

# Reaffirming the Biblical Understanding of Marital Indissolubility as a Proposal for Celebrating the Gift of 500 Years of Christianity in the Philippines<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The Filipinos' continued appreciation for the sacrament of marriage is a valid reason for celebrating 500 years of Christian evangelization. To date, the Philippines remains the only country that does not legalize divorce. Celebrating this milestone, nevertheless, cannot deny the fact that more and more Filipinos voice out their view on what they consider as an "impossible" Church teaching. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that those who argue in favor of divorce also employ Sacred Scriptures as proof of God's sanction for their position. This paper aims to clarify the scriptural evidence for indissolubility of marriage and so re-affirm the biblical theology behind the Catholic Church's position.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Indissolubility, Divorce, Bible, Covenant

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all scriptural references come from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Indissolubility... is not something that the spouses make.  
It is not a prohibition against living freely or an unreachable ideal.

Rather, if it is true that the communion of life and love  
is open to and lives from Christ's merciful love for the Church,  
indissolubility is the impossibility of the union breaking apart,  
or, stated positively, it is the foretaste of eternity in the time spouses  
are given to live ...

To deny marriage's indissolubility by granting exceptions to it  
is to deny that God can fulfill what he promises.  
(Antonio Lopez)<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In a recently published article entitled "Marriage in the Philippines After the Council of Trent (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)," Marya Svetlana T. Camacho<sup>3</sup> documents the challenges the Spanish missionaries to the Philippines confronted concerning the implementation of canonical marriage as defined and regulated by the Council of Trent (evangelization of the Philippines took place after the Council of Trent 1545-1563). She provides the context of the evangelizing mission concerning the sacrament of marriage:

Spanish chroniclers – most of whom were religious – quickly discerned that concubinage, more than polygamy, was practiced, especially among the Visayan elite. They observed that the natives were, for the most part, monogamous. But divorce was readily initiated, and through their lenses they perceived that its main consequence was material: the party with just cause received damages in the form of the *dowry*, that is, whether it was to be restituted to the husband who had originally given it, or remained with the wife whose family had received it. The missionary authors concurred that generally the natives did not marry within the first degree of consanguinity. They reported that the first task of missionaries was to disentangle marriages, both of those to be baptised as well as of the newly baptised, to determine whether diriment impediments existed.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A. Lopez, "Marriage's Indissolubility: An Untenable Promise?," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 41 (Summer 2014), 269-305 (304).

<sup>3</sup> M. S. T. Camacho, "Marriage in the Philippines After the Council of Trent (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)," *Rg: Zeitschrift des Max-Planck-Instituts für europäische Rechtsgeschichte* 27 (2019) 153-162.

<sup>4</sup> Camacho, "Marriage in the Philippines," 154.

One cannot overemphasize the Spanish missionaries' success, as Camacho remarks in her conclusion, namely, that after just the first century of colonial rule, "Notwithstanding the persistence of customs, behaviour, and values deemed incompatible with canonical marriage, which pastoral interventions sought to change, evidence exists that the values of monogamy and indissolubility, of freedom of marriage, of chastity made inroads [*sic*] were slowly implanted."<sup>5</sup> Camacho, therefore, concurs with John Leddy Phelan who categorically stated how the Spanish missionaries' efforts in implanting the Christian ideal of marriage among the indigenous population "represents one of the most enduring achievements of the Spanish religious."<sup>6</sup> A little less than half a century ago, Excelso Garcia, OP expressed a more modest but equally consoling assessment:

It took them [the Spanish missionaries] three centuries to eradicate the pagan influence which prevailed during their arrival. However, it was consoling and gratifying that when Spain lost the Islands in 1898 and when America took over, the Americans found, much to their surprise, the Filipino family so firmly established and its members so strongly knitted to one another, that they took notice of it publicly on different occasions.<sup>7</sup>

Today, the Philippines remains the only country in the world (aside from the Vatican) that does not legalize divorce.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the situation remains bleak despite the Catholic Church's relentless opposition against the proposed bill seeking to legislate divorce.<sup>9</sup> Abalos, in a demographic survey, describes the landscape:

...the number and proportion of Filipinos who are divorced and separated have been increasing in recent decades. This increasing prevalence of union

<sup>5</sup> Camacho, "Marriage in the Philippines," 161.

<sup>6</sup> J. L. Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines. Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses (1565–1700)*, (Madison, WI 2011).

<sup>7</sup> E. Garcia, OP, "Particular Discipline on Marriage in the Philippines During the Spanish Regime," *Philippiniana Sacra* 8 (1973): 9.

<sup>8</sup> "Except for Filipinos who are married to foreigners and seek divorce in another country, and for Muslim Filipinos who are governed by different marriage laws, about 95% of Filipinos need to file a nullity of marriage or an annulment to legally terminate their marriage." Cf. J. B. Abalos, "The Rise of Divorce, Separation, and Cohabitation in the Philippines," *N-IUSSP* (10 July 2017) in <https://www.niussp.org/family-and-households/the-rise-of-divorce-separation-and-cohabitation-in-the-philippines/> (accessed 14 November 2021). On August 17, 2021, the House Committee on Population and Family Relations endorsed for plenary approval House Bill 100 which seeks to reinstitute absolute divorce as an alternative mode for dissolving marriage in the Philippines. Cf. J. M. de la Cruz, "House Bill on 'Absolute Divorce' Up for Plenary Approval, Lagman Says," *Business Mirror* (17 August 2021) in <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2021/08/17/house-bill-on-absolute-divorce-up-for-plenary-approval-lagman-says/> (accessed 9 October 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. House Bill 100, "An Act Instituting Absolute Divorce and Dissolution of Marriage in the Philippines," Introduced by Rep. Edcel C. Lagman available online at: [https://congress.gov.ph/legisdocs/basic\\_18/HB00100.pdf](https://congress.gov.ph/legisdocs/basic_18/HB00100.pdf) (accessed 31 October 2021).

dissolution has also been accompanied by growing approval of legalization of divorce in the country, despite the very high economic and social costs associated with it. Concomitant with these changes in union formation and dissolution have been significant demographic and socioeconomic changes, including expanding education and employment opportunities for women and increasing urbanization, which are thought to influence the character of both union formation and union dissolution.<sup>10</sup>

This article limits itself to one area of the Catholic Church's efforts against the legislation of divorce in the country, namely, in making the biblical evidence for marital indissolubility more intelligible to the Christian faithful. This implies that the proponents of the bill proffer several other buttresses to their proposal. At the very least, our attempt at making intelligible the biblical argument for marital indissolubility remains necessary since the manner by which advocates of divorce argue their case resemble the line of reasoning of Jesus' interlocutors in the Gospels, i.e., the Pharisees, who erroneously metamorphose Moses' provision for damage control (cf. Dt 24:1-4) into an ethical precept. Echoes of such line of argumentation can be discerned in some of the explanations made by proponents of the divorce bill. Thus, the main proponent of House Bill 100, Albay Representative Edcel C. Lagman remarks, for example: "All countries, [*sic*] they already have a divorce law. That means to say, worldwide, there really is a need to give spouses in irremediably broken or lost marriages a second chance at marital bliss."<sup>11</sup> He elaborates:

It is hard to believe that all the other countries collectively erred in instituting absolute divorce in varying degrees of liberality and limitations. An *en masse* blunder is beyond comprehension. An erroneous unanimity on such a crucial familial institution defies reason and experience. Obviously, the rest of the world cannot be mistaken on the universality of absolute divorce.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. Abalos, "Divorce and Separation in the Philippines: Trends and Correlates," *Demographic Research* 36/50 (2017) 1515-1548 (1522). Cf. also Abalos, "The Rise of Divorce. "As cohabitation becomes more common and as more Filipinos come to embrace more unconventional views toward marriage and divorce, the increase in union dissolution in the Philippines is unlikely to slow down in the coming years. The continued expansion of educational opportunities for women and the growing mobility of young people to urban areas will also contribute towards the steady increase in union breakdowns among Filipinos. With the recent change in leadership in the Philippines, the political atmosphere has also become more open to laws opposed by the Catholic Church, as evidenced by the strong support for the revival of the death penalty. Despite this, the Catholic Church remains a force to be reckoned with in terms of divorce legislation in the Philippines."

<sup>11</sup> B. Cupin, "RH2.0? Why Lagman Thinks It's Easier to Pass Divorce Bill," *Rappler* (24 February 2018) <https://www.rappler.com/nation/divorce-law-lagman-catholic-church> (accessed 9 October 2021).

<sup>12</sup> De la Cruz, "House Bill."

Today, the task of re-affirming the biblical foundation for the argument against divorce has become even more grueling because supporters of either position (*for* divorce and remarriage or *against* divorce and remarriage) and even of those who go as far as dismissing long-held moral standards buttress their assertions using biblical texts, that is, contend that the Bible sanctions their positions. For example, Dale Martin in his essay “Familiar Idolatry and the Christian Case Against Marriage”<sup>13</sup> has surveyed a vast number of passages in the New Testament which according to him argue strongly against any kind of marriage: “... we should attempt to recover and revise resources from a forgotten Christianity vouchsafed to us in scripture and premodern traditions: the long and valuable history of the Christian case against marriage.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Tolbert also wrote an essay entitled “Marriage and Friendship in the Christian New Testament: Ancient Resources for Contemporary Same-Sex Unions”<sup>15</sup> expressing not only her agreement with Martin’s assertions but also attempting to demonstrate how references to the New Testament (although she limits her treatment to the gospels and Paul’s Letters to the Corinthians), offer the ideal of *friendship* in affirming same-sex couples: “Maybe we need to listen to the New Testament more carefully and take its downgrading of marriage and valuing of friendship much more seriously than most Christians currently do.”<sup>16</sup> Mary Ann Tolbert goes even further to propound “that the New Testament does not by any stretch of interpretation promote marriage, heterosexual or not, as the bedrock of Christian community. What the New Testament really promotes is quite different: ‘Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (John 15:13).”<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, in Mark D. Jordan’s introduction to the book containing the essays above (and several others), he describes their arguments as a summon to every Christian to carefully read the Bible as a foundational text:

They offer startling readings of scripture. They uncover the philosophical questions underneath the apparently solid floor of religious debate. The essays disconcert assumptions about the fixity of gender or the importance of sex. They make something so familiar as this weekend’s wedding ceremonies appear suddenly alien. The one thing they refuse to do is to pretend to answer all the important religious questions about same-sex unions.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> D. M. Martin, “Familiar Idolatry and the Christian Case Against Marriage,” *Authorizing Marriage? Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions* eds. M. D. Martin, M. T. Sweeney, D. M. Mellott (Princeton: Oxford, 2006), 17-40.

<sup>14</sup> Martin, “Familiar Idolatry,” 40.

<sup>15</sup> M. A. Tolbert, “Marriage and Friendship in the Christian New Testament: Ancient Resources for Contemporary Same-Sex Unions,” *Authorizing Marriage? Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions* eds. M. D. Jordan, M. T. Sweeney, D. M. Mellott (Princeton: Oxford 2006, 41-51.

<sup>16</sup> Tolbert, “Marriage and Friendship,” 51.

<sup>17</sup> Tolbert, “Marriage and Friendship,” 51.

<sup>18</sup> M. D. Jordan, “Introduction,” *Authorizing Marriage? Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions* eds. M. D. Jordan, M. T. Sweeney, D. M. Mellott Princeton: Oxford, 2006, 6.

Thus, among the many paths that the Catholic Church in the Philippines should take to resist the legislation of divorce, a re-affirmation of the biblical evidence remains paramount. Andreas Köstenberger considers the sins of the present times “as a result of its [the world’s] abandonment of the biblical foundations for marriage and the family.”<sup>19</sup> And the problem will continue unabated so long as there is “*lack of commitment to seriously engage the Bible as a whole.*”<sup>20</sup>

A key starting point for re-affirming the biblical foundation is a survey of all scriptural references concerning marriage and divorce. Joe Sprinkle’s article “Old Testament Perspectives on Divorce and Remarriage”<sup>21</sup> catalogues Old Testament (henceforth, OT) scriptural references that support the following notions: (1) cases *allowing* divorce and remarriage under some circumstances (Dt 24:1-4; 22:13-19, 28-29); cases *commanding* divorce (Ex 21:10-11; Dt 21:10-14; Gen 21:8-14); Ezra 9-10; cases *condemning* divorce (Mal 2:10-16; Lev 21:7, 14; 22:13); cases *involving* God in divorce (Isa 50:1; Hos 2:2; Jer 3:1-8). Although the list is limited to the OT, Sprinkle provides a key argument for understanding and developing the Biblical theology of marriage, namely, the fact that the OT explicitly calls marriage a covenant has allowed the prophets “to push the analogy of God’s relationship with Israel as resembling marriage (cf. Hosea 1-3; Ezek 16:8).”<sup>22</sup> Sprinkle’s conclusion is to the point:

But despite the fact that the OT allowed divorce under certain conditions it gives no license to irresponsible divorce. The OT assumes monogamous, lifelong marriage as the ideal in which marriage is a binding covenant relationship, just as Rom 7:3 says that a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. As in any case of breach of promise, violation of the marriage covenant involves sin. Thus the OT gives no grounds for supposing that a man could divorce his wife arbitrarily without any good reason and not incur guilt. There must be some “indecent” as a basis for justifying divorce. Hence Malachi condemns as immoral the unprovoked divorce of innocent Jewish wives. As a general rule God opposes divorce, since all divorce involves violation of covenant promises. The thrust of Biblical teaching is that divorce should be sought

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<sup>19</sup> A. Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family. Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 27 (emphasis original). Köstenberger summarizes the current state of the problematic in this area: “... while there is consensus that lifelong monogamous marriage is the ideal, there is no universal agreement among Bible-believing Christians on whether or not Scripture permits divorce and remarriage in certain circumstances.”

<sup>21</sup> J. M. Sprinkle, “Old Testament Perspectives on Divorce and Remarriage,” *JETS* 40/4 (December 1997): 529-550.

<sup>22</sup> Sprinkle, “Old Testament Perspectives,” 543-544.

only as a last resort, to be discouraged in all but the most aggravated of cases. Modern American culture, with its predilection for no-fault, easy divorce, has made a mistake akin to that of Jesus' opponents.<sup>23</sup>

To argue by simply choosing any of the positions in the register of Sprinkle's article and present it as *the* biblical position, however, is a sure recipe for misinterpretation. The occurrence of a particular idea or concept in the Bible does not automatically mean Biblical warrant. A fundamental *faux pas* in biblical interpretation is proof-texting, "that process whereby a person 'proves' a doctrine or practice merely by alluding to a text without considering its original inspired meaning."<sup>24</sup> Sprinkle cautions and so argues for an overarching theme that could make sense of the apparent contradictions in the biblical references to divorce. There is, therefore, a need for a holistic, canonical approach to the Bible if we are to draw from it a biblical theology of marriage.

Köstenberger concurs and so asserts that "[a]n integrative, biblical treatment of marriage and the family is essential to clear up moral confusion and to firm up convictions that, if acted upon, have the potential of returning the church and culture back to God's intentions for marriage and families."<sup>25</sup> Such integral approach should at once recognize the intertextuality within Sacred Scriptures as Philippe Lefebvre, OP notes:

Les auteurs du Nouveau Testament connaissaient et méditaient essentiellement les Écritures (l'Ancien Testament); ils n'avaient pas moins de capacités intellectuelles que n'en a aujourd'hui un étudiant moyen: pourquoi ne pas conjecturer qu'ils étaient imprégnés par ces textes au point de les connaître intégralement et d'en percevoir les échos? <sup>26</sup>

Viewing the entire Bible with the perspective of the whole necessitates, in the words of N. T. Wright, a "narrative theology" which views the gospels, for example, as having been written "with the deliberate intent of telling the story of Jesus as the proper goal of the single narrative of Israel (and, in a measure, of creation)."<sup>27</sup> In a recently published book, Abner Chou argues for a hermeneutic that takes account of

<sup>23</sup> Sprinkle, "Old Testament Perspectives," 550.

<sup>24</sup> G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 23.

<sup>25</sup> Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> P. Lefebvre, OP, *Joseph, l'éloquence d'un taciturne : Enquête sur l'époux de Marie à la lumière de l'Ancien Testament* (Paris 2012).

<sup>27</sup> N. T. Wright, "Narrative Theology: The Evangelists' Use of the Old Testament as an Implicit Overarching Narrative," *Biblical Interpretation and Method. Essays in Honour of John Barton* (eds. K. J. Dell – P. M. Joyce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 197.

intertextuality in the whole of Sacred Scriptures, that is, of “how the inspired authors expounded upon previous revelation in their own writings” and explains that “those investigating the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament pay attention to how a reference to the Old Testament provides a window into bigger theological ideas and themes.”<sup>28</sup> Chou explains that “The Old Testament writers themselves were exegetes and theologians who understood and correlated their texts with previous revelation.”<sup>29</sup> The apostles, in turn, “continued the logic developed in the Old Testament. They did not change the meaning of previous revelation but under the superintendence of the Spirit, fleshed out its implications in the current era.”<sup>30</sup> The dynamic continues so much so that “as we think the biblical writers’ thoughts after them, we immerse ourselves in their logic, we read the text the way they read it, and their hermeneutical rationale becomes our own. The prophetic and apostolic hermeneutic is, thereby, the Christian hermeneutic.”<sup>31</sup>

All these insights call for a return to the hermeneutic by which the NT writers understood the OT story. This idea is, as a matter of fact, already included in what Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) calls a “hermeneutic of faith” which is able to see the whole Catholic argument for “no divorce and no remarriage” as based on an overarching story that traverses the whole of Sacred Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. Brant Pitre summarizes this overarching human history as “a kind of divine love story.”<sup>32</sup> For Pope Benedict XVI, a “canonical exegesis” that employs a “hermeneutic of faith,” should be able “to read individual texts within

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. A. Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2018), 20-21. “Individual Old Testament texts are windows into larger contexts because they are intentionally part of a series of passages the prophets have woven together. The apostles thought through certain passages with certain biblical theological ideas because the prophets had already made those associations. The Old Testament writers derived certain concepts from their careful exegesis of prior revelation and integrated those concepts into their own writings. These become the presuppositions and backbone of the apostolic rationale.”

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Chou, *Hermeneutics*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Chou, *Hermeneutics*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Chou, *Hermeneutics*, 23: “The doctrines of revelation and inspiration demonstrate that the dual authorship of Scripture determines the legitimate meaning of Scripture. Second Peter 1:21 reminds us God moved certain men to speak, such that their message is actually from God. Man’s words precisely communicate God’s own ideas. The way the apostles quote Scripture affirms that alone is the meaning of the text. They interchangeably discuss what the “prophet” spoke (Rom. 10:16) with what “God spoke through the prophet” (Acts 28:25) with what the “Scripture spoke” (Gal. 3:8).<sup>13</sup> This affirms human intent is God’s intent and this unified intent is the legitimate meaning of Scripture” (Cf. *ibid.*, 28).

<sup>32</sup> B. Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told* (2014) 9; Cf. also G. Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* (Grand Rapids, MI 2000) 32: “In fact, both the Old and New Testaments use marriage as a central analogy—the union between God and Israel (Old Testament) and the union between Christ and his church (the New Testament). Understanding the depth of these analogies is crucial, as they will help us determine the very foundation on which a truly Christian marriage is based.”



the totality of the one Scripture, which then sheds new light on all the individual texts.”<sup>33</sup> This is aligned with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) which asserts: “But, since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out.”<sup>34</sup>

### Working Document: Mark 10:2-12

To present the Bible’s argument for the Catholic position on indissolubility of marriage, we have chosen to use as a working document Mark 10:2-12. The choice for this text should be obvious since this pericope expresses a categorical position against divorce. The fact that during the period in which this text was written, namely, the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, there was no prohibition for divorce among the Jews, the teaching of Jesus in this Markan pericope is truly distinctive and, as Adela Y. Collins and Harold W. Attridge note: “The criterion of dissimilarity could be applied to conclude that the historical Jesus did in fact forbid divorce.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The Pharisees approached and asked, “Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?” They were testing him. <sup>3</sup>He said to them in reply, “What did Moses command you?” <sup>4</sup>They replied, “Moses permitted him to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her.” <sup>5</sup>But Jesus told them, “Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment. <sup>6</sup>But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female. <sup>7</sup>For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother [and be joined to his wife], <sup>8</sup>and the two shall become one flesh.’ So, they are no longer two but one flesh. <sup>9</sup>Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate.” <sup>10</sup>In the house, the disciples again questioned him about this. <sup>11</sup>He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; <sup>12</sup>and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Our choice of this pericope, moreover, is based on the neat flow of argumentation that its literary structure reveals. In this well-crafted Markan pericope, we can identify five parts whose orderly and logical presentation at the same time opens to intertextual references in the entire Bible and so provides a holistic treatment of the case for marital indissolubility.

<sup>33</sup> Ratzinger, *Jesus*, 10; cf. also P.-B. Smit, *From Canonical Criticism to Canonical Exegesis?: A Study in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Boston: Leiden, 2015), 73.

<sup>34</sup> Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (18 November 1965), 12.

<sup>35</sup> Adela Y. Collins and Harold W. Attridge, *Mark: A Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (Fortress, Minneapolis: Hermenia, 2007) 468.

1. *Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?* (Mk 10:2)
2. *What did Moses command you?* (Mk 10:3)
3. *But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female.* (Mk 10:6)
4. *Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate.* (Mk 10:9)
5. *Whoever divorces his/her spouse and marries another commits adultery.* (Mk 10:11-12)

These five parts shall serve as subtitles in our explication of Jesus' arguments against divorce and so of the Catholic Church's affirmation of marital indissolubility.

### 1. *Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?* (Mk 10:2)

The real intention behind the question of the Pharisees is disclosed at once by the narrator, namely, "they were testing him." The Pharisees were aware of the current practice of divorce prevalent in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. At the very least, their question is akin to that of a penitent's posed to a priest during confession – "*Father is it a sin?*" – which hardly expects an affirmative answer from the priest (based on a rigorous application of the law) but rather an exoneration or justification of his/her act. James R. Edwards gives a more forthright example: "Their attitude reminds us of a person who has just been granted a bank loan and then asks under what conditions he might be absolved from repaying it."<sup>36</sup> By doing thus, the Pharisees "intend to demolish his [Jesus'] position by causing him to compromise the authority of the Torah. Their objective is to maintain a permissive divorce policy – and the more permissive the better."<sup>37</sup>

### 2. *What did Moses command you?* (Mk 10:3)

Avoiding their subterfuge, Jesus asks them about the commandment that Moses legislated. Such reply (to the Pharisees' question) should at once tell the reader, as it should have taught the Pharisees, of the continuing validity of the OT. The Pharisees respond obliquely by saying that Moses *permitted* divorce. Such response, R. Alan Cole explains, betrays a deficient logic: "They themselves do not dare to say that divorce had been commanded in the law, even if it was *allowed*, so they have already shown some consciousness of the weakening of their position."<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2002), 301.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 300.

<sup>38</sup> R. A. Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989), 232-233. They wrongly interpret Moses' legislation in Dt 24:1-4 which, as Cole further explains, "was not only as they [the Pharisees] admitted, permissive, instead of being imperative; it was actually concessive, because of the unresponsiveness of human hearts to God (*hardness of heart*). Better, in the days of the law, we might paraphrase, easy divorce than open adultery and defiance of all marriage codes. It was the lesser of two evils in Israel, but its very existence showed a fatal flaw in humanity, to which Jesus drew attention. Perhaps the toleration of polygamy in Old Testament times is another instance of the outworking of the same principle, as being something permitted in early days, but never praised, and never seen as God's plan for humanity."

In fact, the biblical passage invoked by the Pharisees, namely, Dt 24:1-4 is ambivalent on the legal basis of divorce. Without specifically *commanding* or even *permitting* divorce, the passage, as Richard T. France correctly points out, “regulates (in v. 4) the situation which results after a divorce has taken place and been duly certified.”<sup>39</sup> France therefore concludes that “The legal provision of Moses in Dt 24 was not intended as a statement of God’s purpose for marriage, but as a regrettable but necessary means of limiting the damage when that purpose has already been abandoned.”<sup>40</sup> Edwards explains clearly that the passage “did not encourage divorce but rather attempted to preserve an equitable ruling in the unfortunate event of divorce.”<sup>41</sup> The Pharisees’ reply to Jesus betrays their desire to use Dt 24:1-4 hardly to mitigate the ill-effects of divorce but instead to serve as a *pretext* for divorce.<sup>42</sup> Edwards’ analogy of using instructions for crash landing and the rules for sounding the retreat as a way to learn the mechanics of flying an airplane and the art of war, respectively, is powerful:

You do not learn to fly an airplane by following the instructions for making a crash landing; you will not be successful in war if you train by the rules for beating a retreat. The same is true of marriage and divorce. The exceptional measures necessary when a marriage fails are of no help in discovering the meaning and intention of marriage. Jesus endeavors to recover God’s will for marriage, not to argue about possible exceptions to it. His opponents ask what is permissible; he points to what is commanded. Deut. 24:1-3, he argues, is not a pretext for divorce but an attempt to limit its worst consequences for women. The divine intention for marriage cannot be determined from a text about divorce.<sup>43</sup>

It is interesting how Jesus, while using “hard-heartedness” (σκληροκαρδία), a frequent accusation that God lodged against the Israelites in the OT, namely, that “the people of God are hardened against him and impervious to his demands,”<sup>44</sup> demonstrates, at the same time, to the reader how such attitude is exemplified by his interlocutors, the Pharisees whose line of argumentation “denotes the persistent unreceptivity of a man to the declaration of God’s saving will.”<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 390.

<sup>40</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 388.

<sup>41</sup> Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 301.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 301.

<sup>43</sup> Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 301-302.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 391.

<sup>45</sup> F. Baumgärtel and J. Behm, “καρδία, καρδιογνώστης, σκληροκαρδία”, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 3, 614.

3. *But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. (Mk 10:6)*

Jesus' reply to the Pharisees puts emphasis on the continuity in Sacred Scriptures and the legitimacy of Moses as a lawgiver. Firstly, by pointing to the book of Genesis, Jesus asserts that not only Deuteronomy but the whole of Pentateuch was authored by Moses.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, "For the Markan Jesus, the situation that prevailed 'from the beginning of the creation' is the standard to which everything, including the Torah, must conform."<sup>47</sup> For France, "the main point is that this is how it was meant to be from the beginning, and first principles must take primacy over subsequent remedial provisions."<sup>48</sup>

Jesus, therefore, corrects the Pharisees' fixation on the concession to the law by pointing the real marriage ethics to them, that is, "on the pattern set out in God's original creation of man and woman."<sup>49</sup> Using *analogia Scriptura*, namely, the principle of Scripture rightly interpreting Scripture,<sup>50</sup> Jesus demonstrates how to "recover God's will for marriage" through intertextuality as shown in the NT's use of the OT.<sup>51</sup> Thus, as Lamar Williamson Jr. explains, Jesus "shifts the ground of the discussion from what Moses wrote (vv. 3-4) to what God made and meant (vv. 6-7); from loopholes that may be permitted to the intention of what is commanded; from divorce to marriage. Divorce is grounded in law, but marriage is grounded in creation."<sup>52</sup>

Already in this part, we can see Jesus' desire to undo the effects of divorce and to bring back the original intention of God for marriage. Ronald J. Kernaghan notes that Jesus here asserts that "marriage is more than a human convention" but "an example of the Creator's continuing activity."<sup>53</sup> Thus, Kernaghan concludes: "For Jesus, then, the foundation of marriage was not a human choice that could be conveniently undone by one privileged party. It was an act of creation that should not be unmade."<sup>54</sup>

An important corollary to this is that God Himself is the one who will sustain the result of His creative act. Hence, just as in theological parlance, there is a mere

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. J. Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 701.

<sup>47</sup> Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 702-703.

<sup>48</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 392.

<sup>49</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 388.

<sup>50</sup> Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 302.

<sup>51</sup> Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 302.

<sup>52</sup> Lamar Williamson, *Mark* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), 176.

<sup>53</sup> Ronald J. Kernaghan, *Mark* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2007) 189-190.

<sup>54</sup> Kernaghan, *Mark*, 190.

logical difference between creation and providence, so it is in marriage – it is God who unites the man and woman and the one who aids the couple to persevere in their union. The pericope of Mark leads the reader to see how God sustains creation through divine providence and how God does the same for marriage which He created. A survey of the whole of Scriptures will show three key important stages in God’s act of sustaining marriage which continues until man is again united with God. Jesus’ appeal to return to the beginning, therefore, also means a revisiting of history and the challenge to conform our lives to the lifelong, unbreakable marriage that God originally intended.

### 3.1. *First Marriage (Adam and Eve)*

Appealing to the natural complementarity principle of a male needing a companion, Jesus invokes the common sense of people who naturally subscribe to the establishment of the more important bond: “The natural phenomenon of a person voluntarily leaving the closest social bonding already known (that between parent and child) to form a new and closer bond with a person previously unknown would be utterly inexplicable, unless seen as an instance of the outworking of this purpose of God.”<sup>55</sup> The new bond that is formed by marriage, therefore, “relativizes the claims of natural family loyalties.”<sup>56</sup> The citation of Gen 2:24 leads to a recognition of a threefold pattern – (1) leaving parents; (2) union with wife; and (3) man and woman becoming one flesh – which “provides the essential basis for marriage, and its relevance to divorce is that the imagery of a single ‘flesh’ could hardly be more clearly designed to express that which is permanent and indivisible.”<sup>57</sup> The entire dynamics stamps upon the relationship an “ontological” status and not simply a contract of mutual convenience.<sup>58</sup> Thus, “It is not merely that ‘one flesh’ *should* not be separated; it *cannot* ... [T]hey are no longer two independent beings who may choose to go their own way, but a single indivisible unit.”<sup>59</sup> Any attempt to break or separate this unity, Nolland asserts, is tantamount to “violence of something like mutilation, amputation, or dismemberment.”<sup>60</sup>

The couple’s sin of disobedience resulted in the breaking of God’s original order and harmony which is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the punishment meted upon the woman: “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your

<sup>55</sup> Cole, *Mark*, 233-234.

<sup>56</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 772.

<sup>57</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 392.

<sup>58</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 392.

<sup>59</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 392.

<sup>60</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 773.

husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16). Derek Kidner explains how this punishment “portrays a marriage relation in which control has slipped from the fully personal realm to that of instinctive urges passive and active. ‘To love and to cherish’ becomes ‘To desire and to dominate.’ While even pagan marriage can rise far above this, the pull of sin is always towards it.”<sup>61</sup> The original intent having been disrupted by sin, human history has since been marked by “increasing deterioration of the observance of God’s plan for marriage.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, Köstenberger enumerates

six such violations of God’s ideal for marriage, in each of which a sinful pattern compromised an essential element of the creation paradigm: (1) polygamy (or, more precisely, polygyny) violated God’s instituted pattern of marital monogamy; (2) divorce ruptured the durability and permanence of marriage; (3) adultery broke the sacred bond between a man and a woman pledged to marital fidelity; (4) homosexuality developed as aberrant behavior rebelling against the Creator’s design of heterosexual marriage; (5) sterility became a problem which rendered marital relationships devoid of the fertility characteristic of God’s original pattern; and (6) the dilution of gender distinctions violated gender complementarity, an essential and foundational aspect of God’s plan.<sup>63</sup>

### 3.2. *Marriage as Covenant and God as the Bridegroom*

But God did not abandon humanity. Instead, God’s fidelity is to be seen right at the very moment when sin demanded the ultimate separation, namely, death. Walter Brueggemann explains thoroughly God’s favoring life over the supposedly death-sentence on the first couple (cf. Gen 3:15-24):

The miracle is not that they are punished, but that they live. Graciousness in this narrative is not just in verse 21, after the sentence. God’s grace is given in the very sentence itself. Perhaps “by one man came death” (Rom. 5:12). But the news is that life comes by this one God (cf. John 6:68–69). The sentence is life apart from the goodness of the garden, life in conflict filled with pain, with sweat, and most interestingly, with the distortion of desire (3:16). But it is nonetheless life when death is clearly indicated. This is not a simple story of human disobedience and divine displeasure. It is rather a story about the struggle God has in responding to the facts of human life. When the facts warrant death, God insists on life for his creatures.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1967), 76.

<sup>62</sup> Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 51.

<sup>63</sup> Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 42-43.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation – Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 49-50.

God's love and faithfulness towards humanity is such that right from the time the first couple is banished from the garden, God has been calling humanity back to Himself. Beginning with Moses, all the prophets began understanding the relationship between God and Israel in terms of marital relationship, indeed, as a divine love story (cf. Hos 2:16; Isa 54:4-5; 62:4-5; Ezek 16:7-8). Pitre perceives three dimensions in this story that the prophets will constantly remind Israel of, namely, (1) the story begins at the time of Exodus; (2) young bride Israel is wooed by God; (3) marital relationship is sealed by means of the covenant.

Understanding the relationship within the idea of a marital relationship leads, at the same time, to recognizing any violation as adultery (cf. Hos 1:2-3; Isa 1:4, 21; Jer 2:32; 3:20; Ezek 16:15-22), as Pitre explains: "For if the God of Israel is not just a Creator, or a Lawgiver, but the Bridegroom, then sin is not just the breaking of a rule or a law, but the betrayal of a relationship."<sup>65</sup> Thus, "From the perspective of the prophets, who saw the covenant between God and Israel as a divine marriage, the worship of other gods was not just a transgression of divine law, but an act of spiritual adultery."<sup>66</sup>

### 3.3. *Prophets Announce the Renewal of the Covenant*

Despite Israel's sin, that is, adultery, the prophets were constantly proclaiming God's willingness to take her (Israel) back. Even if the exile to Babylon was considered the most terrible of punishments for Israel's sins, it was, at least for the prophet Isaiah, a time of momentary separation which will eventually lead to reconciliation and restoration with God. The prophet Ezekiel's announcement of the restoration of covenant relationship (Ezek 36:24-28) takes several stages beginning with God's act of bringing back the people physically to their native land (cf. Ezek 36:24). This is followed by "sprinkling with clean water" (Ezek 36:25) whose ritual allusions of removal of ceremonial defilement (cf. Ex 30:17-21; Lev 14:52; Num 19:17-19) is "applied to the people's cleansing from the defilement of idolatry (*from all your idols I will cleanse you*, 25)."<sup>67</sup> Then, replacing the people's hard heart, God promises to give them a "new heart and new spirit" that will enable them to follow His statutes and ordinances (cf. Ezek 36:26-27). Having furnished all these, the prophet recapitulates the restoration with a note that the return to the land of Israel's ancestors signals, at the same time, the renewal of God's covenant: "and you shall be my people, and I will be your God" (Ezek 36:28).<sup>68</sup> Finally, the prophets had an eschatological vision

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 15.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. John Bernard Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1969), 225.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Taylor, *Ezekiel*, 225-226.

that Israel and Judah would once again be united as a single nation in a new marriage covenant (cf. Hos 1:10-11; Jer 3:17-18; Ezek 37:15-16).

4. *Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate*  
(Mk 10:9)

While the Pharisees, jumping upon what they perceived as a latitude provided by the law of Moses (cf. Dt 24:1-4), gave to the man (the husband) principal control over the woman (the wife), and thus made the man the lord of the marital relationship, Jesus, on the contrary, brings the discussion back to the original plan of God and the history of God's relationship with His people. This overarching story recalled by Jesus is the primary meaning of the first part of v. 9, namely, that the joining together, the unity between the couple, is God's initiative. Thus by asserting "what God has joined together, no human being must separate," Jesus means "it is neither man nor woman who controls marriage, but rather God, who is the lord of marriage."<sup>69</sup> As Cole also asserts: "This close bond has been created by God: indeed, it was God's aim in the creation of the two sexes, whereas any divorce is purely human."<sup>70</sup> Already in the Old Testament, in the prophet Ezekiel's announcement of the restoration, we see God as the subject of all the acts, with Israel almost having a passive stance. This shows that it is God who will help Israel unite herself to Him.

As far as the NT writers are concerned, there was no rupture in the story from the OT. Rather, they see themselves as participating in the same OT story of God's fidelity for Israel. Thus, we can also discern three key parallel narratives: (1) the marriage between Joseph and Mary recalls God's desire for marriage (and not divorce, as Joseph contemplated); (2) the preaching of John the Baptist echoes OT prophecies of the coming of God as the Bridegroom; and (3) the sacrifice on the cross resonates God's purification of the bride even as it prepares for the eschatological wedding feast between the Lamb and the bride, the Church.

4.1. *Joseph Sleeps and Wakes Up to Take Mary as Wife*

Wright points out how the canonical Gospels narrate the story of Jesus "not only as a kind of detached fulfilment of various ancient prophecies, not only as the

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<sup>69</sup> Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 303. "The antithesis between  $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$  and  $\alpha\upsilon\theta\rho\omega\pi\omicron\varsigma$  highlights the basis of Jesus' rejection of divorce: it is a human decision (that of the husband, who had the right to make such a decision on his own, rather than that of a legal officer) attempting to undo the union which God has created. God's act is expressed as a *fait accompli* by means of the simple aorist  $\sigmaυν\acute{\epsilon}\xi\epsilon\nu\epsilon\nu$ : once the sequence set forth in Gn. 2:24 has been undertaken, the 'one flesh' is a fact, not a matter of provisionality or choice. Given the recognition of Gn. 2:24 as the authoritative basis for marriage, the argument is simple and complete, and Jesus sees no need to qualify the uncompromising conclusion: marriage is for life." Cf. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 392.

<sup>70</sup> Cole, *Mark*, 234.



antitype of various ancient ‘types’ (Moses, David, the Passover Lamb), not only as the decisive recapitulation of major ancient themes (especially the Exodus), but as the point at which the single narrative in which all those were contained reached its dramatic destination.”<sup>71</sup> The story in the OT continues in the NT and is brought to its long-awaited goal. In the Gospel of Matthew this continuity is shown through a genealogy that highlights three ‘moments’ in Israel’s long story: Abraham, David, and the exile:

It is not simply, as one might suppose at first glance, that the exile was a convenient marker, fourteen generations after David and fourteen before Jesus. Rather, Matthew shared the widespread first-century Jewish perception that ‘exile’ was a state of being, not merely of geography; that it had come about as a result of Israel’s sin (see, again, Daniel 9); and that it had not yet been dealt with. The angel’s announcement that Jesus ‘will save his people from their sins’ (1:21) is not referring to a timeless ‘salvation’. Jesus will undo the condition of exile by dealing with its primary cause. Jesus, for Matthew, does not simply recapitulate elements in the ancient scriptures, though of course he does that too. He brings that ancient story to its long-awaited goal.<sup>72</sup>

It is highly interesting that, at the beginning of the NT narrative (in a canonical order where Matthew is read first), Joseph is granted by the biblical narrator the privilege of being the one who will have to grapple with the question of divorce. Lefebvre describes Joseph’s appearance at the beginning of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke like “une gare de transit entre toutes les voix qui viennent de l’ancien testament et qui vont nous diriger à travers le nouveau.”<sup>73</sup> Lefebvre sees a movement “from divorce to marriage” (“de la répudiation aux nocés”) and thus the narrative of Joseph and Mary at the beginning of the NT “nous faut entrer dans le mystère du Christ que dans l’évangile de Matthieu va se présenter lui-même comme l’époux qui vient (cf. Mt 25).” He further explains: “Joseph et Marie à l’inauguration de l’évangile de Matthieu, c’est-à-dire à l’inauguration du nouveau testament vont nous inviter dans ce mouvement qui passe de la séparation menaçante à l’union, à la communion, qui va être en fait le vrai aboutissement.”<sup>74</sup> Reading Joseph’s decision

<sup>71</sup> Wright, “Narrative Theology,” 195.

<sup>72</sup> Wright, “Narrative Theology,” 196.

<sup>73</sup> P. Lefebvre, OP, « Saint Joseph: Conférences du Cardinal Barbarin et du frère Lefebvre, » *KTOTV* (2 May 2018) at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1F34XI8DIYQ&list=PLBS0YYBeIZpdKdOBeRZSgjmpQHEXalgui&index=123&t=3239s&ab\\_channel=KTOTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1F34XI8DIYQ&list=PLBS0YYBeIZpdKdOBeRZSgjmpQHEXalgui&index=123&t=3239s&ab_channel=KTOTV).

<sup>74</sup> Lefebvre, “St. Joseph.”

to take Mary as his wife, Lefebvre indicates the use of the allusions to the story in Genesis and points out something that was not explicitly described in the earlier story:

Le fait que Joseph prenne chez lui Marie n'est en rien un arrangement pour donner une crédibilité sociale à Marie, pour faire « comme si ». Il s'agit véritablement de la rencontre d'une femme et d'un homme que Dieu a préparée, pour laquelle il prend explicitement parti, et leur union est scellée par un fils « engendré de l'Esprit Saint ». Ce qui les rassemble n'est donc pas un contrat d'assistance ou de partenariat ; c'est bien l'Esprit du Seigneur. En ce sens, « tous deux deviennent une seule chair », tant il est vrai que Dieu seul et plus précisément sont Esprit, réalise l'union.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, what is made explicit in the narrative of Matthew is the agency of God (“for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit,” cf. Mt 1:20) that directs and sustains the marital relationship between Joseph and Mary.

#### 4.2. *John the Baptist Prepares the People for the Coming Bridegroom*

John's (the Baptist's) introduction of Jesus as the bridegroom aids Jesus' entrance into the drama of human existence to redeem it.<sup>76</sup> This idea draws on a parallel in the OT when God himself assumed the role of Bridegroom for Israel in the context of a covenant relationship. Using Rabbinic tradition, Pitre explains the role of John the Baptist as the Jewish “best man” (i.e., the “friend of the bridegroom,” cf. Jn 3:29) whose “task is to lead the bride to the bridegroom when the time for the wedding has come.”<sup>77</sup> In the synoptic Gospels, John the Baptist does this by preaching a baptism of repentance (cf. Mk 1:4-5; Mt 3:5; Lk 3:23).<sup>78</sup> In the fourth Gospel, John's (the Baptist's) declaration in Jn 3:29, whereby he says “He who has the bride is the bridegroom,” recapitulates the prophecy of Jeremiah: “In this place of which you say, ‘It is a waste without human beings or animals,’ in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without inhabitants, human or animal, *there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride*, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD...” (Jer 33:10-11).<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Lefebvre, *Joseph*, 61-62.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. also Smit, *From Canonical Criticism*, 76.

<sup>77</sup> Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 33-34.

<sup>78</sup> Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 33-34.

<sup>79</sup> J. McWirther, *The Bridegroom Messiah and the People of God: Marriage in the Fourth Gospel* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 138; Cambridge, UK 2006) 4; Cf. also Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 32.

### 4.3. *Jesus Purifies the Bride on the Cross*

For the Gospel of John most explicitly, the wedding happens on the cross, as Jesus purifies the bride (the community of believers at the foot of the cross<sup>80</sup>) through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, which were efficacious from Jesus' death (cf. Jn 19:34).<sup>81</sup> Here again, it is not difficult to recognize the relationship between the OT and NT narrative as can be seen in the similarities between the creation of the woman and the crucifixion of Jesus. Pitre notes the similarity in the vocabulary used: "Just as Adam falls into a deep sleep so that God can create the Woman from his 'side' (Hebrew *tzela'*; Greek *pleura*) (Genesis 2:21), so too Jesus falls into the sleep of death, and blood and water flow from his 'side' (Greek *pleura*) (John 19:34)."<sup>82</sup> Then he saw the motif of sleeping and finding the woman upon

<sup>80</sup> "The Synoptic tradition on the Galilean women of Jesus' band was that they were in Jerusalem for his death but stood "afar." John has three women—or four or two depending on how one punctuates—"standing by the cross." Of these, Jesus' mother is the one John uses for a typological purpose. Along with the "disciple whom he loved" the women stand near. The "woman" (cf. 2:4) is given over to her anonymous adoptive son and this son to his new mother. He takes her "to his own" (v. 27), a pregnant phrase because identical with that used by Jesus to describe the scattering of his disciples who would leave him quite alone (16:32), each going "to his own." Jesus as Word had, at the very outset, come *eis ta idia* and *hoi idioi* had not received him (1:11). Now a spiritual son reverses that tragic history and receives a mother from "the Son," to begin a community of believers in that only Son who speaks with power from the cross." Cf. G. S. Sloyan, *John* (Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta, GA 1988) 211.

<sup>81</sup> E. Haenchen – R.W. Funk – U. Busse, *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Philadelphia 1984) 195.

<sup>82</sup> Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 111. Pitre cites St. Augustine (*Exposition of the Psalms* 138:2) who recognizes the parallel: "[In] those two original humans ... the marriage of Christ and the Church was prefigured. ... [A]s Adam was a type of Christ, so too was the creation of Eve from the sleeping Adam a prefiguration of the creation of the Church from the side of the Lord as he slept, for as he suffered and died on the cross and was struck by a lance, the sacraments which formed the Church flowed forth from him. By Christ's sleeping we are also to understand his passion. ... As Eve came from the side of the sleeping Adam, so the Church was born from the side of the suffering Christ." Cf. *ibid.*; A homily by Jacob of Sarug (c. 450 – c. 520), a Syriac ecclesiastical writer, provides a summary of history under the perspective of a wedding: "In his mysterious plans the Father had destined a bride for his only Son and presented her to him under the guise of prophetic images. Moses appeared and with deft hand sketched a picture of bridegroom and bride but immediately drew a veil over it. In his book he wrote that a man should leave father and mother so as to be joined to his wife, that the two might in very truth become one. The prophet Moses spoke of man and woman in this way in order to foretell Christ and his church. With a prophet's penetrating gaze he contemplated Christ becoming one with the church through the mystery of water. He saw Christ even from the virgin's womb drawing the church to himself, and the church in the water of baptism drawing Christ to herself. Bridegroom and bride were thus wholly united in a mystical manner, which is why Moses wrote that the two should become one. ... Wives are not united to their husbands as closely as the church is to the Son of God. What husband but our Lord ever died for his wife, and what bride ever chose a crucified man as her husband? Who ever gave his blood as a gift to his wife except the one who died on the cross and sealed the marriage bond with his wounds? Who was ever seen lying dead at his own wedding banquet with his wife at his side seeking to console herself by embracing him? At what other celebration, at what other feast is the bridegroom's body distributed to the guests in the form of bread? Death separates wives from their husbands, but in this case it is death that unites the bride to her beloved." Cf. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall (ed.), *Mark (Revised)* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 128-129.

waking up as the motif of marriage: “And just as the miraculous creation of the first bride from the side of Adam is the foundation for the marriage of man and woman, so too the miraculous flow of blood and water from the side of Jesus is the origin and foundation of the marriage of Christ and the Church.”<sup>83</sup>

Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians (Eph 5:25-27) details the kind of purification envisioned for the bride: “... as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.” Here again, allusion to the OT is clear. Thus, Greg K. Beale, explaining Rev 21:2, points out that “Preparation of the ‘bride adorned for her husband’ conveys the thought of God’s preparation of his people for himself. Throughout history God is forming his people to be his bride, so that they will reflect his glory in the ages to come (so Eph. 5:25–27) ...”<sup>84</sup> M. Eugene Boring adds how the Book of Revelation narrates the continuity in the story of God with His people. “The last chapter [Rev 22] is the continuation and climax of the old story that began in Eden and passed through Ur and Egypt, then settled down and went wrong in Jerusalem from David through Jesus.”<sup>85</sup>

Again, the whole dynamics involving these episodes in the OT and NT can be summarized as the divine love story, as Pitre recapitulates,

...just as the Jewish Bible begins with the marriage of Adam and Eve, the New Testament ends with the marriage of God and humanity in the great “wedding supper” at the end of time (Revelation 19:7). While many people think of the end of the world primarily (if not exclusively) as a time of tribulation, apostasy, deception, and the coming of the Antichrist, the New Testament also describes the end of time in another way: as the eternal marriage of Jesus and his bride in a “new heavens and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1-2).<sup>86</sup>

*5. Whoever divorces his/her spouse and marries another commits adultery.  
(Mk10:11-12)*

A holistic reading of Sacred Scriptures that takes into consideration the OT story (2.3) and which continues into the NT (2.4) leads to the Christological model of marriage that is founded on two fundamental principles, namely:“(1) There is a

<sup>83</sup> Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 111.

<sup>84</sup> Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*: (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 219-220.

<sup>85</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY 1989), 219-220.

<sup>86</sup> cf. Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 115.

sacred nuptial union between Christ and his church, and (2) the outstanding characteristic of that holy marriage is a love that initiates and sustains the relationship, calling for an answering acceptance and consent.”<sup>87</sup> Understood within these principles, one is able to acknowledge indissolubility, not as a burden imposed upon the couple, but as Nicholas J. Healy Jr. explains beautifully, “a supreme gift of mercy whereby divine love indwells human love, and allows this love to grow beyond itself to participate in God’s love and God’s faithfulness.”<sup>88</sup> Precisely because it is a gift, it not only *enables* the spouses to pronounce the vows (“I pledge my life to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, unto death”) in truth but also *know* that those words are true.<sup>89</sup> Healy concludes: “The gift of indissolubility means that despite the vicissitudes and suffering that come with human failure and sin, the sacramental marriage bond remains an abiding source of mercy, forgiveness, and healing.”<sup>90</sup>

After Jesus has walked through with the biblical hermeneutic behind marital indissolubility in Mk 10:3-9, the disciples (in a characteristically Markan style) ask Jesus again about this matter when they are in the house (cf. Mk 10:10). The reader may be surprised at Jesus’ reiteration in vv. 11-12 since the Markan pericope has, until v. 9, hardly mentioned the issue of remarriage. France explains, nevertheless, that “[w]hat is happening in these verses is a further spelling out of the implications of that pronouncement, not a change of subject.”<sup>91</sup> Jesus’ declaration that divorce-and-remarriage constitutes adultery should not be divorced (pun intended) from the overarching principle provided by a holistic reading of Sacred Scriptures. Any pastoral implication must be based on such unequivocal teaching, as France correctly points out that:

The practical application of this teaching in a society in which both adultery and divorce are common and legally permissible cannot be straightforward. But Mark’s Jesus offers no direct guidance on the problem, simply a clear, unequivocal, and utterly uncompromising principle that marriage is permanent, and divorce (together with the resultant remarriage) is wrong. Whatever the other considerations which pastoral concern may bring to bear, some of them no doubt based on values drawn from Jesus’ teaching on other subjects, no approach can claim his support which does not take as its guiding principle the understanding of marriage set forth in vv. 9 and 11–12.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991), 70.

<sup>88</sup> Nicholas J. Healy, Jr., “The Merciful Gift of Indissolubility and the Question of Pastoral Care for Civilly Divorced and Remarried Catholics,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 41 (Summer 2014): 324.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Healy, “The Merciful Gift,” 324 (emphases mine).

<sup>90</sup> Healy, “The Merciful Gift,” 324.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 393.

<sup>92</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 394.

## Concluding Remarks

The early Christians of the NT period saw a continuation of the divine love story that began in Genesis and continued all the way to the prophets. In the life of Jesus, they found the echoes in the OT gradually unfolding and slowly being fulfilled, beginning with Joseph's marriage to Mary, leading to John the Baptist's proclamation of the coming of the Bridegroom, Jesus the Christ, and to Jesus' assuming the role of the Bridegroom who purifies and marries the bride on the cross, in an act that they saw was typified in the story in Genesis (cf. Gen 2). They read not only echoes but also a more pronounced emphasis on the role and agency of God in the covenant, recognizing in the story of Jesus Christ as illuminating the OT story and revealing how from the book of Genesis to the prophet Malachi, God was also the agent of unity in the covenant-relationship into which He was unwaveringly calling Israel to enter.

By entering into a marriage covenant, God the Creator showed His desire to also provide for and sustain the relationship with Israel. Despite Israel's propensity for breaking the covenant, God's love was inextinguishable, indissoluble. The whole of Sacred Scriptures, therefore, narrates the story of God who desires ultimately to be united to His creatures to the point that He makes Himself into a Bridegroom for His people "in an everlasting relationship that is so intimate, so permanent, so sacrificial, and so life-giving that it can only be described as a marriage between Creator and creatures, between God and human beings, between YHWH and Israel."<sup>93</sup>

This fidelity of God is the source and cause of marital indissolubility that characterizes the covenant between husband and wife. Marriage, then, is indissoluble because it involves not only the promise of the spouses to each other "till death do they part" but also, and more fundamentally, God's promise to sustain their relationship and their commitment. The spouses' actions toward each other should be seen as a response to God's love who says: "Continue to love one another out of (*κατα*) the wellspring of love that I have for you." (Cf. Jn 13:34-35).<sup>94</sup> Contrary to how many people perceive it, indissolubility, understood within this perspective is not to be seen as a burden imposed upon the spouses. Marriage is indissoluble because it has God,

<sup>93</sup> Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> "Each time that either the Greek *agapaō*, the love/heart verb, or *agapēn echête* (the love/heart noun with its accompanying verb "have"), is used in the second person for disciples in our passage, the verb is put by John in the *present-tense subjunctive*, a grammatical form meaning a reality's *continuation*, not its *commencement* (which, when commencement is wanted, puts a verb in the aorist tense; BDF 335.4). So disciples are not being asked to "work up" a love they do not already have at work in them by Jesus' presence with them and by his prior and continuing love for them. They are more simply asked to let this love (that they already have and are experiencing) *enjoy its source* (Jesus) and its goal (other people). In teaching settings, in order to catch the full force of the Greek, I have sometimes translated our verse this way: '*Keep on loving one another out of the well of my love for you! Come on, keep on loving one another!*'" (Cf. Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012))

Jesus Christ, as its foundation and strength.<sup>95</sup> It is first and foremost the character of the “absolutely faithful love that God has for man and that the Lord has for the Church,”<sup>96</sup> as Pope John Paul II explains so beautifully in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* [FC]:

...the indissolubility of marriage finds its ultimate truth in the plan that God has manifested in his revelation: He wills and he communicates the indissolubility of marriage as a fruit, a sign, and a requirement of the absolutely faithful love that God has for man and that the Lord Jesus has for the Church....Just as the Lord Jesus is the “faithful witness,” the “yes” of the promises of God, and thus the supreme realization of the unconditional faithfulness with which God loves his people, so Christian couples are called to participate truly in the irrevocable indissolubility that binds Christ to the Church his bride, loved by him to the end.

Only when understood primarily as a gift does marital indissolubility become a sweet yoke upon the spouses: “Just as the Lord Jesus is the ‘faithful witness,’ the ‘yes’ of the promises of God and thus the supreme realization of the unconditional faithfulness with which God loves His people, so Christian couples are called to participate truly in the irrevocable indissolubility that binds Christ to the Church His bride, loved by Him to the end.”<sup>97</sup> Instead of a burden, Burke concludes that indissolubility is a help:

Indissolubility is not meant for the easy moments, when the two spouses *want* to be together; then they don’t need the help of a law. It is designed for the difficult moments, precisely to be the force that *keeps* them together; then they need the reminder of God’s law and its positive purpose, and the encouragement to seek the grace of abiding by it.<sup>98</sup>

A sacramental marriage ought to respond to this grace to manifest in their lives the indissolubility,<sup>99</sup> as Jones remarks: “When, by the grace of God, we’re able to keep a marriage together, we get to be symbols—imperfect symbols, but still

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, 20.

<sup>96</sup> FC, 20.

<sup>97</sup> FC, 20.

<sup>98</sup> Cormac Burke, “Marriage: A Personalist Focus on Indissolubility,” *The Linacre Quarterly* 61/4 (1994): 55.

<sup>99</sup> Healy explains how indissolubility as a gift heals and elevates nature: “The sacrament of marriage is a privileged point of contact between the order of nature and the new gift of grace. Marriage is a real symbol of the fidelity and mercy of God in his covenant love for creation. In the life, death, and Resurrection of the Incarnate Son, this faithfulness reaches down to the deepest roots of nature and—through the Church and her sacraments—heals and elevates nature to the extent of allowing nature to share in God’s own life and love.” cf. Healy, “The Merciful Gift,” 307.

symbols—of God’s faithfulness to his people. Marriages are supposed to last because they are symbols of God’s lasting love for us.”<sup>100</sup>

A hermeneutic that allows us to appreciate the biblical foundation of marital indissolubility should invite and allow spouses to immerse themselves into the mystery of Christ’s love for the Church. I have chosen Mk 10:2-12 not only because of its clear declaration proscribing divorce as contrary to God’s will and intention but also because of the intertextual direction that the literary structure sets forth. When considered through a canonical exegesis that employs a hermeneutic of faith, the declaration of Jesus against divorce in this pericope is consistent with the entire biblical evidence. The theme of this year’s celebration of 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines (“Gifted to Give”) beautifully dovetails with the dynamics of marital indissolubility envisioned in Sacred Scriptures, that is, the spouses’ recognition of their being *gifted* with God’s fidelity to His promise should strengthen their commitment to *give* themselves unconditionally to each other. Edwards’ summary of the meaning of Mk 10:2-12 which should, at the same time, serve as a challenge, is worth quoting at length:

Jesus does not conceive of marriage on the grounds of its dissolution but on the grounds of its architectural design and purpose by God. Human failure does not alter that purpose (Rom 3:4). The intent of Jesus’ teaching is not to shackle those who fail in marriage with debilitating guilt. The question is not whether God forgives those who fail in marriage. The answer to that question is assured in 3:28, “ ‘All the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven.’ ” There is, after all, no instance in Scripture of an individual seeking forgiveness and being denied it by God. The question in our day of impermanent commitments and casual divorce is whether we as Christians will hear the unique call of Christ to discipleship in marriage. In marriage, as in other areas to which the call of Christ applies, will we seek relief in what is permitted, or commit ourselves to what is intended by God and commanded by Christ? Will we fall away in trouble and difficulty (4:17), or follow Jesus in the costly journey of discipleship, even in marriage? Will we sunder the divine union of “two become one flesh,” or will we honor and nurture marriage as a gift and creation of God?”<sup>101</sup> **PS**

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<sup>100</sup> B. F. Jones, as cited by Rebecca Florence Miller, “When Does the Bible Allow Divorce?: Scripture’s Guidance for Broken, Hurting Marriages,” *Christianity Today* (27 April 2016) at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/april-web-only/when-does-bible-allow-divorce.html> (accessed 31 October 2021).

<sup>101</sup> Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 305.



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