

## **Marriage and the Eucharist**

by Lisa Everett

"I never met my father-in-law; he died before my wife and I met. But I admire him tremendously because of the following story. At Mass the day after his wedding, having just consummated his marriage the night before, he was in tears after receiving the Eucharist. When his new bride inquired, he said, "For the first time in my life I understood the meaning of Christ's words, 'This is my body given for you'."

This moving incident, related by Christopher West in his most recent book, "Theology of the Body for Beginners," gives us a glimpse of the intimate connection between Christian marriage and the Eucharist. How exactly are these two sacraments connected? Recall that a sacrament is a visible sign that points to and makes present an invisible reality. Well, Christian marriage and the Eucharist are connected because each of them points to and makes present the covenant of love between Christ, the bridegroom, and his beloved bride, the church.

As Pope John Paul II wrote in "Familiaris consortio," his 1981 apostolic exhortation on the role of the Christian family: "The Eucharist is the very source of Christian marriage. The eucharistic sacrifice in fact represents Christ's covenant of love with the church, sealed with his blood on the cross. In this sacrifice of the new and eternal covenant, Christian spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage covenant flows, is interiorly structured and continuously renewed."

Because these two sacraments are so closely connected, they also illuminate each other. The love of husband and wife helps us to better appreciate the gift of the Eucharist, and understanding the Eucharist more deeply helps us to live better the vocation of Christian marriage. As Pope John Paul II has written, the love between man and woman "has its beginning in God who is the creator, (and) is rooted in Christ the Redeemer, who as the spouse (of the church) 'gave himself' and who teaches all husbands and wives to 'give themselves' in the full measure of each one's personal dignity. Christ teaches us married love." Besides being a sign of the covenant of love between Christ and his church, the sacrament of matrimony actually gives the spouses the grace to love each other and their children as Christ loves us.

Reflecting further on the profound nuptial imagery contained in the Eucharist, the pope wrote the following in "Mulieris dignitatem," his beautiful meditation on the dignity and vocation of women: "We find ourselves at the very heart of the Paschal Mystery, which completely reveals the spousal love of God. Christ is the bridegroom because 'he has given himself': his body has been 'given' his blood has been 'poured out' (cf. Lk 22:19-20). In this way 'he loved them to the end' (Jn 13:1). The 'sincere gift' contained in the sacrifice of the cross gives definitive prominence to the spousal meaning of God's love. As the Redeemer of the world, Christ is the bridegroom of the church. The Eucharist is the sacrament of our

redemption. It is the sacrament of the bridegroom and the bride. The Eucharist makes present and realizes anew in a sacramental manner the redemptive act of Christ, who 'creates' the church, his body. Christ is united with this 'body' as the bridegroom with the bride... It is the Eucharist above all that expresses the redemptive act of Christ, the bridegroom towards the church, the bride. This is clear and unambiguous when the sacramental ministry of the Eucharist, in which the priest acts 'in persona Christi,' is performed by a man."

Because we come to know reality through our senses, sacraments make use of material things such as water, chrism, bread and wine, and these things are called the "matter" of the sacrament. The spouses themselves are the ministers of the sacrament of matrimony, and the "matter" of this sacrament is actually the bodies of the husband and wife. In fact, a Christian marriage is not considered consummated until the complete gift of self is expressed through the bodies of the spouses in what the church has always referred to as the "marriage act." From this perspective, we can perhaps appreciate more deeply the profound significance of human sexuality. Sexual union is intended by God to be "sacramental" in the sense that it points to and makes present the complete gift of self that a husband and wife make to one another on their wedding day: it is the "body language" of married love. With this understanding of the complete gift of self expressed through the body which opens the couple to the gift of a child, we realize that when it comes to human sexuality, we are standing on holy ground.

It is only in this light that we can fully understand the deepest meaning of many of the things that the church stands for: why marriage can only exist between a man and a woman; why the ministerial priesthood is reserved for men; why sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage; why a communion of mind and heart with Christ through his body, the church, must exist before one can receive him in the Eucharist.

Christ gave himself to us completely on the cross, and from the blood and water which flowed from his open side, symbols of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, his bride, the church, was born. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger sees in the final thrust of the lance which opened the side of Christ on the cross an echo and fulfillment of the creation of the first woman from the opened side of the first man. The only adequate response to this complete gift of self which Christ offered once and for all on the cross, and which is renewed in every celebration of the Eucharist, is for us to give ourselves completely to him in return.

Ponder for a moment Christ's encounter with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus that is recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Christ approaches them and asks: "What are you discussing as you go on your way?" The disciples then open their hearts to him, and he enlightens them on the meaning of the Scriptures, he consoles them, he makes their hearts burn within them. As dusk approaches, he makes as if he is continuing on the road and

they beg him to stay with them. And in the breaking of the bread, in the Eucharist, they finally recognize who he is.

Like the two disciples along the road to Emmaus, a Christian husband and wife who invite Christ to stay and walk with them, day by day, will experience his presence in marvelous ways. They will discover that as they draw closer to Christ, he will deepen their love for one another. Receiving the Eucharist regularly makes the self-giving love of marriage all the more possible. It is one of the most profound ways that a husband and wife can say to Christ on the journey of their life together: "Stay with us!"

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