

A reading about the family as God's design for love; from the writings of Blessed Paul VI.¹

As holy scripture teaches us, before it is a sacrament marriage is a great earthly reality: *God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God: he created them man and woman.* We always have to go back to that first page of the Bible if we want to understand what a human couple, a family, really is and what it ought to be. Psychological analyses, psychoanalytical research, sociological surveys, and philosophical reflection may of course have a contribution to make with the light they shed on human sexuality and love; but they would blind us if they neglected this fundamental teaching which was given to us at the very beginning: the duality of the sexes was decreed by God, so that together man and woman might be the image of God and, like him, the source of life: *Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it.* Attentive reading of the prophets, the wisdom books, and the New Testament, moreover, shows us the significance of this basic reality, and teaches us not to reduce it to physical desire and genital activity, but to discover in it the complementary nature of the values of man and woman, the greatness and the weaknesses of conjugal love, its fruitfulness and its opening on to the mystery of God's design for love.

The Christian knows that human love is good by its very origin; and if, like everything else in us, it is wounded and deformed by sin, it finds its salvation and redemption in Christ. Besides, isn't this the lesson that twenty centuries of Christian history have taught us? How many couples have found the way to holiness in their conjugal life, in that community of life which is the only one to be founded on a sacrament!

Love one another, as I have loved you. The ways in which they express their affection are, for Christian husband and wife, full of the love which they draw from the heart of God. And if its human source threatens to dry up, its divine source is as inexhaustible as the unfathomable depths of God's affection. That shows us the intimacy, strength, and richness of the communion which conjugal love aims at. It is an inward and spiritual reality, transforming the community of life of husband and wife into what might be called, in accordance with the teaching authorized by the Second Vatican Council, "the domestic Church," a true "cell of the Church," as St. John the Twenty-third already called it, a basic cell, a germinal cell in the ecclesial body. - over

Such is the mystery in which conjugal love takes root, and which illuminates all its expressions. The rapture which moves husband and wife to unite is the carrier of life,

¹ reprinted in *Meditations on the Sunday Gospels: Year A*; introduced and edited by John E. Rotelle, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995, pp. 26-27

and enables God to give himself children. On becoming parents, the husband and wife discover with a sense of wonder, at the baptismal font, that their child is from now on a child of God, *reborn from water and the Spirit*; and that the child is entrusted to them so that they may watch over its physical and moral growth, certainly, but also the opening out and blossoming in him of *the new nature*. Such a child is no longer just what they see, but just as much what they believe, “an infinity of mystery and love which would dazzle us if we say it face to face” [in the words of Emmanuel Mounier]. Therefore [the] upbringing [of children] becomes true service of Christ, according to his own saying: *whatever you do for one of these little ones, you do for me.*

The Virgin Mary as Land of God: a reading from a homily by St. Theodore the Studite.

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Never has anyone been nearer to God than the blessed and most wonderful Virgin Mary. Who could be purer? Who more sinless? She was loved so ardently by God, the Divine, infinitely pure light, that he made himself of one substance with her through the power of the Holy Spirit and was born of her as perfect man, while keeping entire his own unchangeable and unblended nature. How marvelous this is! In his immense love for man, God was not ashamed to take for his mother her who was his handmaid. What condescension! In his infinite goodness he did not hesitate to become a child of her whom he himself had made. He was truly in love with the most gracious of his creatures, and he took her who was of greater worth than the heavenly powers.

The words of Zechariah the prophet do indeed apply to her: ASing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo, I come and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord@ (Zech 2.10). And again it is she whom blessed Joel is addressing, so it seems to me, when he writes: AFear not, O land: be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things!@ (Joel 2.21). For Mary is a land: that land on which Moses the man of God was told to remove his shoe, figure of the law, for grace was going to take the place of law. Again, she is that land which is established by the Holy Spirit himself, as we sing: AHe laid the foundation of the earth@ (Ps 104.5). She is a land that, without having been sown, has yielded the fruit which nourishes everything that exists. She is a land on which the thorn of sin has never grown: on the contrary, she has given the light of day to him who has torn up sin by the root. In short, she is a land that has not been cursed, as the first one has, with harvests of thorns and thistles, for she is one on which the Lord=s blessing rests, a land bearing in her womb a blessed fruit, as the sacred word declares.

Rejoice, House of God, land on which God has stepped, you who have contained in your body him whose divinity overflows all bounds. For he who is simplicity itself has taken man=s complex nature; the Eternal has entered into time and the infinite into limits. Rejoice, House of God, resplendent with the light of divinity. Rejoice, full of grace: your deed and your name are more joy-giving than all joy. For your immortal joy, Christ, has come into the world, the cure for the sadness of man. Rejoice, Paradise happier than the garden of Eden, where all virtue has grown and where the tree of Life has flourished.

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From a Letter of St Basil on the Incarnation 1

You have written that there are some among you who are doing away with the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, as much as they are able, and rejecting the grace of the great mystery kept secret from eternity but manifested in His own time, when the Lord, after having gone through all things pertaining to the care of the human race, in addition to all else bestowed upon us His own sojourn among us. For He aided His own creature, first through the patriarchs, whose lives have been set forth as examples and rules for those desiring to follow in the footsteps of the saints and through a zeal like theirs to arrive at the perfection of good deeds. Then, He gave a law for our assistance, delivering it by angels through Moses; then Prophets, who proclaimed beforehand the salvation that was to be, judges, kings and just men, who performed mighty works with hidden hand. After all these, in the last days, He Himself was manifested in the flesh, >born of a woman, born under the Law, that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons=.

If, therefore, the sojourn of the Lord in the flesh did not take place, the Redeemer did not pay the price for us, and He did not by His own power destroy the dominion of death. For, if that which is subject to death were one thing, and that which was assumed by the Lord were another, then death would not have ceased performing its own works, nor would the sufferings of the God-bearing flesh have become our gain; He would not have destroyed sin in the flesh; we who had died in Adam would not have been made to live in Christ; that which had fallen asunder would not have been restored; that which was shattered would not have been repaired; that which had been estranged through the deceit of the serpent would not have been again made God=s own. For, all these things are denied by those who say that the Lord made His sojourn with a heavenly body. And what was the need of the blessed Virgin, if the God-bearing flesh was not to be assumed from the substance of Adam? But who is so bold as now to revive once more through sophistic words and the testimony, as they pretend, of the Scriptures the teaching of Valentinus, which was silenced long ago? This impiety of the Appearance@, in fact, is not something new, but it was begun long ago by the weak-minded Valentinus, who, taking a few detached phrases of the Apostle, constructed the impious fiction for himself, saying that He had taken on Athe nature of a slave@, and not the slave himself, and that the Lord had been made Ain the form@, but that humanity itself had not been assumed by Him.

It is evident that the Lord took on the natural feelings for a confirmation of the true Incarnation and not of one according to the appearance, but rejected as unworthy of the undefiled Godhead the feelings arising from vice which soil the purity of our souls.

For this reason it is said that He was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, not, indeed, in the likeness of flesh, as these men think, but in the likeness of sinful flesh. Accordingly He took our flesh with its natural feelings, but He did not sin. Yet even as death in the flesh, which was handed down to us through Adam, was swallowed up by the Godhead, so also sin was utterly destroyed by the justice which is in Jesus Christ, so that in the resurrection we resume our flesh, which is neither liable to death

He must increase and I must decrease@; a reading from a sermon by Meister Eckhart.1

[It says in the Gospel according to St. John that] A God has sent his Only-Begotten Son into the world.@ You must not by this understand the external world in which the Son ate and drank with us, but understand it to apply to the inner world. As truly as the Father in his simple nature gives his Son birth naturally, so truly does he give him birth in the most inward part of the spirit, and that is the inner world. Here God=s ground is my ground, and my ground is God=s ground. Here I live from what is my own, as God lives from what is his own. Whoever has looked for an instant into this ground, to such a one a thousand marks of red, minted gold are no more than a counterfeit penny. It is out of this inner ground that you should perform all your works without asking, A Why?@ I say truly: So long as you perform your works for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, or for God=s sake, or for the sake of your eternal blessedness, and you work them from without, you are going completely astray. You may well be tolerated, but it is not the best. Whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden. But whoever seeks for God without ways will find him as he is in himself, and that one will live with the Son, and he is life itself.

Where the creature stops, there God begins to be. Now God wants no more from you than that you should in creaturely fashion go out of yourself and let God be God in you. The smallest creaturely image that ever forms in you is as great as God is great. Why? Because it comes between you and the whole of God. As soon as the image comes in, God and all his divinity has to give way. But as the image goes out, God goes in. God wants you to go out of yourself in creaturely fashion as much as if all his blessedness consisted in it. O my dear one, what harm does it do you to allow God to be God in you? Go completely out of yourself for God=s love, and God comes completely out of himself for love of you. And when these two have gone out, what remains there is a simplified One. In this One the Father brings his Son to birth in the innermost source. Then the Holy Spirit blossoms forth, and then there springs up in God a will that belongs to the soul. So long as the will remains untouched by all created things and by all creation, it is free. Christ says: ANo one comes into heaven except him who has come from heaven@ (Jn 3.13). All things are created from nothing; therefore their true origin is nothing, and so far as this noble will inclines toward created things, it flows off with created things toward their nothing. Why do you not stay in yourself and hold on to your own good? After all, you are carrying all truth in you in an essential manner.

¹ Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises. From the Classics of Western Spirituality. Paulist Press, New York, 1981., p. 183.

That we may so truly remain within, that we may possess all truth, without medium and without distinction, in true blessedness, may God help us to do this. Amen.

HOW GOD LEADS US IN THE WAY TO TRUE PEACE AND LIVE, by Elizabeth Seton¹

How often have I felt my soul awakened by thy Light and warmed by the fire of thy Love--then I approach thee--I find Thee--but Alas instantly after I lose thee--often I think myself received--then fear I am rejected--and in this continual change of interior dispositions I walk in darkness and often go astray--I desire and know not how to desire, I love, and know not how to love,--nor how to find what I love.

Thus my soul loses itself without ceasing to hope in thee--It knows by its own experience that it desire much, and is unable to do anything--you see its trouble O lord--and in that happy moment when fatigued with so many vicissitudes it falls at last into entire diffidence of itself then you open its eyes and it sees the true way to Peace and Life--it knows you were nearer than it imagined--you instruct it all at once without Voice or Words, it thinks only of what possesses it, abandoning all things else it then possesses Thee--It sees without knowing what it sees, it hears, and is ignorant of what it hears, it knows only Who he is to whom it is attentive, it contents itself with loving HIM, it loves Him continually more and more--Words cannot express, nor the mind comprehend what it receives from THEE O MY GOD even in this place of Banishment.

How happy is that moment O divine Jesus! how pure is that Light, how ineffable is that communion of thy Blessings! You know O Lord how precious that gift is, and thy Creature that receives it knows also--Ah! if it were faithful, if it never departed from Thee--if it knew how to preserve the Grace it had received, how happy would it be! and yet this is but a drop of that infinite Ocean of Blessings which thou art one day to communicate to it--

O Soul of my Soul--what is my Soul and What Good can it have without possessing you--Life of my Life! What is my Life when I live not in you--Is it possible that my Heart is capable of possessing you--of enjoying you all alone--of extending and

¹RICHER FARE, Ed. by Gail Ramshaw (Pueblo Publishing Co. NY 1990) pp. 116-117.

dilating itself in you--can thy creature thus be elevated above itself to repose in thy Breast, and after that depart from you? bury itself in the Earth?--Ah Lord I know not what I ought to say to You: but hear the voice of your love and of my misery; live always in me, and let me live perpetually in You and for You as I live only by You.

Enlighten me, O Divine Light! Conduct me, O supreme Truth! Raise me again, O uncreated Life! Separate me from every thing that displeases Thee. Suffer me to remain at thy Feet!

St John Neumann, Bishop - From Butler's Lives of Saints²

Born at Prachitz in Bohemia on March 28, 1811, John Neumann was the third of the six children of Philip, a German, and Agnes, a Czeck. He early showed signs of considerable intellectual ability, coupled with a wish to become a religious. He went to school in Budweis, and then to the diocesan seminary in 1831. He continued his theological studies at the Charles Ferdinand University in Prague, where he went in 1833, but on completion of his studies he was not ordained to serve his home diocese because of the great number of clergy there.

For this reason he determined to leave Europe and set out for the New World as a missionary. Soon after his arrival in New York, he was accepted for ordination and was promptly ordained by Bishop James Dubois on June 25, 1836. He spent four years of pastoral work in and around Buffalo before joining the Redemptorists. For a short time he was in charge of the American vice-province of the Order, though for most of the time he returned to parish work where his chief care was for the establishment of schools.

In 1852 Pope Pius IX appointed him Bishop of Philadelphia, and this office gave him yet more scope for his efforts to increase the system of parochial schools. To staff them he attracted to the diocese a number of orders of teaching brothers and nuns, so that in a short time the population of his schools increased twenty-fold. He also erected a large number of new parishes, introduced the devotion of the Forty Hours, and began the building of the cathedral. Despite all this activity he still found time to write, including, usually anonymously, articles for newspapers. His most important works, however, he composed in German, his preferred language for composition even though he had a thorough grasp of seven other modern languages. The two catechisms he produced were, in 1852, given the approval of the entire American hierarchy, and continued in wide use in the United States for most of the rest of the century.

He died, renowned for his sanctity and for his pastoral work, on January 5, 1860, on a street in Philadelphia. He was canonized by Pope Paul VI in 1977

2 Butler's Lives of the Saints - Revised edition - ed. Michael Walsh -
Harper -
San Francisco - 1991 - p. 5

The Lord as the movement of all people to the one Father: a reading from *Meditation on the Gospel of St. John* by Adrienne von Speyr. 1

The Lord is the Son of man. This names is mysterious; for we only know that the Lord is the Son of God, and we do not know why he is marked out by being called the Son of man. Though that is what he is in fact. He is the Son of the All Highest, and at the same time the Son of the lowest. He is the Son of him who has nothing to do with sin, and the Son of man who is bathed in sin. He is indeed the Son of a mother who was without sin. But he is equally the Son of the last of sinners. He is so because he took upon himself to be our neighbor. Our neighbor is always the person nearest to us, who is next to us. At one moment it may be our mother, or our brother, or a friend, master or pupil, the crowd on the street, or an enemy one has no wish to see, but whom one sees nevertheless, or perhaps some totally indifferent individual, forgotten as soon as seen. A person with whom we have everything in common, faith, love and hope, or someone with whom we have nothing in common, neither faith, nor love, nor hope. Someone we know all about and understand, because we never feel the need to understand anything about his life, or because in spite of an honest attempt to do so we can never get to the bottom of it.

Christ is the Son of these very people, the dearest to us and the most hated, the one we understand and the one who remains closed to us. He *is* the Son: man as the Son of God and God as the Son of every man, of those who desire him and of those who do not desire him; and in that we can grasp him as really being our neighbor, and as really being the Son of God. He is at one and the same time anonymous, and the one who bears the name closest to us: Our Lord. He it is who bridges all gulfs through the Father, because he embodies God in all men, and as the Son of man is the son of all, and so can be in all, pointing in all towards God.

The substance of the Lord provides the form of mediation between all peoples, between you and me. For although he defines every form of life, he is not tied to any definite form of life. He is in us, but always in such a way that he surpasses us; he is also all around us, in our neighbor, where he lives as essentially and personally, as fully and overflowing as in us. In the Lord we see the inmost reality of our neighbor, and his ideal possibility, towards which we should try to lead him. Everyone is therefore related to God through the Son, and because the Son is in them we must behave toward them so that they may reach the Father in Christ. For they are already in the movement of the

Son to the Father. Through the fulfillment of our love of our neighbor, the Lord is also the fulfillment of our love of God.

Without the Son of man, God would be remote; we should only know him as Spirit, not as flesh, and our flesh would have no relation to him. But in the Lord we can pray to God in the flesh we know, and so find entrance into the living Spirit. The Lord being our brother, we can understand that God is our Father.