

“I cannot think of any duo more competent or attractive for hosting a Catholic discourse on *Sex, Love, and Family* than Jason King and Julie Hanlon Rubio. Today, in the United States, millions agree to disagree about what constitutes good sex, good love, and good family, but that agreement is usually followed by a silence because few are willing to hear the differences. Well, those days are over because our editors did not shy away from truly challenging contributors. Pick up this book and discover that you are probably not as conservative (or as progressive) as you thought. These are powerful, thoughtful, and honest pieces and their claims ought to finally end the timid silence that has been way too seductive and self-serving.”

—James F. Keenan, SJ
Canisius Professor of Theology
Boston College

“Sex, marriage, and family mores are changing radically. Whether you are celebrating or alarmed, you can learn from the realistic, hopeful, and impactful voices gathered here. They seek the light of faith in LGBTQI identity, campus hook-ups, heartbreaking pregnancy loss, identity-challenging infertility, undocumented siblings, incarcerated parents, interchurch families, ‘secular Catholic’ families, twenty-first century parenting, marital love as abiding friendship, discipleship through divorce, and more. *Sex, Love, and Families* would make an excellent course text; no student would skip the readings and the discussions would run themselves.”

—Lisa Sowle Cahill
Monan Professor of Theology
Boston College

Sex, Love, and Families

Catholic Perspectives

Edited by

Jason King and Julie Hanlon Rubio



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Sex, Love, and Families

Lived Christianity in Context

Jason King and Julie Hanlon Rubio

For Christians, Jesus reorients all things—including sex, love, and families. In the earliest days of the church, while some believers chose celibacy over marriage, others organized their families and homes to foster compassion, forgiveness, and service. Some early marriage rites included prayers for the couple to become expressions of God’s peace on earth. The goal was a “renewed and restructured family and community life in which discipleship had priority for all.”¹ The work of trying to understand sex, love, and families in light of Christ has been an ongoing task of Christianity. In every era, thinking and practice develop in response to the challenges of the day. Each era calls for new developments.

Today, people are asking questions about sex that the Catholic theology of the past could not have envisioned. Contemporary Catholics are diverse in race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, and family form. Waiting to have sex until marriage is normative only in very traditional subcultures. The vast majority of adults have sex before they marry.² A majority of births to women under thirty occur outside of marriage.³ Relationships are increasingly shaped by Tinder, Grindr, and Bumble. With tens of millions of users, these apps and others like them have reshaped dating so thoroughly that it is nearly impossible to date without using them. Pornography has become mainstream—and now

1. Julie Hanlon Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 50.

2. Lawrence Finer, “Trends in Premarital Sex in the United States, 1954–2003,” *Public Health Reports* 122, no. 1 (2007): 73–78.

3. Jason DeParle and Sabrina Tavernise, “Unwed Mothers Now a Majority Before Age of 30,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2012, A1.

often mediates expectations of sexual encounters.⁴ Tolerance of sexual violence is declining in the wake of the #MeToo movement. Consciousness of gender equity and diversity is growing. A majority of Catholics support artificial contraception, cohabitation, and same-sex marriage.⁵ Sexual desire is viewed more positively, and sexual intimacy and fulfillment are highly valued.

Given all of these changes, it is understandable that conversations now center on how to negotiate gender and sex in and outside of marriage. Consent is becoming more central to discussions about sex, especially in response to hookup culture and in the context of growing awareness of sexual harassment and sexual violence.⁶ There is less focus on purity and more on love, freedom, self-care, and justice. In evaluating relationships, people ask: Is there a balance of power in the relationship? How are gender norms operating? Does the relationship preserve and promote the dignity of those involved? Does it encourage openness and generosity? Catholic sexual ethics has just begun to address questions like these.

Conversations on love have also shifted in response to cultural changes, and now include reflections on structural forces that make love difficult to sustain and on goods that couples attempt to embody. Only half of first marriages make it to their twentieth anniversary.⁷ While children, sexual fidelity, and lifelong marriage are still desired by most, people are marrying later and marriage rates have declined due to economic forces and growing trepidation. Cultural forces of individualism and materialism engender worries about if, when, and whom to marry. Marriage is becoming more and more an upper-class phenomenon.⁸ Increasing numbers of widows, divorced people, and single parents raise questions about love in diverse, and often challenging, situations. Poverty, incarceration,

4. Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2005).

5. See, for example, Pew Research Center, "Attitudes on Same Sex Marriage," <https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>; and Pew Research Center, "Catholics-Contraceptives," <https://www.pewresearch.org/catholics-contraceptives/>.

6. The CDC indicates 30 percent of women and 10 percent of men have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by a partner. Intimate partner violence resulted in 2,340 deaths in 2007—accounting for 14 percent of all homicides. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, "Preventing Intimate Partner Violence," <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv-factsheet.pdf>.

7. Casey E. Copen, Kimberly Daniels, Jonathan Vespa, and William D. Mosher, "First Marriages in the United States: Data From the 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth," *National Health Statistics Report* 49 (2012): 1–22.

8. Pew Research, "The Decline of Marriage and Rise of New Families," November 18, 2010, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/11/18/the-decline-of-marriage-and-rise-of-new-families/>.

work stresses, and chronic illnesses force couples to reflect on the nature of their love and commitment. Single and married laypeople are interested in how to grow in love amid the struggles of ordinary life.

Contemporary families also face new challenges that give rise to new questions. Social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat vie for our time and attention.⁹ Adults are conflicted about how to balance work and life and how to raise children in an increasingly complex world without being “helicopter” or “snowplow” parents. They struggle to resist consumerism and the domination of technology in the home, attempt to keep teens safe from violence and bullying, and strive to cultivate good values. Poverty, declining job security and low wages, racism, and migration make family life more difficult.¹⁰ Those with more money have access to housing, education, and networks that make family life easier and more stable. In contrast, the poor and middle class marry less often, have fewer resources to support them in parenting, and face increased social and economic risks.¹¹ Households are much more diverse in members, marital status, religious affiliation, and practices. In light of these changes, family ethics involves questions of how to engage structural injustice and how to cultivate intentional practices within households that contribute to family flourishing.

Why This Book?

The Catholic tradition has to face these new challenges. The church can neither abandon its past nor retreat into it. How does it grow, develop, and respond faithfully to Christ? The two editors of this book have been teaching sex, marriage, and family at Catholic universities for more than twenty years, and these questions have been on our mind for some time. We saw the shifts we described above in the new kinds of students that were coming to Catholic colleges and universities, many without a Catholic background and some uninterested in it. Their assumptions about family, sex, and love were new, radically so at times. They raised questions and reflected on experiences that a typical course on “Christian marriage” did not address. In our extended families, professional circles, and among our friends, we also noticed different lived realities of marriage and family life, the declining

9. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

10. Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

11. Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

influence of Catholic teaching, and a lack of awareness of the new situation in most Catholic parishes. When we met over lunch at a professional conference a few years ago, we decided to put together a collection of essays in response to these new challenges.

We knew we needed to gather scholars, not just the best in the field, but those not trapped in debates of previous decades. Too often, the field of moral theology breaks down around issues related to two major papal documents of the twentieth century: *Humanae Vitae* (1968) and *Veritatis Splendor* (1993). In *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI reaffirmed Catholic teaching against artificial contraception, and, in *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II defended absolute moral norms. Debates among theologians often focus on the possibility of dissent or disagreement in the context of an overarching fidelity versus the necessity of fidelity to the magisterium and the absolute moral norms it defends. Theologians gather at different academic conferences, write for different publications, and participate in different online forums. As a result, scholars in the field can remain locked in distinct circles, only rarely coming together to talk about sex and gender or address the new realities shaping family life.

We wanted something different for our book. We invited scholars not to voice different sides of old arguments but to begin new conversations about what was facing the church and the world. We looked for people whose work was complex and added something new to the dialogue. We included scholars with a spectrum of views, including some who could not easily be categorized as belonging to one camp or another. We wanted people who spoke not to the context of the mid-twentieth century but to the diverse experiences of today. We were interested in finding writers who drew on the tradition and applied it in new ways, complicating existing narratives and breaking new ground.

Many of the moral theologians we sought out bracket controversial issues around love, sex, and marriage in order to engage in constructive ethical conversation. Some write about virtue and character, about how to live faithfully in a pluralistic and complex world. They ask new questions: What does it mean to love a spouse, a child, or a parent? How can people grow in their ability to love? What is good sex? What is good parenting? How can a home be more open—to the church and to the world? Another group focuses attention on pressing social issues of poverty, labor, racism, sexism, migration, and human rights. Many now identify their field as “social ethics” rather than moral theology. They care deeply about social issues and yet analyze their impact on love, sex, and family, bringing social ethics and personal ethics together. We asked these scholars to apply the wealth and insights of the Catholic tradition in the new terrain of sex, love, and family. We hoped that in applying the wisdom of the tradition to

a changing world, they would deepen and enrich our understanding of what it means to live a good life.

We embarked on this project because we wanted to envision new possibilities for authentic ways of living in the face of new realities. Many Catholic colleges and universities no longer have a Catholic majority. Professors welcome “Nones,” Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, and Jews, along with agnostics and atheists to their classrooms. Even among Catholic students, many are loosely affiliated, and few come from homes in which Catholicism is central. Some are more closely affiliated through Catholic parishes and high schools, and a minority are very devout, with strong ties to Catholic youth groups, homeschooling networks, and traditionalist parishes. These undergraduates come to Catholic campuses that embody their Catholic identity in diverse ways.¹² Graduate students too are looking for newer perspectives. At most universities and schools of theology and ministry, Catholic laymen and laywomen study alongside religious sisters, brothers, and men preparing for priesthood. Diverse in age, background, and religious traditions, they come from all over the world and bring very different experiences of love, sex, and families. The presence of diverse views, racial and ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, sexual orientations, and gender identities on university and seminary campuses is raising new questions. There is a pressing need to rethink how Christian teachings on sex, love, and families are being taught and discussed.

Outside higher education, in living rooms, church basements, online forums, and other spaces, adult Catholics with increasingly fragile ties to institutional Catholicism are also looking for new perspectives. Reflecting on their own experiences, they raise new questions about sex, love, and families. Or, becoming frustrated with the way these issues are discussed in ecclesial spaces, they are becoming disengaged with religion. A small percentage enthusiastically seeks a countercultural Catholic family life while a somewhat larger group is interested but pulled in many directions. We wanted to offer essays that could be helpful for people trying to navigate the often fraught relationship between faith and sexuality, no matter where they are coming from.

In academic circles, the ethics of sex, love, and family can be dismissed as “pelvic issues” by some, while for others social ethics is viewed as insufficiently theological and only loosely connected to traditional conceptions of a virtuous life. The essays gathered in this volume, however, show, love, sex, and family intersect with every social issue one can think of—technology, incarceration, race, migration, health care, income inequality, sexism, LGBTQ justice, citizenship, labor, environmental

12. Jason King, *Faith with Benefits: Hookup Culture on Catholic Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), chapter 2.

justice, and sexual violence. The essays in this book also show the impact of structural injustice on people's personal lives—on sexual practice, identity, dating, cohabiting, marriage, friendship, infertility, miscarriage, pregnancy, child and elder care, homemaking, religious practice, and time. We hope that readers of this book will see how theologically rich, socially engaged, intellectually sophisticated, and deeply practical the field of Christian family ethics can be.

Conclusion

This volume includes essays from some of the most creative and insightful scholars addressing questions of sex, love, and family in order to bring the Catholic tradition to bear on new contexts. We hope their insights will be helpful to people with varied relationships to Catholicism in their own discernment about the moral life. We imagine this volume contributing to Pope Francis's project of recentering the church as "field hospital" on discipleship in everyday life. In this discussion, traditional and progressive Catholics; single, partnered, married, and divorced people; strong and struggling families, all have a place at the table and an opportunity to share their wisdom. We hope this book will contribute to spirited conversations about relationality and social justice, care for those we love and care for the vulnerable, familial flourishing, and healing the world.

PART II

LOVE

Modern Christian theology of marriage developed along with Western culture, moving slowly from an ideal of contractual marriage controlled by families toward companionate marriage rooted in the freedom to choose the one you love.¹ Catholic theology of marriage has flourished in the last several decades, as married theologians link theological reflection on experience, social science, and the best of the tradition to construct a positive vision of married partnership. Ongoing debates include same-sex marriage, divorce, and remarriage, but we bracket those here in order to focus on social structures that impede love and to lift up models and practices that contribute to love's flourishing.

Attentive to Pope Francis's call to welcome, the essays in this section are not limited to marriage but rather consider the diversity of households in which Christians live out the call to love. Bridget Burke Ravizza and Julie Donovan Massey share their research on how couples understand holiness in their married life. Emily Reimer-Barry's ethnographic work with poor women living with HIV-AIDS in Chicago allows her to offer parallel reflections on holiness from populations disadvantaged by poverty, illness, and racism. Both challenge the tradition to listen to the experience of families. In contrast, Richard Gaillardetz and Timothy O'Malley focus on drawing from the tradition (e.g., theologies of friendship, the marriage liturgy, sacramental theology) to challenge some conventional notions of love. Essays by Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar and Kathryn Getek Soltis illustrate how structures of labor and incarceration impede people's ability to live out their duty and desire to love in their families, while also showing how

1. Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

families challenged by unjust structures can yet witness to the deepest values of the tradition. Finally, Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman and Jana Bennett consider how the church might better serve and learn from singles (unmarried, cohabiting, divorced, or widowed) who love in households and family forms that are rarely considered in Christian theology. Together, these essays offer a window into the diversity of loving relationships embraced by contemporary Christians.

Chapter 9

Love as Holiness in the Daily Lives of Married Couples

Bridget Burke Ravizza and Julie Donovan Massey

When we set out to write *Project Holiness*, a book about marriage in the Catholic tradition, we knew we wanted to deeply root the text in the lives of married persons. Convinced there were abundant examples of holy men and women, ordinary saints, if you will, active in church communities across the country, we first surveyed over two hundred couples in twenty parishes. The respondents not only provided helpful insight into a number of topics but also identified “everyday married saints”¹ from their parishes. From those nominees, and with the help of wonderful pastoral leaders, we were able to connect with and interview fifty couples. The interviews were a mix of focus groups involving several couples and dialogue with single couples; all took place in person. We went into these interviews with the hope that we would gain wisdom from those with whom we spoke. We were not disappointed. In this chapter, you can hear what they can teach us about the powerful call to live holy lives in the context of marriage and family.

The Gift and Power of Married Friendship

“Find a friend.” Jerry Simms calls it the “greatest piece of wisdom” he can offer on marriage. When we spoke to Jerry and his best friend and spouse, Lisa, fourteen years into their marriage, they agreed that their close friendship is at the heart of

1. The survey item asking respondents to identify couples read: “The researchers are interested in interviewing couples whose marriages are identified by others as being especially vibrant and who serve as models of what holiness can look like in everyday life. Please name one or more couples in your parish community who you would describe in this way.”

their marriage and essential to its success. Lisa looked at Jerry and said, “When something really good happens or something really bad happens, you’re the first person I want to tell about it.” In turn, Jerry described the comfort and security that comes with a mutual knowing, accepting, and appreciating “all of the little things” about each other. Facing Lisa, he said, “I know what you like. I know what you don’t like. I know your fears and am able to anticipate them and maybe help deal with [them].” Friendship—marked by deep intimacy, attentiveness, and delight in each other—is clearly the bedrock of Jerry and Lisa’s marriage and the foundation on which they raised their three sons.

Theologian Paul Wadell notes that, while we surely enjoy and celebrate our friendships, we often overlook their *moral importance*.² We do not fully appreciate the connection between having authentic friends and being good persons. But philosophers such as Aristotle thought extensively about this connection, arguing that we *need* good friendships in order to be virtuous.³ Christian thinkers like Thomas Aquinas agreed: we need friendships in order to be good. Yet, Aquinas “radically reenvisioned” Aristotle’s account of the centrality of friendship in the moral life “by suggesting that human beings are made not only for friendship with one another, but also for friendship with God—what he called charity or *caritas*. Our most exquisite happiness, Aquinas insisted, comes from all of us together seeking and enjoying a life of intimate friendship with God.”⁴ Not only, then, do our friends help us become better persons, but simultaneously they bring us closer to God. Simply put, they make us holy. Indeed, the couples in our study showed us that married friendship leads to holiness in myriad ways.

Becoming Responsible to Others and Growing in Virtue

Day after day, friendship in marriage requires us to overcome self-centeredness and move toward other-centeredness. High school sweethearts Jim Donlon and his wife, Anne Marie, have been married twenty-nine years. Jim emphasized the self-transcendence prompted by his marriage:

We’re not meant to live by ourselves. I don’t think it’s an accident that it’s in the Book of Genesis that we weren’t alone for very long. And that makes you a better person because when you are completely alone, everything you do is completely centered on you. And so when I got married to Anne Marie, it wasn’t me anymore.

2. Paul Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 25.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

And boy, when we had kids, I looked through the nursery window and there was that little fat pink thing lying there and oh my God! Now it's not even just the two of us. . . . I really don't think you can live up to the potential of how really good you can be by yourself. I just really don't think you can. It's taking care of somebody, loving somebody, raising somebody, burying somebody; I mean every step along the way.

Jim recognizes the connection between becoming responsible to others—meeting the daily needs of his wife and children over the long haul—and growth in goodness. If one is a faithful friend “every step of the way,” one is inevitably invited to grow ever more patient, more loyal, more kind, more generous. Jim also highlights here a core Christian anthropological claim, reflected in the two creation stories in the book of Genesis, that human beings are not meant to live alone.

In one of those stories, God creates the first human being (*adam*) but sees that the creature is lonely and in need of a partner. God declares, “It is not good for you to be alone” (see Gen 2:18), puts the creature to sleep, and—from *adam*—creates two equal companions who unite to become one flesh (Gen 2:24). Moreover, in both creation stories, human beings are made *in God's image* and therefore are made for communion. Wadell explains, “We are living, breathing images of a Trinitarian God whose very life is the fullness and perfection of intimacy. Born from this love, we are called to mirror in our lives the intimacy, friendship, and community we see perfectly displayed in God. *God is intimacy*.”⁵ And so the logic goes: if we are made in God's image, and God is intimacy and perfect communion, then we will only flourish in communion with others. The Christian tradition argues that only in loving others do we become our best selves, the selves we were created to be.

Although we are beautifully made in God's image, we nevertheless are imperfect creatures, so maintaining friendship over a lifetime is demanding and requires real work from both partners. Interviewees described the challenge of giving way to the other, of trying to see situations from their spouse's point of view, of compromising, and of “letting go of the need to be right all the time.” Jane and Phil Rullo helpfully discuss the power of self-sacrifice and humility in their fifty-two-year marriage. Phil suggests that “you have to leave your ego at the doorstep when you get married, really. You have to have a friendship, [that requires] losing your egocentricity and losing your selfishness and gaining a kind of selflessness. If there is anything important in marriage, it is putting selfishness aside, becoming selfless, and being willing to sacrifice for someone else.” Phil points to the very definition

5. *Ibid.*, 77.

of authentic friendship. Friendship is a relationship marked by beneficence and benevolence—that is, *wanting* what is best for the other and *doing* what is best for the other. His wife Jane said:

I think that's what marriage has done. It has made me want another human being to become the very best they can become and I worked very hard on that. And I think I learned that things don't always go your way. And I always used to think I was right all the time. And I learned I was not right all the time and that you had to give a little and, in turn, that other person gave a little. It was both people working together to make each other better.

Humility and self-sacrifice are just two of the many virtues that spouses in our study both “worked very hard on” and modeled for one another, thus “mak[ing] each other better.” For example, Phil praises the virtues of his wife: “I like very much her patience and her capacity for forgiveness. . . . She has always been very respectful of who I am and what I do. I appreciate her great capacity to love. She’s a very giving person, and I try to reciprocate that love because she’s so generous with it.” Jane models particular virtues—patience, respect, love, generosity—that, in turn, shape Phil and call him to be more virtuous.

Mutual Emotional Support and Challenge

In addition to modeling and reciprocating virtue, spouses “take responsibility” for the betterment of their partner by providing ongoing support and encouragement. When balancing responsibilities in the home, workplace, and wider community—and managing accompanying pressures—it is easy to feel “not good enough,” even overwhelmed. In the midst of such pressures, these couples rely on one another for emotional replenishment and reinforcement. Al and Christine Kozak, married twenty-five years and raising five children, spoke compellingly about concrete and regular efforts they make to build one another up and boost each other’s self-esteem—through spoken words, gestures, and texts—helping them “become successful as a married couple.” Al calls his wife *every day* at noon to check in, but he noted that encouragement is particularly important in challenging times, when one’s partner is “knocked down” by something, such as not getting a promotion, or a sale, or an article published. In that vein, Donna Erikson expressed gratitude for the support that she received from her husband of thirty-two years, Tim, when her business venture failed, which was a devastating loss: “I said [to Tim], ‘You can’t fix this. I’ve got to work on it. Just love me through it, that’s all I ask. Just be there and love me through it.’ And he did.”

It is clear that supporting and encouraging one another—building each other up—is one important way that spouses push each other toward their potential.

Yet spouses do not *only* serve as encouragers and cheerleaders, rightfully reminding their partners of their many gifts and talents. Sometimes spouses need to do the hard work of intimacy by revealing to one's spouse ways that he or she needs to grow. Jeff and Laura Rader, married thirty-four years, with three grown children and "lots of granddaughters," discussed the sometimes tough work of friendship in their marriage. Jeff said, "She challenges me to grow and can be blunt with me sometimes—which is good." Laura responded: "I prefer to call it *caringly direct*." They laughed. "Jeff . . . points out things to me as well. Not as bluntly, but . . . [more laughter] he challenges me to grow in the virtues. I can only change myself, so he can highlight those [areas of growth] for me. But I know that at the end of the day, or the end of the conversation, or the end of him pointing out my faults or an area I need to grow in, he is going to love me through it, so I have a comfort foundation that even when I'm not perfect he loves me and that's good. That's a blessing."

Despite her imperfections and need for growth, the comfort in knowing that Jeff will *love her through it* is a blessing. It is the exact language that Donna Erikson used above—in the midst of loss and worry, she asked her husband not to fix it but to be there and *love her through it*. And he did. This language points to an essential characteristic of married friendship: fidelity.

Covenantal Fidelity

"Fidelity requires us not only not to end or walk out of loving relationships but more importantly to defend and sustain them."⁶ This assertion, made by Catholic ethicist James Keenan, captures the essence of fidelity, or faithfulness. The virtue demands that particular, interpersonal relationships—such as relationships with friends, family members, and married partners—be *defended* and *sustained*. Moreover, from a Catholic perspective, Keenan argues that fidelity ought to be informed by mercy, which he specifically defines as "the willingness to enter into the chaos of another to respond to their need."⁷

When a couple participates in the sacrament of matrimony, they promise a lifetime of fidelity to one another, consenting to "be faithful" to one another "in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health." They pledge to "love" and "honor" each other "all the days" of their lives. They make promises to God and each other, which is symbolized by the exchange of rings. Theologian Margaret Farley explains that, once vows and rings are exchanged, spouses are bound to one

6. James Keenan, "Virtue Ethics and Sexual Ethics," *Louvain Studies* 30, no. 3 (2005): 195.

7. *Ibid.*, 192.

another and have a claim over each other; future choices are henceforth choices of either *fidelity* or *betrayal*.⁸

Couples we interviewed spoke pointedly about the meaning of their vows, which grounded their fidelity and framed their daily choices. When describing a challenging period of his marriage, Jim Donlan said: “When did it become an option that you could just leave? Never. I mean, we all stood up on an altar in front of our friends and God and everybody. Those vows are not multiple choice. It isn’t ‘for better or worse, for richer or poorer: yes, no, yes, no.’ It is ‘yes’ to all of it. So, it isn’t an option.” Some couples used the language of *covenant* when discussing their vows and responsibilities to be faithful to one another and to God. Angie Smith said, “We took a vow. It was the two of us and God in this covenant relationship. It’s not just us. This is our covenant with God,” and thus unbreakable. The Catholic tradition has drawn extensively on covenant imagery to argue that marriage is *indissoluble*. Once the spouses become “one body” in marriage, they cannot be broken apart; they have entered an everlasting covenant.

Covenant imagery for marriage appears in both testaments of the Bible. God’s covenant with the people, whether expressed as God’s relationship to Israel or Christ’s relationship to the church, is one of *steadfast fidelity*. We see that God is faithful to the people, even when they let God down, shirking their covenantal responsibilities—by worshiping other gods, breaking the commandments, or forgetting the poor. As Farley notes, “The story of the Covenant is ultimately a story of a God who does not withdraw divine promises or presence, no matter the provocation.”⁹ God refuses to give up on the beloved people and thus repeatedly forgives and renews the covenant. Such fidelity serves as a model for married couples to imitate.

In fact, we did see couples imitating God’s faithfulness and heard them speak beautifully about it. Frank Brown told us, “It’s like each day when you wake up . . . you get married again . . . you roll over and say, ‘I choose you.’ I mean again. No matter what.” His wife Kelly agreed, saying, “I would name that value faithfulness, a Christian value. Faithfulness means, ‘I say yes to this. I choose this, I believe this no matter what comes.’” *No matter what. No matter what comes*. Couples spoke of *loving each other through* financial difficulties, job loss, literal storms and floods that destroyed homes, and the deaths of family members, including children. One man described as “living fidelity” his accompaniment of his wife as she battled advanced cancer—giving emotional and spiritual support, traveling together for

8. Margaret Farley, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 23.

9. *Ibid.*, 152.

her treatments, and nursing her during her illness. Choosing to defend and sustain one another—and the relationship—in the midst of chaos and hardship. This is living out a pledged fidelity.¹⁰

Expanding Sacrament

What becomes clear in the discussion of friendship and fidelity above is that, while the sacrament of matrimony is celebrated on the wedding day, the sacramental nature of marriage is ongoing and daily. Thinking expansively about the sacrament of marriage highlights three overlapping “layers” of sacrament: married partners are sacrament to one another; sacraments abound in the home; and spouses and families become sacrament to others.

Spouses as Sacraments to Each Other

Sacraments are the moments large and small in which we glimpse the depth of God’s love. Theologian Michael Himes writes, “By ‘sacrament’ I mean any person, place, thing or event, any sight, sound, taste, touch, or smell that causes us to notice the love which supports all that exists, that undergirds your being and mine and the being of everything about us. . . . For all of you who are married, I hope that one of the deepest, richest, most profound experiences of the fundamental love which undergirds your being is your spouse.”¹¹

The hope Himes expresses was validated by many couples. Kevin Landwehr, married to Lisa for over forty years and the father of five, reflected on the abiding presence of his wife as a place of encounter with God, “When you love somebody as much as I love Lisa, God just comes along.” Phil Rullo, speaking from the wisdom of more than five decades of marriage, reflected on the way in which marriage has brought him closer to God: “And I think if you have love, if you have patience, if you show understanding and gentleness—and there is plenty of that in our relationship—all of those things are Christ-like and God-like. I think all of those things bring us closer to God.” Indeed, we are invited daily to open

10. In *Project Holiness*, we discuss concrete ways that couples practice fidelity, particularly in times of conflict or difficulty (106–24). By upholding fidelity as ideal, we do not wish to imply that spouses should remain in a married relationship that is abusive or dehumanizing. For a marriage to live up to its potential, both partners must be faithfully committed to the covenant relationship that includes actively seeking the good of his or her spouse.

11. Michael J. Himes, “Finding God in All Things: A Sacramental Worldview and Its Effects,” in *Becoming Beholders: Cultivating Sacramental Imagination and Actions in College Classrooms*, ed. Karen E. Eifler and Thomas M. Landy (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 13.

our eyes to the presence of God, not despite the complex and often busy lives we have as couples and families, but *through* the relationships and commitments that mark our days.

Sacraments Abound in the Home

Rituals have an important role to play in marriage and family life, and they help us open our eyes to God's presence in the ordinary. One father reflected on an annual family ritual, "Our daughter, when she was in preschool, made an angel out of paper plates and at Christmastime, we put it on top of the tree. . . . [Years later] it isn't Christmas until she gets home, and I put out the stepladder, and she gets up there and has to put her angel on the tree." Theologian Maureen Gallagher helps us understand why such rituals can be so deeply revered. "[J]ust as the church celebrates sacraments in the community, so does the family ritualize its gifts, its ups and downs, its brokenness, its giftedness. . . . It experiences life every day; at certain times such as birthdays, parties, Sunday dinners or brunches, it takes life in slow motion so its members can come to new realizations, new awareness of what they mean to each other. At such times families take their raw experiences, make them significant, and celebrate them. This is the heart of sacramentality."¹² And so a simple angel made from paper plates comes to have real meaning, slowing down time and reminding the family of their deep connectedness.

Some rituals are daily, such as a mother who lays down with her daughter each night at bedtime and shares a story of her childhood. Now nearing twelve years old, this daughter still wants to hear these nightly renditions of Mom's "when I was a little girl" stories. Other rituals are annual demarcations built around a wider circle of family. One woman spoke of a yearly back-home campout where her siblings and their families camp in their parents' yard. Aptly nicknamed "Moochfest," this is one time each year when the adult children (and their children) mooch off the hospitality of Mom and Dad! These traditions move with a rhythm the members understand and value. Like the seasons of the church year, such rituals mark important times in the life of the family.

Some of the rituals in which couples engaged had more clearly religious connections. One family created a candle with their children, painting on it various images and symbols. When someone in the family became aware of a person needing prayer, they would light the candle and pray together for that intention. Another couple blesses their children each morning as they leave the house. In

12. Maureen Gallagher, "Family as Sacrament," in *The Changing Family: Views from Theology and the Social Sciences in Light of the Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio*, ed. Stanley L. Saxton, Patricia Voydanoff, and Angela Ann Zukowski (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1984), 10.

an era when school shootings appear in the news on an all-too-regular basis, it is easy to understand the comfort, for parents and kids alike, of a daily blessing.

Pete and Sally Mahon decided early on that the Prayer of St. Francis held deep meaning for them. So they committed to praying it together each night of their marriage. Sally describes their practice, “There are very few nights we don’t say it. . . . And it’s hard to say when you’re mad at each other! But sometimes, one of us would go, ‘We should say our prayer,’ and you can’t not say it then!” The Mahons and many others also spoke of attendance at weekly Mass as a cherished ritual, valuing the eucharistic celebration as an important “check in” with God, a needed “course correction,” an opportunity to “recharge,” and “a reset button.”

Many couples told us, too, about the rich meaning of regularly gathering around the family table. Powerful and important connections can be made between the formal ritual of the Eucharist in church and the familiar experience of family meals at home. Al Kozak points to those connections when saying: “Our kitchen table is a big place for our family. It’s where we come back and we have . . . a meal together. You know our Catholic faith and Jesus says, come back to the table. A lot of good discussions have happened at our kitchen table.” Jim and Anne Marie Donlon recall their then-teenage sons complaining, “Nobody else’s parents make their kids come home for dinner!” Many years later, their commitment to daily family meals was affirmed by their adult son who noted, “We used to give you such a hard time about the dinners. . . . I wouldn’t change that. I didn’t realize how many people didn’t have that growing up and how important it would be in my life.”

To call our homes places we encounter the sacraments is to know God is experienced not only in moments and places set apart but in the very everydayness of life. One man we interviewed described it well: “This is real life. This is the nitty-gritty feeding the kids, going to work every day; that’s a sacrament too. And I think it’s really important for the church to recognize that too and not just have us lowly peons looking up at the great sacraments up there. I think we need to realize what we are doing is really important for the world, really important for God and each other.” As sacrament, marriage and family life demonstrate God’s grace in the world, most closely to those in the family, but as signs for the wider community as well.

Sacrament to the Wider World

Frank and Kelly Brown understand that the love they share must draw them out into the world where their gifts are needed. As Kelly describes, “It is about us, but has been about more than us. . . . The ultimate end [of the marriage]. . . is to bring more God into the world.” Margaret Murphy, married to Matthew for

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