturgy as it is expressed in the life of the family. We call the family the *little* or *domestic* church. The domestic church has its own liturgy that echoes and points to the universal church.

In *Familiaris Consortio*, Saint John Paul II writes:

Christian marriage, like the other sacraments, “whose purpose is to sanctify people, to build up the body of Christ, and finally, to give worship to God” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 59) is in itself a liturgical action glorifying God in Jesus Christ and in the Church.⁸

For most, the idea that a married couple’s everyday life forms a unique liturgy is surprising, but its importance cannot be overstated. This small liturgy is joined to the great liturgy of the church and has within itself a distinct ministry and liturgical task.

The liturgical–ritual dimension of this spousal liturgy is in danger of being completely forgotten, because those charged with pastoral care frequently feel overwhelmed by problems that appear more urgent than the needs of the family. Modern pastoral culture looks to the rite of marriage itself in the hope that it is sufficient to sustain and equip the couple for the rest of their lives. This is a flawed and incomplete understanding of the spousal liturgy.

SPOUSES: LITURGICAL MINISTERS OF THE MARRIAGE RITE

In celebrating the marriage rite, the spouses, not the priest, are ministers of the liturgy. The priest is the church’s witness; he blesses the spouses. But the man and the woman are really the liturgical ministers of the marriage rite.

In the spousal liturgy, the first liturgical act is the rite of the sacrament of marriage, where God joins husband and wife in a

one-flesh union. The spouses are ministers of the sacrament, by means of, and with the power of, their baptismal priesthood, the priesthood of all believers.⁹

The two baptized persons who marry already belong to Jesus, the central actor in the marriage rite who is acting in and with the church's liturgy. It is Jesus who gives the spouses to each other through their exchange of consent and through the pouring forth of the Holy Spirit.

In the celebration of the marriage sacrament, the spouses occupy the place that a priest does when he celebrates the Mass or hears confession. Spouses make Jesus present, and Jesus gives them to one another. As they exchange vows, they lend their voices so that Jesus can say to each of them, "Yes, I give you to one another."

In every sacrament, it is always Jesus who acts. It is Jesus who baptizes. It is Jesus who gives the Holy Spirit in confirmation. The priest and the bishop are signs, but it is not the priest who baptizes; it is not the bishop who confirms. It is Jesus who baptizes and confirms through the priest or the bishop. In the Mass, it is Jesus who celebrates. "This is my body," he says, using the voice of the priest. In penance, it is Jesus who absolves; in anointing the sick, it is Jesus who gives comfort and healing. And in holy orders and matrimony, it is Jesus who joins the spouses in a one-flesh union. Thus, when we fail to recognize the spouses as the ministers of the marriage sacrament, we distort its meaning and diminish its importance.

As the priest acts in the name of Jesus when he celebrates the Mass, so spouses act in the name of Jesus when they minister in the sacrament of marriage. Of course, couples prepare for marriage; they discern and choose whether one is made for the other. But in the final analysis, it is Jesus who brings and joins the two baptized Christians together.

Earlier we established that every sacrament has an ascending and a descending dimension. The nuptial liturgy *ascends*, giving glory, praise, and worship to the Trinity, praising and blessing God for the creation of man and woman made in his image and

likeness. The four blessings of the marriage rite invoke the Holy Spirit upon the spouses and begin with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord for the great gift of having created man and woman. These blessings make clear that the marriage rite is an act of liturgical worship, of entering into the eternal now of Christ and his church. The nuptial liturgy also *descends*. In the descending dimension, the Lord empowers the spouses to be able to live out the love of Christ in their life together.

Familiaris Consortio underlines these fundamental truths:

The Spirit which the Lord pours forth gives a new heart, and renders man and woman capable of loving one another as Christ has loved us. . . . [The spouses] are called to live the very charity of Christ who gave Himself on the Cross.¹⁰

Spouses must do more than celebrate the rite of the marriage. They are called to live the love that gave itself on the cross!

In the coming chapters, we will continue to explore the characteristics that all the sacraments share with the marriage sacrament. For instance, as a priest celebrates the continuity of Christ's donation in the Eucharist, so spouses celebrate a continuity of Christ's sacrificial love through their married life.

Every marriage is a new *yes* of God ("Yes, I have done a beautiful thing") to the creative action of man and woman, who are made in God's image and likeness.¹¹ Every marriage mirrors and repeats the same *yes* present in the creation of the first man and woman. Every marriage is also a new *yes* to the covenant of love between the Creator and humanity, between Christ and the church, so that this love may continue to live and communicate itself through a new couple. God wants to extend and grow this loving covenant between Christ and the church; he does so by asking the spouses to continuously share and celebrate it.

The celebration of marriage is a new expression of God's love for humanity. Through marriage, he redeems, saves, and renews love from all the decay that may afflict it. Regardless of whether

the couple is Christian, marriage provides a common grace that tells of God's "in the beginning" blessing of creation. In the sacrament of marriage Jesus appropriates the marriage and makes it an effective sign of grace for the glory of God.

SPOUSES CONTINUE THE LITURGY OF MARRIAGE IN THEIR LIFE TOGETHER

Familiaris Consortio tells us, "Marriage is in itself a liturgical action glorifying God in Jesus Christ and in the Church."¹² This underlines the continuity between the marriage rite and the spouses' lives. This continuity can also be found in *The Rite of Marriage*: "The true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of the family life which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Savior."¹³

The rite speaks of a "true practice," which must continue throughout married life. Spouses are called to continue, to remember, to actualize the mystery of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection as well as the nuptial mystery of Christ with the church.

The Rite of Marriage explicitly affirms this concept with these wonderful words:

God, who has called the spouses to the marriage, continues to call them in the marriage. Those who get married in Christ, by means of the faith in the Word of God, are made capable to fruitfully celebrate, to live in holiness and to publicly witness the mystery of the union of Christ and the Church.¹⁴

The passage speaks about a lifelong fruitful celebration of the mystery of the union of Christ and the church. The fruitful celebration discussed above is not found only in a rite of the church but in the entire life of the couple. In the domestic context, the celebration of marriage is meant to describe both worship (ascending liturgy) and the sanctification God accomplishes in those who engage in

it (descending liturgy). This concept of the ongoing celebration of the marriage sacrament emphasizes the beauty, power, and meaning of the fruitful celebration of the mystery of the union of Christ and the church within the domestic church.

One of the most famous liturgical scholars of the post-Vatican II era, Achille M. Triacca, studied the original Latin of the Council text and deepens our understanding of the liturgy of the family for married couples:

Every “liturgy of the conjugal life” is directly related to the vitality of the [church’s] liturgy. If this were not the case, the conjugal ministry would be in vain as well as the dynamisms coming from the fact that spouses are ministers of a permanent sacrament.¹⁵

The passage explains clearly the concept of *permanent sacrament*. If a sacrament is permanent, then there is a permanent ministry for those who receive and engage in it. Marriage is a permanent sacrament, since spouses do not merely *celebrate* the sacrament of marriage; spouses *are* the sacrament of marriage—in the same way that bread and wine, blessed by God through the priest, is the Eucharist.

Thus, in carrying out their *yes* and their mutual promise of sacrificial love and fidelity in their married, or *conjugal*, life, the rite celebrated in the church in the beginning (*in fieri*) is connected to the conjugal life (*in facto*). In this way, marriage becomes a true liturgy of life, linking the great liturgy of the church to the domestic life of the couple, expressed in family and surrounding community. This liturgy of marriage—operating through Jesus within the spouses—is for the glory of God, the sanctification of the couple, and the salvation of the world.

Familiaris Consortio tells us:

Their belonging to each other is the real representation, by means of the sacramental sign, of the very relationship of Christ with the Church. Spouses are therefore the permanent reminder to

the Church of what happened on the Cross . . . Of this salvation event, marriage, like every sacrament, is a memorial, actuation and prophecy.¹⁶

The domestic liturgy is signified by ordinary signs a couple exhibits in day-to-day life, rather than formal signs celebrated in the rites of the church. The priest celebrates the mystery of the cross in an extraordinary way through the Eucharist. The spouses celebrate the same mystery in mutual self-donation. They celebrate the mystery of Christ's love in their life through gestures that form a unique spousal liturgy—an embrace after being apart during the day or a kiss. Through the love of the spouses, Christ loves and continues to donate himself to them, their children and family, and the community of relationships in which they are embedded.

In living the sacrament of marriage, spouses discover the source of love and spiritual energy required to transform every instant of their life into a domestic liturgy. This goes well beyond the clerical understanding of liturgy as ritual: domestic liturgy is not ritual, but the love of God expressed through the normal activities of everyday life.

In this domestic liturgy, the whole life of a married couple becomes a *sign* of Jesus' presence as husband and wife pass from, "I do this because it is what we have become used to or because it is expected," to, "I do this because we are united in the name of the Lord." Through marriage, spouses are called and enabled to assume a ministry in both church and society that expresses—within and through conjugal life—praise, glory, and thanks to the Lord while helping the family and community to grow in holiness.

The more we praise the Lord, the more the Lord sanctifies us. All married life can be considered an everlasting liturgy of praise to the Lord and an ongoing act of sanctification. Nothing is discarded with the exception of sin, which is always a betrayal of marriage.

The words of Saint Robert Bellarmine further strengthen this concept of the continuous liturgy of marriage:

The sacrament of marriage can be considered in two ways: the first when it is celebrated, the second while it endures. It is in fact a sacrament similar to the Eucharist, which is a sacrament not only while it is celebrated, but also while it endures, because while the spouses live their union, it is always the sacrament of Christ and the Church.¹⁷

Marriage is an active, dynamic, living sacrament, a union of two free persons, who in every moment choose between doing and not doing, saying and not saying, embracing and not embracing. The love that empowers each to choose the good of the other incarnates the love of Christ for the church.

The Ecclesial Dimension

The liturgy of the church expresses the worship that the whole community of God, together with the Lord Jesus, raises up to the Father. As we noted earlier, the Christian is never alone in the liturgy, for it is always an act of *all* the church. The liturgy is an ecclesial event owned by no individual but lived in profound and mutual communion in the Holy Spirit. For this reason, there is a unique liturgical celebration, which belongs to all the church's members, gathered around the resurrected Lord.

In the home setting, the sacrament of marriage is expressed in its own unique way. A Christian marriage is not a fragment of the ecclesial mosaic, but rather the church itself, at the very core of the nuptial covenant with Christ the Bridegroom. A married couple does not merely mimic or foreshadow the church. Rather, marriage *makes present* the heart of the church itself. The liturgical action of marriage, like all liturgical actions, can never be isolated. Rather, it always lives and celebrates in communion with the whole church.

The Christian couple is a unique and specific domestic expression of the church itself. The faith experiences lived at home have a liturgical character. At the same time, the domestic liturgy

must always be linked to the larger liturgy of the church and the Christian community so that it can be authenticated and celebrated in its fullness. Otherwise, it is reduced from liturgy to private devotion. In its communion with the larger church, the domestic liturgy becomes truly liturgical and permits domestic acts to be manifested and proclaimed.

To be effective and sustained, the family and its liturgy must also take part in the sacramental celebrations that the domestic church does not have, and cannot give to, itself. Above all, the family must participate in the Sunday Eucharist to be drawn into the larger family of the church. In this way, it shows itself to be part of the church, from which it receives baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, and penance. The family is always a point of interest and love for the church; it must be connected to the church's liturgical pathway, and to the timing and rhythm of the church's liturgical year. In this way, the domestic liturgy is authenticated and located within the ecclesial dimension of the whole community of God rather than operating in isolation.

The Christological Dimension

In all liturgical actions, Jesus Christ makes himself present with the mystery of his death and resurrection. Through these actions, he extends the history of salvation in the temporal realm. His sacramental presence extends beyond such simple signs and gestures as pouring water on the head for a baptism, breaking bread for the Eucharist, or giving a sign of peace for reconciliation.

The permanence of the marriage sacrament implies a continuous outpouring of the presence of Jesus in the family. Thus, in the life of a married couple there is not only a marriage ceremony—an outward recall of God's covenant—but an active participation of Jesus through personal and living signs.

The living liturgy of the family means that Jesus is always present in our homes. We must always be aware of the mystery of Christ's presence! Again, the analogy to the Eucharist is necessary and fitting. If a priest celebrates the Mass without thinking about

the fact that it is Jesus who is acting through him, he would be an automaton, a man who has memorized the words of the rite without those words having real and immediate meaning. Such a priest wouldn't be in the right condition to help others perceive the presence of the mystery. The more the priest recognizes that he is the sacrament of Jesus, that Jesus is enacting the Mass through him, the more he understands the mystery of the sacrament and the mystery of his own relationship to Jesus. This priest, operating with deep knowledge of his words and actions, is better able to communicate the real presence of Christ to those he serves.

It is the same for spouses. The more they are aware of the sacramental nature of their marriage, the more alive they are to the presence of Jesus in their home, the more Jesus resides with them in their home. Every act, every gesture, every person who enters their home is incorporated into the liturgy of their life, which brings greater and greater praise and glory to the Lord. Conversely, if the spouses live their lives forgetting the sacrament of marriage, then their conjugal life cannot become a place of sanctification. Many spouses live together for years without caring about their liturgy with God. They fill the space intended for Jesus with the liturgy of holidays, or the liturgy of entertainment, or the liturgy of consumption. The spouses are asleep to the mystery of the conjugal sacrament, a mystery as profound and as important as the sacrament of Christ's priesthood.

In *Gaudium et Spes* we read:

The Savior of men and the Spouse of the Church comes into the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony. He abides with them thereafter so that just as He loved the Church and handed Himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-bestowal.¹⁸

“He abides with them,” but why? Because he donated himself. In the same way, the spouses are called to donate themselves to each other to celebrate the love of Christ for the church. Jesus wants to continue to celebrate his total donation in the life of every

married couple. He wants to continue to celebrate the reality of the body given for life, even up to dying. Christ has a great desire to celebrate this self-donation in, with, and through the couple!

This original presence of Christ in the life of Christian spouses operates in three dimensions. First, marriage is a *distinctive sign* of the domestic church, an active support in the evangelization of their children and the world, and at the center of the church's worship. Second, the resurrected Lord works through the family to praise, thank, and bless the Father through the sanctification of the couple, whom he has called to incarnate his spousal love for the church. This particular presence of the Lord harmonizes with the spousal union in all its different expressions. Finally, common prayer and other gestures of faith assume a liturgical character as acts of worship to Jesus Christ, who identifies himself with the married couple to give glory to the Father.

These concepts feel very high and abstract but are, in fact, very practical. It is as if Jesus takes the two spouses under his arm and says, "Come with me to praise the Father. Your marriage is a beautiful thing and we will praise the Father for the love that is singing in you. We will bless the Father who created you, male and female in his image, and we will bless his Son who will renew, purify, and sanctify you in and through your marriage." It is Christ himself who helps the spouses in giving praise and glory to the Father, as is done in the celebration of the Eucharist: "By him, and with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours, almighty Father God."

HOW SPOUSES PRACTICE LITURGICAL SERVICE

Achille M. Triacca explains that, "The liturgy of the conjugal life makes visible the invisible presence of the Holy Spirit and the love experienced within the Trinity . . . as well as the Christ's love for his church."¹⁹

In this *ministry of visibility*, the spouses are called to make visible the love of God. Only the spouses, in their conjugal life of reciprocal love, are able to say to the world that God is love; only they can make visible the nature of the love exchanged among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The priest has the ministry of preaching the Word; the spouses have the ministry of visibility. What the priest says through words, spouses are called to say in the flesh. The priest explains a book made of paper; the spouses are a book made of flesh. With this book, one doesn't need to know how to read, but only to see, because the spouses participate in Christ's love for his church and are a reflection of Trinitarian life. Triacca affirms this incarnational reality: "The 'great gift' given to the spouses actualizes itself in the 'domestic liturgy' by means of gestures and words."²⁰

But *what* does the domestic church celebrate? Or, better, *who* celebrates? In *Evangelization and Sacrament of Marriage*, we read:

In the sacramental encounter, Jesus Christ gives the spouses a new way of being, through which they are conformed to his image, the bridegroom of the church, and taken into a particular state of being within the community of God.²¹

It is, therefore, Jesus Christ himself who celebrates in and with the spouses. It is Jesus who makes real his life in and with them. Through them, we see his donation of himself to us. The spouses enact the glorification and sanctification of Jesus in the strength of the Holy Spirit, celebrating the mysteries of Jesus' love in themselves. We will now try to identify these mysteries, so that we can see how spouses celebrate domestically what is celebrated in the church.

In the church we celebrate the feasts of the Annunciation, of Christmas, and of the Presentation of Christ. We celebrate his life in Nazareth and, during Holy Week, his passion, death, and resurrection. During Pentecost, we celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit. But how are these mysteries celebrated in the family?

In the domestic liturgy, spouses remember and continue Christ's incarnation in a special way. Through small gestures and words of love, the spouses make real the love of God for humanity. The Word of God has communicated to the spouses his love for humanity and for the church.

Holy Scripture provides us with a guide for understanding the liturgy in the family in the same way it helps us understand the liturgy of the church. By reading, searching, and understanding Scripture, spouses learn about the incarnation: the Word of God was made flesh as an expression of Jesus' love for humanity and the church. This incarnation is not something that happened only in the past. It is an action that happens even now, through the spouses, who are called both to remember and actualize it. To illustrate: Jesus hears the shout of a blind man from afar, "Son of David, have pity on me!" He hears and heals the woman who touches the hem of his cloak (see Luke 18:38; 8:43-48).

Jesus lowered himself to be among us. How can the spouses celebrate and replicate the lowering and bowing down of Jesus? Spouses can bow down before each other, each taking onto themselves the faults of the other. Spouses can agree to share their blessings and problems, to be *one* as Christ makes himself one with the church, as the Word of God makes himself one with humanity. This unity can be practiced in every aspect of their common life—from tender embracing, to the unity of their bodies, to the attention paid to each other, to the service rendered to each other or to their children.

All of these are gestures of unity, and each is a celebration, a rite, which incarnates the love of God. The smallest acts—the welcoming home and the being welcomed, offering refreshment, sharing the day's events, and simple listening to the details of each other's lives—all are gestures that celebrate both the love of God, which desires to be united with human flesh, and of Christ's unity with the church.

The unitive dimension of the marriage sacrament extends beyond the couple and the family. This love is also intended to

celebrate unity outside itself. If a couple visits someone in need or cares for a sick person or for a child, they express the love of the Word of God for humanity and the love of Christ for the church.

With this understanding, we can also see how teaching catechism, serving the parish, or providing help to people is a bowing of the couple toward others, a unitive reality celebrated outside the home. The family is called to celebrate these mysteries, this domestic liturgy, in service to the world. This liturgy has its heart in the home, but it is not for the home alone. It is meant to be celebrated for and in the world.

When we are aware of being a sacrament of Jesus, all of life becomes more precious. Each moment is made sacramental, filled with extraordinary meaning. In the life of a couple and family, the Word has been fully incarnated; he has been excluded from nothing, and nothing in the conjugal life is excluded from this re-expression of his incarnation.

The life of Jesus in Nazareth gives us a very clear example of how simple gestures can become praise, glory, and sanctification. It is the whole life of Jesus that saves us and not just the passion. The small acts of daily life, like those shared by Jesus and his family in Nazareth, make up the domestic liturgy of the couple.

These acts of worshipful praise help to sanctify us and lead us to the celebration of the passion, death, and resurrection. Spouses reenact the liturgy of sacrifice in themselves. Think of a spouse waking early in the morning to work on behalf of his wife and children, or a spouse who stays at home to care with loving kindness for the children. These are costly, beautiful sacrifices for the well-being of the spouses and the family.

This liturgy of sacrifice extends and expresses the love and sacrifice of Jesus, allowing him to continue to celebrate his saving work in the lives of spouses and families. Giving the body for love is much more than a sexual relationship. It is a total gift, a matter of how spouses live twenty-four hours a day the liturgy of mutual self-donation.