

Love Is All Around

We do not live in a vacuum. We are influenced by the world around us. So, in February with the American world adorned with hearts and flowers and all things romantic, it is no surprise that some of our young men and women and maybe some that are not so young are moved to ask or to respond "Yes" to the question of love, "Will you marry me?"

The world is seen through rose-colored glasses, and everything is beautiful. The cynics mock and the older and wiser remember with a feeling of warmth of those days. It is in those feelings that may lead to a marriage that a journey is begun. The journey may be as old as time because it begins in creation. "Male and female, He created them." They, Adam and Eve, were created in a union, not just of themselves but with God. God walked with them in the Garden, and they were happy and at peace.

Sin entered the scene. First, they were no longer one with God. Then through their own words blaming another for the sin, they were no longer one with each other. From the depths of their being, they wanted to go back to the way they were in Creation. They wanted to be a male and a female in union with each other and with the Divine.

The Father too wanted this unity to be restored. He wanted His creation to be in His image and likeness. To do this, He sent His Son. Restoration was the work of the Son. The purpose of this restoration was the salvation of humanity living in the image and likeness of creation.

It is not surprising then that the first of our Lord's miracles was the Wedding Feast at Cana. Jesus did not invent marriage. People married with ceremony or not. For the Christian, the Wedding Feast at Cana shows the new element present in marriage, namely Jesus Himself. As St John Chrysostom writes, "Do you want Christ to come and sanctify your mar-

riage? Then invite the priest." As it was in Creation the union of a couple with God, a Trinitarian image, is restored by Christ through the Mystery of marriage in the Church.

The ceremony in the Church is part of the divine process. The goal of salvation remains, but like the salvation of humanity it is a process that has a beginning but no end. The Church established by Christ to guide and to be the source of grace is there from the moment of a person's new life in Baptism until they are laid to rest. The ceremony developed in the Church is modeled upon the Mysteries of Baptism and Chrismation. There is a beginning at the doors of the Church, and when the



ceremonial part is over, they go back out into the world anew.

St Paul writes that all who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. In the marriage ceremonial, joining the hands is old and is mentioned by St. Gregory of Nazianzus. It symbolizes the presence of Christ who, through His servant-priest, confirms the marital union, saying: "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder." (Mt. 19:6). The couple has joined themselves to Christ and Christ has joined Himself to them.

What began in the couples' mind, or so they thought, was transformed into a spiritual relationship. That is part of the plan.

The same is true with sexual desire. A very human desire under the shadow of marriage becomes a spiritual union. The passion of sex becomes the passion of love. Here two become one bound by love. Love is powerful because love is of God. It is divine love that joins people together. As St Maximos the Confessor writes, "God so loved that He burst into creation." The love union between a man and a woman can also burst into new life. This new life, while of the couple, is also from God. Life is at the heart of marriage. Not all couples will have children. St John Chrysostom writes that having children is normal for marriage, also writes, "Marriage does not always lead to child-bearing, although there is the Word of God which says, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.' We have as witnesses all those who are married but childless."

Couples must be open to their part in the plan of God whether to be fruitful and multiply or not. The couple must have trust in God that this part of their marriage vocation will be an effective witness.

Witnessing is key to marriage. This is not a private event but one that is public for the world to see and to be transformed by. It is common in our tradition to call the marriage ceremony, the Mystery of Crowning. The couple wears crowns of gold or of flowers. They are the crowns of martyrs. The word *martyr* means witness. The couple enters into a new relationship with God. They become one in spirit and in the flesh. Human love cannot bring this about only the gift of divine energies from God can do so. We pray, "O God, our God, ... accept their crowns into Your kingdom, keeping them pure, blameless and above all reproach."

We are praying that their witness of their unique relationship as a man and his rib, inseparable since they are joined together by God, and life-giving to each other and in the creation of a family is eternal and without end.

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