

Developing Respect For Marriage

by the Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

The Lord created marriage. In the gospel of *Matthew* the Lord said:

“He who made them at the beginning ‘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’ ” (*Matthew* 19:4-5).

The creation story in the book of Genesis culminates in the formation of human beings. In His crowning work, God created male and female, both in His image. At the very same time the Lord created marriage. As one teaching in the work *Conjugal Love* puts it:

“When the Lord created mankind, He at the same time created [true married love] and implanted in it a capacity for receiving and perceiving ... all the blessings, felicities and delights that could ever be conveyed” (335; see also *Conjugal Love* 157).

The Lord created marriage. And He did so for some very important reasons. Let me just list three:

Marriage is one of His ways of blessing people with happiness. The Lord has a desire to make people happy—here on earth and to eternity in heaven. Marriage is one of the ways He can bring the greatest joy to people. We’ll talk more about this later.

A second reason for creating marriage is so that people could prepare for heaven. One of the primary things we need to do to get to heaven is develop an unselfish love for other people. We call it charity towards the neighbor—looking outside ourselves to the well-being of someone else. Marriage is an intense framework within which two people can practice unselfish love and respect for each other, and so make progress towards heaven. What we will see is that preparing for marriage and preparing for heaven are virtually the same thing. Marriage and religion go hand in hand.

Marriage is the rightful context for the birth and rearing of children. In the book of the Writings for the New Church called *Divine Providence*, we read, “[A heaven from the human race] was the Lord’s end in creation, and since this was the end in creation, it is also the end of His Divine Providence” (n. 27).

The Lord created marriage to bring people happiness, to help them prepare for heaven, and to provide a means for the creation of more people whom He could lead to heaven.

Before we go any further, we should acknowledge certain things about marriage and the way it is experienced by many people. Some people don’t end up getting married here on earth. That doesn’t make them any less cared for by the Lord; nor does it handicap them in their path to heaven. Some people’s experience with marriage is marginal at best; they find themselves in a

marriage which does not bring them great joy. Two people get married only to discover that they don't share some of the same values in life, or they have lost sight of what attracted them to the other person in the first place. And let's face it, lots of marriages end in divorce, sometimes for very good reasons. Having said that, we should also acknowledge that some people experience tremendous joy by means of marriage. It is the best thing in their lives, and they can't even remember a time when they weren't married.

Marriage is experienced in many different ways here on earth. But that doesn't change the fact that the Lord created marriage, and that He created it for our happiness. Our challenge this morning is to look beyond some of the shortcomings of marriage that we can see, to how the Lord created marriage-how He set it up, and how we can cooperate with Him to have the best chance of experiencing a happy marriage. We need to develop a respect for marriage and honor it as the Lord's creation.

Marriage is holy. The first part of this respect is a recognition that marriages are sacred. Consider this teaching from *Married Love*:

This love is celestial, spiritual, holy, pure and clean, more so than any other love which exists from the Lord in angels of heaven or people of the church (n. 64).

Marriage as an institution is holy because it comes from the Lord. It is pure and clean for the same reason. If we are to respect marriage, then we have to see where it comes from. It is not something that just happens whenever two people decide to share their lives. The love which a husband and wife experience is a gift from the Lord. As this passage continues:

If married love is received from its Author, who is the Lord, it is accompanied by holiness from Him.... If then, a person has a desire and striving for it in his will, that love daily becomes more clean and pure to eternity (*Ibid.*).

This teaching says to me that marriage is not ours to do with as we please. The Lord set it up. He has certain goals in mind by means of it, one of which is to make us happy. We need to strive for it, pray for it, look forward to it, desire to receive it from the Lord. We need to honor the institution of marriage as a sacred.

To illustrate this point, we turn to the parable of the wedding garment from the Gospel of Matthew. The Lord told this parable about heaven. It is a parable about respect, or more appropriately, a lack of respect for the things the Lord offers. Heaven is compared to a wedding feast. The guests who were invited were unwilling to come. They didn't see the value of living a good life, and so preparing for heaven. The story goes on to describe the king's efforts to find other people to come to his son's wedding: he sent his servants into the highways and streets of the city to invite anyone who was willing to come. Then we hear about one guest who came to the wedding without a wedding garment. It is important to realize that the Lord was not talking about external signs of respect in this story. The parable isn't about how someone chose to dress at a wedding party. It is about inward respect for heavenly things. The Lord is the king who invites all to come to heaven. But only those end up in heaven who value it, and want to be there.

It's no accident that the Lord chose a wedding for the context of this message. Marriage deserves the same consideration as heaven does. If our thoughts and inward intentions are pure in respect to marriage, then the Lord can bless us with happiness in marriage, or at least help us to prepare for the time when we will get married. If we do not see it's value, we are like those guests who were unwilling to come to the wedding feast, or like that man who showed up without a wedding garment.

The Writings for the New Church use two terms for this sacred attitude towards marriage. One is the term "conjugal." "Conjugal" love means "married" love or the love experienced within marriage. But many people in our church hold that term as sacred. It conveys the sense that marriages are holy, and that they are from the Lord. Certainly this is a large part of what the book *Conjugal Love* or *Married Love* is all about.

Another term which is used is "chastity." This is a somewhat antiquated term in today's world. It is a word that conveys purity, lack of corruption, innocence, and decency with respect to marriage. I believe it also has a connotation of restraint, of not letting oneself have any fun, of holding back, of prudishness, but this is not the way the Writings for the New Church use it. In the work *Conjugal Love* there is a whole chapter devoted to the subject of chastity. It is primarily concerned with a person's attitude towards marriage-what is going on in a person's mind-with the purity of a person's thoughts (see *Conjugal Love* 140). It talks about the fact that a person's love and respect for marriage can become more and more purified or chaste (see n. 145). It points out that no love can become completely purified in people-not even the love in strong marriages, which is comforting to know (see n. 146). But it also explains that purification takes place to the extent that people stay away from what is impure. This includes big things such as adulterous relationships and sex before marriage, and also relatively small things like joking about the opposite sex in a mean spirited way, or filthy thoughts about someone. The point is that our attitude towards marriage is what counts. Chastity means that we regard marriage as holy. The more "chaste" our thoughts and intentions are, the more the Lord can lead us towards happiness in marriage.

Marriages can last to eternity. Another part of our respect for marriage is a realization that the love a husband and wife feel for each other does not end at death. This is an essential concept taught in the New Church. Marriages can last to eternity!

There is a common perception in our world, which I believe comes from the Lord, that the next life is real. Heaven is real. And because of that, people have this feeling that they will see loved ones again who have died. The work *Divine Providence* speaks to this general perception by saying:

Who does not believe that his little children are in heaven, and that after death he will see his wife, whom he has loved? Who thinks that they are ghosts, still less that they are souls or minds hovering about in the universe? (n. 274).

People continue to live in heaven. Good people become angels. And there is marriage in heaven.

Now we need to think about that statement for a minute: there is marriage in heaven. The Lord appeared to say something radically different while He was on earth. We read about the Sadducees who posed a question for Jesus. They devised a scenario which would never really happen: a brother dies, leaving a wife behind and no children. One after the other, each of his six brothers takes her as a wife and dies. And the question comes: “In the resurrection whose wife does she become? For they all had her as a wife” (Luke 20:33). We can see that their intent was to entrap Jesus—to make Him say something foolish, or something which would contradict Jewish law. It doesn’t help that these were people who didn’t even believe in “the resurrection” or in life after death (see Luke 20:27).

Knowing these things, Jesus answered by saying: “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Luke 20:35-36). Our goal this morning is not to discount what Jesus said, for it is part of His Holy Word. But we do need to understand what He meant by it. There is marriage in heaven. And we can see this even here when Jesus appears to have said the direct opposite.

His aim was to teach the Sadducees that there is life after death. He spoke of the reality of the resurrection, and concluded by saying that the Lord “is not a God of the dead but of the living” (Luke 20:38). But by means of His answer He also taught something true and important about the state of marriage after death. If we go back to the parable of the wedding garment we can see that the Lord uses marriage as a symbol for heaven. Being invited to the wedding means being invited into heaven (see *Conjugal Love* 41:3). In exactly the same way the Lord taught the Sadducees about the process of coming into heaven. The preparation for heaven takes place in this world. We cannot change the kind of person we are once we get to the other world. This is why the person without the wedding garment was cast out. His internal nature was not heavenly. He had not become an angel or prepared himself to live in heaven while he was on earth. So the Lord said, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage.” We choose to accept or reject the Lord’s invitation to heaven in this world (see *Conjugal Love* 41).

It is exactly the same with marriage. The attitude towards marriage which we develop in this world is what counts. We can't change that when we enter the next life. Marriages in heaven are like the best of marriages here on earth. They are holy, pure, and clean. They are loving and enduring. They are between one man and one woman, not eight people as the Sadducees proposed. The attitude towards marriage displayed by those Sadducees does not exist in heaven—the attitude that marriage is temporary and can be terminated for any reason, that men have more rights than women. The truth of the matter is that the Lord created marriage for people on earth and for people who become angels in heaven. He did not contradict this essential teaching when He was in the world. He just directed our thoughts inward, to our respect for marriage.

Knowing that marriages exist in heaven leads us to an amazing realization and belief. The Lord will provide happy marriages for all good people—on earth or in heaven. Part of our respect for marriage is to realize this. As one teaching from *Conjugal Love* says:

“The only determining factor [of whether we will be happily married here on earth, or in heaven] is the marital disposition [or attitude towards marriage] which is seated and guarded in a person’s will, in whatever state of marriage the person lives” (*Conjugal Love* 531).

Ideally a husband and wife who have shared their lives here on earth will remain married in heaven, and their love will continue to grow and develop to eternity. I believe that happens quite frequently. Sometimes marriages end at death; the husband and wife realize that they have some substantial differences, and agree to separate. But they find new partners who are more suited to them, if they have loved marriage, and respected it as something set up by the Lord alone (see *Conjugal Love* 48[repeated]). Some people never get married in this world. They too will receive the blessings of marriage in heaven, if they have loved marriage while they were here on earth. The same thing could be said for a person who is divorced.

Working towards the dream of love truly conjugal. What we come to see with more and more clarity is that marriage is one of the Lord’s most fundamental institutions. He calls it “the precious jewel of human life, and the repository of the Christian religion” (*Conjugal Love* 457). Marriage is a “precious jewel” because the Lord has created it to bring us the greatest happiness we can experience. It is “the repository of Christian religion” because “religion,” or the Lord’s laws of order, are essential if we are to feel that happiness (n. 458). Marriage, after all, is two people looking outside of themselves and caring for another human being. Isn’t that what religion is all about?

In whatever state of marriage we find ourselves: happily married, in a mediocre marriage, single, or divorced, we can all develop a respect for marriage. Every generation of people needs to come to love the Lord’s order in relation to marriage. We all need to revisit His precious teachings from time to time. Only then can we prepare ourselves for happiness in marriage to eternity in heaven. *Amen.*

Lessons: Matthew 22:1-14; Luke 20:27-40; *Conjugal Love* 71.