

***The Theology of Marriage:
Personalism, Doctrine, and Canon Law***
by Cormac Burke

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Monsignor Cormac Burke's riveting book, *The Theology of Marriage: Personalism, Doctrine, and Canon Law*, is a must-read for couples in Pre-Cana, marriage counselors, and anyone involved in pastoral ministry who wants a fuller understanding of the sacrament. Although the book reads much like a college textbook because of its use of Latin phrases and high academic language, the first several pages establish its central theme, namely, the truth that marriage is "a union between one man and one woman which is exclusive, permanent, and open to life" (2). From these four principles, Burke expounds on several details of marriage that may be unfamiliar to the laity.

As he establishes marriage's societal role, Burke makes the point that even civil marriages are sacramentally valid if they fulfill the prerequisites of being between a man and a woman and being exclusive, permanent, and open to life. Initially, this supposed challenge to my conservative Southern values aroused my indignation, but, as I continued to read, the statement began to make sense. Marriage, as a sacrament, is performed, not by the priest, but by the couple. Consequently, the couple conveys the sacrament to itself. Therefore, if a marriage between baptized individuals fulfills the four orders, it is sacramentally valid even if officiated by the state. The couple has already been presented to Christ in baptism and, through the sacrament of marriage, its members are dedicating themselves to Him. Far from detaching marriage from the Church, where it fulfills its supernatural reality—the unity between Christ and the Church—Burke's

argument strengthens the sacrament's universality by affirming their inseparability. Today, many young couples who were raised Catholic but no longer practice their faith believe that they can separate marriage from its sacramentality. According to Burke, this is impossible: "This is a power which he or she does not have, any more than a person has the power to 'separate' Christ from the consecrated Host" (26). That which God has deemed sacrament will always be sacrament. That which God has joined cannot be broken or undone.

Later chapters address the contemporary tendency to downplay marriage's relationality. Burke references *Gaudium et spes*, n. 24, which states that man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself." Through marriage, spouses participate in the mutual act of giving themselves to each other, but marriage is not a one-day event. It is a life-long pursuit that spouses live in sacrament, through which they give themselves daily and accept one another daily. Ultimately, the main goal of all sacraments is unity, not just with each other but with God.

By applying the unifying characteristic of marriage to the conjugal act, Burke examines the marital act's societal role. He uses St. Augustine's teachings on the beauty of the conjugal act and the mutual help that spouses give to each other in the home to show how the conjugal act is part of the society of the home. There is no greater or lesser member in marriage, but there are roles. Burke mentions Aquinas's view that women are meant to help men, emphasizing that this does not make them inferior or beneath men: just

as Christ was not lower than his disciples because he washed their feet. Each spouse is meant to help the other in the ways they can and to accept the help that is offered to them. In Genesis, God created woman to be a helpmate to man, not his slave. This is an important pastoral message for many cultures that deem women less than what they share—an equal right to the redemption and sacrifice of Christ.

After establishing its importance in the society of the home, Burke explores the conjugal act within the context of ends and essential elements. Intercourse is not an essential element of marriage. It is a good. For example, older couples do not need intercourse in order to have a loving relationship. Many couples enter marriage with an openness to life. However, if couples deem intercourse an essential element, they lose sight of its beauty as an end that contains another one of sexuality's ends: children. The goal of intercourse is an indissoluble part of the society created by marriage, though which children are introduced into the society of the household. According to the teachings of Pope John Paul II, this society is the only context in which these relationships can be brought about "in a truly human way" (*Familiaris consortio*, n. 11). Burke explains that problems arise when society views the conjugal act as essential to the marriage rather than as a wholly unitive act. He refers to Augustine's point of view on sex to contextualize several key ideas that have been introduced into modern Catholic thought, for example, an altogether pessimistic attitude toward sex. We struggle, as Augustine struggled with his own sexual appetites, but often

dismiss his conclusion as an unattainable ideal and decide that sex is a neutral, biological function. Humanity, Burke argues, has a capacity for sin, and, although we always seek the good, we sometimes do not recognize it. Subsequently, saying that *sex is good* and *there is nothing wrong with sex* are two entirely different things (141). Modern sexual education teaches that there is nothing wrong with sex: There is no good or bad from it. Catholic moral tradition states, along with Augustine, that, although the body is good, it can be used wrongly. As we strive to be the best we can in marriage, we are given support as well as challenges, through which we have the capacity to achieve virtue.

Monsignor Burke has written an exceptional book that will influence many across the board. His text answers several misconceptions and strengthens many deeply held beliefs. I have already started to recommend this book to many of my colleagues as a great informer. Although *Theology of Marriage* elucidates the Church's perspective on the sacrament, Burke, at times, draws radical conclusions that may make some Catholic readers wince. So read it with an open mind and, if it helps, repeat the prayer to St. Francis. Notwithstanding this light admonition, couples who wish to better understand their faith should consider this book an indispensable companion to their Catechism.

HARRISON DENN

Harrison Denn holds a master's degree in theology from the Oblate School of Theology, in San Antonio, Texas, and a bachelor's degree in theology from the University of Dallas.