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Dr. Anna Mercedes
Theological Conversation
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Marriage the Marian Way:
Mary as Spouse of the Holy Spirit

St. Josemaría Escrivá sits down after Mass one day in 1931 and pens a series of masterful reflections on the mysteries of the rosary that will touch the hearts of the faithful for generations to come. Meditating on the fifth Glorious Mystery, the Coronation of Mary, he showers the Blessed Mother with titles: “Daughter of God, Mother of God, Spouse of God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost crown her as the rightful Empress of the Universe” (Escrivá No. 15). As grand as these titles are, most of them are fairly easy to understand. Mary is the daughter of God the Father because she has been created by Him. She is the mother of God the Son because she gave birth to Jesus Christ. She is the empress of the universe because she is the queen mother; Mary is the queen (or empress) of everything over which Jesus is king (or emperor), and Jesus rules over the entire universe. This leaves only one title that is not easily explained: *Spouse of God*. The historical introduction of this Marian epithet is unclear, though the largest body of writing on the subject comes to us from St. Maximilian Kolbe during the early 20th century. Whatever its precise origin may be, Mary’s identity as Spouse of the Holy Spirit is deeply rooted in Scripture. By employing a meditative form of systematic theology alongside textual criticism, it becomes clear that this epithet carries rich insights into the meaning of marriage and the reality of Mary’s bond to God the Holy Spirit. The Catholic sacrament of marriage informs and deepens the Church’s understanding of the Virgin Mary as Spouse of the Holy Spirit. In turn, Mary’s supernatural marriage sheds light on the role of sacramental marriage in the human journey toward holiness.

Mary is called the Spouse of the Holy Spirit in view of her Immaculate Conception, her perpetual virginity, and her miraculous motherhood. The Holy Spirit brings about and elevates all three of these facets of Mary's life, and all three are visible in Luke's account of the Annunciation. The Immaculate Conception is the first part of Mary's espousal to the Holy Spirit in both chronology and, according to St. Maximilian Kolbe, in importance. Much like Jesus's virginal conception in Mary's own womb, the Immaculate Conception of Mary was a singular event in human history. In the first chapter of his Gospel, Luke writes that the angel Gabriel hails Mary as the Lord's "favored one," she whom the Lord has chosen from among all the women in history (Luke 1:28, NABRE). The Greek word *κεχαριτωμένη*, translated here as "favored one," is also the word translated as "full of grace" in the traditional Hail Mary prayer. In the second volume of *Word Pictures of the New Testament*, A. T. Robertson and Wesley J. Perschbacher write that *κεχαριτωμένη* is "a perfect passive participle of *χαριτώω* that means 'endowed with grace' (*χάρις*) or 'enriched with grace,' as in Ephesians 1:6. The Vulgate *gratiae plena* is right, if it means 'full of grace which you have received'; wrong, if it means 'full of grace which you have to bestow'" (Robertson and Perschbacher, *Luke* 29). The angel's greeting therefore points to an action that has already been accomplished for this lady who has been favored above all creation: Mary has been filled with grace, and the gift of grace she received at her conception continues to affect her present life. Everything that is full is by definition incapable of containing anything else. Mary's grace-filled soul, then, had—and continues to have—no room for original sin. Grace is the self-gift of God bestowed on His creatures. This means that the grace that has filled Mary's soul is the very Person of God the Holy Spirit, whom St. Maximilian Kolbe identifies as the divine Immaculate Conception:

“If among human beings the wife takes the name of her husband because she belongs to him, is one with him, becomes equal to him and is, with him, the source of new life, with how much greater reason should the name of the Holy Spirit, who is the divine Immaculate Conception, be used as the name of her in whom he lives as uncreated Love, the principle of life in the whole supernatural order of grace?” (Kolbe, qtd. in Manteau-Bonamy 5)

Therefore, Mary’s Immaculate Conception was the intimate work of the Holy Spirit, the divine Immaculate Conception; her conception was the first part of the Holy Spirit’s espousal to her. Mary revealed herself by the name “Immaculate Conception” to St. Bernadette at Lourdes, France, in 1858. In reflecting on this strange way of identifying herself, H. M. Manteau-Bonamy writes, “Mary, the humble Virgin, was ‘filled by the Holy Spirit’ even from the time of her own conception in the womb of St. Anne her mother . . . She is bathed, plunged into the Spirit of the Father and the Son to such an extent that when she says, ‘I am the Immaculate Conception’ she means, ‘I am the manifestation, the *epiphany*, of the Holy Spirit’” (31-32). Her Immaculate Conception was a gift from the divine Immaculate Conception, and it is the first step that the Holy Spirit makes toward His human spouse. As the apparition at Lourdes shows, Mary claims this relationship with the Holy Spirit as her true identity; she takes on His name, just as a bride takes on the name of her husband as a sign of her unity with him. As a husband becomes one with his bride and shares a life with her, the Holy Spirit becomes one with Mary’s soul at her conception and shares a life of grace with her. Mary’s unprecedented relationship with the Holy Spirit from the moment of her conception is inseparable from her perpetual virginity and her vocation to become the mother of Jesus, the Son of God.

The Blessed Mother's vow of virginity, indicated by her words at the Annunciation, is her response to God's action in her soul that further espouses her to the Holy Spirit. The angel of the Lord appears to Mary and tells her that she will conceive and bear a son: "He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32-33). Mary boldly asks, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" to which the angel responds, "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (1:34-35). In these beautiful lines, we see the roots of almost all Catholic Marian theology. For our purposes, it is particularly important to take note of Mary's question and the angel's response. First, the very fact that Mary must ask how the child will be conceived indicates that she is, and hopes to remain, a virgin. Under normal circumstances, there would be no reason for her to ask such a question. She is not simply ignorant of the facts of life, unaware of how pregnancies usually occur; this is clear enough from her declaration that she "[has] no relations with a man" (1:34). This also rules out the possibility that Mary suffers from infertility, the burden borne by biblical women such as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and Mary's own cousin Elizabeth. Without having had relations with men, how would Mary have discovered she was infertile? Nor is the problem her lack of a husband. Scripture tells us that Mary is betrothed at the time of the Annunciation, but betrothal in first-century Judaism is the first part of a legal marriage, not the prelude to marriage as it is today. The most telling part of Mary's response to the angel is her use of the present indicative tense: she *has no* relations with men. The only way to make sense of her words is to say that Mary is a married woman freely choosing to abstain from sexual relations with her husband. At the heart of her question, then, is a desire to know

whether or not God wishes her to remain a virgin.¹ She desires to give her virginity to the Lord to serve Him more whole-heartedly, but she does not want her human plan to interfere with His divine plan. The angel's response to her shows in no uncertain terms that this unique supernatural conception will involve not Mary and Joseph, but Mary and the Holy Spirit. Having received the answer she hoped for—not merely a passive, implicit acceptance of her offer to remain a virgin, but a definitive place in God's plan of salvation that perfectly incorporates her offering of virginity—Mary can solidify her vow of perpetual virginity as a gift to God. In their article “An Assessment of the Being and Operation of Mary's Marriage,” theologians Carlos A. Casanova and Ignacio Serrano del Pozo explain the significance of Mary's vow, particularly during a time when intentional virginity was essentially unheard of²:

Since Mary is the “place” in which the New Testament started, she is compared to the Dawn, the very boundary of night and day, the line in which the Old and the New Testaments touch each other. For this reason, she was subject to the expectation of the Messiah, the Beloved Anointed One, the Blessed Seed, and obliged to follow the path of marriage and fruitfulness (see Deut. 7:14). At the same time, she opened the path to the evangelical counsels. Thus, moved by the Holy Spirit, she vowed to be virgin. But her vow was not unconditional, precisely because it lay at that boundary between the two Testaments: she would be virgin only if God did not want to make use of her in order to

¹ This marks the distinction between Mary's question to the angel and Zechariah's question during the first annunciation earlier in the chapter: “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years” (Luke 1:18). What is at first glance a different phrasing of the same question is actually a very different question expressing disbelief rather than requesting clarification. Mary is asking if she should change her actions in order to better cooperate with God's will. Zechariah, on the other hand, is expressing doubt that God can overcome the physical obstacles of old age and infertility to accomplish His will.

²One demonstration of the cultural stigma against lifelong virginity in the Old Testament appears in the Book of Judges. Jephthah's daughter, on hearing that her father has accidentally promised to sacrifice her to the Lord, says to her father, “Let me have this favor. Do nothing for two months, that I and my companions may go wander in the mountains to weep for my virginity” (Judg. 11:37). In this passage, at least, lifelong virginity is something to be mourned, not freely chosen.

prepare the coming of the Messiah. Her vow was given under condition that God did not require something else. (Casanova and del Pozo 44)

Being unable to understand her immediate role in God's plan, Mary wishes both to offer her virginity to God and to participate in the holy lineage of the coming Messiah. Her vow of perpetual virginity is essentially the first of its kind. It is a gift to the God she loves, who responds with gratitude and bestows on her the infinitely greater gift He had intended since the dawn of creation: the Messiah Himself.³ Through a singular miracle, the Lord's favored one is able to become both the Blessed Virgin and the Blessed Mother. However, there remain three questions to answer regarding Mary's virginity: how does it espouse her specifically to the Holy Spirit, where does it leave her marriage to Joseph, and how can we explain the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in the New Testament?

It may reasonably be objected that the vocation of consecrated virginity espouses a Christian woman to Christ rather than to the Holy Spirit. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is very clear on this matter: "Virgins who, committed to the holy plan of following Christ more closely, are consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to the approved liturgical rite, are betrothed mystically to *Christ, the Son of God*, and are dedicated to the service of the Church" (CCC 923, emphasis added). At first glance, this appears to contradict Mary's espousal to the Spirit, at least from the angle of her perpetual virginity. However, as mentioned above, Mary lives during a turning point in salvation history. For the first fourteen or fifteen years of her life, *there is no incarnate Jesus* to whom she can consecrate herself. Mary consecrates herself *for* Jesus rather than *to* Him, although she does not immediately understand this. Alone among vocational consecrations, Mary's consecration espouses her to the Holy Spirit, the one with

³ To be clear, Mary does not earn her place in salvation history by offering her virginity to God. It is only by cooperating with God's free gift of grace that Mary becomes the Mother of Christ.

whom she will cooperate to bring Jesus into the world. With her spouse, the mother sets apart her life for her son. This points to a second potential problem regarding Mary's perpetual virginity: her relationship with Joseph.

If Mary is truly a virgin as Scripture indicates, one may understandably inquire after the nature of her marriage with Joseph. Is Joseph her legitimate husband? If so, how can their marriage be complete if Mary remains a virgin? The answer to these questions lies at the core of sacramental marriage. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that "the exchange of consent between the spouses [is] the indispensable element that 'makes the marriage.' . . . This consent that binds the spouses to each other finds its fulfillment in the two 'becoming one flesh'" (CCC 1626-27).⁴ The important thing to notice here is that consent, not sexual union, is the indispensable element in a valid marriage. It is then possible for a couple to be validly married as long as both consent to physically consummate their marriage, even if that consummation never occurs. This is similar to the Church's position on baptisms of desire; a person who wishes to be baptized but dies before he or she is able to be baptized still receives the fruits of baptism after death. If a married couple is open to consummating their marriage but circumstances impede them from doing so, their marriage is not invalidated even though it remains unconsummated. As might be expected, such circumstances are rare. Mary's circumstances are even unique in human history. Casanova and del Pozo offer the following explanation of Mary and Joseph's situation:

They celebrated their nuptials with an act of consent after the Incarnation while leaving open the possibility of future carnal union if God willed it. This could be the full explanation of the passage "but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a

⁴ While it may be objected that the ancient Jewish understanding of marriage differs from that of the modern Catholic Church, the Catechism argues that marriage has certain "common and permanent characteristics" that prevail across time and culture (1603).

son” (Matt 1:25). Thus, perhaps it was after Jesus' birth that it was revealed to them definitely that they should remain virgin. At that time, they uttered together their vows of remaining virgin. This is possible because Joseph and Mary could not be sure of what God's plan was until he revealed it to them. And, certainly, it fits better in God's plan that the consent could be given with no external or internal restraint. (Casanova and del Pozo 49)

For their marriage to have been valid, Mary and Joseph must both have been open to the possibility that God willed them to consummate their marriage, despite Mary's desire to remain a virgin. It was only through their joint patience and discernment that the couple eventually understood and embraced God's desire that their marriage remain unconsummated. Thomas Aquinas puts the matter quite succinctly in his *Summa Theologiae*: “[T]he marriage of the Virgin Mother of God and Joseph was absolutely true: because both consented to the nuptial bond, but not expressly to the bond of the flesh, save on the condition that it was pleasing to God” (Aquinas III.29.1). Mary's human marriage was indeed unusual, but it held fast to the heart of sacramental marriage at God's direction, and it was therefore blessed.

The unique case of Mary's virginal marriage recalls the Genesis story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. Although Abraham loves his son deeply and longs to live out the vocation of fatherhood, he is willing to sacrifice Isaac back to the Lord when asked. As Abraham takes the knife to kill his son, the angel of the Lord stops him, saying, “Do not lay your hand on the boy . . . Do not do the least thing to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you did not withhold your son, your only one” (Genesis 22:12). The Lord then promises Abraham, “I will bless you and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore”—not because Abraham sacrificed his son, but because he was willing to sacrifice him

when asked (Gen. 21:17). The same principle applies to Mary's offering of her virginity. She longs to give her entire life to the Lord, including her virginity. However, if the Lord asks her, she will consent to give her virginity to her husband instead. In response to Abraham's willing sacrifice, the Lord fulfills his desire to remain a father and blesses him with an unfailing line of offspring: "And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice" (Gen. 22:18). In response to Mary's willing sacrifice, God fulfills her desire to remain a virgin and blesses her with Jesus, the most precious offspring in human history. Her offspring fulfills the Lord's promise to Abraham as well: Jesus, Abraham's descendant, comes to possess the gate of sin and death and blesses all the nations of the earth with His grace. Mary's openness to God's will reflects the same radical trust that Abraham possessed, and both of their acts of faith are blessed beyond imagining.

Still, there may appear to be a glaring problem in the case for Mary's perpetual virginity: the Scriptural references to the brothers and sisters of Jesus. There are approximately ten of these references in the New Testament, including at least one mention in each of the four Gospels. Rather than going through the many theories theologians have offered over the centuries concerning the precise identity of these mysterious brethren, I would like to focus on two particularly convincing arguments that support Mary's virginity even in light of these troublesome passages. First, belief in Mary's lifelong virginity is ancient.⁵ Even the earliest theologians in the Church wrestled with the question of who these brothers and sisters of Jesus were, refusing to accept the simplest answer that they were other children of Mary. With so much seeming evidence in Scripture against her virginity, it would be difficult to explain why the

⁵ The *Protoevangelium of James*, dated around 150 AD, contains the first known mention of Mary's perpetual virginity.

early Church wrestled with the question at all unless there was good reason to believe that Mary had in fact remained a virgin. Nor did the conviction that she remained a virgin fade with time or change with new theological trends; the Catholic Church solidified Mary's perpetual virginity as dogma in 649 AD. Yet even if this first argument can be dismissed as wishful thinking or even prolonged theological gullibility, the second argument is far more difficult to explain away. In every instance, the word that is translated as Jesus's "brethren" or "brothers and sisters" in the New Testament⁶ is a form of the Greek word ἀδελφοί. The same Greek word appears in 1 Corinthians 15:6, which says, "After that, he appeared to more than five hundred *brothers* at once, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:6, emphasis added). Here we have an instance of "brothers" that cannot be explained in a literal way. Not even the most promiscuous fathers in Scripture had anywhere near to five hundred children. "Brothers" in this case must have a broader definition than the children of one's parents. This evidence shows that the word ἀδελφοί in the New Testament is not limited to its literal interpretation of biological siblings. When combined with the curious fact that the early Church was convinced of Mary's perpetual virginity, this is strong evidence that she truly was a virgin her entire life.⁷ Having dealt with three possible problems arising from Mary's perpetual virginity, we turn to the third avenue by which the Holy Spirit and Mary espouse themselves to one another: Mary's miraculous motherhood.

Mary's conception of Jesus by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit is the clearest expression of a spousal relationship. Having been preserved from all sin by God's grace and

⁶ Specifically, these passages are Matthew 12:46 and 13:55; Mark 3:31–34 and 6:3; Luke 8:19–20; John 2:12, 7:3, 5, and 10; Acts 1:14; and 1 Corinthians 9:5.

⁷ As a point of interest, one final argument points to the scene in John's Gospel when Jesus entrusts Mary to the beloved disciple before His death, despite the fact that it was the duty of adult children to care for their parents. This duty was particularly important in the case of a widowed mother who had very limited rights and securities. If Mary had any other living children, they would have been duty-bound to care for her. The fact that Jesus asks his disciple to care for her as though she were his mother indicates that Jesus is truly her only child.

having saved her entire self for God by her choice, Mary now cooperates with God the Holy Spirit to bring forth God the Son. The word “spirit” in Greek, πνεῦμα, is also the word for “breath.” The Holy Spirit is therefore the very Life-Breath of God, so that when the Holy Spirit overshadows Mary, she is filled with the superabundance of God’s own life. In this way, the partnership between Mary and the Spirit of God at the Annunciation is not sexual reproduction but creative incarnation. In her book *Truly Our Sister*, Elizabeth Johnson phrases it in this way: “Despite a scenario all too frequently entertained by the literal imagination, it is simply not the case that God the Father or his Spirit inseminates Mary. Conception by the Spirit signifies rather that God is the creative origin of Jesus’ being” (Johnson 234-35). Johnson is careful to distinguish between truth and literalism; Jesus truly was conceived by Mary through the Holy Spirit, but not in the literal, physical way that conception occurs between two human beings. Nevertheless, it is spousal cooperation that brings children into the world. The cooperation between Mary and the Holy Spirit brings Jesus into the world through their free and mutual self-gift.⁸ However, the spousal imagery surrounding the conception of Jesus does not go unchallenged.

One possible issue arising from the imagery at work here regards the relationships within the Holy Trinity. Elizabeth Johnson claims that some Christians may intuitively reject the idea that Mary is the Spouse of the Holy Spirit in her conception of Jesus. “This intuition is borne out in Christian vocabulary,” she writes, “which does not call the Spirit the father of Jesus” (Johnson 234). This is an important point to address. While the unity of the Trinity surpasses human understanding, it remains necessary to distinguish between the three divine Persons. The angel’s

⁸ As a rather beautiful side note, it is the Holy Spirit who first spreads the news of Mary’s pregnancy. Immediately upon hearing Mary’s greeting, “Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, ‘Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb’” (Luke 1:41-42). Like any husband in a loving marriage, the Holy Spirit is bursting with joy, eager to tell the good news of His wife’s pregnancy.

words at the Annunciation shed light on this complication: ““The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”” (Luke 1:35). The Holy Spirit is indeed the power of the Most High—that is to say, the love of the Father. It is the Father’s love that begets the Son, in time as in eternity. Therefore, Jesus remains the Son of God the Father, yet the Holy Spirit is the Person of the Trinity by whom Jesus is directly conceived, as recited in the Apostles’ Creed. Because Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit within the womb of Mary, and because Mary is willing to give her whole self, soul and body, to God in a mystically consummate way, Mary remains the true Spouse of the Holy Spirit.⁹ In sum, the mystical marriage between Mary and the Holy Spirit begins at the moment of Mary’s conception, when Mary receives an unearned and unasked-for gift of grace from her God. Their relationship is strengthened by Mary’s free offering of her entire life—body and soul—to her mystical Spouse. Finally, the two spouses cooperate in a mutual self-gift at the new high point of creation: the Annunciation, when the Son of God takes on human flesh. The spousal relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit points to the beauty and purpose of sacramental marriage within the Catholic Church.

Marriage has historically been oversimplified as being solely for procreation or solely for personal fulfillment, but the Church holds that the Sacrament of Matrimony has two authentic ends: sanctity and the good of children. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states quite plainly, ““The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the

⁹ Elizabeth Johnson raises an additional objection to Mary’s role as Spouse of the Holy Spirit: the characterization of the Spirit as the feminine wisdom of God as Spirit-Sophia. While this is a legitimate concern to explore, it goes beyond the scope of this paper. The Third Person of the Trinity is not incarnate and therefore is neither male nor female. However, the Spirit is the love eternally flowing between the Father and the Son. For the purposes of this paper, then, I posit that He can be imperfectly understood as a “masculine” love, thereby completing the imagery of Mary’s divine Spouse.

spouses and the procreation and education of offspring” (CCC 1601). I would suggest that within the rather broad concept of “the good of the spouses,” four interrelated elements come into play: complementarity, union, love, and sanctity. Addressing these elements in backward order reveals the special task of marriage as a vocation. The goal of every human life is—or at least ought to be—sanctity. Sanctity is nothing other than continual growth in love, because love is the very essence of the God who is our destiny. To grow in love is to grow in union with others, increasing in compassion until those around us become our other selves. Almost paradoxically, union requires separation; if there is only the self rather than the “self and other,” union is impossible. There is no unity of persons without diversity of persons—a lesson we learn from the Trinity. In this separate diversity, we discover our natural complementarity: what I am is what you are not. The starting point of Holy Matrimony is the complementarity of two free people who are striving for the same end goal, which is sanctity. Beginning in their complementarity, their difference, the two spouses strive for perfect union. They unite every aspect of their being in mutual self-gift, as expressed by their self-giving in bodily union. This is both the form and the content of married love: knowledge of the other, gift of the other, knowledge of the self, and gift of the self. The three central kinds of love involved in marriage—*philia*, *eros*, and *agape*—loosely align with these aspects of married love. Knowledge of the other is best associated with *philia*, or friendship. The gift of the other is received in the spirit of desire, which is *eros*. Knowledge of the self in relation with the other leads to the gift of self, which is the self-sacrificial love of *agape*. In his article “Toward an Integrated Phenomenology of Married Love,” Thomas M. Kelly writes, “In this world of human relations, all three loves [*philia*, *eros*, and *agape*] must be understood as a differentiated unity, and not in opposition” (Kelly 94). This is reminiscent of the Trinity. Just as God is three in one, so love is three in one.

The three Persons of the Trinity do not oppose or take anything away from each other. They exist as eternal self-gift. The Trinity is therefore the source and model of marriage, which is a vocation to sanctity built on the love of two unified though distinct persons, through whom new life can come forth.

Though significantly different from a typical human marriage, Mary's mystical marriage with the Holy Spirit reflects and sheds light on these characteristics of the Sacrament of Matrimony. The complementarity between the mystical spouses is quite pronounced: Mary is human and the Holy Spirit is divine. Their differences are brought together but not extinguished. Mary remains a created woman and the Holy Spirit remains the uncreated God. Through this invincible complementarity, they can attain the unity of perfect mutual self-gift. Both are free from sin and therefore entirely free to give of themselves. This unity results in greater love, as in normal marriages, but in an exceptional way. The Holy Spirit *is* love and therefore cannot increase in love; nor can He increase or decrease in any way, being already perfect in His divinity. Still, His union with Mary fills her with unspeakable love, culminating in the conception of Jesus in her womb: love incarnate. As a true though mystical marriage, the love between the spouses reflects the three aspects of marital love: *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*. I would suggest—at the risk of sounding excessively poetic—that the Holy Spirit and Mary truly are friends in their knowledge and affection for each other, that they are drawn to each other in desire, and that they are willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the other. These may be startling images because of the Spirit's identity as God. Suffice it to say, though, that Jesus, who is the incarnate God, proves that God is capable of *philia*, *eros*, and *agape* toward His people. Jesus calls His followers friends (see John 15:15). He becomes man out of a desire to be closer to mankind. He sacrifices Himself on the Cross for the good of all people. Because the Holy Spirit

is the love proceeding from the Son, we should be able to see in Him the same facets of love. Finally, Mary's mystical marriage with the Holy Spirit leads to sanctity, but not for both spouses. The Holy Spirit is perfectly holy by virtue of His very essence, but He elevates Mary to the heights of holiness through His three-part espousal to her. Even more importantly, this mystical marriage opens the door to the New Covenant between God and His people, and because of it, the grace of Jesus Christ will sanctify millions of souls. Mary's spousal relationship with the Holy Spirit therefore encompasses far more than the fulfillment of one pure soul; it affects the entire Church throughout time and space. In these unique ways, the mystical marriage between Mary and the Holy Spirit tends toward "the good of the spouses" through complementarity, union, love, and sanctity (CCC 1601).

The second main aim of marriage according to the Catechism is "the procreation and education of offspring," which Scripture shows is also a key part of Mary's relationship with the Holy Spirit (CCC 1601). As discussed above, Mary conceives Jesus in her womb by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. This supernatural conception is a work of creation more than procreation, but the effect remains essentially the same: Mary conceives a child through the cooperation of the Holy Spirit. It is clear in the Scriptures that Jesus lives with Mary during His childhood, and we can reasonably posit that Mary and Joseph educate Jesus as He grows up. What is perhaps less clear is the Holy Spirit's role in Jesus's childhood. If His mystical marriage with Mary is authentic, then He too must educate the Child resulting from their union. Once again, Luke's Gospel holds the answer. Having returned home from His presentation in the Temple as a baby, Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40). Thinking back to the analysis of her Immaculate Conception, we recall that the angel greeted Mary as *κεχαριτωμένη*, which can be translated as "favored one" or

“endowed with grace,” χάρις being the Greek word for “grace.” A. T. Robertson reveals that the text of Luke 2:40 says the χάρις of God is upon Jesus (see Robertson and Preschbacher 29). As we concluded before, the grace of God is the very Person of the Holy Spirit. Mary’s spouse therefore accompanies her Child throughout His life, guiding Him and divinely instructing His humanity. In a supernatural way, then, the mystical marriage between Mary and the Holy Spirit is indeed ordered to the spouses’ good and the procreation and education of children. This spiritual marriage may be unprecedented and unrepeatable in salvation history, but it nevertheless grants us new insights into Catholic marriages.

Having explored how the marks of sacramental marriage shine through Mary’s mystical marriage, we can return to their importance in the ordinary marriages with a deeper understanding. First, we see that complementarity in marriage must honor the fundamental differences between the spouses. Thomas M. Kelly writes, “The recognition of and acceptance of the other as Thou and as distant, is a confirmation that the other cannot be reduced merely to one’s utility. This acceptance of the other as ‘mystery’—as infinitely inexhaustible and possessed of their own intrinsic, irreducible dignity—is only possible through one’s encounter and acceptance of that mystery which is absolute” (89). The Holy Spirit neither uses Mary as a means to an end nor erases her ontological difference from Him. In the same way, human spouses must value each other for their own sakes, honoring the radical differences between them without trying to absorb the other into the self. One’s spouse is not an extension of one’s own will.

The spouses’ complementarity in marriage is designed to culminate in union. Mary and the Holy Spirit share a deeper spiritual union than human spouses, but they remain a perfect model of unity for ordinary marriages. Spouses bring together two distinct lives, vowing to share

those lives with each other in a unique way. Marital unity is not a give and take, but a give and receive. It is meant to be entirely mutual. To the very reasonable argument that Mary's relationship with the Holy Spirit is not and cannot be perfectly mutual, I would simply respond that Mary gave her entire self to her divine Spouse, who in turn gave His entire self to Mary. Her entire self is all that He asked for, and His entire self was all that she asked for. So it is with spouses who truly love one another.

The most important thing the Holy Spirit and Mary teach us about love in marriage is that it comes from God, who *is* love. We are offered God's love from the very moment of our conception just as Mary was offered her singular grace of espousal to the Holy Spirit at her Immaculate Conception. From then on, all the love in their mystical marriage was sown by the Holy Spirit, just as all love that we receive and give in our lives has first been given to us by God. Mary and the Holy Spirit also show the importance of what Kelly calls the perichoresis (or trinitarian nature) of marital love. If the Holy Spirit loves Mary with friendship, desire, and self-sacrifice even though He is God and she a mere creature, then mere creatures surely ought to love their spouses with these same loves. Kelly writes that "when considering, even theoretically, these three types of love a real perichoresis of them must be maintained as they move imperfectly in and through each other. . . . There will be times when one love predominates over another--this is both normal and necessary for the development of human relationships over time. But without this perichoresis, the fullness of married love is not present, and thus the full self-presence of a person within the marriage commitment is no longer possible" (97). Kelly is gesturing toward the possibility of unhealthy imbalance when a marriage is not firmly grounded in all three facets of love. A marriage without *philia* is infatuation; a marriage without *eros* is

lukewarm; a marriage without *agape* is self-centered. God is the source of all love, and His Trinitarian nature is the model of the perichoresis of marital love.

Mary's mystical marriage does not aim toward her earthly happiness (indeed, one of Mary's more common epithets is Our Lady of Sorrows), but toward her sanctity and the sanctity of the world; so it is intended to be for sacramental marriage. Having grown in love for one another, spouses are called to increase in love for God and neighbor, which is growth in sanctity. Every human vocation has sanctity as its final cause. Marriage can and should result in earthly joy, but if it ends there, it has failed. The fact that Mary's union with the Holy Spirit resulted in the Incarnation of Jesus and the subsequent floods of grace on all of humanity highlights another essential characteristic of marriage: it is public. This goes far beyond the need to have witnesses in the courthouse. It suggests that a good and holy marriage will impact society, making it easier for those around the spouses to become holy themselves. One important way sacramental marriages impact society is by producing holy children.

Mary remained a virgin for the entirety of her life, but she nevertheless had a fruitful marriage.¹⁰ At the heart of all Judeo-Christian marriages is the Genesis command to “[b]e fertile and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). Children are both a gift and a duty within marriage. They come forth as a result of the spouses' union, mirroring the fruitful love between the Father and the Son that is the Holy Spirit Himself. The fact that Mary and the Holy Spirit (and for that matter, Mary and Joseph) do not have a physical, sexual union in their mystical marriage should in no way alter the ideal image of sacramental marriage. Mary's virginity is not meant to undermine the importance, holiness, and beauty of sexual intimacy in the vocation of marriage. Rather, the Blessed

¹⁰ The unusual circumstances of Mary's motherhood and Joseph's foster-fatherhood should be a source of comfort for the countless couples who are unable to have biological children. The graces of marriage extend to adopted, fostered, and spiritual children in the spouses' lives as well.

Mother's virginity points to the goodness of marital union. The Catechism makes this very clear: "Both the sacrament of Matrimony and virginity for the Kingdom of God come from the Lord himself. It is he who gives them meaning and grants them the grace which is indispensable for living them out in conformity with his will. Esteem of virginity for the sake of the kingdom and the Christian understanding of marriage are inseparable, and they reinforce each other" (CCC 1620). Sexual union with one's spouse is an inherently good, natural expression of love, and the fact that virginity is a supernatural expression of love for God comes from the very sacrifice of that natural good. Furthermore, the pairing of virginity and motherhood in Mary's vocation unites her more deeply with Christians of all vocations; no one is left without a model and helper, celibate or married. Because of the everyday duties Christian parents face in raising their children, spouses with children are close to Mary's maternal heart in a special way. Children change marriage forever. With the increased challenges of parenthood come increased joys, along with ever more opportunities for the parents to grow in holiness. Mary's own life was immeasurably altered with the gift of her Son, yet she accepted God's will for her at every moment. So too are Christian spouses called to accept the gift of children when God bestows it upon them.

By exploring the Marian epithet "Spouse of the Holy Spirit," we begin to see the incredible depths of Mary's union with the Third Person of the Trinity, and we receive a rather extraordinary model for marriage. Mary's spousal relationship with the Love of God, the very Life-Breath of the Trinity, is necessarily different from sacramental marriage. After all, sacraments are by nature tangible signs of intangible grace, and marriage is a particularly concrete, bodily sacrament. Still, the supernatural union between Mary and the Holy Spirit expresses the most fundamental aspects of marriage: the good of the spouses (that is, sanctity

through love built on the union of complementary persons) and the procreation and education of children. This mystical marriage ought not to be seen as being primarily about Mary; the Holy Spirit gives Himself as a gift to Mary in a singular way, but the benefits of that gift extend to all of humanity. Through this mystical marriage, Christian spouses can witness the depths of sanctity to which their holy vocation calls them. Through this mystical marriage, Mary gives birth to Jesus Christ, Emperor of the Universe, who is pleased to bless us through the intercession of His mother. *Mary, Spouse of God, Empress of the Universe, pray for us.*

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