

*A meeting organized by the Cultural Center of Milan  
on the occasion of the "Week of Culture 2009" of the Diocese of Milan  
Auditorium of Milan, May 20, 2009*

**The experience of family  
A beauty to be conquered once again**

by Julián Carrón

A NEW BEGINNING

Lately, family is at the center of the public debate. The attempt to settle new ways of living together different from marriage conceived as definitive and fruitful relationship between man and woman has roused a passionate dispute. This is not something totally new, rather it's the peak of a process started many years ago.

This debate has made it clear, on one side, that the propaganda of a mentality contrary to the family disseminated by use of the media (movies, television, newspapers), even though with such powerful means could not prevent many people from still having a positive experience of family. In front of such an impressively powerful ideological attack, it might appear inevitable for the family to cease being interesting. On the contrary, there is a fact that we must recognize almost with surprise: such an impressive apparatus has shown itself to be less powerful than the elementary experience that many of us have lived within our own families, the ineradicable experience of a good. A good that we are grateful for, and that we want to pass on to the future generations in order that it might be shared.

On the other side, this experience of good has not been able to stop the social attempts to transform marriage into different forms. We need to add a not less significant fact: this process started when an overwhelming majority of marriage laws maintained a traditional concept derived from Christianity. All this legislation has not been able to impede the spreading of a mentality contrary to marriage, it couldn't stop this change.

How could that happen? How is it possible that the clear concept of the nature of matrimony that had been reached and confirmed for centuries could be questioned in such a short time period and in such a general way? I think that it's particularly important to try to understand the current situation in order to respond to it.

In his last Encyclical, *Spe salvi*, Benedict XVI offered a key for understanding what is happening, when he affirmed that «an incremental progress is possible only in the material sphere. Here, amid our growing knowledge of the structure of matter and in the light of ever

more advanced inventions, we clearly see continuous progress towards an ever greater mastery of nature. Yet in the field of ethical awareness and moral decision-making, there is no similar possibility of accumulation for the simple reason that man's freedom is always new and he must always make his decisions anew. These decisions can never simply be made for us in advance by others—if that were the case, we would no longer be free. Freedom presupposes that in fundamental decisions, every person and every generation is a new beginning»<sup>1</sup>.

A new beginning. It would be difficult to find a more adequate expression to describe the present times. If every moment is a new beginning exactly because freedom is involved, our time is actually a new beginning because what used to tranquilly be passed on from one generation to the next no longer exists. It is a new beginning because we can't any more take for granted that which was widely acknowledged up to a short time ago. We need to start all over again.

Actually, our situation is not very different from the beginnings. Just recall the disciples' reaction when they heard Jesus speak about marriage for the first time. «Some Pharisees approached him, and tested him, saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?" He said in reply, "Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate." [His] disciples said to him, "If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."»<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, we shouldn't be surprised. The same thing that today seems impossible to many of our contemporaries, and often to us, too, appeared impossible also to the Disciples.

This doesn't mean that what was learnt along the journey of thousands of years is useless, but this stored patrimony cannot be transmitted mechanically. In fact, the Pope continues: «Naturally, new generations can build on the knowledge and experience of those who went before, and they can draw upon the moral treasury of the whole of humanity. But they can also reject it, because it can never be self-evident in the same way as material inventions. The moral treasury of humanity is not readily at hand like tools that we use; it is present as an appeal to freedom and a possibility for it.»<sup>3</sup> The transmission in the moral field is not easy because its contents can't be as evident as the scientific discoveries. The moral treasury is an invitation to freedom.

For this reason we need to stop dreaming of «systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.»<sup>4</sup> This is necessary first of all for us, who aren't different from most of the people. Painfully we can see that among us there are many friends who aren't able to be firm against the numerous difficulties, both external and internal, that they run into. And as far as we are concerned, it's not enough to know the true doctrine about marriage in order to withstand the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Spe salvi*, 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Mt* 19,3-6.10.

<sup>3</sup> *Spe salvi*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Choruses from "The Rock"*, 6.

challenges of life. Again, the Pope reminds us of this: «Good structures help, but of themselves they are not enough. Man can never be redeemed simply from outside»<sup>5</sup>.

### WINNING BACK THE I

How, then, can this new beginning that Benedict XVI speaks about happen? There cannot be other way than the one suggested by Goethe's Faust: «What thou hast inherited from thy sires, win back so as to possess it as thy own!»<sup>6</sup> In order to win it back, in order to discover its true nature, we need to go back to the origin of the experience of love. Only this experience may be an adequate starting point in order to grasp from within the value of Christ's proposal regarding the love of the married couple.

The married couple is made of two human subjects, an I and a you, a man and a woman, who decide to walk together towards their destiny, towards their happiness. What they base their relationship on, how they conceive it, all depends on the image that each of them has of their own life, of the realization of their self. This implies a concept of man and of his mystery. The Pope affirms: «The question of the right relationship between man and woman is rooted in the essential core of the human being and it is only by starting from here that its response can be found. In other words, it cannot be separated from the ancient but ever new human question: Who am I? What is a human being?»<sup>7</sup>

For this reason, the first help we can give to those who want to be united in marriage is that they become aware of the mystery of their being human. Only in this way, will they be able to adequately put their relationship into perspective, without expecting from it something that, by their own nature, nobody can give to the other. How much violence, how much disappointment could be avoided in the conjugal relationship, if only the characteristic nature of the person were understood!

This lack of awareness about the human being's destiny leads one to base the whole relationship on a deceit, which may be synthetically described as follows: the conviction that you can make me happy. Therefore, the marital relationship becomes a refuge, as much desired as useless in resolving the problem of affection. And when the deceit manifests itself, the disappointment is inevitable because the other failed to meet the expectation. A marriage relationship cannot be based on anything other than the truth of each one.

How can they discover the truth of themselves, the mystery of their being human?

### THE DYNAMICS OF THE NEW BEGINNING: BEAUTY, SIGN, PROMISE

---

<sup>5</sup> *Spe salvi*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> J.W. Goethe, *Faust*, 682-683 («Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast, lErwirb es, um es zu besitzen!»).

<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the participants in the ecclesial diocesan convention of Rome*.

The loving relationship itself mainly contributes to discover the truth of the I and of the you; and, together with the truth of the I and of the you, the nature of a common vocation reveals itself.

What we are is clearly disclosed in the relationship with the person we love. Nothing wakes us more than this; nothing makes us more aware of our desire for happiness that constitutes us than the person that we love. His or her presence is such a great good that makes us realize how deep and true this desire is: an infinite desire. We may analogously apply to the loving relationship what Cesare Pavese says about pleasure: «What a man looks for in pleasure is infinity, and nobody would ever give up hoping to get this infinity.»<sup>8</sup> An I and a you who are limited provoke in each other an infinite desire and they find themselves thrown by their love towards an infinite destiny. This is the experience that reveals to both of them their own vocation.

And at the same time that it is revealed to us that our desire has a limitless dimension, we are offered a possibility of fulfillment. Moreover, we perceive in the person we love the promise of a fulfillment, kindling in us the infinite possibility of our desire for happiness. That's why nothing can allow us to understand the mystery of our being human better than the relationship between a man and a woman, as Benedict XVI reminded us in his Encyclical *Deus caritas est*: «Love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness. This would seem to be the very epitome of love; all other kinds of love immediately seem to fade in comparison.»<sup>9</sup> In this relationship the human being seems to meet the promise that allows him to overcome his own limits and permits him to attain an incomparable fullness, because «at the basis of all of living reality is the spousal relationship. And everything becomes a promise through this spousal relationship, as the word itself implies: spousal means a promising reality, one that promises.»<sup>10</sup> For this reason, the history of humanity—in its various forms— has always established a link between love and divine: «Love promises infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence.»<sup>11</sup>

This is exactly the experience that Giacomo Leopardi unforgettably describes in his hymn to *Aspasia*: «A ray divine, O lady! To my thought | Thy beauty seemed.»<sup>12</sup> The poet perceives the woman's beauty as a divine ray, as God's presence. God himself knocks at the man's door through the woman's beauty. If man doesn't understand the simplicity of that call and isn't able to give in to this call, he hardly can thoroughly understand his own destiny for the infinite and for happiness.

The woman, with her limits, provokes in the man, also limited, a desire for fullness that is disproportionate to the ability that she has to satisfy it. She provokes a thirst that she can't

---

<sup>8</sup> C. Pavese, *The business of living. Diaries 1935-1950*, Quartet Books, United Kingdom, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> *Deus caritas est*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> L. Giussani, *Affezione e dimora* [Unpublished English translation: *Affection and Dwelling Place*], Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano 2001, p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> *Deus caritas est*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> G. Leopardi, *Aspasia*, 33-34.

quench. She provokes a hunger that can't be fulfilled by her who provoked it. Hence the anger and violence that many times spring within married couples, and the disappointment they fall into, unless they understand the true nature of their relationship.

The woman's beauty is actually a ray of the divine, a sign that points to something beyond, to something greater, divine, incommensurable to her limitedness, as Romeo describes in William Shakespeare's tragedy: «Show me a mistress that is passing fair, | What doth her beauty serve, but as a note | Where I may read who pass'd that passing fair.»<sup>13</sup> Her beauty shouts: «It is not I. I am only a reminder. Look! Look! What do I remind you of?»<sup>14</sup>

This is the dynamic of the sign, of which the relationship between man and woman is a moving example. The more they live the beloved's presence as a sign of another—which is the beloved's truth,—the more they await and long for this other.

If this dynamic is not understood, man falls into the error of stopping at the reality that stirred up the desire. It is as if a woman, upon receiving a bouquet of flowers, enchanted by their beauty, forgets the face of the one who sent them to her, and of whom they are a sign, and misses the best that those flowers have to offer. To not recognize in the other their being a sign, leads to inevitably reducing the other to what appears to the eyes. And sooner or later the inability to satisfy the desire becomes evident.

Therefore, if they don't encounter what the sign points to, the place where the promise provoked by the other can be satisfied, the married couple is doomed to be consumed by a claim that they can't get rid of, and their desire for infinite, that nothing like the beloved can stir up, is condemned to remain unsatisfied. Faced by such dissatisfaction, many today perceive a change of spouses as the only solution, thus beginning a spiral process where the problem is postponed until the next disappointment.

But such spiral can't be the only solution. This is the paradox of love between a man and a woman: two infinities meet with two limits; two infinite desires for being loved meet with two fragile and limited abilities to love. And only keeping in mind a greater love, they do not get consumed with the expectation and they don't give up, but walk together towards a fullness of which the other is a sign. Only keeping in mind a greater love one can avoid being consumed by the claim, full of violence, that the other, limited, satisfies the infinite desire that provokes, thus making it impossible for the fulfillment of one's self and of the beloved to be achieved. To discover this, we need to favor the sign's dynamics, remaining open to any possible surprises that may come from it.

Leopardi had the courage to take this risk. Following an acute intuition about the loving relationship, the Italian poet glimpses that what he was looking for in the beauty of the women he fell in love with, was Beauty, with a capital B. At the apex of his human intensity, the hymn *Alla sua donna* expresses all his desire that Beauty, the eternal idea of Beauty, assume a tangible form.

---

<sup>13</sup> W. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I, I.

<sup>14</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, A Harvest Book, New York 1955, p. 218.

This is what happened with Christ, the Word made flesh. That's why Luigi Giussani defined this poem as «a prophecy of the Incarnation.»<sup>15</sup>

In this context, we can well understand Jesus' unheard-of proposal in order that the most beautiful experience in life, that of falling in love, doesn't decay to the point of transforming itself into something suffocating.

Jesus' claim that we find in some Gospel passages can at first might seem paradoxical. «Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law: and one's enemies will be those of his household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me: Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.»<sup>16</sup>

In this text, Jesus presents himself as the center of man's affection and freedom. Putting himself at the core of the natural sentiments, he rightly places himself as their true origin. In this way, Jesus reveals the extent of the promise constituted by his person for those who let him in. It is not an interference on the part of Jesus at the level of the most intimate feelings; on the contrary it is the most important promise that man has ever received: without loving Christ (Beauty made flesh) more than the beloved person, this last relation withers, because He is the truth of such relationship, the fullness to which each one points to the other, and in which their relationship is fulfilled. Only allowing Him to enter it, the most beautiful relationship that can happen in life may not decay and die in time. Such is the audacity of His claim.

How did Jesus reply to his disciples' fright in front of the truth about marriage that he was announcing to them? We can say it in a formula: starting Christianity. He didn't stop at announcing the truth about marriage, but he introduced a novelty into their lives that made it possible to live marriage according to that truth.

It is evident that this novelty is very real and correspondent to man's nature because you can bet your own life on it. This is what the Christian tradition calls virginity.

#### MARRIAGE AND VIRGINITY

To his disciples' astonished reaction in front of the original nature of marriage, Jesus opposes a sentence that may appear even more enigmatic: «He answered them: "Not all can accept [this] word, but only those to whom that is granted. Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have

---

<sup>15</sup> L. Giussani, *Le mie letture* [Unpublished English translation: *My readings*], Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano 1996, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Mt* 10,34-40.

renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it".»<sup>17</sup>

Through these words, Jesus adds a new category of eunuchs to those already known, that is, those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Obviously, this is about the free decision to renouncing marriage that only those who have been graced with recognizing the unique value of the Kingdom of Heaven can take. When John Paul II commented this passage, he said: «In that call to continence "for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven," first the disciples themselves, and then the whole living Tradition of the Church, will soon discover the love that is referred to *Christ himself as the Spouse of the Church, the Spouse of souls*. He has given himself to them to the very limit, in the Paschal and Eucharistic mystery. In this way, continence "for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven," the choice of virginity or celibacy for one's whole life, has become in the experience of Christ's disciples and followers the act of a *particular response of love* for the divine Spouse. Therefore *it has acquired the significance of an act of nuptial love*, that is, a nuptial giving of oneself for the purpose of reciprocating in a particular way the nuptial love of the Redeemer. It is a giving of oneself understood as *renunciation*, but made above all *out of love*.»<sup>18</sup>

In light of this we can understand what virginity is: a new relationship, totally gratuitous, that Christ introduced into history. Virginity is to live things according to their truth. And how did virginity enter into the world? As imitation of Christ, that is, as imitation of the life of a man who was God. No other reason may sustain something so great as virginity as a way of living existence: only becoming one with the way in which Christ possessed reality, that is, according to the will of the Father.

Jesus' person is such a great and precious good that He is the only one who totally corresponds to man's thirst for happiness. Exactly such unique correspondence, which his person is for whoever meets him, makes it possible to have a totally gratuitous relationship with reality. Therefore, whoever adheres to virginity can feel free to renounce marriage.

How do those called to virginity collaborate to the Kingdom of Heaven? Those called to virginity have been chosen to «shout in front of everybody, in every instant—their whole life has this purpose—that Christ is the only thing worth living for, that Christ is the only thing worth the world to exist for. [...] This is the vocation's *objective value*: the *essence* of their life plays in the world for Christ, fights in the world for Christ. The essence itself of their life! It is a life whose essence is shouting: "Jesus is everything." They shout this in front of everybody, those who see them, those who bump into them, those who hear them, those who look at them.»<sup>19</sup>

Vocation to virginity is strictly connected with vocation to marriage. Answering the call, the virgins shout to the married people the truth of their love. Let's follow John Paul II again:

---

<sup>17</sup> Mt 19,11-12.

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, *General audience, April 28, 1982*.

<sup>19</sup> L. Giussani, *Il tempo e il tempio. Dio e l'uomo* [Unpublished English translation: *Time and the Temple. God and Man*], Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano 1995, pp. 20-21.

«In the light of Christ's words, and also in the light of the whole authentic Christian Tradition, it is possible to deduce that *this renunciation is at the same time a particular form of affirming that value* from which the unmarried person consistently abstains, following the evangelical counsel. This can seem paradoxical. Nevertheless, it is known that many statements in the Gospel are paradoxical, and those are often the most eloquent and profound. Accepting such a meaning of the call to continence for the sake of the "Kingdom of Heaven," we draw a correct conclusion, holding that the realization of this call serves also—and in a particular way—to confirm the nuptial meaning of the human body in its masculinity and femininity. The *renunciation* of marriage for the kingdom of God at the same time *highlights* that meaning in all its interior truth and personal beauty. We can say that this renunciation on the part of individual persons, men and women, in a certain sense is indispensable. This is so that the nuptial meaning of the body can be more easily recognized in all the ethos of human life and above all in the ethos of conjugal and family life.»<sup>20</sup>

Virginity is the authentic hope for the married people; it is what makes it possible to live marriage without claims or deceits: «By virtue of this witness, virginity or celibacy keeps alive in the Church a consciousness of the mystery of marriage and defends it from any reduction and impoverishment.»<sup>21</sup>

«That's why virginity is the ideal Christian virtue for any relationship, including the one between married man and woman. Indeed, the apex of their relationship, the true climax of their relationship is there where they sacrifice themselves, not where they express their possession. Because, as a matter of fact, due to the original sin, grasping leads to slipping. It is as if a person desires something and runs towards it and, when they are close to it, they run so fast that they break their nose hitting it: they slip, they stumble. This is why we say that virginity is a possession with a detachment within.»<sup>22</sup> True possession is a possession with a detachment within.

#### THE FAMILY'S PLACE: LIVELY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Therefore, it is evident how important the task of the Christian community is: to favor an experience of Christianity for a true fullness of life. Only within this greater relationship it is possible not to be consumed, because everybody finds their own human fulfillment in it, discovering within themselves an ability to hug the other in their dissimilarity, an endless gratuitousness, and an ever new capacity to forgive.

Without Christian communities able to accompany and sustain the married couple in their adventure, it is difficult, if not impossible, that they happily bring it to completion. The

---

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, *General audience, May 5, 1982*.

<sup>21</sup> *Familiaris consortio*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> L. Giussani, *Affezione e dimora* [Unpublished English translation: *Affection and Dwelling Place*], Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano 2001, p. 250.

married couple, in their turn, can't avoid an education process—of which they are the main protagonists,—presuming that belonging to an ecclesial community saves them from the difficulties. In this way, the nature of the conjugal vocation reveals itself completely: to walk together towards the Only One that may satisfy the thirst for happiness that the other constantly provokes in them, that is towards Christ. Thus, they will avoid going from husband to husband, as the Samaritan woman did, without ever fulfilling their authentic desire. The awareness of her incapacity to solve by herself her drama—not even changing husbands five times!—made her perceive Jesus as such a desirable good that she couldn't help shouting: «Give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty.»<sup>23</sup>

Aware of the current situation, Benedict XVI maintains that it's necessary «that families do not feel alone. A small family can encounter difficult obstacles when it is isolated from relatives and friends. The ecclesial community therefore has the responsibility of offering support, encouragement and spiritual nourishment which can strengthen the cohesiveness of the family, especially in times of trial or difficulty. Here parishes have an important role to play, as do the various ecclesial associations, called to cooperate as networks of support and a helping hand for the growth of families in faith.»<sup>24</sup> This invitation full of tenderness and realism is at the same time the suggestion for a task: the family needs a place where to live, and such place may only be made up of Christian communities that in their turn live their faith in complete contemplation and action. During an interview, Giussani used the following image: «A people is born of an event, it is constituted as a reality that wants to affirm itself in defense of its typical life against those who threaten it. Let's imagine two families on palafittes in the middle of a flooded river. The unity between these two families, and then of five, ten families, as the generation grows numerous, is a struggle for survival, and, ultimately a struggle to affirm life. Unconsciously they affirm an ideal which is life. Therefore, whoever says that they refer to a people, inevitably consider life as something positive. Through my rationally committed knowledge of the life of both the individual and society, these conditions of the idea of the people touch the apex of conception and actuation in the announcement of the Christian Fact, in which we find the fulfillment of what has qualified the great *ethos* of the Hebrew people and its tension to change the world throughout its history.»<sup>25</sup>

Then, when a human being belongs to his own family, he also belongs to the Church and, therefore, to that piece of Church where each one of us experiences Christ's universal presence. Coming close to each other fraternally, creating welcoming dwellings: these are the main contribution that Christians may offer to favor and accompany the experience of the family as an inexhaustible journey towards the fullness of Christ. «Overcoming solitude in the experience of the Spirit of Christ not only draws us near to others but also opens us to others up to the very

---

<sup>23</sup> Jn 4,15.

<sup>24</sup> Benedict XVI, *Apostolic journey of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Valencia (Spain) on occasion of the Fifth world meeting of families*.

<sup>25</sup> L. Giussani, *L'io, il potere, le opere. Contributi da un'esperienza* [Unpublished English translation: *The self, power, works*], Marietti, Genova 2000, p. 251.

depths of their being. [...] The community becomes essential to each of us, to our lives. [...] "We" becomes the fullness of the "I", the law for the fulfillment of the I.»<sup>26</sup>

Without this experience of human fullness made possible by Christ, the Christian ideal of marriage becomes something impossible to realize. Love's indissolubility and eternity seem unreachable chimeras. And, instead, they are such gratuitous fruits of an intense experience of Christ that the married couple perceives them as a surprise, as the proof that, really, «nothing will be impossible for God.»<sup>27</sup> Only this experience may prove today the rationality of the Christian faith, a reality that totally corresponds to man's desire and needs, also within marriage and family.

This is the witness that the Christian married couple can give today against the toil in which so many of their fellow-citizens find themselves. It is a gratuitous witness that challenges the reason and freedom of those who, looking for an authentic satisfaction to their need for happiness, can't find it. It is a witness that we try to offer aware that «we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us.»<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> L. Giussani, *The journey to truth is an Experience*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2006, p. 110.

<sup>27</sup> *Lk* 1,37.

<sup>28</sup> *2Cor* 4,7.