LITURGY, THEOLOGY, MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

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Foot-Washing

THE LITURGY OF THE LORD'S SUPPER on Maundy Thursday includes reference to the episode in John's Gospel when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The last time I attended this liturgy there was an impressive ministerial presence: three celebrants at the altar, elaborately vested and attended by five acolytes. The actual foot-washing was not visible, because the six participants from the congregation remained seated in their places at the end of their pews next to the nave; they were quickly visited and that part of the ceremony was soon over. After Mass, there was a procession to the altar of repose. During the procession, a toddler behind me, about three years old, escaped from her mother yet again, sat in the aisle and removed her shoes. Her six-year-old brother collected her, and her mother, holding her baby in one arm, replaced the toddler's shoes. This mother and three children were far from being a rich family. I watched, and thought that this woman has replaced more shoes, washed more feet—and other things—than some of us have had hot dinners. This is where the real foot-washing happens: in the family, the place of the constant care, attention and self-sacrifice that the bringing up of children inevitably entails. This is what the family is about. But I experienced a mismatch between this reality and what seemed a very attenuated acknowledgement of it in the liturgical celebration.

In an article from *The Way Supplement* in 2001, Kevin Kelly tells the story of a young woman, Jenny, with three children, one of whom has a long-term medical condition; she has a mother with mental health problems, a partner who is over-fond of a drink, little money and few prospects. Jenny's life is one unending cycle of service and hardship. Kelly observes that she is not a churchgoer, would know nothing about doctrine or the Gospels, and would not describe herself as holy or good.

The Way, 54/2 (April 2015), 21–31

He quotes the source of the story, an article in *Catholic Pictorial* by Margaret Rogers:

> Jenny had plenty of knowledge of God but it was a knowledge gained through the heart and through her life experience …. She 'denied herself and took up her cross daily' …. A wise woman friend of mine once said: 'Parenthood is the way we ordinary people find out what Love (God) is all about.' It can take us to the sharp edge of self-sacrifice and self-denial in a way that little else in life can.[1]

For Kelly,

> It is tragic that the Church seems unable to respond to her need. If only the words and actions of its liturgy were sufficiently in tune with the nitty-gritty of her ordinary, everyday life, they would enable Jenny to recognise that her daily round is, in fact, 'holy ground', and the deep presence of God is there.[2]

He sees the need for a renewal of parish practice and liturgy, and cites the guiding principle from *Sacrosanctum concilium*, that 'full and active sharing on the part of the whole people is of paramount concern'.[3] He says 'It is about whether our everyday lives are named, celebrated and inspired

[1] Margaret Rogers, *Catholic Pictorial* (4 February 2001), quoted in Kevin T. Kelly, 'Spirituality and the Parish', *The Way Supplement*, 101 (2001), 132.
[2] Kelly, 'Spirituality and the Parish', 132.
[3] *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 2. 14.

by the liturgy. A liturgy could be rubrically perfect and yet in gross violation of this basic principle.'[4] He discusses the difficulties of bringing this about and outlines some positive attempts that have been made.

The point here, for me, is that the experience of families, as concrete instantiations of 'the family', is essential for the 'full and active sharing' that is foundational to liturgy. But it seemed somehow minimised at the Mass of the Lord's Supper that I attended, displaced by a focus on liturgical splendour. The real commemoration of the Lord's sacrifice and trust seemed to be more in the chatter of the toddlers and hushing of the babies in their mothers' and fathers' arms among the families clustered at the back of the congregation than in some parts of the rite enacted before us. If liturgy is a performance, a participative communication, then the message of the families somehow rescued and healed the failure of the formal rite.

This was for me a kind of 'negative contrast experience'; Kevin Kelly summarises this idea from Edward Schillebeeckx as the process by which an awareness of some kind of violation of human dignity becomes the starting point of a much deeper encounter with God.[5] Interestingly, in an extended discussion, Schillebeeckx bases this on an account of God's transcendence that is foundational for both prayer and liturgy:

> Salvation is in fact the conquest of all human personal and social alienations ….
>
> Therefore a final healing of the division in our existence in the world can only be the consequence of an active reality which embraces ... the whole of reality …. and this is a definition of God ….
>
> We need a liturgy in which we *transcend* both personal and individual intimacy, and also critical, socio-political concerns, from within …. This awareness of being grounded in God, of persisting when every empirical foundations and every guarantee have been removed … is the mystical power of faith.[6]

This, then, gives rise to the capacity to oppose injustice and suffering while recognising that redemption is 'not yet'. Schillebeeckx argues that the Church truly remembers Christ to the extent that it can be shown that it is '… presenting a challenge and leading to revolution …. Unless

[4] Kelly, 'Spirituality and the Parish', 134.
[5] Kevin Kelly, *New Directions in Moral Theology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), 59.
[6] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1980), 814–816.

it goes with a liberating way of life which overcomes suffering, kerygmatic remembrance cannot have any critical epistemological force.'[7] On this argument, a liturgical renewal that really does include the suffering experience of families, rather than appearing to pay it lip-service, is essential.

The Last Supper and Trust

Gerry J. Hughes has written about the Last Supper, reinterpreting the elements of sacrifice in this context in terms of trust, rather than propitiation or ransom.[8] He cites Hosea 6:6, 'I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice', and he asks how the parallels between Abraham and Isaac and Jesus should be read, if not in the expiatory way of some of the many theologies of atonement. He considers the story of Job, which 'is about the nature of faith and what faith should be based upon. The conclusion is that there comes a point at which understanding has to be replaced by sheer trust.' This being true of Job, the story of Abraham and Isaac can be read in the same manner. Hughes recalls variant Jewish versions of the event, and notes their common approach to it as a story of absolute trust in God. The image of the Lamb is, then, not one of expiatory sacrifice but 'a symbol of God's fidelity'.

This reading can be applied also to the experience of Jesus at his death—Hughes reminds us that Psalm 22, which Jesus quoted on the cross ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?),[9] follows the classic structure of psalms, beginning with lamentation, including a moment of illumination, and then turning to expression of confidence in God. He cites Anselm and Abelard in repudiating sacrifice as atonement or ransom, and questioning 'whether sacrifice in that sense was the best way to think of what Jesus' death should mean for us'. Applying these ideas to the Last Supper gives a different reading: 'Jesus took bread as a symbol of himself given trustingly to God …', and he asked his disciples to 'see the shedding of his blood as the sign of the new covenant with the God who spared his people in Egypt when they marked their doors with the blood of the Passover lamb'. Jesus trusted in God, who raised him, and 'the disciples needed to recognise, and be themselves strengthened by, that total trust'.

[7] Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 820.
[8] Gerry J. Hughes, 'A Fresh Look at the Last Supper', *Thinking Faith* (17 April 2014), at http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/fresh-look-last-supper, accessed 28 April 2014.
[9] Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46.

This is the trust that we recall when we celebrate any Mass, but particularly the liturgy of Maundy Thursday. We are not offering symbols of a pagan vicarious or propitiatory sacrificial victim. We are recalling trust in God, and committing ourselves to it in the future. This trust is surely the experience that all families seek to promote in different relationships: children trusting parents, parents trusting children and parents trusting each other. Trust, and the service that both grows out of and is inspired by mutual love, are surely the foundation of family, as well as of the Eucharist.

Jesus, Marriage and the Family

Given the commitment shown by Jesus to the poor and powerless, it is not surprising that he was alert to the exploitation of women in his world. He upheld the need for mutual trust, love and care between married partners and family members, and his words on divorce and adultery are meant to reinforce this (Matthew 5:27–32; 19:3–9). He was concerned for widows, who had no status (for example the widow of Nain: Luke 7:11–15) and he healed the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:25–30; Matthew 15:21–28), breaking social taboos in doing so. He empowered the family as a community of trust in God, and critiqued it where it degenerated into a mechanism of social control or the advancement of human exploitation and greed.

We also have evidence of sayings and actions of Jesus that refer to other aspects of family. Luke Timothy Johnson remarks: 'In the New Testament the absolute status of marriage is challenged because of the radical character of the Christian experience'. He goes on to give three reasons for this. They are the radical lifestyle of Jesus himself, the expectation that the eschaton was imminent and, importantly, the fact that 'Jesus' resurrection as "life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45) made the reception of God's blessings not dependent on biological fertility but on the power of the Spirit'.[10]

I would make a lot more of this last than Johnson does. He notes the apparent ambiguity in the New Testament about marriage and family. It seems to me that Jesus is quite clear that all human relationships, including those within the family, are now brought into the realm of the Spirit. They become part of the Kingdom, no longer standing as structures of power

[10] Luke Timothy Johnson, 'The Biblical Foundations of Matrimony', in *Marriage*, edited by Charles C. Curran and Julie Hanlon Rubio (New York: Paulist, 2009), 5.

in their own right. That is why we can become adopted children of God, and rely on such a status more than on any human child–parent relation. That is why Jesus can make such disturbing comments. He seems to reject the family in comments such as 'who are my mother and brothers?' (Mark 3:33); 'I have come to set a man against his father …' (Matthew 10:35); and 'whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother …' (Luke 14:26). His own family think he is mad (Mark 3:20–21). Nicholas Peter Harvey gives an insight into how these words might be read. He supposes that Jesus is not opposed to his family as such, but to the temptation in himself, and in all of us, to give up the struggle for personal integrity and settle for an easy conformity with the expectations of others.

> It is not therefore the family which is under attack but the conservative and even regressive potential of the family in oneself …. It is possible to choose a familial identity which dictates the whole shape of my life. The maintenance of family relationships can become an absolute, and as such a destructive alternative to living your own life.[11]

In other words, we can make the family into an idol, and it is this kind of idolatry that Jesus exposes when he relativises and redefines the family.

Marriage, in the time and place of Jesus' ministry, was to a large extent a legal and financial matter. Family landholdings, businesses and property were consolidated or expanded, and the provision of sons to carry on trades and perpetuate clans was ensured. Clans and families planned marriages: even men were not always free to marry where they wished, and women were certainly severely constrained. If marriage partners developed a relationship of mutual respect, that was an added bonus.

Jesus challenged the barriers of class, power and gender in his world, and that includes such marital structures. He ate with prostitutes; and the inclusion by the gospel editors of the episode of the woman caught in adultery shows that they certainly thought it typical of Jesus, even if it did not come from the older sources. In the story of the Samaritan woman (John 4:6–42), Jesus does not care about her marital status. The issue is her initial marginalisation of him ('You, a Jew, ask me?') and her lack of trust ('you have no bucket'). He offers her 'living water' without any qualifications; trust in God is what is needed. He brings up her marital status only to show how she has projected her own marginality on to him.

[11] Nicholas Peter Harvey, *The Morals of Jesus* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991), 60.

I would also argue that the healing ministry of Jesus illuminates his honouring of human embodiment. A large part of his time and activity appears to have been devoted to this, and it is not always reflected in present-day accounts of him. He allowed himself to touch and be touched by those proscribed by ritual purity laws, again relativising concepts of the body and opposing contemporary idolatries of bodiliness. He interacted with people independently of their sexual status, reaching out to their needs as persons created by God to be in relationship with God.

The Church and the Family

At the Second Vatican Council there emerged a groundswell of new thinking on the family in terms of marriage, and in terms of social and economic issues. Before the Council, church teaching had focused on the formal aspects of marriage, but it had come under increasing criticism as one-sided and inadequate to meet the challenges of social change in the twentieth century. In *Gaudium et spes,* the introduction to this subject begins with a relational description of marriage as a 'partnership of love'; the next section asserts the holiness of marriage and its essentially relational nature:

> The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws. It is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence, by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other, a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one …. For God Himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes …. Christ the Lord abundantly

> blessed this many-faceted love, welling up as it does from the fountain of divine love and structured as it is on the model of His union with the Church ….[12]

It is clear here that the teaching of the Church on marriage is that it is founded on reciprocal love, empowered by God and blessed by Christ—just as he blessed the Samaritan woman.

Marriage was a social fact long before church practice relating to it developed. As Ladislas Örsy shows in his excellent historical survey, the Church treated it purely as a secular arrangement, with whatever legal and financial contracts contemporary culture required, until well into the fourth century. It was not until the eleventh century that its sacramental character was completely recognised by the Church and it became a fully religious ceremony. The Church's awareness of marriage, just like its awareness of, for example, slavery, has a historical dimension.[13] This leads to a certain untidiness in concepts and a plurality of ideas in both teachings and their reception. This should not discourage serious thinking and consideration of all positions, and of their adequacy or inadequacy at any given time.

Kevin Kelly offers a contemporary perspective on marriage as primarily about growing relationship rather than formal contract, reflecting the developments of Vatican II. He argues that the recognition of mutual 'life-giving love' is part of establishing an actual marriage: this is a developmental process. A marriage is indissolubly established when,

> … in their life-giving love for each other, each has given and received so much that the words 'I cannot live without you' are no longer just an expression of the promise they have made, but an accurate summing up of what they now know from experience.[14]

This life-giving, mutual love is surely the obverse of the service and self-sacrifice empowered by Christ, who makes it possible by living it out himself. The encounter with Christ, signified and made real in the sacrament of marriage, is mediated in this reciprocal service of love.

[12] *Gaudium et spes*, n. 48. I note the parallel in the language here with the story of the Samaritan woman at the well: 'the water that I give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life', John 4: 15).

[13] Ladislas Örsy, *Marriage in Canon Law: Texts, Comments, Reflections and Questions* (Dublin: Dominican, 1988), 13–37.

[14] Kevin Kelly, *Divorce and Second Marriage: Facing the Challenge*, 2nd edn (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1996), 35.

Elsewhere, Kelly also points out some key issues for the moral theologian: the recognition that marriage is between persons implies the acceptance that a person has a history, a narrative; marriage is not only about two people at the altar, but about their pasts—the experiences and life events, good and bad, that bring them to this stage in their life journey. A theology of marriage needs to recognise the social implications of this. Kelly presents the concept of growth and change in his use of the parable of the wheat and the darnel.

Marriage is not only about two people at the altar

> Moral theology is not meant to condemn the plant emerging from the seed simply because it does not live up to the promise of the idealized picture on the packet. Rather, it appreciates the growth that has occurred. Sometimes what might look like a puny and undeveloped plant might, in fact, be a miracle of growth, given the adverse conditions under which it has had to struggle.[15]

This is said in the context of the limitations of normative morality; it can be a guide to an understanding of what is right, but it can never be applied as an absolute. This must be particularly true of attempts to provide norms for marriage, given that its sacramental character is rooted in the everyday reality of creaturely human life. A similar concern is expressed by Ladislas Örsy when he observes that, although the Code of Canon Law applying to marriage has the character of law, 'its purpose and its hallmark throughout should be pastoral'. He devotes some pages to a more detailed explanation:

> To be 'pastoral' means to be inspired by the image of the good shepherd …. it supports an operation that transcends the laws, an operation that ought to be dominated by tender love for all, solicitude for the lost ones, and unselfish dedication to an excess ….
>
> For the Code to be pastoral means also to point to higher demands than the law can define. It is to give priority to charity in the care for the community.[16]

The Future: Back to Foot-Washing?

There are plenty of warnings about avenues to avoid in the theology of marriage and family. Theologies that are negative about human bodiliness,

[15] Kevin Kelly, *From a Parish Base: Essays in Moral and Pastoral Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), 109.
[16] Örsy, *Marriage in Canon Law*, 44–45.

that are dualist, that are biologically determinist, have all been advanced and criticized. But we need theologies that acknowledge the goodness of God's creation in human affairs including marriage, that do not stereotype the genders, and that acknowledge the immanence as well as the transcendence of God. We need an understanding of love which includes mutuality, trust and joy as well as the absoluteness of self-giving. We need to recognise the family as the foundational school in power relations: if peace and justice do not begin there, we can hardly expect their development in the adults who grow and emerge from the experience of family. And we need to remember the critique of family in the New Testament; it should not be an agent of social control or an economic object; plural forms of family are healthy.[17]

Lisa Sowle Cahill observes:

> The kinship family's well-being is for Christians integrated with and to some extent relativised by the inclusive nature of the Christian community as 'new family in Christ'. Christ's new family potentially reaches out to all those who are weary and heavily burdened, whether Christian or non-Christian.

This is a call for a theology of marriage matching up to Kevin Kelly's concern for pastoral reality. She argues further:

> The natural pro-social role of families is shaped for Christians by a preferential option for the poor. In institutionalising just treatment and just access to goods across society, those who have been previously excluded must first be included.[18]

In a culture of celebrity weddings, ordinary and extraordinary families buy into the mixture of materialism and hypocrisy they represent. The poor are excluded and regarded as inadequate because of their poverty. How well does the Church oppose these misreadings of marriage and family, and how much does it collude with them?

It is clear that any theology of marriage and family must start from the mutual covenant of self giving, empowered by the sacramental service that is found in faithful families such as those described by Kevin Kelly. One happy consequence of this would be that the unhealthy obsession

[17] I draw for example on the arguments offered by Charles C. Curran, 'Pope John Paul II and Post-Vatican II US Catholic Moral Theologians on Marriage', in *Marriage*, edited by Curran and Rubio, 92–113.
[18] Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'A Christian Family Vision', in *Marriage*, edited by Curran and Rubio, 238–247, here 245.

with sexuality found in some church quarters would wither. Readers will have noticed that I have managed a sketch of some of the sources in scripture, tradition and reason for a theology of family and marriage without recourse to an overdependence on modern biology and without once mentioning the sexual act. I believe that the families of today radiate the mutuality, trust and service to which we are all called by God. Can present liturgies be rescued by the recognition of this? Can we perform our liturgies while recognising and opposing the negative effects that social status, wealth, possessions and power all have on the family in all societies, including the developed West? Can we allow ourselves to discern God's continuing action in the experience of everyday life for the majority of church members by including one-parent families, unmarried mothers, the poor and the badly educated, who are so easily marginalised in contemporary parish structures?

If this were to happen, I surely would not have the chance of experiencing again such a discontinuity between the liturgy of the Church and its teaching as I did on Maundy Thursday.

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