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*Deus Caritas Est* and the Spirituality of Marriage

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Good morning. I am very pleased to be here with you today, and would like to thank the speaker committee for inviting me.

I have been doing quite a bit of thinking about marriage, mine in particular, in the past couple of years. Last June, my husband and I celebrated 25 years of married life. In the days leading up to that milestone, I found myself doing a great deal of thinking about the beginning of our marriage, and the persons my husband and I were then. It was a time to look back and reflect. One thing clearly stood out for me: despite the examples of our parents' happy marriages, despite the fact that we were both old enough to have had some life experience, and despite an adequate parish preparation program, neither of us had **any** idea of what we were getting into. In the movie *Shakespeare in Love*, one character always calmed nervous actors, financial backers, and Shakespeare himself, by reassuring them that the play in question would come out right in the end. When asked how he knew this, he always gave the same response, "It's a mystery." In looking back on my marriage, I would have to say the same thing.

My husband and I are very different people. He was born and raised in Marin County, I am from the New York City metropolitan area. He operates from a Julian of Norwich perspective, that "All manner of things shall be well." My slogan is "You snooze, you lose." Nowhere are the differences between us more evident than in our attitude about parking spaces. Bob is willing to park some distance away from his destination without complaint, often commenting that it's a good day for a walk. I just can't understand this. I will circle a parking lot repeatedly in order to get as close as possible. For me it's combat: a matter of personal honor and a testimony to my ingenuity. I would never dream of surrendering as quickly as Bob does. I kid you not, but I still have fond memories of prime parking spaces I've snagged under impossible conditions as long as twenty or thirty years ago. And yet, Bob's over all track record is far better than mine. People in close parking spaces just seem to be ready to pull out as he happens by. He effortlessly gets parking spaces that I can only dream about. I can't tell you how much that irritates me. The fact that we've lasted this long is definitely a mystery.

And it is very proper, in a theological sense, to speak of the sacrament of marriage as a mystery. All sacraments are, because they point to a reality greater than themselves. We say that in marriage the two become one, but that "one" is not a mere merging of personalities in which certain aspects of one person become subordinated to another. Yes, there is unity, but each person in the marriage becomes more fully him- or herself through participation in this unity. If this language of personhood and unity sounds familiar, it should, because such language is also deeply Trinitarian.

When I teach my students in the diocesan School of Pastoral Ministry about the Trinity, I always point out the Western tendency to view the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as job descriptions. The Father creates, the Son redeems, and the Spirit sustains. This is actually a heresy. God is one and acts with one will. The language of personhood does not mean distinct psychological entities.

What distinguishes the persons of the Trinity is their relationship. The Father lovingly shares himself completely with the Son and the Son lovingly shares himself completely with the Father. That self-giving, that love, is so dynamic and generative, that it is expressed in the Holy Spirit. This generative exchange is not a one-time event: it has existed from all time, exists now, and will exist eternally. It forms the very basis of reality. Most importantly, the communion of love that is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is not a closed communion but spills outward. God ever and always invites humanity to share in the divine communion.

Although the analogy is imperfect, we can nonetheless see its applicability to marriage. In his book *A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage*, Richard Gaillardetz makes a very interesting and important point about the creation stories in Genesis that is literally lost in translation. The first human that God creates is referenced as *ha adam*, a generic word that means “earth creature.” not the proper name Adam, as it is indicated in translation. This earth creature has no gender per se. It is only when God creates a companion out of the creature’s side, that they are called *is* and *issah*, man and woman. They only become persons in relationship to one another. Furthermore, the mutual love and self-giving that characterizes marriage at its best is dynamic and generative. Children bear witness to the generativity of that love. But even when marriage does not result in children due to infertility, or when the couple is beyond childbearing age, the generativity of marital love informs the couple’s response to Christ’s call to discipleship and mission in the world. Like the Trinity, marital love is not meant to be a closed communion.

This leads me to *Deus Caritas Est*, particularly to the section in which the Holy Father discusses the concepts of *eros* and *agape* and the essential difference and unity of the two. In today’s culture, we understand *eros* primarily in crass bodily terms, but its meaning in antiquity entailed more than this. *Eros* was seen as connected to the divine; an intoxication, a “divine madness” in which the human drive for transcendence found expression. However, as is so often the case, human beings made *eros* into a commodity for which it became acceptable to use the body of another, all in the name of a self-absorbed quest for supreme happiness. The Pope rightfully characterizes undisciplined *eros* as a degradation rather than the exaltation of the human person. Its inwardness can never lead to authentic personhood and certainly cannot lead to God. It is only through discipline, purification and growth in maturity that the promise of *eros* is realized.

*Agape* is characterized by a self-giving love that seeks the happiness of the other above one’s own. It is the word for “love” that is overwhelmingly used in the New Testament. In contrast with the possessive love that characterizes *eros*, *agape* is a giving love. And yet, the Holy Father points out that the two cannot and should not be set in opposition to one another. Both are present in God’s nature as well as our own. God’s desire, freely entered into, for relationship with us is rooted in *eros* which is a “seeking love.” At the same time, this love is *agape* in that it does not love in order to possess or control. In a profound act of love, God created us with free will and allows its unfettered exercise. God’s love for us is personal, but not self-seeking. It is a love that is utterly gratuitous, forgiving and compassionate, that seeks nothing but our perfection.

Similarly, both elements are present in the sacrament of marriage. The saying “the honeymoon is over” somewhat negatively expresses the simple truth that marriages do not survive by *eros* alone. Care and concern for one’s spouse, forgiveness, compassion, and a love that does not “keep score” are essential elements of a loving union. At the same time, Pope Benedict states

very clearly that *agape* alone does not serve the purpose of the sacrament either and notes the tendency in Christianity to exalt *agape* at the expense of *eros*. Human beings must receive as well as give. The intimacy of sexual union between a wife and husband replenishes and strengthens us for the sacrifices and compromises that form the fabric of married life.

When I survey the modern landscape of marriage, I feel a sense of dismay. The Holy Father's analysis in *Deus Caritas Est*, gave me a vocabulary to express my perceptions: too much *eros*, not enough *agape*. Our culture's emphasis on externals, our materialism, and the packaging of weddings as a commodities are all to blame. A look at some of television's reality shows gives the impression that some young women desire marriage simply to have the experience of the "fairy-tale wedding." When "the honeymoon is over" what will that couple have left?

But the factor that I think is most to blame for the shakiness of the institution of marriage is the overly psychologized me-ism of today's society. We are encouraged to evaluate our marriages on the basis of how well our needs are being met, and on the ability of our spouses to "be there for us." The ideal of the perfect mate who anticipates our every wish, meets our every need, and adores us into feeling wonderful about ourselves is a dangerous fantasy. It is rooted in a narrow understanding of *eros* which seeks to use the other in order to experience the deep fulfillment for which all persons long. It is dangerous because it leads us in exactly the wrong direction, that is to say inwards, absorbed in self-preoccupation. Contrast this to what the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World has to say about the sacrament of marriage:

*[Married] love is an eminently human one since it is directed from one person to another through an affection of the will; it involves the good of the whole person, and therefore can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling these expressions as special ingredients and signs of the friendship distinctive of marriage. This love God has judged worthy of special gifts, healing, perfecting and exalting gifts of grace and charity. Such love, merging the human with the divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves, a gift proving itself by gentle affection and by deed, such love pervades the whole of their lives: indeed by its busy generosity it grows better and grows greater. Therefore it far excels mere erotic inclination.*

Comment [Comment1]: .

*...Firmly established by the Lord, the unity of marriage will radiate from the equal personal dignity of wife and husband, a dignity acknowledged by mutual and total love. The constant fulfillment of the duties of this Christian vocation demands notable virtue. For this reason, strengthened by grace for holiness of life, the couple will painstakingly cultivate and pray for steadiness of love, large heartedness and the spirit of sacrifice. [Gaudium et Spes #49]*

This is consistent with the central paradox of our faith, the Pascal Mystery. One can only save one's life by losing it. In other words, our deepest needs are met in marriage not through self-absorbed demands upon one's spouse, but by tending to his or her needs with empathy, compassion, and forgiveness. It is unfortunate that in the history of Catholic Christian spirituality, the married state was seen as far less holy than the celibate vocations to the priesthood or religious life. The sacrament of marriage, faithfully lived, is no less a way of self-renunciation. If the love between spouses is rooted in *agape* as well as *eros*, the mutuality of self-giving will lead both spouses to God, who alone can fill the deepest needs of the human heart.

I have been blessed in my marriage. Despite the differences of our temperaments, my husband and I have formed a loving union, based on mutual caring and respect. Not all our difficulties have been as trivial or as humorous as our different approach to parking spaces. Both of us have had to make sacrifices and I am very aware of the sacrifices Bob has made in the service of my fulfillment. It is not easy to be married to someone who serves within the Church, especially when it represents completely unforeseen change of profession. My husband married a software engineer like himself, and ended up with a lay ecclesial minister. His adjustment to the changing landscape of our marriage far exceeds mere tolerance, and I am eternally grateful to him for his support and encouragement. His love for me mirrors the love of God.

I can only hope that he can say the same for me. I have made sacrifices as well for my husband's career. Working for a high-tech start up that does business all over the world means frequent travel, and long hours, including conference calls at some very inconvenient times. Then there is Bob's intense interest in world soccer, but I won't bore you with the details of that. Suffice it to say that on a few mornings last year, in the midst of our second honeymoon trip, going out to breakfast had to wait until the end of overtime in a World Cup soccer match. I like to think that I dealt with it more maturely than I would have in younger days, but you'll have to check that out with him!

Marriage, along with Holy Orders, is a sacrament of vocation. It is sometimes called a sacrament of service, and with good reason. The challenges of married life provide many opportunities for the purification and maturing of *eros* and the exercise of *agape*. The love that is experienced in the mutual self-giving of marriage is an echo of the truth that indeed, *Deus caritas est*.