



What makes marriage a sacrament?

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When I first learned about the sacraments of the church, I was but a youngster in a Catholic school. We were given this little book that was called “the drill book.” Basically it was filled with Catholic facts, especially those having to do with numbers. I recall the seven capital sins, three persons in God, nine first Fridays, two natures in Christ, ten commandments, six special precepts that were created by the church, fourteen stations of the cross, fifteen mysteries of the rosary, and so forth. Then there were the seven sacraments which were described as outward signs, instituted by Christ, to give grace. The nuns who taught us even held contests to determine who knew their facts the best, sort of an early version of Trivial Pursuit. I more or less assumed back then that all these collectives came from Christ himself, or perhaps Moses. It gave a certain amount of comfort knowing that we Catholics had all these “things from God” to help us get to heaven. Somewhere along the way I also learned that Protestants didn’t have as many things. So Catholicism maintained a kind of lead in the church race because we had more sacred stuff.

Today, when I ask people why they remain Catholic even knowing of widespread clergy sexual abuse, they will often say that there’s still the sacramental life of the church, and that’s important to them. They are to me as well. Sacraments were and remain part of the church’s bedrock because they connect us as humans to the person and work of God’s Spirit. God connects with us and we connect with God in and through the sacraments.

When I studied theology in the seminary, and later as a doctoral student at Notre Dame, I learned that behind these “Catholic facts” were a mass of wonderful truths, along with some interesting and complex

Excerpted from Thomas, David, *Christian Marriage: The New Challenge*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN. Copyright 2007 by The Order of Saint Benedict, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

history. I found out that Jesus did not deliver a “drill book” to his disciples. But he did offer a perspective on God and creation that formed the basis of wonderful and challenging insights about the sacramental nature of God’s world. Here we will be reflecting on the sacramental nature of Christian marriage. And we will learn that the search for ever deeper insight into its meaning is very much an ongoing process.

HISTORY OF MARRIAGE SACRAMENT

Every great idea, just like every person, has a history. The same can be said about how marriage came to be named one of the seven sacraments of the church. Some might be surprised to learn that it took the Catholic Church close to a millennium and a half to give marriage what, I would say, was its due. In affirming the sacramental aspect of Christian marriage, the church was officially saying that marriage among Christians was sacred, that it was intended by God to be not only a way to achieve closeness with God, but that it was a public symbol of something very profound, namely God’s relationship with God’s beloved, the members of the church. Sacraments are created human symbolic actions that make available and point to God’s presence and power. And they have been created for us.

Gradually, the church took interest in creating a meaningful sacred rite to initiate marriage. That it took so long to bring marriage into the middle of church life suggests to me that the holiness of marriage may not be that obvious. . . .

When we examine the history of marriage as a sacrament, we learn that the church found at least some evidence that Jesus instituted the other six sacraments of the church. A few theologians believed that Jesus might have instituted matrimony at the marriage feast at Cana. That proved to be too much a stretch of the ecclesial imagination. The wedding feast at Cana is important not because Jesus “made” a sacrament

there, but because it was the first great sign in St. John’s Gospel that the kingdom of God was beginning. And Jesus was there to insure that there was enough wine to celebrate this. Marriage as part of God’s world had a different kind of history. Unlike the other sacraments, marriage preceded the coming of Christ, going all the way back to the dawn of human time. I believe the names given to that first married couple were Adam and Eve.

The history of theological reflection on marriage in the church shows a great deal of uncertainty and debate.¹ At its low point, in the middle of the first millennium, marriage was only tolerated as something needed for the continuation of family and humanity. It was not valued as a way to follow the full challenges of Jesus. Sacred virginity filled that role. There were times when the church taught that the only justification for sexual relations in marriage was to have children. Mostly, however, the church had very little to say about marriage.

There were a whole host of other reasons why the church was slow to sing its praises. In the period right after Christ’s resurrection, there were serious expectations that he would soon return and that this world would end. Some saw marriage as an unnecessary complication, a sort of waste of time. Why not just stay single and wait prayerfully for the grand finale when Jesus would return fully victorious over evil? St. Paul seemed to share this view. Later, as the church used some of the indigenous philosophies of the day to explain its teachings, it began to divide creation into two parts. Anything related to the body (matter) was considered bad, and anything of the soul (spirit) was deemed good. Such an approach came largely from the philosophy of Platonism, which was quite popular among intellectuals of the third and fourth century.

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IDEAL OF VIRGINITY

The ideal of virginity also grew in importance. One theologian, the famous St. Jerome (340–420), who translated the Bible into Latin, held that one of the best things about marriage was that it produced more virgins for the church. A rather limited view of things, I would say. If marriage came into the church’s conversation at all during these first few centuries, it was mostly to use it as an allegory of God’s relationship to us. In itself, it was not considered that important.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354–440) accepted some of this anti-matter view early in his life, but later, after his conversion to Christianity, wrote about the goods of marriage. He listed it as “sacrament” but not in the sense of the formal rituals of the church. He saw it as a symbol of God’s relation to us. That was an important addition to the theology of the church.

He referred to the passage in the Epistle to the Ephesians where we read the following in referring back to what was said about Adam and Eve in Genesis. “For this reason [getting married] a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery [this word in Greek is *mysterion* which will be translated into Latin as *sacramentum*], and I am applying it to Christ and the church.”² This became the most important text we have for eventually establishing Christian marriage as sacramental. St. Augustine was at the threshold of seeing marriage as a sacrament, but he held back because he still largely associated sexuality with sinfulness. His views on marriage prevailed for the next thousand years.

NOT THE BEST WAY

In brief, we can summarize the first fifteen hundred years of Christianity as affirming that marriage was good, but not the best way for Christians to live. Monasticism grew as the preferred way of life among Christians. Eventually, priests in the Roman Catholic Church were not

allowed to marry. In the late middle ages, as the legal structures of the old Roman Empire began to crumble, the church took on a more active role of overseeing not just marriage, but many of the societal connections relating to its rights and responsibilities.

From a general view of history, many marriages within the church’s realm were arranged, especially if title or land were involved. So-called common-law marriages were often the way of the peasant class. By the thirteenth century, theologians were beginning to list Christian marriage or matrimony as one of the sacraments of the church. But it was not until the sixteenth century at the Council of Trent that the Roman Catholic Church, largely in response to the view of some reformers who claimed that there were only two sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist, formally

declared that there were seven sacraments, and that Matrimony was one of them. It also legislated that marriage should take place in the church before a priest and two witnesses. Clandestine marriages at that time were a pastoral concern.

From then on the church looked upon marriage mostly from a legalistic point of view. The church defined the nature of marriage, determined who could marry and who could not, and it described the required dis-

positions necessary to enter marriage. Up until recent times, most church experts in Christian marriage wore the hats of canon lawyers. This need not to be thought of in negative terms, but it shows that the church’s official thinking about marriage was mostly from a legalistic and liturgical perspective. That began to change in the twentieth century when views from trained theologians, who were also married, began to write about Christian marriage using a broader spiritual and theological perspective. One might add, they also possessed the experiential insights to deepen their understanding of this sacrament.³

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BREAKTHROUGH

Like many other aspects of contemporary church life, a significant breakthrough concerning marriage was expressed in the documents of Vatican II, especially in the section on Christian marriage and family life in *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. There we read, “Spouses, therefore, are fortified and, as it were, consecrated for the duties and dignity of their state by a special sacrament; fulfilling their conjugal and family role by virtue of this sacrament, spouses are penetrated with the Spirit of Christ and their whole life is suffused by faith, hope and charity; thus they increasingly further their own perfection and their mutual sanctification, and together they render glory to God.”⁴

One can almost feel fresh air flowing around these words, perhaps a little of that air Pope John XXIII hoped for when he figuratively opened the windows of the church at the beginning of the council. To continue this positive approach, instead of couching the reality of Christian marriage in terms of dangers and difficulties, it was given a positive framework. It was as if the wind was blowing from behind, moving marriage into its rightful place as a very important expression of the Christian life of holiness and sanctity. I especially appreciate the notion of “mutual sanctification” in this Vatican II passage. . . . It deserves our full attention.

To develop an understanding of the sacramental nature of Christian marriage for today, I want to examine it from two perspectives. First I will connect marriage with patterns in creation itself, dimensions of which go back literally to the beginning. Within the church, this approach toward understanding has been respected as a fruitful way of knowing God. It’s been referred to as looking at God in the book of nature (creation). Knowledge gained in that context can then be connected with the knowledge of God as revealed in the Bible, especially through the life, words, and work of Jesus. What can be done, I believe, is to show that the understanding of marriage we gain from creation can strengthen and deepen what we learn from its specifically Christian context. Catholicism holds that grace builds on nature and that we can effectively use the natural world as a stepping-stone to God.

That’s at the heart of the sacraments of the church. Water for baptism. Bread and wine for the Eucharist. Oil for the sacrament of the sick. And for Christian marriage? The couple themselves, joined in the service of love and life. Another way of saying this is that marriage as intended in God’s creation already had a kind of sacramental identity from the beginning. Not just the beginning of human history, but even before that. Well before! My approach in this matter will be more existential than legal, more experiential than abstract. We’ll be using a method of analogy, which implies a movement from what’s seen to what’s unseen, what’s in creation to what’s connected with God. This way of discovery has been used in the church for centuries.

MARRIAGE AND SACRAMENTAL CREATION

If we look at creation, like St. Augustine did, looking for signs of God, we can find them everywhere. All creation ultimately came from the mind and heart of God. Or as we say in the Nicene Creed, all things seen and unseen. So with the right frame of mind, and with God’s grace that is always there, we could potentially “see” God in anything and everything that was good.

I'm not saying that we can directly see God, or peer into God's mind, but the more we understand the nature of the created cosmos, the closer we seem to get to where Albert Einstein hoped to find God's very thoughts, especially what God thought at the very beginning of creation. Recall what's written in Genesis, when God looked over all that was created, especially humankind, and God immediately proclaimed that it was "very good." Something very important was "there." Something about God. Something we should investigate not just out of curiosity, not just to use for our purposes, but to gain insight into the "big picture," which is how God sees it.

Today, we look at this same creation with some new eyes, especially through the wondrous inventions of high-powered microscopes and telescopes. Incredible and enticing mysteries of nature unfold before us every day. I have had an interest in cosmology, the study of the nature of the universe, and especially its history for many years. While I am not a professional scientist, I can appreciate some of what's reported. I enjoy the role of being an informed amateur, a word that carries the notion of being someone who loves what's learned. For example, I am deeply touched by what's now coming to light using astronomical instruments and sophisticated computers that describe what has been happening at each period during the amazing history of our universe. We can now describe in rich detail much of what has happened all the way to within less than a second from the moment of the initial big bang. The closer we get to understanding the absolute beginning, the more we gain insight into what we experience today. We grasp a little of its long history.⁵

Allow me to share some simple scientific findings about the early history of the universe that, I believe, shed a bit of light on the nature of marriage – which, of course, came much later. Today we know which element constitutes

most of the known matter in the cosmos, unless you include dark matter of which we know very little. It's the element hydrogen, each atom of which is composed of one proton and one electron. When I studied chemistry and physics many years ago, we were taught that hydrogen was as basic as one could get. In that understanding, God would be thought of as having created hydrogen atoms first. Nowadays, that's as true as are all those theories of a flat earth!

All atoms, we now know, are composed of almost countless subatomic particles. Some call them "strings" containing both mass and energy, but describing that level of created reality would take us away from our topic. So let's return to hydrogen.

To my surprise, I learned recently that our universe was almost a billion years old before the first hydrogen atom came into being. Before then, the universe was too hot and there was too much movement for its various component parts to connect. A potential hydrogen nucleus with its proton could not even connect with an electron to form a molecule of hydrogen. There was no "place" to meet. To use a crude, but I think helpful image, it would be like going to a very busy, lively, and noisy rock concert and trying to meet someone new. If you cannot even hear yourself think because of the uproar, there's no possibility that you could carry on a decent conversation. So no meaningful connection is possible.

But finally, conditions were favorable. The grand meeting of proton and electron happened and because of what's called the evenness of the expanding universe, it happened all over the place almost simultaneously. Differences at this very basic level between the proton and electron were overcome, and union took place. The two became one. Then, give or take a few million years, a second meeting took place, this time between two hydrogen atoms forming the hydrogen molecule. Again, two became one. And finally,

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the most powerful event of all came about, the coming together and uniting of two hydrogen molecules with the result that burning bright stars came into being! The lights were turned on in the up-to-then absolutely dark universe. Nuclear fusion happened. Two became one. A new helium molecule was created by their union and in the process bright energy was released. Energy that was needed for all the rest to come about, including us! And because of nuclear fusion, the galaxies, the stars, their planets and moons, and everything else came forth in a form about the way they look today.⁶

Around four billion years ago our current solar system was born. Our Brother Sun flared forth. The earth congealed and grew from the gravitational attraction between countless particles of stardust that were left over from an earlier stellar explosion. The earth's temperature was brought to just the right level so that hydrogen could combine with a host of other elements like oxygen and carbon, and eventually create living beings. Then, one bright spring day (that's just a guess), an Adam met an Eve and they said to each other, "Let's get married." All creation immediately cheered.

Well, you can write that story however you wish, but I would insist that the basic process include the uniting of individual parts in forming something much greater, more complex, and more wondrous than existed before. That's the pattern embedded in God's creation.

The research and discoveries that have given to us this fairly complete history of our universe is, I believe, the greatest scientific advance of our time. And as I'm telling it here, which admittedly is only a small part of the whole story, I only want to note that the joining of "two into one" is a process that truly goes to "the heart of the matter." It changes those who unite, perfects them in ways well beyond their individual capacities, and transforms the whole of creation.

Further, this bit of science underscores how everything is related to everything else. Einstein, along with thousands of scientists after him, is right. There are no isolated atoms, nor are there isolated persons. We are created by God in the deepest part of our being as social. And one of

the places where our social existence is most pronounced and intensively experienced is in the relationship of marriage. It's also important to add that it's through the love and the union achieved between the wife and husband that new human life is created and develops. That's nature's way. While there's massive debate these days about various aspects of the procreation of new life, the fundamental, and I would add, the preferred way this should occur is within a loving marriage.

All of what I've shared in this section of our investigation can be read in the book of nature. But God also became human to offer us further clarity about the intent and plan of God in creating us. Through God being with us in Christ Jesus, through all that he said and did, our salvation and sanctification became possible. God's light enlightened our darkness. In the final section of our discussion about the challenge of Christian marriage, we will say something about how the message of Jesus sheds even more light on the sacramental aspect of Christian marriage.

MARRIAGE AS CHRISTIAN

St. John's Gospel begins with the astounding declaration that God's Word became flesh. In a sense, all the other "words" ever communicated by God to humankind were focused like a laser beam on and through the person of Jesus. In Jesus, the way to all the truth about life was there. God's revelation became personal. The proper faith response to God became personal. And through the person of Jesus, the firstborn of the New Creation, all creation, including marriage, was transformed. In a sense, all authentic religion became fully personal and interpersonal. But more about that in a minute.

Jesus once told a fascinating story to illustrate something about life in God's kingdom. He said that there was a very important wedding feast planned. The list of guests was carefully put together because it was the wedding of the king's son. But when the door opened for the guests to enter, no one was there. Not a single soul. The king then sent out a second invitation (perhaps the first one was mislaid), but those invited all had excuses for not coming. This re-

ally bothered the king so he sent out soldiers to kill those first invited. I don't know exactly what that meant except that it showed really deep disappointment on the part of the king. Eventually the king decided to forget about protocol, forget about the social registry, and open the doors to everyone. "Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet. Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests."⁷

Like all of the stories or parables of Jesus, we can find rich food for thought in them. Often we need to read them a few times, think about them, even pray about them. Vatican II said that God's Spirit addresses us through the biblical word, so we pay extra close attention. We get a glimpse of what Jesus came to share with us in the parable of the wedding feast for the king's son.

So let's examine this parable a little further. Wedding feasts in biblical times were huge social events. Scholars tell us that they could last for days! We're talking about a celebration with a capital "C"! And if it was the wedding of the son of a king, well, this was an event no one would want to miss. Thus, the irony. Everyone on the A list of guests decided that staying with the banalities of their ordinary life, the humdrum of the office, weeding the fields, washing clothes, maybe even watching TV (if it had been available back then) was more important than attending the party of the century! The Gospel of Matthew is very good on dramatics.

We then learn that a revised list of invitees was prepared, which was not really a list but an open invitation to anyone who wanted to come. We are told that the servants of the king went out to the streets and indiscriminately invited everyone they encountered. Can you imagine what that kind of a net would drag in? If the new guests were just hanging around on the street corners, they could be anyone! But that's the point. Everyone was welcome. The king was a very generous person and a bit of a risk taker.

There was one catch, though. You had to come on your own. The invitation demanded a response. Later in the story we find out that

you had to attend wearing a wedding garment. Important events required a little extra decorum. We're told that one fellow failed to cooperate with the dress code. In the end, he probably wished he had.

This story tells us something rather remarkable about God. We don't need a degree in advanced biblical studies to figure out that this parable about God's kingdom describes how God operates. God wants everyone to come to the feast. The feast is part of life in God's kingdom, and we know from other words of Jesus, it has



Sterling Severns Photo

already begun. There's a compelling feeling of inclusiveness and openness about the parable. The desire of the king is to reach out and include everyone, the good and the bad. That covers it all. And when a wedding feast is used as a kind of metaphor for life with God, it means good times for all.⁸

With the coming of Jesus, everything changes. That includes marriage. All interpersonal life becomes very important. Love between humans comes to be center stage. Final judgment of humankind revolves around how we respond to each other's needs. Love of God is pervasively connected with love of neighbor. Love between followers of Jesus becomes the great sign of authentic discipleship. The great sacramental events connect life with love. Just like a wedding feast.

It's not more than a short step from this valuing of interpersonal life to affirm the importance and the value of the marriage relationship. When God loves, life comes into being. All life! We are all here, as were all who came before us and after us, because God loved us first! God says the opening word in the creative conversation of life. But God employs humans to express additional words. The primary word of marriage is one of love, a total statement of love. That's where, for instance, the full expression of love involving human sexuality comes into play. As the church has taught through the centuries, marital love expressed in sexual union should be open to new life. Just as God's love is generative of life, so too is human love in marriage. That's why all of marriage is sacramental.

A couple's human manifestations of love, given through body and spirit, are also expressions of God's love. In Christian marriage, the couple gift each other in a deeply, sexually personal way and in a thousand other ways, too. Love is expressed in mutual care and assistance year after year. And while the wedding is the formal beginning of marriage, the loving acts that embody their mutual love continue. That means the whole of marital life can be sacramental. It can be a continuous manifestation of divine life wrapped in totally human form.

Having described this understanding of the sacramental side of marriage, I have to be honest and at least wonder whether all this wonderful meaning is widely known. I know it's there in church documents although these documents often sound more like legal briefs than love letters. Maybe the church should have gifted poets write its documents, especially those dealing with the complexities and depth of interpersonal life. Jesus had this gift of communication. He used stories, images, and symbols, and a variety of symbolic gestures to communicate the mystery of God that was at the depth of all that was. The church as a whole is constantly challenged to refine its language to more adequately capture what we as Christians experience and understand. Sometimes words are not enough, so we express ourselves through meaningful gestures. That's why surprise gifts, unexpected acts of

kindness and affirmation, and endearing words can be so important in marriage. And in other relationships, too.

If we are attuned to God's presence in our ordinary lives (no small matter, to be sure), we will see the many gifts that come to us all the time. God is always there, but as mentioned earlier, just a little under the surface. We need reminders. For some, a near death moment can awaken a new sense of life as God's gift. While I'm not trying to sell this practice, I find it helpful to keep what I call a surprise log, an accounting of God's gifts that seem to me, at least, as an extra bonus in life. It may be as ordinary as two sunny days in a row, which can be a real oddity during midwinter where I live in northwest Montana. Last evening, two large Canadian geese paraded their four new little ones across our backyard. Beholding that simple spectacle reminded me of our family and others we know and how we parade through life. The more we are alert to seeing God's gifts, the more we will notice.

The sacrament of Christian marriage contains the central mystery of faith: God loves us and creates us. The big bang, looked at in faith, becomes the Big Gift. God invites us in on the great human project through creating a social reality that unites woman with man for the whole of life. This involves a joining of persons for their own sake and for the sake of those that their life will touch.

A final thought about the personal aspect of this. Above we noted that when the Word became flesh in Jesus, all that was communicated by God through creation and through history, especially through that of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, was suddenly concentrated within the person of Jesus. Jesus became God "on the move" through all the events reported in the Gospels, and through a few thousand other events that weren't recorded. To encounter Jesus was to have face-to-face contact with God in a totally human way. From Gospel reports, we know that some came to know this mystery and some didn't. And most likely, even those who had some inkling of the immense importance of meeting Jesus might also have been assailed by second thoughts or doubts. We see this wonder-

fully described in the story of doubting Thomas after the Resurrection of Jesus. He wanted more proof than just the word of his buddies.

To continue his presence in the world, Jesus created certain actions which, in a sense, kept him “there” on earth and active in the community. The most important of these activities is the celebration of the Eucharist, the breaking of the bread as it has sometimes been called. Remembering Jesus through doing what he did at the Last Supper was not just historical remembering as in “let’s do what he did.” No, done in faith and love, Jesus was there among them in the form of food for their journey ahead. Today the church speaks of the “real presence” of Jesus in the Eucharist. And Jesus is there in the other sacraments, too.

This personal presence of Christ Jesus through sacramental enactment is one of the more important theological developments of recent years. Vatican II taught that sacraments invite the whole community to participate and be active within the sacramental rituals. Every sacramental moment contains a kind of invitation to come and meet Jesus. Sometimes the church has to remind us of this because we forget. We also live in a culture which seems to have lost its sense of God in everyday life. Some would say this can even happen while we are engaged in activities that are expressly religious.

The church, to use a current image, seemed like a space station positioned halfway between heaven and earth. Sacramental experiences were like momentary trips from earth to heaven. Sacred moments were sharply separated from profane ones. There was little connection between sacraments and everyday experiences. This led to the sacraments of the church being not so much actions pointing to the Christian meaning of life on earth, but rather events that lifted us away from earth into a more sacred or divine space. When Christians entered wondrous churches they were led to believe that they were in some sense entering a space akin to heaven on earth.⁹

I know that I’m describing a most complex matter but it’s important to get this description on the table because this separation or distancing of what’s human from what’s Christian has had a direct effect of how marriage was thought of as a sacrament. We still see remnants of this view when people talk about Christian marriage as if its whole meaning and significance happened only at the time of the wedding.

Think of it this way. Jesus came to *this* earth to be available to humankind, to give his life for all of us. He wanted us to know about God and connect with God through earthly experiences. Heaven was planted on earth. This purpose was not lost with his Resurrection. In fact, he

continued being present through the faithful, trusting, and loving actions of his disciples, then and now. Encountering Jesus remained possible, but now it happened especially in those actions of the church called sacraments.¹⁰ In other words, the church and its activities, especially its sacramental ones, were not to pull us away from earth or from each other, but rather to ground us in the sacred, grace-empowered life that is ours right now and will continue to be even after we die.

The presence and power of God also entered Christian marriage. And while it took the church a long time to acknowledge this, eventually it did. Through the marital vows of promise given before God and the church, including one’s family and friends, through the unique gift of self that is embodied in the expression of bodily, sexual love, through the many acts of love in word and deed that pass between the husband and wife throughout their shared life, through the ups and downs that seem an essential part of terrestrial life, through efforts to share what’s within us and lighten each other’s burdens, through it all, married couples enjoy sacramental existence, God with and in them, and most of all, actively loving them as they love each other. They experience the love of God in a privileged way, through their mutual love of each other.

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God's gift of life includes a grand love story filled with surprises and one great challenge: To love each other as Christ Jesus has and continues to love us. And this can even happen (in fact, it does!) in Christian marriage.

ENDNOTES

1. For a summary of this, see Peter Jeffery, *The Mystery of Christian Marriage* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2006) 194–226.
2. Eph 5:31-32.
3. See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Marriage* (New York: Longmans, 1942) and Herbert Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939).
4. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), section 48.
5. For a compelling comprehensive description of this history, see Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the*

Primordial Flaring Forth to the Eozoic Era—a Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

6. To learn more about this, see Adam Frank, “The First Billion Years,” *Astronomy*, 34:6, June, 2006, 30–35.
7. Matthew 22:9-10.
8. For a most interesting interpretation of this parable, see John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers: On Earth as It is in Heaven, Year A* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004) 297–301.
9. For a richly detailed historical account of this separation of heaven from earth, see Bernard J. Cooke, *The Distancing of God: The Ambiguity of Symbol in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).
10. See the brilliant account of this aspect of sacramental life in E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963).

NEW!!

Application to the church



In this issue of the journal, we begin a new feature titled “Application to the church,” wherein pastors and practitioners respond to the preceding academic article. We have asked these authors to synthesize the highpoints as a way to help busy church leaders quickly grasp the article’s potential application to their ministries.

Christ with us. The presence and power of God, actively loving humanity. A grand love story of a Creator who wants to be present with that which has been created, and to be so in everyday life!

To be honest, that isn’t what most newly-weds and newlyweds are thinking about in the days before their weddings. Neither are most of their family and friends. They’re tasting cake samples, drawing up contracts with photographers or finalizing honeymoon plans.

Which is why David Thomas has made a helpful contribution with his recent book, *Christian Marriage: The New Challenge*. Thomas calls upon Christians to review their notions about the power of marriage. His emphasis on the Catholic view of mar-

riage as one of the church’s seven sacraments is central to his writing. Early on, he mentions that marriage vastly precedes even the coming of Christ in time. Marriage is to be not only a sacred bond, but he suggests it was intended by God as a way for partners to achieve closeness with God.

As a reader, I was curious to see if Thomas specifically differentiated between “wedding” and “marriage.” I also wondered if I understood his faith perspective well enough to interpret his work. So, I called on a Catholic friend. Bonnie is a wise reader of people and relationships.

“Everything else stems from the sacrament of marriage,” she said. “I think we’ve put far too much emphasis on the wedding ritual, beautiful as it is. I’m more interested