
Signs of Love
Christian Liturgy in the
Everyday Life of the Family

by Don Renzo Bonetti

Chapter 1

LITURGY OF THE CHURCH AND LITURGY OF THE FAMILY

Introduction

Christian worship is a drama. It is a drama in two acts. These two acts do not happen one after the other, as if in chronological order, but rather happen as two actions made by two “actors” at once and the same time. First, the Church gathers to give glory, blessing, and thanksgiving to God, and her praise ascends to heaven. Second, and at the same time, God descends to earth. He comes down to meet his Church, to sanctify her and help her grow. At the center of the action stands Jesus Christ, who as the protagonist of this drama unites heaven and earth in the Spirit.

Every time and everywhere the Church gathers this drama is enacted. Yet, Christian worship does not begin and end at the doors of the Church. It extends to the whole of life. Married couples have a unique calling and gifting to express this drama in their lives together. In the normal activities of married life, the husband and wife offer praise to God and God descends to be with them, so that they might be a sign of Jesus in the Church and the world.

Scripture Verses

Genesis 2:26-27

Ephesians 5:22-33

Key Terms

Liturgy: literally means “the work of the people” – generally understood to be the worship of the whole Church, when the Church on earth joins with the saints and angels in heaven in offering praise and glory to God.

Sacrament: a visible sign entrusted to the Church that communicates God’s grace.

Marriage: the visible sign given in creation, consecrated by Christ, and entrusted to the Church (by which “a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”) that particularly communicates Christ’s spousal love for the Church.

Domestic Church: a term used in the early Church to describe the continuity between the Church and the family – where the home becomes the first school of Christian life and the whole household participates in the love of God by sharing that love with one another the world.

★ ★ ★

Liturgy of the Church

This book is a meditation on and prayer for the great mystery that spouses receive through the sacrament of marriage.¹ For marriage is more than the wedding ceremony itself. It is a mystery that endures throughout the life of the couple, a mystery that has its own liturgy and rites.

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

We need to begin by deepening our understanding of liturgy as something far more than the religious ceremonies of the Church. To go deeper we must focus on the Person at the heart of liturgy, Jesus Christ.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches the centrality of Jesus this way: Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations.² And again:

“Seated at the right hand of the Father” and pouring out the Holy Spirit on his Body which is the Church, Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace . . . By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.³

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

Just as Christ was sent by the Father so also he sent the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit . . . so that the work of salvation which they preached should be set in train through the sacrifice and sacraments, around which the entire liturgical life revolves.⁴

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

Christ, indeed, always associates the Church with himself in [the liturgy] in which God is perfectly glorified and men are sanctified. The Church is his beloved Bride who calls to her Lord and through him offers worship to the eternal Father.⁵

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

We must emphasize that the *whole* Church is involved in this action of praise, and the *whole* Church benefits from the salvation that comes from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit in *every* liturgical celebration. Even a small congregation—a few people, celebrating a single baptism—is joined by the whole Church. When a single priest prays the Liturgy of the Hours, he celebrates with the Church, and the Church with him. In this way, the Christian is never alone. Through the Holy Spirit, we are all always part of one Body that is the Church.

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

1 Ephesians 5:32

2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011), sec. 1088, www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catechism/catechism-of-the-catholic-church/epub/index.cfm.

3 *Catechism*, sec. 1086.

4 *Catechism*, sec. 1086.

5 *Catechism*, sec. 1089.

Christian liturgy not only recalls the events that saved us but actualizes them, makes them present. The Paschal mystery of Christ is celebrated, not repeated. It is the celebrations that are repeated, and in each celebration there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that makes the unique mystery present.⁶

The paschal mystery of Christ, the center of Christian life and faith, is beyond time and eternal. While it cannot be repeated, the liturgy makes it present to us. As the *Catechism* tells us, “The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments.”⁷ It further explains, “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church.”⁸

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

Liturgy of the Family: The Little Church

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

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

Christian marriage, like the other sacraments, “whose purpose is to sanctify people, to build up the body of Christ, and finally, to give worship to God” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 59) is in itself a liturgical action glorifying God in Jesus Christ and in the Church.⁹

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

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

Spouses: Liturgical Ministers of the Marriage Rite

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

In the spousal liturgy, the first liturgical act is the rite of the sacrament of marriage, where God joins husband and wife in a one-flesh union. The spouses are ministers of the sacrament, by means of, and with the power of, their baptismal priesthood, the priesthood of all believers.¹⁰

6 *Catechism*, sec. 1104.

7 *Catechism*, sec. 1113.

8 *Catechism*, sec. 1131.

9 Saint John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* [On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World], November 22, 1981, sec. 56, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html.

10 The ministerial priesthood (i.e. the one of the priests) serves the baptismal priesthood. There is no dignity in the world higher than being a child of God and being part of the body of Jesus. Therefore, a ministerial priest is never above the others, but rather *under* the others, to serve a community of God. The ministries of deacons, priests, bishops and the pope add nothing to the dignity of being a child of God, because this is already the highest possible attainment. A ministerial priest descends to clean the feet of the community so that the community can offer sacrifices of praise with pure hearts.

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

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

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

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

Earlier we established that every sacrament has an ascending and a descending dimension. The nuptial liturgy *ascends*, giving glory, praise, and worship to the Trinity, praising and blessing God for the creation of man and woman made in his image and likeness. The four blessings of the marriage rite invoke the Holy Spirit upon the spouses and begin with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord for the great gift of having created man and woman. These blessings make clear that the marriage rite is an act of liturgical worship, of entering into the eternal now of Christ and his Church. The nuptial liturgy also *descends*. In the descending dimension, the Lord empowers the spouses to be able to live out the love of Christ in their life together.

Familiaris Consortio underlines these fundamental truths:

The Spirit which the Lord pours forth gives a new heart, and renders man and woman capable of loving one another as Christ has loved us . . . [The spouses] are called to live the very charity of Christ who gave Himself on the Cross.¹¹

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

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

Every marriage is a new "Yes" of God ("Yes, I have done a beautiful thing") to the creative action of man and woman, who are made in God's image and likeness.¹² Every marriage mirrors and repeats the same *yes* present in the creation of the first man and woman. Every marriage is also a new *yes* to the covenant of love between the Creator and humanity, between Christ and the Church, so that this love may continue to live and communicate itself through a new couple. God wants to extend and grow this loving covenant between Christ and the Church; he does so by asking the spouses to continuously share and celebrate it.

¹¹ *Familiaris consortio*, sec. 13.

¹² Genesis 1:31. According to recent studies on the Greek version of the Bible, *beautiful*, rather than *good*, is the adjective best suited to describe the pleasure of God.

The celebration of marriage is a new expression of God's love for humanity. Through marriage, he redeems, saves, and renews love from all the decay that may afflict it. Regardless of whether the couple is Christian, marriage provides a *common grace* that tells of God's "in the beginning" blessing of creation. In the sacrament of marriage Jesus appropriates the marriage and makes it an effective sign of grace for the glory of God.

Spouses Continue the Liturgy of Marriage in Their Life Together

Familiaris Consortio tells us, "Marriage is in itself a liturgical action glorifying God in Jesus Christ and in the Church."¹³ This underlines the continuity between the marriage rite and the spouses' life. This continuity can also be found in the *Rite of Marriage*: "The true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of the family life which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Savior."¹⁴

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

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

God, who has called the spouses *to* the marriage, continues to call them *in* the marriage. Those who get married in Christ, by means of the faith in the Word of God, are made capable to fruitfully celebrate, to live in holiness and to publicly witness the mystery of the union of Christ and the Church.¹⁵

The passage speaks about a lifelong fruitful celebration of the mystery of the union of Christ and the Church. The fruitful celebration discussed above is not found only in a rite of the Church but in the entire life of the couple. In the domestic context, the celebration of marriage is meant to describe both worship (ascending liturgy) and the sanctification God accomplishes in those who engage in it (descending liturgy). This concept of the ongoing celebration of the marriage sacrament emphasizes the beauty, power, and meaning of the "fruitful celebration of the mystery of the union of Christ and the Church" within the domestic Church.

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

Every "liturgy of the conjugal life" is directly related to the vitality of the [Church's] liturgy. If this were not the case, the conjugal ministry would be in vain as well as the dynamisms coming from the fact that spouses are ministers of a permanent sacrament.¹⁶

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

Thus, in carrying out their "Yes" and their mutual promise of sacrificial love and fidelity in their married, or *conjugal*, life, the rite celebrated in the Church in the beginning (*in fieri*) is connected to the conjugal life (*in facto*). In this way, marriage becomes a true liturgy of life, linking the great liturgy of the Church

13 *Familiaris consortio*, sec. 56.

14 Catholic Church. *The Rite of Marriage: The Roman Ritual revised by decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and published by the authority of Pope Paul VI*. (New York: Alba House, 1997).

15 (*Praenotanda*, 10)

16 Achille M. Triacca, *Matrimonio e verginità: Teologia e celebrazione per una pienezza di vita in Cristo* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), 250.

to the domestic life of the couple, expressed in family and surrounding community. This liturgy of marriage, operating through Jesus within the spouses, is for the glory of God; the sanctification of the couple; and the salvation of the world.

Familiaris Consortio tells us:

Their belonging to each other is the real representation, by means of the sacramental sign, of the very relationship of Christ with the Church. Spouses are therefore the permanent reminder to the Church of what happened on the Cross . . . Of this salvation event, marriage, like every sacrament, is a memorial, actuation and prophecy.¹⁷

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

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

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

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

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

The sacrament of marriage can be considered in two ways: the first when it is celebrated, the second while it endures. It is in fact a sacrament similar to the Eucharist, which is a sacrament not only while it is celebrated, but also while it endures, because while the spouses live their union, it is always the sacrament of Christ and the Church.¹⁸

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

The Ecclesial Dimension

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

¹⁷ *Familiaris consortio*, sec. 13.

¹⁸ Saint Robert Bellarmine, S.J., *De controversiis*, t. III, *De matr.*, controvers. II, cap. 6.

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

The Christian couple is a unique and specific domestic expression of the Church itself. The faith experiences lived in homes have a liturgical character. At the same time, the domestic liturgy must always be linked to the larger liturgy of the Church and the Christian community so that it can be authenticated and celebrated in its fullness. Otherwise, it is reduced from liturgy to private devotion. In its communion with the larger Church, the domestic liturgy becomes truly liturgical and permits domestic acts to be manifested and proclaimed.

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

The Christological Dimension

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

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

The living liturgy of the family means that Jesus is always present in our homes. We must always be aware of the mystery Christ's presence! Again, the analogy to the Eucharist is necessary and fitting. If a priest celebrates the Mass without thinking about the fact that it is Jesus who is acting through him, he would be an automaton, a man who has memorized the words of the rite without those words having real and immediate meaning. Such a priest wouldn't be in the right condition to help others perceive the presence of the Mystery. The more the priest recognizes that he is the sacrament of Jesus, that Jesus is enacting the Mass through him, the more he understands the mystery of the sacrament and the mystery of his own relationship to Jesus. This priest, operating with deep knowledge of his words and actions, is better able to communicate the Real Presence of Christ to those he serves.

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

In *Gaudium et Spes* we read:

The Savior of men and the Spouse of the Church comes into the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony. He abides with them thereafter so that just as He loved the Church and handed Himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-bestowal.¹⁹

“He abides with them,” but why? Because he donated himself. In the same way, the spouses are called to donate themselves to each other to celebrate the love of Christ for the Church. Jesus wants to continue to celebrate his “total donation” in the life of every married couple. He wants to continue to celebrate the reality of the body given for life, even up to dying. Christ has a great desire to celebrate this self-donation in, with, and through the couple!

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

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

How Spouses Practice Liturgical Service

Achille M. Triacca explains that, “The liturgy of the conjugal life makes visible the invisible presence of the Holy Spirit and the love experienced within the Trinity . . . as well as the Christ’s love for his Church.”²⁰

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

The priest has the ministry of preaching the word; the spouses have the ministry of visibility. What the priest says through words, spouses are called to say in the flesh. The priest explains a book made of paper; the spouses are a book made of flesh. With this book, one doesn’t need to know how to read, but only to see, because the spouses participate in Christ’s love for his Church and are a reflection of trinitarian life. Triacca affirms this incarnational reality: “The ‘great gift’ given to the spouses actualizes itself in the ‘domestic liturgy’ by means of gestures and words.”²¹

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

In the sacramental encounter, Jesus Christ gives the spouses a new way of being, through which they

19 Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes* [The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World], December 7, 1965, sec. 48, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

20 Triacca, *Matrimonio e Verginità*, 251.

21 Triacca, *Matrimonio e Verginità*, 251.

are conformed to his image, the bridegroom of the Church, and taken into a particular state of being within the community of God.²²

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

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

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

Holy Scripture provides us with a guide for understanding the liturgy in the family in the same way it helps us understand the liturgy of the Church. By reading, searching, and understanding Scripture, spouses learn about the incarnation: The Word of God was made flesh as an expression of Jesus’ love for humanity and the Church. This incarnation is not something that happened only in the past. It is an action that happens even now, through the spouses, who are called both to remember and actualize it. To illustrate: Jesus hears the shout of a blind man from afar, “Son of David, have pity on me.” He hears and heals the woman who touches the hem of his cloak.²³

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

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

The unitive dimension of the marriage sacrament extends beyond the couple and the family. This love is also intended to celebrate unity outside itself. If a couple visits someone in need or cares for a sick person or for a child, they express the love of the Word of God for humanity and the love of Christ for the Church.

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

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

22 (ESM, 44)

23 Luke 18:38, 8:43–48.

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

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

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

★ ★ ★

END OF CHAPTER ONE

Questions for Reflection

1. Read Ephesians 5:22-33 and explain in your own words what the “great mystery” of marriage is.
2. How is the “great mystery” of marriage lived in everyday life? What are the “signs of love” that display and make known this mystery?
3. Reflect on your marriage or the marriages of those you know. Have you ever thought about marriage being both an image and source of God’s love in the world? Can you think of any couples who are an example of this?
4. Reflect on the normal activities of your everyday life. How can these activities be a “domestic liturgy” where God is present to you and you are present to God?

Memory Verse

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”—1 John 4:7

Resources for Study

- *Let’s Start with Jesus* by Dennis Kinlaw
- *The Role of the Family in the Modern World* by John Paul II
- *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family: the Domestic Church* by Joseph Atkinson