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More Than Self-Gift and Sex: The Role of Receptivity In Catholic Marital Ethics

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RECENT SCHOLARSHIP WITHIN THE CATHOLIC tradition on sex and sexuality, like much of American political and ethical debate, seems deadlocked with so-called "liberals" on one side and self-styled "conservatives" on the other. On one hand, proponents of the theology of the body argue it presents a positive view of sexuality that emphasizes the importance of self-gift. On the other hand, opponents criticize this approach as too constrictive, emphasizing self-giving too much, neglecting the role of pleasure, and creating unrealistic and irrelevant ethical norms. Much of the debate zeroes in on the ethical norms found in this personalist theology of self-gift, especially the prohibitions of artificial contraception, divorce, extramarital sex, and homosexual relations. The objections to these norms deserve significant attention, if for no other reason than that they seem to be a majority opinion.

The way forward in this debate, however, does not seem to be to rehash the opposing sides of the debate. Rather, this essay will strive to find common ground in the importance of receptivity for an ethic of sex and marriage.[1] It will engage the theology of the body more deeply in order to address criticisms and reach out to a broader audience. Specifically, this essay aims to show that receptivity serves as a necessary ethical norm within a theology of self-gift for both marriage in general and sex specifically. First, it will demonstrate receptivity as necessary for a true communion of persons in marriage, and particularly underscore this understanding in light of the sacramental nature of marriage. Further, it will assert the importance of an ethic of receptivity in the social role of the family. The essay will then highlight the

[1] Here, I build on the work of many others, particularly the unique contributions of authors like David Matzko McCarthy, in his *Sex and Love in the Home*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2004) and Julie Hanlon Rubio, in *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010) and "The Practice of Sex in Christian Marriage," in *Leaving and coming Home: New Wineskins for Catholic Sexual Ethics*, ed. David Cloutier (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books Press, 2010), 226-49. I am particularly indebted to Julie Rubio for her frequent help and direction throughout the process of writing this essay.

role of receptivity in sex and move to a discussion of the receptivity involved in the grace of sex within the sacrament of marriage, the gift of a child, and sexual pleasure.

This undertaking first calls for a brief framework of self-gift as a sexual and marital norm.[2] On this account, sex by its nature expresses the full gift of one's self to another. This self-gift finds fitting expression only as free, total, faithful, and fruitful. Such a physical expression only properly belongs in the fully committed marital relationship. This committed marital love implies giving entirely of one's self, physically, spiritually, emotionally, to the other without reserve. Without a lifelong commitment, one holds something back from the other and limits the self-gift. The body thus serves as a physical expression of this complete self-giving. According to John Paul II, the body has a spousal or nuptial meaning; in other words, the body has the "power to express love" in an embodied fashion.[3] Without a permanent and public pledge of the couple's love, one can call this powerful physical expression of love a lie because it expresses total commitment where such a commitment does not exist.

On this account, this mutual and total self-gift then results in a real communion of persons.[4] Because each person gives himself or herself totally to the other within the context of full committed love, they form a dynamic communion. Each one gives and accepts the other without condition or restraint. The two form a new union that opens itself to the larger community and to the gift of children. This union symbolizes the union of Christ for his church, of God for his people. As Christ pours out himself for the church, so also God calls a husband to pour himself out for his wife, and a wife to pour herself out for her husband in mutual and reciprocal self-giving.[5]

Within this framework lies the basically undiscussed and yet important concept of receptivity. Receptivity stands as the flip side of the self-gift coin, so to speak.[6] Receptivity and self-gift are so closely linked that theologians often simply presume the idea of receptivity in

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[2] For a full account of a sexual ethic of self-gift, see John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. and ed. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006). Hereafter, *TOB*. David Cloutier and William Mattison, III, have a nice, brief recap of the positive contributions of this approach, "Bodies Poured Out in Christ: Marriage Beyond the Theology of the Body," in *Leaving and Coming Home*, 208-14.

[3] John Paul II, *TOB,* 15:1.

[4] Jennifer Bader explains how self-gift leads to communion. See Jennifer Bader, "Engaging the Struggle: John Paul II on Personhood and Sexuality," in *Human Sexuality in the Catholic Tradition*, eds. Kieran Scott and Harold Daly Horell (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 93-4.

[5] See Ephesians 5:21-33.

[6] Margaret Farley notes that giving and receiving are two sides of one and the same sexual reality. Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum Press, 2006), 222.

the theology of self-gift. They note that spouses both give and receive the gift of self, that a communion of persons requires both giving oneself and accepting the other, but then almost exclusively focus on the giving.[7] The present task will be to highlight what has been almost completely ignored elsewhere.

The rest of this essay will use the word "receptivity" to mean the ability and capacity to receive from another. This receiving includes the sense that one receives, accepts, or acknowledges the gift of the other and the sense that one receives something for one's self, that is, one gets something out of it. These two senses of receptivity might be understood as the more active and the more passive senses of receptivity, in which the more active aspect of receptivity involves actively receiving the gift of the other and paying attention to the experience of the other, while the more passive sense consists in receiving something as good for one's self.[8] The relationship between these two dimensions will continue to manifest itself throughout this essay, but presently, it seems sufficient to distinguish these closely linked elements.[9]

Moreover, receptivity stands as an ethical norm for both men and women. This assertion goes against the impression of some that men

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[7] For examples of this tendency to highlight self-giving without any significant time spent discussing receptivity, see Cloutier and Mattison, "Bodies Poured Out in Christ," especially 211-12, John Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), especially 43-48, William E. May, *Theology of the Body in Context: Genesis and Growth* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2010), 21-2, 46-7, and 76-7, John Grabowski, "Pope John Paul II on the Theology of the Body," in *Marriage: Readings in Moral Theology #15*, eds. Charles Curran and Julie Hanlon Rubio (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 72-77, and Richard Hogan and John LeVoir, "Pope John Paul II on Love, Sexuality, Marriage, and Family," also in *Marriage: Readings in Moral Theology #15*, 78-91. Mary Shivanandan notes that John Paul II does not specifically use the concept of "receptivity," although she notes very briefly it is present in his work in other concepts he uses. See Mary Shivanandan, *Crossing the Threshold of Love: A New Vision of Marriage* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 161. She, too, spends considerably more time focusing on self-giving (for example, see 35-9, 150-2, and 156-61). Michael Waldstein, in his introduction to John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, even cites St. Therese's axiom "To love is to give everything and to give oneself," as the "guiding star" of theology of the body. Waldstein, "Introduction," *TOB*, 124-8.

[8] While the general understanding of passivity does not necessarily entail the reception of something as *good* for one's self, this essay will use 'passivity' to mean the reception as good for one's self to avoid clumsiness. Neither dimension of receptivity is totally passive, but the latter is more passive than the former. Hence, receptivity has a "more active" and a "more passive" sense, where neither entails total passivity.

[9] Normally one receives a gift from the other as good for one's self. One can, however, acknowledge the gift of another even though the gift may not actually benefit the receiver. Consequently, one can receive a gift from someone else even if it is not needed or will simply be passed on.

are exclusively the givers and women the recipients.[10] While John Paul II does cite Mary as the perfection of womanhood and femininity, particularly in her receptivity to the Incarnation in her womb, he also argues that the church, who receives everything from Christ, is present in each of the baptized.[11] His argument that Christ assigns "the dignity of every woman as a task to every man," also suggests receptivity on the part of the man.[12] The man must receive the woman properly, that is, with dignity, in order to fulfill his task. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith builds on this understanding when it argues that feminine values are above all human values.[13] Thus, even if receptivity is assigned as a feminine value, as some would have it, receptivity nonetheless stands as a norm for all, male and female alike.[14] Mary, as recipient of God's Word, serves as the model not just for women but for every Christian.[15] While this universality does not preclude receptivity being experienced or exercised in different ways by men and women, receptivity nonetheless prevails as a norm for all.

RECEPTIVITY AS A CONDITION FOR COMMUNION

Having now defined receptivity and asserted it as a norm for all, we now move to show receptivity as fundamental to marriage. It forms a crucial facet of the communion of persons of marriage, that is, the

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[10] Here, one might point to Ephesians 5:22-5, where the husband stands in the place of Christ and the wife stands in the place of the church.

[11] John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem,* Eng. trans. (1988), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem_en.html, no. 5, and John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, Eng. trans. (1994) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families_en.html, no. 19. See also CDF, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (hereafter CDF), *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,* Eng. trans., (2004) www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html*, no.* 13.

[12] John Paul II*, TOB*, 100:6. Just a line later, John Paul II goes on to say that Christ also "assigns the dignity of every man to every woman," suggesting that this receptivity belongs to both men and women.

[13] CDF, *Collaboration of Men and Women*, no. 10.

[14] There may be some legitimate debate about whether receptivity is a "feminine" trait that is nonetheless a norm for all Christian spouses or whether it is neither masculine nor feminine. Mary Shivanandan for example argues that the woman seeks to be loved in order to love, whereas the man loves in order to be loved. See Shivanandan, *Threshold of Love*, 43. She proposes a possible solution to this difficulty where she proposes that woman experiences surrender (that is giving way, receiving) on both the psychological and ontological levels, but man only experiences such receptivity on the ontological level. See Shivanandan, *Threshold of Love*, 35-6. Her proposal seems deficient in that it leaves out the possibly for men to receive on the psychological level, even if such receiving differs from the woman's experience of receiving.

[15] CDF, *Collaboration of Men and Women*, no. 15, and *Mulieris dignitatem*, nos. 4 and 5.

"partnership of life and love."[16] While self-giving remains important, learning to receive stands as equally important in the give and take of the marital relationship. This reception includes welcoming the other's self-gift of love, commitment, vulnerability, shared communal life, mutual responsibility, and physical affection, among other things. The relationship lacks a crucial facet without this welcoming of the other. The denied, ignored, forgotten, or misunderstood self-gift simply cannot form interpersonal communion.[17]

Proper reception involves not just receiving the gift but acknowledging the nature of the gift.[18] In marriage, this reception involves acknowledging both the enduring self-gift of committed love and shared life, and the self-gift in any particular moment of care, energy, openness, or sacrifice. The self-gift manifested in the loving touch, supporting word, sexual overture, thoughtful gift, or shared responsibility in raising a child can lead to communion only when received and welcomed by the other as uniquely personal and in the context of the committed relationship.[19] A gift received without recognition of the other's personal offering and its relational context can leave the other hurt, alone, or shut out. This recognition of the other's gift and its acceptance as good for one's self does not involve selfishness but creates the very condition for communion with another. Indeed, sometimes the best way to respond to a gift requires simply accepting and enjoying the gift.[20] The emphasis on self-gift without receptivity runs the danger that the "I-you" relationship does not become a "we." Hence, a true communion of persons, a "we," requires receiving and affirming the other's gift of self in addition to giving one's self to the other.

In fact, the formation of one's very identity as spouse requires an understanding of receptivity.[21] Giving one's self to the other does not

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[16] See Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), no. 48, where marriage is defined as an "intimate partnership of life and love," and no. 50 where it is described as "a whole manner and communion of life."

[17] Along these lines, Michael Lawler says man has the responsibility "toward the woman-gift he receives in marriage as his wife" in *Marriage and Sacrament: A Theology of Christian Marriage* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 42-4.

[18] One receives an engagement ring very differently from other pieces of jewelry precisely because the nature of the gift is different.

[19] See Rubio, "The Practice of Sex," 232-4, and *Family Ethics*, 106-8, for her discussion of vulnerability that notes the importance of being open to the other.

[20] McCarthy argues this point at some length. See McCarthy, *Sex and Love*, 135-7.

[21] This paragraph builds from the theology of the body's understanding that man discovers his meaning and identity only by a sincere gift of self. The flip-side of that identity formation also consists in receiving from the other. For man's identity discovered in self-gift, see Cloutier and Mattison, "Bodies Poured Out," 212. Also see CDF, "Collaboration of Men and Women," no. 6, Theodore Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 631-2, *Mulieris dignitatem,* no. 7, and David S. Crawford, "Of Spouses, the Real World, and the 'Where' of Christian Marriage," *Communio* 33 (2006), 116.

reveal the full meaning of being husband or being wife. Rather, how a man's wife treats him, what she expects of him, what she desires from him, what she does for him, and all the ways in which he receives her hopes, desires, expectations, and affections form his understanding of what it means to be a husband. The rejection or neglect of this self-gift will limit a man's understanding of his own full identity, especially his identity as spouse. If a wife ignores the husband's self-gift of hopes, desires, time, care, and love, his identity as husband and father will be stunted. Certainly the same stands true for the wife as well. In other words, a spouse's very identity is shaped and formed in relationships with his spouse (and with God).[22] Spousal identity formation happens in give and take, in dynamic communion.[23]

In forming this communion of persons, both dimensions of receptivity come into play. Communion requires both the acknowledgment of the other's gift and the reception of that gift as good for one's self. In the first, more active aspect, reception of the other's self-gift involves accepting the offered gift and a certain attention to the needs and wants of the other. The analogy of receiving a guest is helpful; receiving a guest involves an active awareness of his or her needs, wants, and desires.[24] In this way, the receptivity needed for a true communion means accepting the other, with her giving of herself and with her needs. This sort of receptivity and openness to the other in turns enables one's reciprocal self-gift to be given in the best possible way.

This sort of openness to the desires and experiences of the other deepens communion between husband and wife; at the same time, it makes them vulnerable to being hurt by each other.[25] What is received may not be expected or desired. This reception of the other involves the concrete reception of the other in this moment, not as he imagines her.[26] For example, when a husband receives his wife in her sadness

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[22] See Marc Cardinal Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family,* tr. Philip Milligan and Linda Cicone, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 28, where he claims that the God is mirrored not by the individual, but by the community. Also see William Mattison, III, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2008), 358.

[23] This claim seems to hold true of identity formation in general, but such an assertion goes beyond the scope of this paper.

[24] See Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Agape in Feminist Ethics," in *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader,* ed. Lois K. Daly (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 154-5, for this comment in the context of sexual ethics. This statement does not presume that all desires of the other are good. Rather, proper receptivity means receiving proper desires and rejecting negative ones. In addition to the immediately following discussion, see 157 for more on ambiguity of desire.

[25] For an excellent discussion of vulnerability as an ethical norm, see Rubio, *Family Ethics,* 106-8, and "Practice of Sex," 233-5 and 240-2.

[26] Ouellet argues, "The newly married couple needs intimacy and space precisely to learn how to live together, to share everything, to dialogue often with one another in order to understand more deeply the other's mode of being, to accept the other as he is, and not only as he is dreamed of being." Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 114.

or pain, he is liable to experience that same feeling.[27] If he is expecting joy and instead receives anger, if her desires were different than his, or if she did not offer the support he had hoped, he will be hurt. Thus, openness to the other both serves as a basis for true communion and makes one vulnerable to being hurt.

At the same time, however, the second dimension of receptivity, namely, receiving for one's self must balance this vulnerability and openness to the other.[28] One should receive joy, laughter, emotional support, comfort in sorrow, and the companionship of the other. Of course, attentiveness to the other may entail sacrifice at times, but an authentic communion of persons necessarily involves both aspects in relative balance. Focusing too exclusively on either dimension leads to a distorted view of receptivity and of marriage in general. In other words, this balance of both dimensions of receptivity means that vulnerability and openness to the other has limits. The work of several feminist theologians stands out on this point. They are critical of an over-emphasis on self-gift and especially self-sacrifice because it can lead to devastating consequences for the woman.[29] Too often, women have become victims precisely because they focused on giving themselves to the other.

The focus on receptivity highlights the important of both partners receiving concrete good from a relationship. While a woman might be tempted to think she is not being receptive enough, this dimension of receptivity shifts the focus to the gift of the other. A morally good and healthy relationship does not consist simply in being receptive, welcoming, and aware of the other; it also involves gaining that which is good for one's self from the other. The balance between these two dimensions means that the question "What am I getting out of this relationship as it is now (not ideally or if one of us changed)?" arises as a fair and important question.[30] While not the only question to be asked, it nonetheless cannot be ignored. A good relationship certainly entails sacrifice and vulnerability on the part of each spouse, but it also entails receiving for one's self for each one. Sacrifice without return is neither morally good nor healthy.[31]

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[27] Along these lines, McCarthy notes that greater selflessness is required of the recipient than of the giver at times. See McCarthy, *Sex and Love,* 135. In other words, receptivity is tied to humility in a crucial way.

[28] This balance must be both in degree and quantity, or intensity and amount, of receiving from the other and receiving as good for one's self. This balance precludes receptivity as a justification or mask for any sort of abuse or one-sided relationship.

[29] For some examples, see Karen Lebacqz, "Love Your Enemy: Sex, Power, and Christian Ethics," in *Feminist Theological Ethics*, 252-57, Andolsen, "Agape," 149-55, and Farley, *Just Love*, 220-224.

[30] I would suggest that this is a fair and important question in every relationship. Many unhealthy relationships could benefit by each party honestly asking this question.

[31] The term 'healthy' seems to imply promoting the temporal well-being of the individual. Generally the terms "healthy" and "morally good" will overlap, but not in all

David McCarthy has laid the groundwork for this emphasis on receptivity with his work on reciprocity.[32] He highlights the importance of both giving and receiving in forming a community. He strongly challenges the notion that unilateral love stands as the highest form of love; instead, he argues for mutual and reciprocal love as the highest form of love.[33] He suggests unilateral love does not fulfill love's full potential. Similarly, one might say any marital or sexual ethic that focuses unilaterally on giving is similarly lacking. Marriage and sex has not yet achieved its full potential for forming a true communion of persons if it only involves giving.

This emphasis on both giving and receiving suggests a paradigm for married love different from that of Christ and his church found in Ephesians 5:21-33. While the love of Christ for his church remains at the heart of the sacrament of marriage, the model of the Trinity serves as a better paradigm for marriage.[34] Indeed, the event of the Trinity actualized sacramentally forms the heart of the Christian family; the Father and Son exchange their eternal love in a created manner through the power of the Holy Spirit.[35] In the Trinity, each person gives himself and his gift of total self-giving love to the other persons, but each also receives perfectly the love of the divine other. From the perfect giving *and* receiving of the Father and the Son proceeds the Holy Spirit, that is, love personified. Mutual and reciprocal love hence becomes the paradigm for love, rather than the unilateral-appearing love of Christ on the cross.[36] Michael Waldstein, following John Paul II, highlights this reciprocity in the Trinity: "All that is mine is yours,

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cases. For example, while one food may be healthier than another, presuming a generally healthy lifestyle, a certain food choice may well be morally neutral. Also, a martyr's choice to sacrifice his or her life for the faith certainly is not healthy in a certain sense, but does represent moral goodness.

[32] See McCarthy, *Sex and Love*, 127-51.

[33] McCarthy carefully reinterprets the parable of the Good Samaritan to show it argues for reciprocal, not unilateral love. See McCarthy, *Sex and Love*, 129-33.

[34] John Paul II uses the Trinity as a paradigm for marriage. See *Mulieris dignitatem*, no. 7. Cardinal Angelo Scola notes three fundamental aspects of nuptiality (Christ/Church from Ephesians 5, 2 natures of Christ, and the nuptial dimension of the Trinity) and goes on to argue that the ultimate root of nuptiality lies in the Trinity. See Angelo Scola, "The Nuptial Mystery at the Heart of the Church," *Communio* 25 (1998), 649-55. David McCarthy also discusses reciprocity and the model of the Trinity. See McCarthy, *Sex and Love*, 133-4. For sources that are critical of the use of Ephesians 5 as part of sexual ethic, see Mackin, *Marital Sacrament,* 638-40, and Francis Schussler Fiorenza, "Marriage," in *Systematic Theology,* Vol. II (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 330-2.

[35] Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 53-5. Ouellet provides groundbreaking in-depth reflections on the relationship of the family and the Trinity, specifically on the family as an image of the Trinity, the Trinitarian mission of the family, the Holy Spirit as seal of marriage, and the sacramentality of marriage. For the family as image of the Trinity, see especially pp. 20-37.

[36] The love of Christ on the Cross is unilateral in relationship to humanity, but his self-offering is also directed to the Father, who perfectly reciprocates this love.

and what is yours is mine."[37] Everything belongs to the other, but also to one's self, thus creating balance and reciprocity. This reciprocal love leads to the communion of persons of the Trinity, in which one finds perfect unity in difference. Further, the equality among persons in the Trinity also provides a more fitting model of marriage in which both the man and the woman come as equal partners. The communion of the Trinity hence should become the primary model for the communion of persons in marriage.

Moreover, like the reciprocal love of the Trinity, authentic married love reaches beyond itself.[38] Cardinal Angelo Scola provides the helpful concept of "asymmetrical reciprocity."[39] Asymmetrical reciprocity does not form a closed loop complete in itself; rather it opens beyond itself. In other words, this one relationship receives and makes space for other relationships and facets of life. The relationship gives life and bears fruit because it does not remain wrapped up in itself. This understanding of fruitfulness entails much more than physical fruitfulness.[40] It involves being receptive to other relationships, reaching out through works of mercy and love, and encouraging each partner in their own particular vocation and profession.

In contrast to a potentially destructive sense of total self-gift, the concept of asymmetrical reciprocity or spiritual fruitfulness makes space for the reality beyond the couple. As McCarthy points out, friends can cultivate important qualities in a person that a spouse cannot.[41] In this way, the relationship between a husband and wife does not exhaust the complementarity between man and woman but includes the complementarity between a woman and all of the various relationships with men in her life, and vice versa.[42] Proper receptivity of course means receiving the friendship of others in a way that builds

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[37] Waldstein, "Introduction," *TOB*, 33.

[38] One cannot press analogy too strongly, however, The Trinity freely chooses, out of no necessity whatsoever, to extend their love beyond the Trinity. On the other hand, a moral need exists or authentic human love to reach beyond the two persons hand, a moral need exists for authentic human love to reach beyond the two persons.

[39] Scola, "Nuptial Mystery," 643-6.

[40] The idea of spiritual fruitfulness finds wide support among contemporary theologians, even across the alleged "liberal-conservative" divide. See for example Farley, *Just Love*, 226-8, John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio,* Eng. trans., http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html, no. 41, Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 30-6 and 172, McCarty, *Sex and Love*, 117. It should be noted that these authors each explicate spiritual fruitfulness in his or her own way. This author's only significantly disagrees with Farley on her interpretation. She contrasts spiritual fruitfulness with physical fruitfulness. These two should not be seen in opposition, but as complementary. See my rejection of latent dualism on 161 and McCarthy's comments on their connectedness in *Sex and Love*, 117.

[41] McCarthy, *Sex and Love,* 122-3.

[42] Scola, "Nuptial Mystery," 645.

up the marriage, but this understanding of receptivity goes beyond the relationship of the two.

A Sacramental Understanding of Receptivity

The importance of receptivity as a norm for forming a communion of persons in marriage has thus far clearly emerged; the sacramental understanding of marriage, however, greatly deepens and even prioritizes the significance of receptivity. A sacrament, according to the Catholic Church, is "an efficacious sign of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us."[43] In other words, a sacrament serves as a symbol that contains the sacred reality of grace that it signifies.[44] As a real event of grace, it gives salvation and brings about a sacred reality.[45] In a sacrament, the participants really encounter the living and sacramentally present Jesus Christ.

To assert the sacramentality of marriage means maintaining that Christ has taken up marriage as part of his redemptive work and made it a grace-filled reality. Specifically Christ expresses his love for the church in and through this sacrament. For this reason, the Catechism understands marriage as a "sacrament of Christ and the Church."[46] It does not merely image the love of Christ and the church, but actually brings about the living and sacramental reality of that love.[47] Michael Lawler notes that marriage is a two-tiered reality: the first tier, so to speak, comprises that of the covenantal love between man and woman and the second tier involves the covenantal love between God and his people.[48]

These two tiers interconnect in such a way that God's love becomes present in and through the human love between spouses. God elevates and transforms that human love into the very love between Christ and his church; as *Gaudium et spes* wonderfully describes, "married love

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[43] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday Press, 1997), no. 1131.
[44] Crawford, "Christian Marriage," 110-12.
[45] Michael Lawler explains at some length what it means that marriage confers the grace it signifies. See Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament,* 25-33.
[46] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1617.
[47] Ouellet argues, "We furthermore propose that marriage is a sacrament not only based on the fact that it is received and celebrated, but above all as a state of life; we therefore presuppose that the couple receives the sacrament, not in a fleeting fashion, but permanently, based on the charism of consecration proper to marriage." Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 54. See also *Gaudium et spes,* no. 48, where marriage is "an image and a sharing the partnership of love between Christ and the Church."
[48] Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament,* 12-15. It seems that Lawler does not emphasize enough the connectedness of these two tiers. They are not simply extrinsically joined because of the sacramental nature of marriage, but rather the human merges into the divine, the two become one so to speak.

is caught up in divine love."[49] Human love has been taken up into the grace of redemption. The Eucharist serves as a parallel. In the Eucharist, God takes the bread and the wine's very substance and transforms it into something far greater, something divine.[50] Similarly in marriage, the love between man and woman is taken up and subsumed into Christ's love for the church. It does not, for this reason, lose its particularity. Rather, the couple's love sanctified in marriage particularizes and actualizes Christ's supreme and self-giving love for the church.[51] In this way, spouses interpret the love of God by their sacramental instantiation of it.[52] In other words, "married love is eminently human love," but that human love has divine love hidden within it.[53]

This divine love is the spousal, jealous love of Christ for the church, of the Trinity for humanity. As was noted earlier, marriage sacramentally actualizes the give and take of divine love within the Trinity. This love must be understood as Trinitarian love personified in the Holy Spirit. Indeed, as Cardinal Ouellet notes, "the primary gift of sacramental marriage is the seal of the Holy Spirit."[54] God gives this seal of the Spirit, the very presence of God, not only at the moment of the exchange of vows, but permanently, throughout the entirety of

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[49] *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48. These comments are also inspired by a wedding homily given in the summer of 2007 by the Most Rev. Edward Rice, Auxiliary Bishop of St. Louis, when he was pastor of St. John the Baptist Catholic Parish in Saint Louis, MO.

[50] The transformation effected by marriage continues throughout the course of the marriage. In this way, the transubstantiation of the Eucharist differs from marriage, because the substantial change takes place once and for all in the Eucharist. Nonetheless, the change that happens in the marriage ceremony is real and important. As *Gaudium et spes* points out "Spouses, therefore, are fortified, and, as it were, consecrated for the duties and dignity of their state by a special sacrament." *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48. Cardinal Ouellet explains, "The couple consecrated to Christ is therefore inserted in a new way in the life of the Son, precisely according to the modality of his spousal love for the Church." Ouellet, *Divine Likeness,* 114. This consecration has immediate impact. For example, one effect immediately conferred by this consecration (upon consummation) is the indissolubility of the marriage. Thus, while the grace of the sacrament of marriage must be lived and grown into in one sense, in another sense, the sacrament of marriage immediately transforms the love of the couple. That love immediately becomes both sign and instrument of Christ's love for the church. Such love will grow on the human level and thus better reflect Christ' love, but this growth does not take away from immediacy of the effect of the sacrament. In this sense, then, marriage confers both capacities and facilities.

[51] Mackin, *Marital Sacrament*, 633. It is important to note that here I speak on a level that is possibly deeper than experience. In sacraments, more happens than can be understood simply on the level of experience. This is certainly obviously in the case of the Eucharist; senses experience no difference between the unconsecrated host and the precious Body, but that does not prove or even assert that something deeper is not happening. In marriage, the couple does participate in and receive this love of Christ for the church, but they may not realize, understand, or feel it to be such.

[52] See *Gaudium et spes*, no. 50.

[53] *Gaudium et spes,* no. 49. See also Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 90.

[54] Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 95. Ouellet speaks extensively on the Spirit as seal of marriage, 79-101.

their marriage, in the whole communion of life and love.[55] Through the sacrament, God himself comes to encounter the spouses as He encountered his people of old and to "abid[e] with them all the days of their life."[56]

This description of the sacrament of marriage serves to show that in marriage, as in any sacrament, God takes the initiative and human receptivity becomes key.[57] This receptivity should always be paired with a giving back to God, but such a return gift is only possible because God has given first. Thus, receiving God's gift occupies the central focus. This human cooperation of receptivity takes as its model Mary's *fiat*, in which she received the very Word Incarnate.[58] She makes a return, but even the possibility of this return offering depends on her prior receptivity.

This primacy of reception does not take away from the importance of the self-gift, but it does emphasize the work of God. The couple's self-giving love is possible only because of God's grace. God gives to the wife her love of husband and to the husband his love of wife. Each spouse does not create or author his or her love for the other, but rather actually receives this love from the Triune Godhead. In other words, the self-giving love of wife for husband comes first as a gift to her from Christ to be given and shared to her husband. Even that love which is given as gift is first received. This dynamic actually intensifies the ethic of self-gift. The husband and wife are now not only called to give of themselves to the other with a human love, but they are also called to give of themselves with the very same love with which Christ loves them, that is, the love of Christ for the church on the Cross.

The reception of this divine gift, though sounding rather idealistic, remains in a fully human manner.[59] As a finite, concrete, and embodied participation in the divine mystery of Christ and his church, the couple will not experience the full reality of this mystery totally at any given time. Over time, both spouses will come to give and receive more fully of themselves and so participate more deeply in the divine mystery.[60] Every aspect of their marriage becomes revelatory of the

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[55] Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 167.

[56] Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 171. Also see *Gaudium et spes,* no. 48.

[57] Mackin emphasizes God's initiative in sacraments. See Mackin, *Marital Sacrament*, 7-9 and 669-70.

[58] Both Crawford and Scola highlight the importance of Mary's *fiat*. See Crawford, "Christian Marriage, 103 and 106-108, and Scola, "Nuptial Mystery," 657. Both authors rely on the work of Hans von Balthasar in their approach.

[59] See *Gaudium et spes,* no. 49.

[60] Both Scola and Lawler highlight the couple's continued growth in participating in the divine mysteries. See Scola, "Nuptial Mystery," 652 and Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament*, 24. Mackin prefers the language of "participating in" rather than "receiving." See Mackin, *Marital Sacrament*, 628-29. The language of 'participation' might more clearly avoid a misunderstanding that receiving entails total passivity. Further, the continued growth of the couple's love in the divine mystery does not mitigate or

divine presence, even in very ordinary ways. The shared meal, the gentle touch, the forgiving word, the encouraging embrace, the supporting shoulder, the washing of dishes, the passionate kiss, even the difficult raising of a child or the uncomfortable discussion about over-intrusive in-laws, all become graced encounters in which both husband and wife can experience the living God day after day. God's abiding presence might often remain hidden from the couple, but because the human love now intertwines with the divine, the grace of the sacrament "permeates their whole lives."[61] The sacrament still involves receiving another concrete, limited human being with all of his or her weaknesses and imperfections, but this acceptance of merges into the reception of the perfect Christ. They become two dimensions of one and the same reality, which, like other sacraments, both transcends space and time, and exists within it.

Moreover, because grace perfects nature and does not destroy it, one can expect that the receptivity to grace in marriage is rooted in a deeper and more fundamental receptivity, namely the receptivity of the human person toward God from the first moment of creation. The omnipotent God, who created *ex nihilo*, gives the entirety of creation as a gift. The human person receives everything from the Creator, including sex, sexuality, the ability to give one's self in and through relationship, and even the natural understanding of marriage.[62] Certainly, through grace, marriage achieves new meaning as a sacrament of God's spousal love that makes the family into a domestic church, but even on the natural level, the human being stands fundamentally in the place of receiver.[63] Further, the more one opens himself or herself to the gifts of God, the more one will be open to receive the ability to give one's self.

The wedding liturgy provides a fitting conclusion to this section on the primacy of receptivity in marriage. During the liturgy, the priest or deacon, as an agent of Christ and the church, gives the nuptial blessing to the couple.[64] In this way, each spouse receives much more than he

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minimize the importance of the real change effected by the marriage at the moment of the exchange of vows. They receive the mystery at that moment that they in time continue to grow into.

[61] *Gaudium et spes,* no. 49.

[62] John Paul II points out that only marriage is a sacrament of something that was part of the very economy of creation. See *Familiaris consortio,* no. 68. He even calls it the primordial sacrament for this reason. John Paul II, *TOB,* 96:1-7.

[63] "Hence the emergence of a new likeness, properly supernatural, which crowns the first creation by offering the family the status of domestic Church." Ouellet, *Divine Likeness,* 36.

[64] The Eastern Church considers this blessing necessary for the validity of the sacrament. See Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 220. Michael Lawler even wants to argue for the priest or deacon to be the "co-minister" of the sacrament of marriage along with the husband and wife, which fits with this line of argument. See Lawler, *Marriage and*

or she gives. He gives of himself in the vows, and he receives not only her vows, but also the very covenantal love of Christ. The context of Mass for the wedding ceremony heightens this emphasis on receptivity because at Mass the couple takes in the very Body of Christ. Sacramental marriage involves not just giving to and receiving from the other, but more deeply it involves receiving the gift of God himself.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF RECEPTIVITY

Earlier, this essay argued that receptivity expanded beyond the limits of the couple with the concepts of asymmetrical reciprocity and spiritual fruitfulness. The wedding liturgy now provides the opportunity to explore this understanding at greater length. Cardinal Ouellet points out that the Trinitarian blessing of the couple in the liturgy of matrimony "places the Christian family at the center of the institutions of the Kingdom of God."[65] God calls the family to proclaim the Word of God, whom it has received, to the world.[66] In addition, the ceremony requires witnesses, who stand in the place of the community. Their required presence indicates the couple's receptivity and openness to the support from and accountability to the community, and in contrast the community's openness to the couple.

Receptivity to the broader community forms an essential part of marriage. The family has an intrinsically social role; this social role certainly includes the procreation and rearing of children, but it does not stop there. Along these lines, John Paul II argues for the importance of hospitality in all of its forms, from "opening the door of one's home and still more of one's heart to the pleas of one's brothers and sisters."[67] Just as husband and wife receive each other, so together they receive the hungry, the stranger, the lonely, the hurting. God calls the couple not just to give to the poor, but to receive them as agents of Christ.[68] This reception of the poor and hurting avoids the "I-you" relationship of giving and instead creates the "we" of the Christian community.

In this way, the concept of receptivity can strengthen a personalist theology of self-gift, which, in McCarthy's words, tends to "lack social complexity."[69] He notes this view of marriage tends to first look

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Sacrament, 116-17. William Mattison is particularly interested in arguing for the public nature of marriage. See Mattison, *Moral Theology*, 351-62. Also see John Paul II, *TOB,* 103:1.

[65] See Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 117-18, 126, and 192.

[66] For an example of where John Paul II comments on the duty of the family to proclaim the Word of God, see *Familiaris consortio,* no. 47-51.

[67] *Familiaris consortio,* no. 44.

[68] According to David, McCarthy, "Receiving the gift is what it means to be poor and why it is vitally important in the Christian life to *receive* the poor as agents of Christ." McCarthy, *Sex and Love*, 127-37. Also see Matthew 25:31-46.

[69] McCarthy, *Sex and Love,* 110-13.

inward, but the family as domestic church should properly be understood to be intrinsically oriented outward as a sign of God's presence.[70] On this point, McCarthy nicely develops at length the idea of the open household.[71] An open household has porous boundaries and depends on wider social networks, such as family, friends, and neighborhood. This type of home stands in contrast to the isolated, independent, and consumer-driven closed household. Again, both dimensions of receptivity come to the fore. On one hand, the open household receives those that need help with warm hospitality, but at the same time, it receives help from others that benefit it. Both of these dimensions taken in tandem create networks of dependence. These networks of dependence require the mutual giving and receiving of family and community. Thus, the concept of receptivity flows into a social dimension of the family.

RECEPTIVITY IN SEX

Having discussed at length the role of receptivity in marriage, this essay will only now highlight the role of receptivity in sex because it has placed sex within its proper marital context.[72] Sex, as one act proper to marriage, reflects the basic dynamism of receptivity in marriage as a whole.[73] Earlier this essay argued that a true communion of persons required receptivity on the part of both spouses. The same principle applies to sex. Sex strengthens the bond between two people only when each opens himself to the other, both on the physical level and on a much deeper emotional and spiritual level.

The concreteness of receptivity most clearly emerges at this point. As several theologians have noted, the sexual ethic of self-gift has a tendency to become transcendent, theoretical, and even disconnected from reality.[74] The love in the flesh of spouses, however, does not consist of a pure, transcendent love where one gives one's self totally to the other; rather, it is embodied, and as such, it is "messy, clumsy, awkward, charming, casual, and yes, silly" at times.[75] Sexual intercourse does have transcendent meaning, but in concrete practice, when one spouse receives the other in and through sex, he or she receives

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[70] McCarthy, *Sex and Love,* 114.

[71] See McCarthy, *Sex and Love,* 86-108.

[72] While the framework of this essay simply assumes the place of sex is within marriage, it seems that the ethic of receptivity applies universally to sex as an ethical norm, although this author would argue extramarital sex lacks openness to commitment and to God.

[73] Marriage of course cannot be reduced to sex. John Paul II nicely notes that the language of the body extends beyond sex. See John Paul II*, TOB,* 106:2.

[74] See for example Luke Timothy Johnson, "A Disembodied 'Theology of the Body': John Paul II on Love, Sex, and Pleasure," in *Human Sexuality in the Catholic Tradition*, 113-21, Cloutier and Mattison, "Bodies Poured Out," 215-24, and Crawford, "Christian Marriage," 113-14.

[75] Johnson, "Disembodied 'Theology of the Body,'" 114.

the other in the most concrete and embodied fashion possible.[76] *Gaudium et spes* describes married love as "eminently human;" this description includes accepting the other with all of his messiness, clumsiness, weaknesses, and strengths.[77]

On the physical level, both dimensions of receptivity shine forth clearly. On one hand, this concrete receptivity directs itself to the other. It entails receiving the other's body, and receiving it in all aspects of its imperfection and unattractiveness, and still welcoming him or her into this sexual relationship.[78] It involves careful attention to and acknowledgement of the needs and desires of the other, even when responding to these needs requires self-control and sacrifice. It encompasses receiving the other's most intimate bodily parts and the other's nakedness and acknowledging the vulnerability, the concern, the fear of failure, the desire to be loved of the other. It means heeding what brings the other pleasure and noticing the other's mood and sensitivities on this day. Such receptiveness certainly can be difficult and requires self-control, but good sex requires it.[79]

On the other hand, receptivity for one's self on the physical level entails receiving for one's self, especially in the pleasure and delight of receiving the touches, advances, passion, and physical affections of the other. This openness to the other's advances, however, also means a recognition of when these advances are not experienced as good for the one receiving. Here communication becomes critical to express the goodness or lack thereof of another's advances. Good receptivity does not mean simply letting the other do as he pleases, but rejecting negative touches and delighting in pleasurable ones. In other words, receptivity, with both of its dimensions as acknowledging the other and receiving for one's self, serves a key standard for sex on a physical level. Moreover, on the physical level, beyond receiving the very flesh of the other, receptivity in sex also includes the reception by the woman of the male gamete that can lead to a child; this facet will require its own ensuing discussion (see "Child as Gift" below).

Moreover, on a deeper emotional and spiritual level, good sex means receiving the whole of the other, not just his or her body. Sexual intercourse implies not just giving one's self entirely to the other, but also accepting the other in all of his or her brokenness. This receptivity forms part of the beauty of marriage: He need not be perfect for her to

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[76] In marital sex, each spouses receives the perfect gift of grace, as will be discussed in section three of this essay, but this perfect gift does not destroy or eliminate the imperfect human gift through which the perfect gift of grace comes. In this way, we maintain the Thomistic axiom that grace perfects nature.

[77] *Gaudium et spes,* no. 49. See also Mackin, *Marital Sacrament*, 19-20.

[78] Along these lines, John Paul II points out that "flesh itself becomes the specific "substratum" of a lasting and indissoluble communion of persons." John Paul II*, TOB,* 101:4.

[79] See Rubio, "Practice of Sex," 233-5 and 240-3.

accept and receive his gift of self. To marry and have sex with someone says, "I want to pour myself out to you, and I accept and receive you just the way you are, in all of your humanness."

While such a sentiment might not be the explicit intent of sexual intercourse (in fact, it seems like this will be the intent only rarely), sex still has this meaning within the relational context of marriage. What has already been explicitly given in the exchange of vows is now implicitly renewed and made particular in this moment. She welcomes him into communion at this moment, this specific day, at this point in their relationship, in his mood and state in life, with his flaws and sins, with what he has achieved or not achieved, and vice versa. As a result then, this or that particular bit of sex might express acceptance of the other's joy, excitement, sorrow, anxiety, apology or even weakness as a specific manifestation of total self-gift and reception.[80] She also remains open to the support and companionship of the other that benefits her. Thus, receptivity, in both of its dimensions, operates both in an immediate sense and in a long-term sense. Sex outside of this openness lacks moral goodness.

The experience of the other as desired forms another element of the concreteness of receptivity. True sexual self-giving begins with and roots itself in the experience of desire, even physical desire, for the other. One desires to take in and receive the other, and so enters into a relationship that leads to the communion of persons. Here, the moral ambiguity of desire in the Christian tradition cannot be ignored. In a fallen world, desire has a tendency to become perverted, sinful desire. Such perversion, however, does not totally negate the fundamental goodness of desire as received from God.[81]

A spouse receives this basic and fundamentally good experience of desire from the other in the sense that one does not generate desire on his own. Along these lines, in a pastoral letter, the Irish bishops claim

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[80] Both Rubio and McCarthy note the multiplicity of meanings a particular act of sex may have. See Rubio, "Practice of Sex," 238, and McCarthy, *Sex and Love,* 46-7. John Paul II also notes that the couple become authors of the meanings of the language of the body. See John Paul II*, TOB,* 106:2-3.

[81] For example of the distinction between natural desire and concupiscence in the tradition, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae I-II,* tr. Blackfriars (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1964), q. 82, a. 3, ad. 1. John Paul II also notes that concupiscence does not destroy our ability to understand the language of the body. See John Paul II*, TOB,* 107:3. He later comments briefly on the goodness of desire in Song of Songs. See John Paul II*, TOB,* 111:5 and 112:5. Rubio nicely distinguishes between the desire shared in the bodily communion over a lifetime between married couples and desire for a hook-up. She claims these types of desire are radically different. See Rubio, "Practice of Sex," 244. The Irish bishops also recognize the basic nature of desire when they affirm that attraction is the beginning of marital love. See Tomas Cardinal O'Fiaich, Kevin McNamara, Joseph Cunnane, and Thomas Morris, *Love is for Life: A Pastoral Letter issued on behalf of the Irish Hierarchy* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1985).

that the meaning of sex expresses not only a singular love for the other, but also a need for the other and a need for the other to love in return.[82] The other stands not simply as the object of one's self gift, but also as the object of desire and even of one's need, as the one to be taken in and received.[83] In other words, sex expresses physically not only the total gift of one to another, but also the desire and want of the other. The couple says to each other with their bodies, "I recognise you. I want you. I need you. I appreciate you."[84] This desire for the other, to receive from the other, becomes disordered if it does not lead to true communion formed through self-gift, but such communion begins with the received experience of desire. In fact, it seems that the desire to give and the desire to receive, when both are in balance, build off of each other.[85]

Moreover, the concept of desire again emphasizes the discernment necessary for proper receptivity. Proper receiving means discerning which desires are to be received and which are to be shunned. Even a wife's desire for her husband has to be received in an appropriate way, with respect to her husband's desire, and at an appropriate time. The desire to objectify the other or desire unable to lead to deeper communion will be disregarded as lacking moral goodness.[86] Again, receptivity does not entail total passivity. For example, it involves the ability to reject that which harms the relationship.[87]

Further, one receives desire from the other not only inasmuch as the other stimulates one's desires, but also inasmuch as one knows the other desires him or her. This sort of receptivity, to know that another is sexually attracted to one's self, makes each spouse feel sexual. The expression of the spousal desire to experience pleasure and be pleasure for one's own partner, to touch or be touched, to rest in the intimate embrace of the other, bring to the fore the sexuality of the other and confirm him in his sexuality. When a woman knows her husband desires her sexually, she more easily understands herself as worthy of being desired. As a partner takes pleasure in one's body, one delights in and discovers more fully his own sexuality.[88] In a sense, it might be

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[82] *Love is for Life*, no. 8. See also Mattison, *Moral Theology*, 345, for his citation and explanation of the same.

[83] The other stands as the object of one's desire, but not in such a way as to objectify him or her.

[84] Dominian, *Let's Make Love*, 66.

[85] I would suggest this point might present an avenue for bringing together *agape* and *eros*. Mary Shivanandon makes some comments on this topic, following the lead of John Paul II. See Shivanandan, *Threshold of Love,* 136-8.

[86] McCarthy notes the unhealthy societal understanding of desire as restlessness. See McCarthy, *Sex and Love*, 34-42.

[87] Again, this point proves helpful in the case of an abused wife. Proper receptivity will involve discerning that what is being received is not good for one's self.

[88] See Jack Dominian, *Let's Make Love: The Meaning of Sexual Intercourse* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd Publishers, 2001), 68, for this point.

said that spouses teach each other how to be sexual in their receptivity to the other. The pleasure of the other communicates his own goodness and can help him to understand himself as beloved by God.[89] In these two ways, desire highlights the significance of receptivity.

SEX AND GRACE

Further, at least three additional elements of receptivity in sex seem to merit discussion: the possibility of new life, pleasure, and sacramental grace. Sacramental grace links closely to the earlier discussion of the sacramentality of marriage because marriage intimately connects to sexual intercourse. Sex belongs within marriage. According to the church, sex serves as the primary symbol of marriage, its consummation and perfecting act.[90] Hence, intercourse becomes a particular locus of receptivity of grace in marriage, a reflection of marriage's basic dynamism, but of course not the only locus of grace. In sex, as in marriage more generally, God calls both spouses to give of themselves, but God also gives them grace to receive.

This grace received in sex particularizes and embodies the grace of marriage, namely, the love of Christ for his church and the strengthening of the human love of the couple. One receives the Holy Spirit in and through the body of the other. The embodied fashion of this love implies not just an agapic love but also an erotic and ecstatic love purified of lust by the Holy Spirit.[91] Further, because the grace of marriage permeates the whole of life and all of its different situations, the grace received in sex will take on various specific instantiations depending on the circumstances of this or that particular act of sex. For example, if this particular sexual encounter carries the meaning of forgiveness for the couple, God's grace will build on that forgiveness. Moreover, God's grace is not limited to the awareness of the couple. For example, in sex open to life, and particularly in sex that results in conception, the grace needed for the various responsibilities of parenthood is bestowed.

God transforms the human offering (physical, emotional, spiritual) of each spouse to the other given in sex into his own supernatural love.

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[89] See Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 97-8. She says, "I have argued that body pleasure is a good in that it communicates to us our own goodness. That sense of self-goodness is essential if we are to understand ourselves as beloved by God, and thus able to communicate God's love to others." The importance of pleasure in receptivity will be treated more fully later.

[90] For comments about sex as the primary symbol of marriage, see *Gaudium et spes*, no. 49, John Paul II, *TOB,* 103:1-2, and Christine Gudorf, "Graceful Pleasures: Why Sex is Good for Your Marriage," in *Human Sexuality in the Catholic Tradition*, 126-8.

[91] See John Paul II, *TOB,* 112:1-5, for some comments by John Paul II on *eros*.

Again, the Eucharist serves as a helpful parallel.[92] In the Eucharist, bread and wine are offered and the Body and Blood of Christ are received. In marital sex, each spouse offers to God and the other the self-gift of embodied love, and they receive that human gift transformed into the divine and unfailing love of Christ for his bride, the church. Thus, one can fittingly describe sex as the divine liturgy of marriage in which each spouse offers himself or herself to their partner and to God, and in turn they each receive the gift of God's own life.[93] In the Eucharist, one receives the Body of Christ in the form of bread, whereas in marriage, one receives the Body of Christ in and through receiving the body of his or her spouse. Indeed, the body of each spouse offered in sex sacramentally becomes Christ's own Body poured out on the Cross. Jack Dominian describes this beautifully when he says, "The act of intercourse is like the Eucharist feast in which we take in each other's bodies."[94] While human and imperfect gifts are offered, the perfect and eternal gift of Christ himself is received.

Here, the danger exists to become too idealistic regarding sex within marriage. The sacrament of marriage intensifies the transcendent meaning of sex, but imperfect people embody sexual intercourse, even in marriage. God does pour out his grace through sex and each sexual act does reveal God's covenantal love, but human experience remains limited. The capacity of human experience simply pales in comparison to the infinite depth of the mystery of God's love. As a result, each particular act of sex only reveals certain aspects of this mystery.[95] This touch, this kiss, this particular pleasure can each reveal some aspect of the mystery of God's spousal love for humanity to the couple receptive to it. Just as the human self-offering in each sexual act will be more or less, better or worse, so too the human reception of God's grace will be more or less, better or worse, in each particular act.

CHILD AS GIFT

The giving and receiving in sex also includes the giving and receiving of the male gamete. In this physical exchange, the female alone receives, so while receptivity stands as an ethical norm for both male and female, at least in this regard, some differentiation between

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[92] As Ouellet nicely describes, "The nuptial mystery of Christ is Eucharistic." See Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 155-7.

[93] Dominian, *Let's Make Love*, 78-80.

[94] Dominian, *Let's Make Love*, 80. See also John Paul II*, TOB,* 92:8.

[95] At the same time, each act of sex does reveal at least some aspect of this nuptial mystery, even if not the entirety of it. For this reason, every act of sexual intercourse in marriage has importance.

the genders arises.[96] While just one aspect of the giving and receiving in marriage and sex, this carnal offering properly belongs with all the other aspects of receptivity. A dualism where one separates the physical reality, or one aspect of the physical reality, from other parts of the sexual act must be avoided. Such a dualism attempts to separate human reality from its embodied state. Just as openness emerges as a norm for man and woman in many other ways, so too openness to the most concrete and physical giving and receiving in sex also arises as a norm. Further, within the context of sacrament, in which sexual intercourse embodies and sacramentally makes real God's spousal love for his people, any attempt to limit part of the physical reality contradicts the sacramental meaning of marital sex.

Along with this bodily exchange also comes the possibility of new life. While the man stands as the giver and the woman as receiver on one level, both the woman and the man, in a real way, give and receive this possibility of new life. Further, not only do the couple exchange this possibility of children with each other in a sense, even more so, they receive this gift from God. God is immediately involved in the creation of every new human life, so while man and wife have an active role in the creation of new life, they also work in the role of recipients.[97] Indeed, according to *Gaudium et spes*, children constitute the "supreme gift" of marriage.[98]

In this way, an emphasis on receptivity renews the emphasis on a child as gift. When one understands a child fundamentally as a gift, no one can claim that he or she is entitled to or deserves a child. Children and the ability to procreate are not a product to be bought and sold, the byproduct of chance, nor the result of biological engineering. God bestows new life as a gift to those who remain open to it as he sees fit.[99] Even a new life not perfect in every way, or exactly as the parents had hoped, is a gift to be received with joy. Put beautifully, "the Church firmly believes that human life, even if weak and suffering, is always a splendid gift of God's goodness," and to be received with open arms.[100]

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[96] Here, one must be careful not to interpret gender differentiation to imply outdated gender roles that lack equality. See McCarthy, *Sex and Love*, 191.

[97] See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 366, for the assertion that God immediately creates every human soul.

[98] *Gaudium et spes,* nos. 48 and 50. Along these lines, Cardinal Ouellet argues on this basis that artificial contraception is a closure to the divine Partner. It shows a shutting out to the gift that God may want to give. See Ouellet, *Divine Likeness,* 64.

[99] See Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 121, for comments along these lines.

[100] *Familiaris consortio,* no. 30.

PLEASURE AS A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING RECEPTIVITY

Finally, the God-given gift of sexual pleasure forms another aspect of the receptivity in sex that simply cannot be ignored.[101] Any account of giving and/or receiving in sex that does not mention pleasure simply lacks completeness.[102] In order to avoid this omission, first we affirm that Christianity understands pleasure, even physical pleasure, as a good, indeed even a gift to be received from God.[103] While not to be pursued at all costs, pleasure nonetheless comprises a gift to be received with joy. Certainly, pleasure cannot be the only or seemingly even the primary standard of ethics for the Christian, but this point does not negate its goodness. God created pleasure for humankind's sake, and it has a role in the life of a Christian.

The goodness of pleasure holds true in the area of sex. In this area, several theologians have pointed out that the framework of self-gift

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[101] This section is particularly indebted to the work of Christine Gudorf and Gareth Moore. See Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure,* especially 81-159 and "Graceful Pleasures," 123-36. See Gareth Moore, *The Body in Context: Sex and Catholicism* (New York: Continuum Press, 2001), especially 43-91. John Paul II also notes that the language of the body includes both the dimension of "mystery" but also the "reciprocal fascination and pleasure." John Paul II, *TOB,* 117b:3.

[102] Rubio notes that if we lose sight of the reality of pleasure, "we will spiritualize sex out of recognition." Rubio, "Practice of Sex," 244-5.

[103] Here, unfortunately, there are historically been mixed views on this topic, both as a general impression and amongst theologians. Shaji George Kochuthara argues that for the Fathers, "the pleasure of sex, the greatest attraction for humans to engage in sexual activity, was also the reason to doubt the goodness of sexuality." Shaji George Kochuthara, *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Moral Tradition* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2007), 8. He also notes "the general impression that the Church is against sexuality and sexual pleasure." (9) For other comments on the suspicion of sexual pleasure throughout the tradition, see Rubio, "Practice of Sex," 241, Moore, *Body in Context,* 43-50, and Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure,* 81-82, among many others. Even Ronald Lawyer, Joseph Boyle, and William May acknowledge, using what seems to be the most generous language possible, that "there was nonetheless in these Fathers anxiety about sex." See Ronald Lawler, Joseph Boyle, and William May, *Catholic Sexual Ethics: A Summary, Explanation, and Defense,* 3rd ed. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2011), 80. They later argue that a development in the tradition is "the explicit recognition that spouses may legitimately seek pleasure in the marital act," thus implying such a recognition was not present in the Fathers. (100) For one example in the tradition of a theologian suspicious of sexual pleasure, see Clement of Alexandria, who argues that "a man who has taken a wife in order to have children should also practice continence, not even seeking pleasure from his own wife." See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata,* 3.7 in *Patrologia Cursus Completa: Series Graeca,* ed. JP Migne (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857), 8.1162, as translated in Lawler, May, and Boyle, *Catholic Sexual Ethics,* 81. Kochuthara explores at length the position of various church fathers on the topic of sexual pleasure. See Kochuthara, *Sexual Pleasure,* 123-266, It is a great good that in our own time, pleasure is not viewed so suspiciously, but rather understood to have a place in the Christian worldview, even though clearly the pursuit of pleasure must be tempered by other values.

recognizes sex as good, but does not fully appreciate sex as pleasurable.[104] Luke Timothy Johnson notes, "Amid all the talk of self-donation and mutuality, we should also remember, 'plus it feels good'."[105] This claim does not mean that every act of sex, even every act of consensual sex is physically pleasurable for both people, but simply that sex has the God-given potential to be extremely pleasurable.[106] Further, this accent on pleasure does not reduce sex to simply pleasure; certainly, sex also communicates important meaning and expresses the total gift of one person to another. But pleasure forms a natural part of sex that cannot be overlooked, even in a framework of self-gift. Julie Rubio argues strongly for the interconnection of pleasure and self-gift. She wonders if they are not really two separate realities or dimensions of sex at all, but in and through pleasure self-gift occurs.[107] Building from her account with the understanding of receptivity, we could say that pleasure indicates both self-giving and receptivity to the other.

At the very least, the God-given pleasure of sex helps emphasize receptivity because the potential for pleasure in sex comes from the other. The occasional elusiveness of sexual pleasure highlights its status as received. No matter how hard the husband attempts to give pleasure and vice versa, sex cannot be said to be pleasurable unless both spouses actually experienced pleasure. Some may object that sexual pleasure can be attained on one's own, and others may object that an emphasis on pleasure sounds too hedonistic. The understanding of sex as an interpersonal pleasure replies to both of these objections. Interpersonal pleasure does not use another for self-pleasure, but recognizes him or her as a person worthy of being enjoyed. In sex, this interpersonal pleasure can and should include physical pleasure, but this inclusion does not objectify the other as long as it also remains focused on mutual pleasure.[108] This sort of inclusive personal pleasure

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[104] See Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 89-101, Moore, *Body in Context*, 43-63, and Johnson "Disembodied 'Theology of the Body,'" 116-18.

[105] Johnson "Disembodied 'Theology of the Body," 117.

[106] Even Vatican II notes that sex, when in its proper context and performed in a truly human manner, "fosters self-giving," but also "enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude." *Gaudium et spes,* no. 49. The Catechism cites this line and then immediately goes on to note that "Sexuality is a source of joy and pleasure." See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2362.

[107] Rubio, "Practice of Sex," 230-43, esp. 230. She later grants at least some distinction between the two when she says that "even if the most significant aspect of sexual self-giving is personal, it does not follow that pleasure is unimportant." 239).

[108] See Moore, *Body in Context*, 50-62, for some distinction between these types of pleasure. This portion of Moore's book has a particularly significant impact on this paragraph. It seems that these types of pleasure are interconnected and build from each other.

recognizes the other, including his body, as good, as a gift to be received. Such pleasure enjoys the other precisely as a person.[109] To seek only one's own physical pleasure cannot be regarded as an interpersonal pleasure. True interpersonal pleasure acknowledges the other person as a unique gift of God.

Further, pleasure highlights the importance of receptivity in its close connection with intimacy and mutuality. Mutual pleasure both results from and causes an intimate bond of communion between spouses.[110] Such a bond requires real mutuality in giving and receiving, and great respect and attention to one's partner.[111] In other words, mutual pleasure will only result from both a husband and a wife being willing to give and receive, to take initiative and to follow the lead of the other, to explore and to be explored, to strive to give pleasure to the other and to let the other give pleasure.[112] Giving and receiving do not stand in opposition, but in fundamental harmony with one another; as the woman's pleasure increases so does the man's, and vice versa.[113] If one partner remains unwilling to receive the advances of the other, this refusal stunts pleasure, intimacy, and communion. Thus, sexual pleasure strongly emphasizes the aspect of receptivity in good sex.

At this point, the question about the morality of pleasure as a motive for sexual intercourse arises. While a full discussion requires more space than this essay allows, the norm of receptivity can provide some initial direction. This norm does not exclude sexual pleasure as a motive for sex, as long it remains receptive in the ways that have been laid out.[114] Briefly summarized, the pleasure sought cannot be one's

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[109] John Paul II clearly argues against the objectification of either spouse. See *Mulieris dignitatem*, no. 10. It should also be noted that not objectifying the other can be difficult in practice.

[110] Gudorf suggests that intimacy and bonding in sex are normally dependent upon mutual pleasure. See Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 106. See also Rubio, Family *Ethics,* 105-6, for similar comments.

[111] Gudorf proposes, "Accepting mutual sexual pleasure as the primary purpose of sexual activity requires respect and care for the partner and responsibility for avoiding pain and maximizing pleasure for all affected by that activity." Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 139. While I do not accept Gudorf's proposal for the primacy of pleasure, at least as she envisions it, she does clearly highlight the importance of attention to the other in pleasure.

[112] See Gudorf, "Graceful Pleasures," 131, and *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 146-8. On this point, Gudorf uses gay and lesbian couples as "models" of this mutuality and equality of giving and receiving. I disagree with her use of these models and would suggest that there is something unique to man and unique to the woman in each's giving and receiving to the other, but this topic goes beyond this essay's focus. See also Moore, *Body in Context,* 50-2, for more comments on this topic.

[113] Gudorf explains this dynamic well. See Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 94-6.

[114] Pius XII very nicely expresses this sentiment, when he claims that God has united spouses in marriage and "has also decreed that in this function the parties should experience pleasure and happiness of body and spirit. Husband and wife, therefore, by

own alone as that would objectify the other; it must be the mutual pleasure of the couple. Further, there must be an openness to the deeper realities of sex, including the strengthening of the communion of persons, the giving and receiving of one's most vulnerable self-gift, the possibility of new life, and the exchange of grace.[115] Sex aimed at sexual pleasure also must include the earlier noted norms regarding concrete receptivity to the wants and desires of the other and receptiveness to the embodied other as is and to the significance of sex at this particular moment. For example, if one spouse has sex trying to convey a particular meaning, while the other only seeks sexual pleasure alone, that particular bit of sex lacks full moral goodness. So, pleasure would seem *prima facie* to be a valid motive for sexual intercourse as long it remains open and receptive to the other as concrete and embodied person, to life, to total self-gift, and to grace.

While the openness to all of these aspects may seem unrealistic, all of these dimensions of receptivity need not be explicit in every act of sex. The initial desire of the couple to give themselves to each other and to be open to life and grace can carry over implicitly into this or that particular bit of sex, as long as neither the couple's intent nor action explicitly rejects this receptivity.[116] For example, sexual intercourse just because it feels good while the spouses are angry with each other without any attempt to reconcile lacks moral goodness because it lacks a real receptivity to an authentic communion of persons. This standard *de facto* rules out the use of sex to manipulate or to use the other for one's own self-gain even within marriage.[117]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the key role of receptivity in both marriage and sex has been highlighted in this essay. Bringing receptivity to the forefront has reaped important dividends. It has emphasized not only the sacramental nature of marriage, but also the sacramental nature of marital sex. The former is too often overlooked; the latter is barely discussed at all. It has provided a framework to prevent a harmful sense of self-gift and provided balance to the idea of sacrifice within marriage. It has highlighted the importance of awareness and attentiveness to the other without losing a sense a self. It has carried over into a discussion

seeking and enjoying this pleasure do no wrong whatever. They accept what the Creator has destined for them." *Allocution to Midwives*. October 29, 1951.

[115] The Catechism notes that sexual pleasure is morally disordered when it is sought apart from the unitive and procreative aspects of sexual intercourse. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2351.

[116] Ouellet discusses the initial yes of the couple, although in the context of an openness to children. See Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 121.

[117] John Paul II argues strongly against objectifying the other. For one example, see John Paul II, *Letter to Families,* nos. 12 and 14.

of the social role of the family. It has renewed an emphasis on offspring as gift from God without making openness to life the only end or ethical norm of sexual intercourse. It has led into a discussion of sexual pleasure, and it has done all these things while building from a theology of self-gift, drawing from a variety of sources that range across the liberal-conservative spectrum, and remaining real and concrete about sex and marriage. In other words, as a result of this endeavor, we can assert that the good Christian, understanding the importance of self-gift, the social implications of marriage, and the importance of attention to the other, can nonetheless enjoy sex and be open to God's grace in the midst of the pleasure he experiences with his wife!

The introduction noted that our discussion would largely avoid discussion of ethical norms. The discussion of contraception unavoidably crept into the discussions about receptivity and openness. Other discussions of ethical norms, such as abortion, premarital cohabitation, and homosexual activity, have remained shelved for the time being, although it does seem the concept of receptivity may be able bear fruit in those discussions as well. M