

“Consumer culture poses one of the most comprehensive and subtle challenges to Christian faith and discipleship. While many books have offered general accounts of this tension, *The Sacraments and Consumer Culture* focuses on each sacrament: the challenges that each face in a consumer culture and the resources they provide for the Church to live its mission more fully. Along the way, Brunk considers both the history and contemporary practice of the sacraments. This helpful book speaks to both academic and pastoral audiences.”

—Vincent Miller, author of *Consuming Religion:
Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*

“This book reads as a compelling plea for deep connections. In an era where advertisements and commercialization are no longer dominating the world of trade only, but also the areas of politics, education, and health, and where the commodification of the life-world slowly but surely reaches a certain level of absurdity, Brunk proposes to take a step back and thoroughly rethink the relation between Christian faith and culture. He lucidly observes that there have been perilous evolutions in society which have alienated us from the cosmos, from God, the Church and, most saliently, and tragically, from each other. The response to what he describes as consumerism and its concomitant individualism is, however, not massive rejection but subtle discernment. Brunk brilliantly shows how the built-in sacramental principle of Christianity offers an enormous but virtually unexplored potential to uphold a truthful vision where emptiness rules, to undermine rhetoric without love or against life, and to promote solidarity in misery. Put differently, the gist of Brunk’s book is as sagacious as it is thought-provoking in today’s world: sacraments establish much deeper connections than any consumerist ideology is capable of.”

—Joris Geldhof
Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

“Christian sacraments only exist in the practice of real parishioners, living the faith in social environments affecting and even dominating their response to the Gospel. Timothy Brunk invites us to reflect with him on two decades of theological criticism of the pervasive consumerism of our time to assess the problems it poses to our participation in the graces each sacrament affords. Brunk’s expert enlistment of historical and contemporary theological sources on the sacraments provides readers greater knowledge and insight for more effective pastoral-liturgical practice.”

—Bruce T. Morrill, SJ
Vanderbilt University

“Timothy Brunk’s scholarly yet accessible book shows how Roman Catholic sacraments today are, like most of us, tangled up in consumer culture—but how sacraments also retain the power to resist and overcome consumerism. Brunk’s confidence in Catholic ritual life as a humanizing anchor in a dehumanizing culture should provoke lively conversation, especially among lay and ordained ministers, about the staying power of sacraments and the cultural relevance of Catholic ritual.”

—Tom Beaudoin
Fordham University

“Living as we do in a time of heightened confusion at the intersection of Christ and culture, Timothy Brunk’s book is an urgent, insightful, and compelling reexamination of the church’s sacramental practice forming Christian identity, even as that practice must contend with a profoundly influential and not-so-innocent consumerist culture.”

—David B. Batchelder
Pastor, West Plano Presbyterian Church, and Consultant
for Commissioned Ruling Elders, Grace Presbytery,
Presbyterian Church (USA)

“This expertly researched text provides an insightful and practical guide to help Christian churches navigate the complex threats posed by consumer culture. Treating each sacrament in turn, Brunk enumerates the ways that consumerism has deformed many worship practices. While Brunk’s lucidly describes the way our own consumerist desires have damaged the way we celebrate the sacraments, he also equips the reader with the historical and textual resources to confront these problems. By providing clear and practical suggestions, this book offers the church a way forward in its ongoing struggle against rampant consumerism. This book is an essential read for all ministers and for anyone who wants to deepen their love for the sacraments.”

—David Farina Turnbloom
University of Portland

The Sacraments and Consumer Culture

Timothy Brunk



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To

Laura and David Ash
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They helped me think about liturgy.

Vincent Miller
Participants in the 2014 Lilly Seminar on Consumer Culture

They helped me think about consumerism.

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INTRODUCTION

Pointing out the many flaws and weaknesses he found in the teachings of Plato, the Stoics, the Epicureans, and other Greek philosophers, the third-century Christian apologist Tertullian asked, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the [Greek] Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians?”¹ Readers of the present work may wonder, “What indeed has consumerism to do with the sacraments?” In the following pages, I will argue that consumer culture has a great deal to do with the understanding and practice of the sacraments of the Catholic Church in the North Atlantic context in which I live. The heart of the argument is two-fold. First, consumer culture lives and breathes a form of individualism that is hostile to a shared world of meaning. Second—and related to the first point—consumer culture involves relating to a world of objects shorn of larger contexts. Each of these claims deserves expansion before proceeding.

Concerning a shared world of meaning, Bernard Lonergan writes:

For what is community? It is not just a number of men within a geographical frontier. It is an achievement of common meaning, and there are kinds and degrees of achievement. Common meaning is potential when there is a common field of experience, and to withdraw from that common field is to get out of touch. Common meaning is formal when there is common understanding,

1. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics* 7, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 3: *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcion; III. Ethical* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 246.

and one withdraws from that common understanding by misunderstanding, by incomprehension, by mutual incomprehension. Common meaning is actual inasmuch as there are common judgments, areas in which all affirm and deny in the same manner; and one withdraws from that common agreement when one disagrees, when one considers true what others hold false and false what they think true. Common meaning is realized by will, especially by permanent dedication, in the love that makes families, in the loyalty that makes states, in the faith that makes religions. Community coheres or divides, begins or ends, just where the common field of experience, common understanding, common judgment, common commitments begin and end.²

Rather than forming or engaging a common meaning realized by will, love, loyalty, and faith, consumer culture fosters what James K. A. Smith identifies as a “strange configuration of sociality,”³ which encourages people to assess themselves against standards of youth, beauty, and taste relentlessly promoted in advertising. More to the point, this configuration of sociality also forms people to assess *others* by these standards.

If we could somehow analyze ourselves as a friend of a friend approaches “our circle” for the first time, we might catch ourselves looking him up and down, noting clothes that seem to be from Old Navy instead of Abercrombie & Fitch (and from last season at that!); he’s got a big clunky cell phone that’s about two years old; his tastes in music seem a bit dull and dated; and he’s from a part of town we wouldn’t walk through at night. Or while we’re sitting at the Starbucks in the food court, we might find that our eyes are constantly darting to watch the other girls and women passing by. In just the blink of an eye, we find that we’ve sized them up from top to bottom.⁴

2. Bernard Lonergan, “*Existenz and Aggiornamento*,” in Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 4: *Collection*, ed. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1993), 226.

3. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 96, 98. I return to this “strange configuration” again on pp. 67, 76, 83, and 200.

4. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 98.

What is “in common” here is a sense of individual competition, alienation from each other, and even alienation from ourselves as beings created in the divine image and called to communion with the triune God.

Sacramental celebrations, on the other hand, are precisely manifestations of communion, as Augustine points out: “People could not be gathered together under the name of any religion, whether true or false, if they were not bound together by some sharing of visible signs or sacraments. The power of these sacraments is great beyond description.”⁵ Indeed, the “power” of sacraments in the Christian tradition is rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ: the paschal mystery.⁶ The communal element of the paschal mystery is stressed in the *Catechism*: “By his word, through signs that manifest the reign of God, and by sending out his disciples, Jesus calls all people to come together around him. But above all in the great Paschal mystery—his death on the cross and his Resurrection—he would accomplish the coming of his kingdom. ‘And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.’ [John 12:32] Into this union with Christ all [people] are called.”⁷

I have stated that consumer culture involves relating to a world of objects shorn of larger contexts. For example, if I had the means I could in principle purchase the Mona Lisa from the Louvre and then use it as a welcome mat for my house. As the purchaser / owner of this piece of art, I could do with it whatever I wish. I determine its use and application. I would be free to ignore its place in the history of art—I could make it into a dartboard—or I could choose to display it publicly for others to appreciate. This example is perhaps a bit overdrawn so let’s choose something closer to

5. Augustine, *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean*, 19, 11, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. I/20: *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Ronald Teske (New Rochelle, NY: New City, 2007), 244–45.

6. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 61 teaches: “For well-disposed members of the faithful the liturgy of the sacraments and sacramental sanctifies almost every event of their lives with the divine grace which flows from the paschal mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. From this source all sacraments and sacramental draw their power.”

7. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 542.

home, say, items for sale at a supermarket. In ages past, shoppers knew the farmers who tended the livestock now for sale as cuts of meat. They knew those who planted and harvested the fruits and vegetables. How many of us can say the same of the food we buy at our local supermarkets? Vincent Miller writes about eating “beans from nowhere,”⁸ appearing on store shelves as if by magic. The context that produced these beans is closed to the shopper.

This book argues that, being formed by the many-times repeated purchasing of items whose context of origin is closed to them, people in North Atlantic cultural contexts can and do transfer this mindset to religious objects and practices. Miller points out that consumers can purchase Tibetan prayer flags and display them on their front porches with no connection to or understanding of the lives of prayer of Buddhist monks facing Chinese cultural oppression.⁹ Perhaps one is in fact a practicing Buddhist—or perhaps the color of the flags nicely sets off the blue trim on one’s porch. What can happen to prayer flags can happen to sacraments. Is baptism fundamentally about being plunged into the death and new life of Jesus Christ or is it about sentimentality and fancy \$600 baptismal gowns?¹⁰ Is confirmation about God’s gift of the Spirit or about being rewarded for mastering elements of one’s catechism?¹¹ Is weekly Mass a time for parishioners to outdo one another in their “Sunday best” or is it a time of corporate prayer in which individualism is shunned?¹² Is the Rite of Marriage fundamentally concerned with a display of one’s sense of style (reflected in one’s choice of garment, for example) or is it a matter of taking up with one’s spouse the mission of the church in and to the world?¹³

8. Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 38. I expand on this point in section II of the first chapter, p. 3.

9. Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 4. I reference these prayer flags again in section IV of chapter 3, p. 76.

10. See section IV of the first chapter, p. 10.

11. See section IV of the second chapter, p. 48.

12. See section II of the third chapter, p. 64. See also Tissa Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 149.

13. See section IV of chapter 6, p. 148.

Pope Leo the Great, who helped to steer the Catholic Church through the Christological controversies of the fifth century, taught in one of his sermons that

after all had been fulfilled that belonged to the preaching of the Gospel . . . our Lord Jesus Christ was raised to heaven. He made an end to his bodily presence in the sight of his disciples on the fortieth day after the Resurrection What was to be seen of our Redeemer has passed over into the Sacraments.¹⁴

What was to be seen of our Redeemer, according to a passage from the *Catechism* cited above, is that Jesus calls all people to come together around him. Vincent Miller contends that with respect to consumerism sacramentality may “provide the cultural basis, both in belief and practice, for an oppositional sensibility.”¹⁵ By examining the words and gestures of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, I argue in this book that what is to be experienced in these sacraments does indeed provide a basis for resisting consumerism.

14. St. Leo the Great, *Sermon 74*, 2 as quoted in *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 93: *Saint Leo the Great: Sermons*, ed. Thomas Halton (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 326. I refer again to this sermon in section IV of chapter 5, p. 126.

15. Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 189.

Chapter One

BAPTISM AND CONSUMER CULTURE

I. Introduction

Tom Beaudoin, Patrick McCormick, Vincent Miller, and William Cavanaugh (among others), have argued persuasively that an important facet of consumer culture is its production and marketing of commodities that appear before us on store shelves as if by magic, shorn of all apparent connection to the conditions under which the items were made, harvested, packaged, shipped, and so on, in order to arrive at the market.¹ Ignorance of the contexts under which consumer goods are produced is a basic feature of late-modern society, at times perhaps verging on deliberate indifference to those contexts. When one becomes accustomed to the abstraction of products from the people and

1. See Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 68–69; Patrick McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide to the All-Night Soup Kitchen of the Kingdom of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 17; Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 37; William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 36–37; Miller, "The Body Globalized: Problems for a Sacramental Imagination in an Age of Global Commodity Chains," in *Religion, Economics, and Culture in Conflict and Conversation*, ed. Laurie Cassidy and Maureen O'Connell, The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society 56, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 116. In various ways, the theme of commodities from "nowhere" runs throughout each of the works cited above.

places that produced them, one becomes accustomed to living in a world of brute things with very little by way of social meaning or significance. Miller in particular has sounded warnings about what this acclimation to abstraction might mean for religious symbols, beliefs and practices, but he also sees in the principle of sacramentality “an interesting example of a religious resource for countering consumer culture, because it challenges consumer culture not by critiquing consumption but by challenging the abstracting dynamisms of commodification itself.”²

In this book, I want to examine this challenge to commodification and in this chapter, I will treat baptism. In what ways might we understand baptism as a religious practice subject to abstraction from the religious context in which it is properly located? In what ways does this sacrament offer a means to counter and challenge the “abstracting dynamisms of commodification”? I will first present a summary of the arguments made by Miller and others about commodification. I will argue that attending to the paschal mystery as the root element at work in baptism (and indeed all the sacraments) is one approach to resisting commodification. I contend that in a consumer culture the practice of infant baptism can complicate attempts to resist commodification. On the other hand, attending to the rich context of the ancient preparation for baptism known as the catechumenate (significantly revived with the 1972 promulgation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), allows one to appreciate baptism as associated with quite specific practices as well as having very clear social significance (and not merely significance for the individual being baptized). The ancient and still current practices of exorcisms and the baptismal renunciation of Satan will be other elements to bring into the discussion of resisting consumerism. Finally, I will argue that the church’s baptismal practice can be a springboard for social concern about the pollution and privatization of water.

2. Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 189. See also Andy Crouch, “Life after Postmodernity,” in *The Church in Emerging Culture: 5 Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Sweet (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 84.

II. The Veil of the Commodity

In the late fourth century, Ambrose of Milan sounded an early warning about the dangers of ignorance of and indifference to the conditions under which goods are produced as he discoursed about Lazarus and Dives:

More endurable was that rich man from whose table the beggar Lazarus was collecting what fell, desiring to be filled; but his table also was made from the blood of many poor and his cups dripped with the blood of many whom he had driven to the halter. How many are killed, so that what delights you may be secured! Deadly is your hunger; deadly, your luxury. One fell from a roof top when he was building spacious store-homes for your grain. Another fell from the highest branches of a lofty tree while he was searching for the kinds of grapes to bring down, from which wines worthy of your table might be pressed. Another was drowned in the sea because he feared that a fish or an oyster might be wanting to your table. Another was frozen stiff by the cold of winter while he was intent on tracking hares and catching birds in cribs.³

Tom Beaudoin allows us to fast-forward to the early twenty-first century:

To stay competitive, global corporations are attempting to distance themselves from earthbound issues like workers, wages, unions, and factories. More and more, they turn their focus to the construction of an ethereal brand-image. Their logos must be globally recognizable, symbolizing an attitude, a feeling, a value, or a lifestyle, while avoiding conjuring up any images of the earthly origins of the products that bear their logo. The logo must suggest a certain ethos but not remind the consumer that someone somewhere actually makes the products that bear the logo. The logo should float freely above and beyond the way it was actually produced.⁴

3. Ambrose, *De Naboth* 5.19–20, in Martin R. P. McGuire, “S. Ambrosii De Nabuthae: A Commentary, with an Introduction and Translation” (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1927), 57.

4. Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 68–69. See also Miller, “The Body Globalized,” 115; Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 36–37. Beaudoin may be overgeneralizing

The suppression of the human and social context that gives birth to the commodity is now a high art. Thus, what matters is not the working conditions of those who stitched together my sneakers with their stylish swoop designs but whether I embrace the philosophy that I should “just do it.” Miller observes that “the formation of our imaginations on this side of the veil of the commodity makes us appear autonomous, unrelated to anything. We are not implicated in the world, but rather are individual, sovereign subjects who choose from a range of objects at our disposal.”⁵ Advertisements purporting to lift the veil give us happy elves making cookies⁶ or employees in a cereal factory waxing enthusiastic about the “joy we put in every spoonful.”⁷ Viewers of ads may be “unrelated to anything” or to a world of production that does not really exist! In any event, whether the process of production in question is socially meritorious or socially scandalous remains out of sight. The web of social implications and human relationships is hidden or falsified.

Beaudoin uses the phrase “economic docetism” to describe the abstraction of commodities from their contexts of origination in the skill, sweat, and labor of human beings. For Beaudoin, this term refers to “Christian participation in the economy that denies the facticity, holiness, and potential revelatory character of our bodiliness or the bodiliness of others.”⁸ What happens when the docetism of commodification is applied to religious beliefs and practices? Miller argues that religious “traditions are pillaged for their symbolic content, which is then repackaged and recontextualized in a way that jettisons their communal, ethical, and political

here, for there are companies such as Patagonia that do seek to be socially responsible. However, there is a clear sense in which the exceptions prove the rule.

5. Miller, “The Body Globalized,” 116.

6. Videos of television ads for Keebler cookies in which happy (and magical) elves make cookies are available online. See, for example, “Keebler Town House Crackers: 80’s,” I Love TV Commercials, June 16, 2010, 0:30, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0KRNCb83ZU>.

7. See “Honey Bunches of Oats - Our Latest Commercial!,” WeLoveHBOO-cereal, April 15, 2009, 0:30, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=em9thvkiS7L>.

8. Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 75.

consequences.”⁹ Drawing upon the work of Katherine Bergeron, Miller writes of the commercial success of the 1993 *Chant* album: “The use of chant is particularly informative, as this music forms part of the ritual prayer of the monastic community. There it is tied to a host of practices and institutions that link it as a cultural object to the life of the community. She argues that such nostalgic uses of religious music remove it from its liturgical context and transform it into ‘virtual’ rituals that make no demands on the listener.”¹⁰ Of course, the Spanish Benedictine monks of Santo Domingo de Silos featured on the album pray and chant together in a regular daily cycle featuring not only the Liturgy of the Hours but shared participation in sacramental life, notably the Mass. The monks are also committed to lives of poverty, chastity, and obedience to their religious superiors. None of these strings come attached for those who merely listen to the album in their cars or at work. Certainly, some who listen to *Chant* may find themselves drawn to prayerful contemplation, even specifically Christian prayer. The album might renew or reinvigorate one’s Christian faith, perhaps inspiring a vocation to monastic life. Or it might be just one of many options on the shelf, an album with soothing and non-demanding sounds that connote nothing religious at all. In the latter case, the songs in praise of God have been well and truly commodified.

Can the sacrament of baptism be commodified? Two elements of commodification are relevant here. One concerns the sense in which baptism is (or is not) understood by the parties involved as a commercial transaction. The other concerns the extent to which baptism is (or is not) separated from the religious context that gives it meaning. Of course, the church has always condemned in principle the notion that grace could be bought and sold, going back to Peter’s rebuke of Simon the magician in Acts 8. Just as

9. Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 84. Here Miller is writing with specific reference to Joseph Campbell.

10. Ibid., 76. Miller is using Katherine Bergeron, “The Virtual Sacred,” *New Republic* 212 (February 7, 1995): 29–34. What is said here about this album also applies to the Cistercian Monks of Stift Heiligenkreuz, *Chant: Music for Paradise*, Universal Music 1766016, 2008, which reached #1 on the Billboard classical charts.

clearly, certain members of the church were in effect crossing the line with the sale of medieval indulgences. Even in the present day, the practice of stipend masses is subject to critique.¹¹ Our focus, however, is baptism. Of the twenty-two parishes I contacted in a survey about monetary gifts and infant baptism, eleven make a point of *not* mentioning finances at all to those inquiring about baptism. Two parishes always mention a specific amount for a customary gift. One parish provides information about specific amounts only if the parents ask. These last three parishes also make it clear that financial gifts are not required. The remaining parishes did not respond to the survey.¹² Insofar as this sampling of American parishes is representative, then it seems safe to say that American parishes successfully avoid giving the impression that baptism is somehow for sale, although one may ask about the degree to which identifying a customary amount nevertheless connotes the expectation of a financial gift.¹³

In what ways might baptism be dissociated from the religious context that gives it meaning in the way that the *Chant* album is torn from its religious moorings? Apart from the exceptional circumstance of a person who is at the point of death foreseen in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) 373, the rite of baptism always involves a renunciation of Satan and a profession of faith, whether these are uttered by the one to be baptized (in the case of

11. See Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert Daly (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 205–37.

12. My admittedly non-scientific research involved contacting twenty-two parishes around the United States: Arkansas (one); California (one); Colorado (one); Delaware (one); Florida (one); Georgia (one); Indiana (one); Kansas (one); Michigan (one); Nebraska (one); New York (one); Ohio (one); Oklahoma (one); Pennsylvania (two); South Dakota (one); Texas (one); Washington state (two); West Virginia (two); Wisconsin (one).

13. In this connection it is interesting to note that the third-century writer Tertullian had to contend with people who disdained Christian baptism because it was a relatively simple rite that was offered at no cost. The thinking of his opponents was that the price of a rite was connected to the significance of the rite. See Tertullian, *On Baptism* 2., quoted in Mark Searle, “Faith and Sacraments in the Conversion Process,” in *Conversion and the Catechumenate*, ed. Robert Duggan (New York: Paulist, 1984), 64.

mature persons) or by the parents and godparents of the one to be baptized (in the case of infants).¹⁴ Baptism is thus almost always celebrated in an explicitly named context of shared religious faith, marked above all by belief in the saving triune God. On the other hand, when baptism is celebrated apart from Sunday Mass (e.g., on Saturday mornings or Sunday afternoons), then the full depth of its connection to the rest of the sacramental life of the church is obscured. The practice of infant baptism, for its part, runs the risk of directing attention to sentimentality and away from what is quite literally a life-and-death event. It is a life-and-death event rooted in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

III. Paschal Mystery as Context of Production of Baptism

If commodities conceal the contexts of their production (fair wages? sanitary working conditions?), one way to resist commodification is to attend as best one can to those hidden contexts.¹⁵ It follows, then, that one path to pursue to resist the potential commodification of baptism is to attend to what might be called its context of production: the paschal mystery. What God effects through the paschal mystery of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the reconciliation of God and human, lost first of all in the sin of Adam and Eve. It is interesting to note Alexander Schmemmann's observations on that first sin: "The fall of man is the rejection by him of [his proper] calling, his refusal to be priest. The original sin consists in man's choice of a non-priestly relationship with God and the world. And perhaps no word better expresses the essence of this new, fallen, non-priestly way of life than the one which in our own time has had an amazingly successful career, has truly become the symbol of our culture. It is the word *consumer*. After having glorified himself as *homo faber*, then as *homo sapiens*, man

14. RCIA 373 reads thus: "In the case of a person who is at the point of death, that is, whose death is imminent, and time is short, the minister, omitting everything else, pours natural water (even if not blessed) on the head of the sick person, while saying the usual sacramental form."

15. A point made in Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 102–104, and Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 184–86.

seems to have found his ultimate vocation as ‘consumer.’”¹⁶ We will return to the notion of redemption as including overcoming a consumerist worldview but for the moment, let us simply note that belief in the paschal mystery goes hand in hand with denial of docetism. Jesus, the human being, really suffered and died on the cross. He had a social context of friends, religious teachings, opponents and supporters. If the old adage is true that it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death on the cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole church, then perhaps there is something about the principle of sacramentality that can work to resist economic docetism.¹⁷

To begin this assessment of baptism and the paschal mystery, a good place to start is the well-known passage in Rom 6 according to which those who are baptized are baptized into the death of Christ so that like him they may walk in newness of life. Although Christian writers of the first few centuries did not exploit this theme, after the third century or so it became more and more prominent.¹⁸ The same fourth-century Ambrose who warned about indifference to the fate of workers bringing food to one’s table also had counsel to offer about abstracting baptism from the paschal mystery. “For what,” he asks, “is water without the cross of Christ except a common element without any sacramental effect?”¹⁹ Reading Scripture allegorically, he draws similar lessons

16. Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1974), 96.

17. The adage is quoted approvingly by St. Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 62, a. 5, sed contra. See also *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5. Tom Beaudoin makes the bodiliness of Jesus part of his argument about how to address consumerism; my analysis differs insofar as I am considering the specifically sacramental practice of baptism. See Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 74–76.

18. See Mark Searle, “Response: The RCIA and Infant Baptism,” *Worship* 56, no. 4 (1982): 327–32 at 329. Thomas Finn theorizes that the “absence of Pauline influence in the baptismal theology of the more orthodox writers of the second century may be a reaction to the gnostic sects who were fond of citing Paul as the authority for their speculations.” Citation from Thomas Finn, “Baptismal Death and Resurrection: A Study in Fourth Century Eastern Baptismal Theology,” *Worship* 43, no. 3 (1969): 175–89 at 175n2.

19. St. Ambrose, *The Mysteries* 1.4.20, in *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 44: *Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works*, ed. Roy Deferrari (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 12.

about baptism from the unpalatable water at Marah, purified by a piece of wood: "So the water is bitter, but when it has received the cross of Christ, when the heavenly sacrament, it begins to be sweet and pleasant, and worthily sweet, in which fault is withdrawn."²⁰ The bishop of Milan makes the same point when he draws on a curious incident involving Elisha and an axe-head that had fallen to the bottom of the Jordan River. "Then Eliseus threw a piece of wood [into the river], and the head of the axe was raised. So do you see that in the cross of Christ the infirmity of all men is raised?"²¹

Remembrance of the cross of Christ is a feature of Christian initiation, notably in the rite of consignation. The sign of the cross is made on or over those who are accepted into the order of catechumens: "The cross is traced on the forehead of the candidates (or, at the discretion of the diocesan bishop, in front of the forehead for candidates in whose culture the act of touching may not seem proper . . .); at the discretion of the celebrant the signing of one, several, or all of the senses may follow."²² Michael Witczak observes: "The minister touches each inquirer, at least on their forehead, but also, optionally, on each of their senses. When one enters Christ, Christ's Body, the church, one does so completely and bodily. No aspect of one's person is left out."²³ In the case of infants, consignation (by the minister, parents, and godparents) takes place on the day of baptism.²⁴ The child, writes Witczak, "is marked with the most dramatic image of Christ's love: his total self-giving on the cross when he revealed his love for the Father and the world."²⁵

Remembrance of the cross of Christ in baptism is not a matter of gesture only. There is the baptismal profession of faith, which

20. St. Ambrose, *The Sacraments* 2.4.13, in *Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works*, 283. See Exod 15:23-25.

21. St. Ambrose, *The Sacraments* 2.4.11, in *Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works*, 282. See 2 Kgs 6:1-6.

22. RCIA 54.

23. Michael Witczak, *The Sacrament of Baptism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 19.

24. 1969 Rite of Baptism for Children (RBC) 41; 79. The 2020 Order of Baptism of Children (OBC) retains this language in 41 and 79. See *The Order of Baptism of Children for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020), which will be the source for all references to the OBC.

25. Witczak, *The Sacrament of Baptism*, 59.

includes the question: "Do you believe in Jesus Christ . . . our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?"²⁶ In this connection, what St. Augustine had to say about the word of faith is reminiscent of St. Ambrose's words about the cross: "Take away the word, and what is the water except water? The word is added to the elemental substance, and it becomes a sacrament, also itself, as it were, a visible word 'This is the word of faith which we preach,' says the Apostle. 'For if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him up from the dead, you will be saved.'"²⁷ In baptism, the paschal mystery is present in both word and gesture. Indeed, the RCIA itself proclaims that "the whole initiation must bear a profoundly paschal character."²⁸ The question, then, is to what degree this context of production for baptism is clearly perceived and grasped by late-modern believers.

IV. Infant Baptism

The vast majority of late-modern Roman Catholics are initiated into the church in infancy and as infants they do not do much perceiving and grasping of the paschal mystery on display in their baptisms. My aim in pointing this out is not to challenge the legitimacy or validity of infant baptism, a practice of immemorial

26. RCIA 225; see also RBC 58 and 85 and OBC 58 and 95 where the parents and godparents make the same profession of faith.

27. Augustine, *Tractates on John* 80.3.1–3.2 in *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 90: *Saint Augustine Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 55–111, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 117, 118. In *The Mysteries* 3.14, Ambrose makes a similar point, drawing, as earlier, on the incident at Marah: "Marah was a bitter fountain. Moses cast the wood in it, and it became sweet. For water without the preaching of the cross of the Lord is to no advantage for future salvation; but when it has been consecrated by the mystery of the saving cross, then it is ordered for the use of the spiritual laver." *Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works*, 10.

28. RCIA 8. This leads Aidan Kavanagh to wonder whether the Easter Vigil, the culmination of the RCIA, might really be the only suitable time for baptisms. See Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1978), 135.

custom in the church. Rather, I want to highlight at least two ways in which the practice of infant baptism can contribute to a sense of commodification of baptism. One way involves the passivity of the infant as recipient of the sacrament; the other involves the role of sentimentality as obscuring the paschal mystery.

As noted earlier, the commodification of objects involves abstracting them from the web of human relations whence they come. Another aspect of consumer culture is how it attempts to foster the belief that once one has purchased the consumer item in question, enjoying the promised good (whether this is a savory taste or a new “you”) is a matter of effortlessness—not just “rice” but “Minute Rice.” Ads for sports cars feature spine-tingling rides along scenic roads; only the fine print clarifies that the road had been closed to other traffic that might complicate one’s excursion. The consumer invests no effort; the product simply delivers the satisfaction for which it was obtained.

I argue that a similar dynamic is potentially at work in infant baptism. The “goods” of remission of original sin, incorporation into the church as body of Christ and so forth, are delivered to the infant who makes no effort towards these goods. The infant is not even aware of the fact that he or she is making no effort—but others at the baptismal ceremony can be left with the impression that sacraments can be a matter of what God does to (imposes on?) passive recipients. To be clear, I am not attempting to argue that baptismal grace is given by God (only) as a reward for human effort. I am not seeking to get the nose of the Pelagian camel under the flap of the sacramental tent. I *am* suggesting that in a consumer culture that is quite different from the culture in which infant baptism first emerged, Christians may need to articulate how infant baptism is not after all just another form of passive enjoyment of a consumer good.

A second risk with respect to infant baptism is sentimentality. John Burgess contends: “It is easy to make baptism little more than a sentimental ritual of welcoming a newborn baby into a congregation. The pastor sprinkles a few drops of water on the baby’s head and parades her up and down the aisle. Those in the pews smile approvingly, as the organist finds the register with tinkling bells and plays, ‘Jesus Loves Me.’ But baptism is not simply a gentle

anointing that makes everything about the baby innocent and clean."²⁹ Indeed, as William Strange observes, Christian parents in the early church likely hesitated to bring their children forward for baptism: "Augustine's mother agonised over this decision when her son was ill in childhood, and came down against it (*Confessions* 1:17). Her reason is instructive: she did not want to lay the heavy demands of discipleship on her child. . . . Parents from the second to fourth centuries did not regard baptism as a blessing for their children, but as a burden placed upon them. Probably, the more pious the parents, the more reluctant they were to baptise their children."³⁰ Part of the "demands of discipleship" in the church of this earlier epoch was the notion that the forgiveness of postbaptismal sin was at best a difficult affair.³¹ There was as yet no practice of repeatable confession. Having had one's sins erased once in baptism, one would have a single additional opportunity in the form of canonical penance, which was quite stringent. One was committed to the high wire of discipleship with a small safety net. There was a vivid sense that baptism involved matters of life-and-death seriousness. One present-day homilist observes: "In the domestic beauty of our lovely ritual of Baptism, with proud parents and grandparents and godparents beaming joyfully at the innocent charm of a white-gowned child, it can be hard to recognize the radical nature of the act of Baptism. But if your nostrils were spiritually energized, they would be filled with the smell of death."³²

The passive reception of baptism on the part of the infant can reinforce notions of consumerist passivity. The sentimentality associated with infant baptism, though not directly an aspect

29. John P. Burgess, *After Baptism: Shaping the Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 3.

30. William Strange, "Entering the Sheepfold: A New Look at Infant Baptism," in *Joining and Leaving Religion: Research Perspectives*, ed. Leslie J. Francis and Yaacov Katz (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2000), 48–49.

31. In his *On Baptism* 18, Tertullian provides a classic example of this kind of thinking.

32. Lowell Grisham, "The Baptism of Jesus by John," sermon preached at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fayetteville, Arkansas, January 7, 2001, as quoted in Debra Dean Murphy, "Identity Politics: Christian Baptism and the Pledge of Allegiance," *Liturgy* 20, no. 1 (2005): 5–10 at 8.

of consumerism, can serve a consumerist function insofar as it removes baptism from the paschal mystery that gives it its meaning. Consumer culture is also all too happy to capitalize on this sentimentality, however. It took me a very short time online to find a baptismal gown costing \$625.³³ Again, I want to emphasize that I am not denying the validity or legitimacy of infant baptism. I simply want to point out that in a consumer culture the potential complications of this practice go beyond sixteenth-century debates about whether only adults should be baptized.

V. The Catechumenate I: Public Persons

In the early centuries of the church, of course, most baptisms involved adults. This section of this chapter directs attention to how the ancient catechumenate allows one to appreciate baptism as far from being an event abstracted from a context of meaning. The catechumenate, first of all, was a public affair and not private. It involved attention to the practice of almsgiving, and it was a matter of energizing the faith not only of those seeking baptism but of the rest of the Christian community as well—and even non-Christians.

The New Testament provides a number of examples in which only minimal preparation preceded adult baptism (e.g., the three thousand or so who were baptized in Acts 2, the eunuch in Acts 8, the household of Cornelius in Acts 10), but the *Didache*, parts of which have been dated to the first century, provides basic catechetical instruction in the Ways of Life and Death as a prelude to baptism.³⁴ By the third century, the catechumenate was well-established in at least some regions as a prerequisite for initiation into the church. In the ancient catechumenate as well as the restored RCIA, baptism is associated with quite specific practices as well as having very clear social significance beyond the importance the rite has for the individual(s) being baptized.

33. See "Silk Christening Gowns," *One Small Child*, <https://www.onesmallchild.com/product-category/christening-gowns/luxurious-fabrics/silk-christening-gowns>.

34. See *Didache* 1–6.

Chapter Six

MARRIAGE AND CONSUMER CULTURE

I. Introduction

Among official enumerations of the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, one often finds marriage occupying the last spot.¹ Marriage was also the last of the church rites to be formally designated as a sacrament, making the list in the profession of faith of Emperor Michael Paleologus at Lyons II in 1274, where, however, it was listed in the sixth place.² Part of the reason why marriage did not achieve such recognition earlier is connected, of course, to the ambivalence of the Christian tradition toward sex. To offer just a few examples, St. Jerome, Doctor of the Church, wrote that “in view of the purity of the body of Christ,

1. Marriage was listed in the seventh spot in 1547 by the Council of Trent (session 7, can. 1; DS 860); in 1566 by the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (DS 1601); in 1870 by Vatican I in the Profession of Faith by Pius IX; in 1963 by Vatican II in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which addresses reform of the sacraments in paragraphs 64–78, treating marriage in paragraphs 77–78; in 1965 by Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* 10; and in the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Bernard Cooke, however, places what he calls the “sacrament of human friendship” in the first place and his discussion of the seven sacraments begins with marriage. See Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2004), 78–92.

2. Extreme unction was listed in the seventh place. See DS 860. A general treatment of the history of the sacrament of marriage is available in Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, rev. ed. (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 2014), 405–62.

all sexual intercourse is unclean."³ Saint Augustine, another Doctor of the Church, echoed St. Paul's advice about marrying rather than burning with lust;⁴ and there is no question that Augustine prized the chastity of celibacy over the chastity of marriage.⁵ Yet as we turn to the question of consumerism and the sacrament of marriage, a second objection to its sacramental status arises, this time from financial quarters. Edward Schillebeeckx observes that as the issue of the sacramental status of marriage was being debated between roughly 1150 and 1250, "canonists, anxious to prevent simony, were hardly able to accept that the marriage contract, which was accompanied by so many financial transactions between the two families in connection with the arrangement of the dowry, was capable of conferring grace."⁶ Indeed, the 1453 Sarum Manual in England had the priest inquiring into the matter of the dowry!⁷

Perhaps more than any other sacrament, marriage has been entangled with commerce and finance. On the other hand, writing in 1997, Susanne Friese contended that "little has been written about

3. Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, I.20, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church*, Series II, vol. 6: *Jerome: Letters and Select Works* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 361. While not as harsh as Jerome, the earlier Origen held that "when conjugal acts are being done, the presence of the Holy Spirit will not be granted." Homilies on Numbers 6.3.7 in Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*, trans. Thomas Scheck, ed. Christopher Hall (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 23.

4. See Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, 10.10–11, in David G. Hunter, ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century I/9: Marriage and Virginitly: The Excellence of Marriage, Holy Virginitly, The Excellence of Widowhood, Adulterous Marriages, Continenence*, trans. Ray Kearney (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1999), 41–42.

5. See Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, 23.28, in Augustine, *Marriage and Virginitly*, 54; Augustine, Sermon 354.9 in John Rotelle, ed., *The Works of Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century: Sermons III/10 (341–400) on Various Subjects*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1995), 161–62.

6. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery*, trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965), 332. Schillebeeckx refers here to G. Le Bras, "Mariage," in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. 9 (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1927), col. 2208.

7. See *Documents of the Marriage Liturgy*, ed. Mark Searle and Kenneth W. Stevenson (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 165.

the ritual and traditions of the wedding as these relate to consumer behavior or marketing.”⁸ The situation has changed since then with the appearance of works such as Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, and Rebecca Mead, *One Perfect Day*.⁹ Yet a search for the conjoined key words “marriage” and “consumerism” in the ATLA Religion Database yielded zero hits.¹⁰

I intend here to fill some of that gap by addressing first how consumer culture does or does not prepare would-be couples to undertake marriage. I will turn to a particular aspect of this “preparation”—namely, the ways in which consumer culture encourages couples to make of their wedding a display of the self. I will argue next that the church offers a different understanding of an ecclesially and socially rooted self, grounded in the full sacramental life of the church and with an eye towards a mission in the world. I will conclude with some suggestions for tackling challenges presented by consumer culture.

II. Consumer Culture and Preparation for Marriage

In his 2016 apostolic exhortation on love in the family, Francis warned against “a cultural decline that fails to promote love or self-giving” and a “culture of the ephemeral.” He continued:

Here I think, for example, of the speed with which people move from one affective relationship to another. They believe, along the lines of social networks, that love can be connected or disconnected at the whim of the consumer, and the relationship quickly “blocked.” I think too of the fears associated with permanent

8. Susanne Friese, “A Consumer Good in the Ritual Process: The Case of the Wedding Dress,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997): 47–58 at 47.

9. Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2003); Rebecca Mead, *One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding* (New York: Penguin, 2007). Though it is not written with respect to weddings per se, there is also Kurt Armstrong, *Why Love Will Always Be a Poor Investment: Marriage and Consumer Culture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012). Note as well that *Cinderella Dreams* and *One Perfect Day* are helpful but *secular* assessments of consumerism and marriage.

10. Search conducted April 24, 2017. There were likewise no hits for “wedding” and “consumerism.”

commitment, the obsession with free time, and those relationships that weigh costs and benefits for the sake of remedying loneliness, providing protection, or offering some service. We treat affective relationships the way we treat material objects and the environment: everything is disposable; everyone uses and throws away, takes and breaks, exploits and squeezes to the last drop. Then, goodbye.¹¹

Expanding on this theme in an address he gave in Rome a few months after the exhortation was promulgated, Francis raised the question of the nullity of (some) Catholic marriages: “This is why a part of our sacramental marriages are null, because they [the spouses] say, ‘Yes, for a lifetime,’ but they do not know what they are saying because they have another culture. They say it, and they mean well, but they do not have the awareness.”¹²

Surely consumer culture socializes persons to “have it your way,” in the words of a well-known ad campaign run by a major fast-food franchise,¹³ and consumer tolerance for discomfort is

11. Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family (*Amoris Laetitia*, March 19, 2016) 39. Francis’s comment here about using and throwing away is a clear link to the denunciation of the “throwaway culture” in his encyclical *Laudato Si’* (May 24, 2015). See especially paragraphs 16, 22, and 43 of that document. In a general audience on March 4, 2015, Francis lamented the effects of the throwaway culture on the elderly: “It’s brutal to see how the elderly are thrown away, it is a brutal thing, it is a sin! No one dares to say it openly, but it’s done! There is something vile in this *adherence to the throw-away culture*.” See https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150304_udienza-generale.html. Mutatis mutandis, this principle applies to “affective relationships.”

12. Pope Francis, “Many Sacramental Marriages Are Null,” *Origins* 46, no. 12 (July 28, 2016): 184–98 at 188. The address was given on June 16, 2016. On the same page, Francis laments the influence of a “culture of the provisional.” Richard Gaillardetz had made a similar exculpatory point in 2007: “Many of the difficulties that couples face in remaining faithful to their marriage commitment are not due to any moral failing but are rather the consequence of living in a culture that is inhospitable to keeping commitments of any kind.” Gaillardetz, *A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage* (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2007), xi.

13. Burger King’s “Have It Your Way” campaign ran from 1974–2014. See “Burger King changes slogan to ‘Be Your Way’ after four decades of ‘Have It Your Way’” *New York Daily News* (May 19, 2014), <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/eats/burger-king-slogan-article-1.1798278>.

no virtue on Madison Avenue. Sociologist Juliet Schor writes that “[in 1929] the general director of General Motors’ Research Labs, Charles Kettering, stated the matter baldly: business needs to create a ‘dissatisfied consumer’; its mission is ‘the organized creation of dissatisfaction.’ Kettering led the way by introducing annual model changes for GM cars—planned obsolescence designed to make the consumer discontented with what he or she already had.”¹⁴ Ever ready to cater to dissatisfied consumers, entrepreneurs in 2002 launched AshleyMadison.com, a dating website promising discreet connections to those seeking extramarital affairs, with the slogan “Life is short. Have an Affair.”

These more or less overt attempts to generate or appeal to a sense of dissatisfaction are certainly worthy of note but they are only part of the story; they do not take place in an otherwise neutral cultural environment. Among others, Frederic de Coninck has pointed out that trends in the workforce have for some time undermined notions of commitment on the part of one’s employer, generating uncertainty among employees. This development, he argues, “is supported by an ideology that wants each person to become a combatant in an uncertain and fluctuating universe, relying only on himself/herself.”¹⁵ Having to “prove oneself constantly” in the spheres of work, friends, and intimates creates “a burden that crushes one.”¹⁶ In other words, what is at issue here is not merely social cultivation of discontent but anxiety about when or if the other (one’s employer, one’s friends, one’s intimate partner) might jump ship first. Continuity is hard to come by, and, as Kathleen Fischer and Thomas Hart suggest, this instability has consequences even for the willingness to undertake marriage in the first place, arguing that “to live in the West today is to be accustomed to moving geographically, to holding a succession of jobs,

14. Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American* (New York: Basic, 1991), 120. Schor’s source here is Charles F. Kettering, “Keep the Consumer Dissatisfied,” *Nation’s Business* (January 1929); the line about organized creation of dissatisfaction is from Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 156.

15. Frederic de Coninck, “Le défi de la fidélité dans une société dominée par le temps court,” *Foi et vie* 109, no. 5 (2010): 26–34 at 29. My translation.

16. *Ibid.*, 29. My translation.

to relating to a changing circle of friends, to being bombarded with a confusing variety of philosophies and values. Having learned to expect and live flexibly with change, many people experience a strong reluctance to enter into a lifetime commitment to another individual in marriage."¹⁷ Certainly the number of Catholic weddings is falling. Citing statistics from the *Official Catholic Directory*, one recent study found that "since 1985 the US Catholic population that is connected to a parish has grown by 30 percent, but Catholic marriages are *down* by 57 percent."¹⁸

One alternative, of course, is the choice to merely cohabit. Writing in 1981, Jo McGowan had observed that merely cohabiting implied "that the central relationship of one's life is nobody's business but one's own. To live together is a decision reached privately and put into motion alone."¹⁹ Cohabiting is a phenomenon connected to consumer culture not only insofar as it lacks permanence but also insofar as one's choice of partner is a private choice, not unlike one's decision to buy a yellow toaster rather than a blue toaster or to have pizza for dinner instead of burritos. The US bishops were correct in 2009 when they asserted in *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* that "at the heart of cohabitation lies a reluctance or refusal to make a public, permanent commitment."²⁰ Yet that sixty-page document makes only

17. Kathleen Fischer and Thomas Hart, "The Contemporary Setting for Marriage: Sociobehavioral Insights," in *Alternative Futures for Worship*, vol. 5: *Christian Marriage*, ed. Bernard Cooke (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987), 18–19.

18. Charles E. Zech et al., *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 142.

19. Jo McGowan, "Marriage Versus Just Living Together," *Commonweal* 108, no. 5 (March 13, 1981): 142–45 at 143.

20. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* (November 17, 2009), 27. In 2000, the Pontifical Council for the Family had argued that some "persons who live together justify this choice because of economic reasons or to avoid legal difficulties. The real motives are often much deeper. In using this type of pretext, there is often an underlying mentality that gives little value to sexuality. This is influenced more or less by pragmatism and hedonism, as well as by a conception of love detached from any responsibility." Citation from Pontifical Council for the Family, *Family, Marriage, and 'De Facto' Unions* (July 26, 2000) 5. Linking consumerism and hedonism is easy enough but I am not sure that it is helpful to refer to economic factors as in all cases a "pretext."

two references to consumerism and neither reference concerns cohabitation or indeed any respect in which consumer culture forms persons for marriage.²¹

Despite the silence of the US bishops in their 2009 document, it is clear that consumer culture and the rugged economic individualism that accompanies it are associated with baneful influences on the formation of persons for marriage. So, then, according to consumer culture, what is a marriage about? To that question we turn.

III. A Display of Self

The website Brides.com offers advice to brides interested in religious wedding ceremonies. According to one source, the first question guests will ask concerns the length of the ceremony.²² On the same website, Erin Celletti advises that parish officials might have objections to strapless gowns.²³ Celletti also states

See Fenaba Addo, "Debt, Cohabitation, and Marriage in Young Adulthood," *Demography* 51 (2014): 1677–1701; Jamaal Abdul-Alim, "Student Debt is Causing New Graduates to Delay Making Major Life Moves," *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* 33, no. 10 (June 16, 2016): 8. Addo finds that "credit card debt is positively associated with cohabitation for men and women" (1677), and Abdul-Amin reports on a recent survey that found 49 percent of respondents "would delay engagement or marriage because of their own debt" and 33 percent of respondents "would be reluctant to marry someone who was also repaying loans." I will return to the question of consumerism and hedonism in the chapter on holy orders.

21. *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* refers to a consumer mentality regarding procuring children via in vitro fertilization (20) and to "consumer-oriented versions of sex" (46) that set impossibly high standards for delights in bed. The 2000 Vatican document *Family, Marriage, and 'De Facto' Unions* does not mention consumer culture at all nor does *Preparation for Marriage*, a 1996 document also issued by the Pontifical Council for the Family.

22. See Jaimie Mackey, "What Do We Need to Tell Guests Before Our Religious Wedding Ceremony?," *Brides*, June 18, 2016, <http://www.brides.com/story/religious-wedding-ceremony-what-to-tell-guests>.

23. Erin Celletti, "6 Essential Details about Getting Married in a Catholic Church," *Brides*, February 14, 2017, <http://www.brides.com/story/essential-details-getting-married-catholic-church>. Though standards of decorum may vary from parish to parish, there are in fact no rubrics in either the 1969 *Rite of Marriage* or the revised 2016 *Order of Celebrating Matrimony* concerning what the bride and groom may or must wear.

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