



Fra Angelico  
*Marriage of the Virgin* (ca. 1433-34)  
Museo Diocesano (Cortona)

## THE MORAL LIFE

COMMUNION  
WITH SPOUSE

HOW DO SPOUSES BECOME ONE?

BY DEACON JAMES KEATING, PH.D.

Ultimately, God wants engaged couples to fall in love with one another in the manner that He loves them: out of sheer gift and in wonder over the beauty of who you are. Since the male-female relationship is so damaged today (through fornication, cohabitation, divorce and re-marriage, pornography, etc), cynicism toward love and falling in love rules the day. Many people then come to marriage carrying some emotional injury from past relationships. People in pain are not free to truly give themselves to their beloved. Their marriage preparation requires *healing aimed at emotional and moral freedom*. If such pain is present in you, then Christ is asking that you surrender to Him and let Him stay *with* you and *in* you in order to offer such healing. To suffer the healing of past emotional injuries is necessary so that on your wedding day, you are free to say “Yes” to love and are not bound to past emotional memories (possessive parents, loneliness, fear of abandonment, promiscuity, pornography, etc.). Let Christ work at the site of this pain. Do not turn away from Him, but bring the pain to Him in prayer and to those to whom your marriage preparation is entrusted, especially your pastor.



*Deacon James Keating, Ph.D., is Director of Theological Formation in The Institute for Priestly Formation at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska.*

For you to be happily married, Christ has to heal you so you can be free to give yourself as a gift to your spouse. In fact, to be someone's spouse in the Christian sense is to knowingly enter communion with another to assist in their growth in holiness and moral healing. Keeping your vows of fidelity until death and possessing openness of heart to give and receive love creates the most secure arena for spiritual and emotional healing. This remedy can occur because spouses are willing to say one simple sentence, "I am not going anywhere," and then back this statement up with one simple promise to "remain" vowed to the one they love. This is the surest sign that spouses understand both the attraction of love ("I desire you and you alone") and the work of love ("I will suffer my and your needed healing/conversion"). To "suffer" the healing of your spouse is to endure his or her spiritual, moral, and emotional conversion by way of your graced and promised vowed love. The spiritual goal of Catholic marriage is to mediate grace from God for the mutual conversion of spouses. The vow is, "I am not going anywhere." With this vow, and with God's help, one spouse sees the other spouse through his or her moral and emotional conversion. This vow frees the spouses to live in truth and communicate their struggles with each other. The vow for spouses to stay faithful until death gives each partner the courage to receive the truth about his or her present weaknesses, struggles, and faults without the thought that "I will be abandoned" (see Jn 14:18).

Most people come into a marriage emotionally, spiritually, or morally disadvantaged to a greater or lesser extent. Since this is the case, each spouse may or may not be able to attend to the pain of their spouse as they are coping with the effects of their own distress. To counteract this state of mutual strain and, therefore, mutual unavailability to one another, it is good for couples to get outside help with their needed healings

and, most especially, to seek freedom from these difficulties during the marriage preparation period.

To vow to remain ("Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit" Jn 15:5) with your spouse until death and then to entrust your heart to, and share your prayers with, him or her creates the emotional and spiritual *security* necessary for a person to entrust their body to their spouse. You will respect the body of your spouse if you do one thing: "clothe" that body, not with fabric, but with true and lasting intimacy.<sup>1</sup> Mature communion between spouses depends upon emotional, spiritual, and physical safety. "I will reveal all only if I am assured you will receive all and not run from me." In creating such a safe place called marriage, a man and a woman know happiness. Anything less than this kind of safety carries the *potential* for such happiness but not yet its fullness.

Marital intimacy, then, is the real sharing of the heart and body within the safety and trust of a prayerful and vowed relationship until death. This intimacy is the glue that holds a relationship together. Without it, outside forces can interfere with the commitment and seduce a spouse to look for a false safety elsewhere, an environment where self-donation and revelation will not be secure but, perhaps, only temporarily received (sexual affairs, emotional affairs, immature and lingering emotional dependency upon one's family of origin, etc.). In this temporary "intimacy," a spouse may receive false consolation, mistaking it for vowed security. Much pain is caused by couples who do not bestow intimacy as their primary gift to one another. Intimacy is demanded by the human heart and when real, is its deepest place of rest, and when received within a communion of prayer, becomes the deepest place of life's meaning.

To love is to give the self for the good of your beloved. This giving, however, is not simply a series of discreet

acts of service for your spouse. Love also involves the desire to abide in the presence of another. To be in your spouse's presence physically does not mean, however, that you have achieved union with him or her. Union involves not only service, not only sexual intercourse, but, perhaps most especially, the commitment to reveal the heart, to reveal thoughts, feelings, and desires. These heart movements are not revealed in service of the self. In other words, they are not revealed to relieve oneself of an affective burden ("I am angry; I will tell you about it so I feel better"). No, these heart movements are shared because you have come to know that *your spouse will receive these interior movements as a sure path to union* ("I am angry so I will tell you about it to guard our communion. I do not want this anger to separate us in any way").

Without such deep sharing, a couple may simply co-exist in a house, efficiently choosing the most amenable route to accomplishing daily duties but in reality, missing one another, never really being in the real presence of the other. To live in the real presence of your spouse, you need to commit to reveal your heart and to receive your spouse's heart within the context of the lifelong reciprocal gift of the body, thus achieving intimacy.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Angelo Cardinal Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery (Ressourcement: Retrieval & Renewal in Catholic Thought)*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 75.