

Getting Married to God

A reflection based on a text by Fr. Emeric Lawrence

The first reading at today's Eucharist sounds like a love letter from God to us, given us through Isaiah. "You shall be called "My Delight" and your land will be described as "Espoused. For the Lord delights in you and makes your land his spouse. As a youth marries a virgin so your builder shall marry you." The marriage theme dominates the Gospel reading too. Mary and Jesus have been invited to a wedding but so many have come that the wine has all been drunk while the celebration is half over. At Mary's request, Jesus does his first "sign".

'Sign' is St. John's favorite way of referring to what we like to call Jesus' 'miracles'. A sign points to something beyond itself. Jesus' signs point to God's compassion and love. Jesus changes water—about 150 gallons of it—into wine of the very best vintage. The point is not so much the manifestation of Jesus' divine power Jesus as the coming of a new relationship between God and humankind. The Old Covenant is taken into a New Covenant when God marries the entire human race. The difference is like that between wine and water.

We enter into this by following Mary's direction: "Do whatever Jesus tells you!" A more complete description of the practical results is given in today's second reading. Paul describes the kind of person one becomes because of this new relationship with God. He describes some of the many gifts God gives us in order to enable us to serve others, especially to those God has already married and one body with himself, members of his Church which Paul refers to as the Body of Christ.

This community of believers is what God has married, and in doing it God has married each of its members. As a human body has many members, so does what we call the 'mystical' Body of Christ. Each one has a special function in promoting the life of that Body. All are given the power, the strength, to enable Christ's Body to live and rejoice in its married life. This comes from the Holy Spirit—the fundamental marriage gift of the groom to the bride.

This entire description is intended to show us the dignity of marriage; it has a dignity much greater than anyone had known because a marriage relationship is analogous to the relationship we have with our God. God's relation with us is not like marriage but marriage is like our relationship with God. It is not marriage that shows us how to love God but it is love for God that shows us how to love our spouses, and all others as well.

The wedding feast at Cana is intended by St. John to point us toward the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a "feast", and a feast of "love" like a marriage celebration. It expresses the love between God and each of us, between members of a family or of a faith-community. Part of the point is that love is never easy but confronts us with a testing. There are tragedies that come to us, there may be mutual indifference or selfishness or hurts of all kinds. Human love has to grow and this happens only through mutual effort and sacrifice. Above all we have to learn to forgive and to be compassionate. God does more than we do but insists on our contribution. We know how much we need help. We find it our Eucharist. Do you truly believe this and live the conviction?

The Wine Jesus Gives Us

A reflection derived from a sermon by Isaac of Stella

Jesus was invited with the disciples to a marriage celebration but a marriage achieved only in a process of conversion. We need to know not how the process takes place but what we have to do if we fall away from it and need to rise up. The two feet we use to get up are understanding and love. We must go from merely literal understanding to a spiritual one, and love must lead us from vice to virtue. It is a change to an ever greater understanding leading to the embrace of love that lets us say, "My true love is all mine and I am all his".

Notice the enthusiasm of the Son of God's crossing over to you. He gave his all for you so he could come to this marriage. And now yours and mine is to be the mind which Christ Jesus shows us. Why did he come to us? We come to him solely because he first loved us. With the love that becomes children of God we should go to meet him, so that mercy and truth may meet and justice and peace be joined in a single embrace. Our itinerary is from the pit of sin to the form of God and we make the passage by repentance. Thus we come to the maturity of mind called wisdom and the inner clarity called perfect love.

Christ tries, as it were, to make us guests at the marriage drunk. Water symbolizes our foolish weakness and Christ changes it into the wine of wisdom and virtue. The wine he gives us is folly changed into wisdom. And this is the "best" wine. God had shown that worldly wisdom was folly. The so called sages of this world reel and stagger to and fro like drunkards and this should remind us how marvelous a thing it is that the former wine has run out and we are not left to our own understandings.

We must let Jesus fill our minds and hearts. We must let him first fill them with water that he can later change into wine. St. Paul says, "If any of you think you are wise you must turn yourself into a fool so as to be made truly wise". One must get rid of the illusion of having a sufficiency of wine if you are to be given your fill of the "best wine". Let go of self-complacency. Recognize your folly and weakness. The sooner you see yourself as you really are the sooner you will come to Jesus to be made what you should be. If you would drink Jesus' wine you must not refuse the water. You must renounce your pet notion of yourself so you can advance to wisdom and charity.

The words "you send forth your spirit and there is a fresh creation" tell us that if Christ supplies the wine we experience the inebriation of being part of the "new creation". And remember that Jesus' mother was there and the new wine was granted at her intercession. We must follow St. Paul's advice so that "Christ may find a dwelling place through faith in our hearts". It was grace that saved us, with faith for its instrument. Grace is the mother that brings Jesus to birth in our hearts and that gives growth. Mother Grace was there and the first virtue, faith, was created in us. The Master of the Feast gifts us with free choice and to it is offered the gift of faith. We must answer to God for obedience or contempt for the offer. Let us use the abilities God has given us to obey and walk in the way of Christ inebriated by the Spirit who lead us through wisdom and to daily charity.

We Are God's Book of Wisdom

A reflection derived from a sermon by Isaac of Stella

As we reflect on the wedding feast at Cana we discover a hidden meaning about God's gift of wisdom. The primal Book of Wisdom is God's very self. The saints read this book and find ultimate joy. From it is derived a secondary book of wisdom, the rational mind. Through our minds, we as God's creatures find wisdom written within us as images of God. In addition, visible creation is a third book because understanding it makes clear what Divine Wisdom does and has done. But we are blinded by sin and are unable to read this book as we ought. So God wrote a fourth book through the words of his prophets and holy ones. Yet even this trumpet blast was wasted on blind Israel, led astray by the worship of idols. And so the Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us. The Lord Jesus, the unique Teacher of Wisdom, has become a book for our sake so we might learn how to live. And that word is with us today through the book of Scripture whose meaning is made palpable in his mysteries.

So we have a sixth book in the gracious gift of the Holy Gospels and it makes the Word become flesh perceptible to us. Let us try to grasp what the Word of God has said to us through the miracles we read about in this book. He seems to teach us that there are three kinds of wedding feast—and outer, an inner and a higher feast. The first takes place in marriages between human beings, the second in the inward marriage of a human person with God, and the third in a union higher than any human can reach. The first is a union of flesh, the second of spirit with flesh and the third of spirit with spirit. The first makes two human beings one flesh, the second brings complete inner unity to a person of flesh and spirit, and the third unites human beings with God so that they become one spirit with God. The human spirit, clinging to God, becomes one with God, becomes what God is. Jesus prays: "Father, grant they may be one with us as we are one".

By the first kind of marriage a human person is given existence, by the second that human being is perfectly formed but in the third that human person is completed and exists in everlasting glory. Human persons naturally tend toward union with God; we come from other human beings so that we might go to God. This, over time, finds its fulfillment through grace. Apart from this no one can find fulfillment. Our sins come between us and God. A violent adulterer, the Devil, seeks to come between us and our heavenly spouse. He would cause us to conceive spite and give birth to empty hopes.

But God has provided the means to regain our union with Him in Christ. For in him humanity and divinity are so closely united as to leave no space for that Adulterer to come between us. This is the mystery of our mediator, one who is both divine and human. "You, who have had many lovers, will come back to me", the prophet said. This is a fourth, a marriage that is a kind of mystery, and which takes place after the others. It unites God and the human mind. Jesus went to the wedding at Cana to point us toward this kind of marriage, one that takes place only through the process of conversion that brings us to everlasting marriage with God. So we become a book in which the message of divine wisdom shows forth the heavenly marriage and draws others to it and to everlasting glory!

The Saving Message of Monastic Life

A reflection derived from a homily of St. John Paul II

Today we recall the heroic dedication of Father Cyprian Tansi to the spread of the saving message of Jesus Christ. He died in England, in Mount St. Bernard Abbey, where he had been sent to learn the monastic way of life as a model for the peoples of Nigeria. His bishop had seen his call to the monastic way of living as a wonderful opportunity to bring a contemplative way of living the Gospel to these peoples.

The person who became “Father Tansi” sought to advance his people’s welfare in every way possible. He began with education and this led him to priesthood and dedication to prayer and the apostolate of family life. He was “deadly serious”, as is said in English, about everything that might lead people to the fullness of life found only in and through Jesus. He promoted recognition of the dignity of women, of the importance of chastity, and of married life as lived in Christian Holy Matrimony. To love God deeply is to love those God has chosen to hear the redeeming, liberating Gospel. Loving God more than self leads to loving others and loving personal goodness.

He recognized something of the younger of the two sons of the Prodigal Father, who welcomes back all who would come “home” and find themselves in God’s loving mercy and acceptance. We seek happiness and ourselves in illusions and illusory “goods” and find only emptiness. In the contemplative life we dedicate ourselves to true good and to loving others rather than just self. So he dedicated himself to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and called people to forgive one another and to make reconciliation a way of life. He called people to make self available always to deeds which can lead to reconciliation among peoples and communities. He sought to make all aware of the joy that can be experienced through restored communion, first with God and then with one another. The life of grace is nourished by Holy Communion and that leads all to communion with one another as well as with God.

All of this is lived out in contemplative, monastic life. This way of life seemed to him to offer a model to the people of Nigeria in their struggle with all the influences that set people against one another. In this way of life one doesn’t seek self but puts the well-being of others first. He found this ideal clearly stated in the Rule of St. Benedict as lived by the Trappist monks who modelled for him the Christian ideal and message.

He calls us to God, to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, and to a vivid awareness of the apostolic meaning of contemplative prayer. He spent the last years of his life, amid illness, in praying and sacrificing himself for the sanctification of the peoples of Nigeria. God has given him the gift of being a Nigerian and so had called him to love Nigeria’s peoples in their diversity and differences. In them he glimpsed the riches and variety of God’s gifts given in creation to which Jesus brings us. Difference is a path to the enrichment of all rather than conflict. It is a vision of leading all to God by incarnating the Gospel in a life centered on prayer and dedicated to building community.

Remembering the Power of God's Grace

A reflection derived from Butler's Lives of the Saints

We are told in a fifth century document about a thirteen year old girl who accepted martyrdom rather than be unfaithful to her complete gift of self to Christ. Her virginity is emphasized as a way of reminding all Christians that not even sexual attraction is more powerful where believers are concerned than love for God. Agnes was remembered as a person who had given herself in marriage to Christ. When young men sought to marry her she refused them with the explanation that she had already been "married" to God in Christ and so was not available. Finally, one of them denounced her to the prefect of Rome citing the decree of Diocletian that those obstinately professing Christ were to be executed.

In the legend the prefect begins by decreeing she shall be confined to a public house of prostitution and all her clothes taken away. Those who sought to have sex with her found they could not overcome her resistance, and this was attributed to the miraculous intervention of God. In other words, she was a convincing witness to the power of grace that enables one to cling to God, and to doing God's will, in spite of every and any obstacle. In Roman law virgins were not to be executed and to get around it a virgin was usually raped by the executioner or condemned to prostitution—as a prelude to execution. The legend claims this did not work in Agnes' case and so the prefect had to order her killed while still a virgin. Nothing could keep her from remaining faithful to her gift of self to God alone.

The name 'Agnes' means "pure" in the sense of "guiltless". Scripture tells us that the "pure of heart" will see God. Agnes is a witness to the fact that God's grace can enable everyone who will trust in Jesus to remain pure and guiltless, and so to enter God's Heavenly Kingdom and "see" God face to face. If one need not fear government sponsored persecution and the death penalty how can those who are not threatened by such extreme dangers draw back from fidelity to their gift of self to God in Christ? But accepting baptism is equivalent to making such a gift. There is nothing with a person, including sexual passion or attraction, which can prevent us from being faithful to this gift. The legend witnesses to the fear of their own passions which our early Christian ancestors felt, and an assurance that God's grace can overcome every such influence. Nothing can come between God and those God has chosen, as St. Paul declares. The example of St. Agnes amazed these ancestors of ours because they didn't expect a person so young could resist authority figures as she did. She overcame all obstacles, both within her and outside her. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ! We can bear witness to these things no matter what our age or circumstances. As Scripture so often says: Do not be afraid!

Defending Human Life

A reflection derived from texts by Card. Carlo Maria Martini

There are two fundamental motives urging us to be very careful where human life in its origins is at risk.

On the one hand, we have to consider everything in terms of its relationship with God. The Church believes God is the provident creator of every human life. Life is not given as our absolute property but as a treasure to be administered and for which we will have to render an account. Human life is sacred and untouchable from its beginnings to its end. The ultimate value of human life is the value of an untouchable relationship with God. God is a lover of life.

On the other hand, the defense of God's rights concerning human life is also a defense of human dignity. The motive is love toward human being as responsible to God and for one another's wellbeing. In a human individual the image and likeness of God reaches its fullest created expression. Human beings have not been given dominion of one another's life. Our dominion is over ourselves; this founds our responsibility before and to God. Responsible liberty is a gift from God, offered to all in mutual support. It is a fundamental human duty to become increasingly human through free and conscious decision making.

There is a God-given intellectual instinct for seeking to know our selves precisely as human and to know the world we live in. It urges us to take advantage of newly discovered possibilities for survival and well-being. Every period of history has handed on new medical knowledge, new technology and new ways of seeking such knowledge. The challenge is to recognize and learn to protect properly "human" values; this is particularly so where human dignity is at stake. Every expression of science finds its meaning in human well-being and perfection. If one uses knowledge to threaten or harm what makes us human then one's action is anti-human and wrong.

The Church is the guardian of a form of human memory not storable on a computer. It is a memory dealing with the human journey to cultural, moral and religious transcendence, and which finds its point of reference in Jesus and his Gospel. It looks toward a "new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God". We must use this memory to guide our use of sexuality and the generation of new human lives. We must not use such powers in a merely utilitarian fashion, especially if the ends in terms of which utility is judged are short-term or purely subjective. In order to protect life and human dignity we humans have to learn to use our powers in ways that lead to the future Jesus offers us. We have to show how doing this can transform and improve the quality of all human living. That should be the witness of every Christian to the world in which we all live together. It is a very practical way of loving each other as Jesus has loved us.

Mary's Vocation is Our Vocation

A reflection based on a text by Fr. Gerald Vann

In the imagery of the book of Genesis it is from Adam that Eve is formed and from then on she stands at his side as helpmate and as the mother of all human persons. In the imagery of the Gospel of St. John, Mary—taken by the church to be the “second Eve”—stands by Jesus’ side as his companion and helper even unto the passion. From that position at his side as he hangs on the cross she receives her second vocation. She is to be the mother of all human persons unto life everlasting.

From Mary the mother, as for Jesus her son, Calvary is the culmination of what was initiated at Cana: There we encounter the beginning of the signs that Jesus did. There the Messianic mystery discloses itself. It is also the beginning of a kind of separation from Jesus Mary had to accept—one which is foreshadowed in the story of the losing and finding of the young Jesus during the family’s pilgrimage to the Passover celebration in Jerusalem. The Word must leave mother and home behind and must embark on another journey as a homeless wanderer.

When Mary called Jesus’ attention to the fact that the wine was all gone he addressed her formally. “Woman”—which is a standard Hebrew & Aramaic way of addressing a woman publically—is a formal as well as courteous way of speaking to another. It is not a common way for a son to speak to his mother and creates a kind of contrast with the Gospel’s telling us that “the mother of Jesus was there”. In effect, Jesus is passing from the status of her child to that of the “Son of Man”, as he liked to term himself. So Mary is reminded that her vocation is not simply that of the mother of Jesus. She has a vocation as the Second Eve, which means a vocation to bring life, as shown us in Jesus, to all human kind. What was formally promulgated from the Cross is already disclosed to Mary at Cana.

Our vocation too is not simply one of personal relationship with Jesus. We are disciples of Jesus who have been given the vocation of continuing his mission to all the world. This is promulgated to Jesus’ first disciples only after the resurrection. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”! In this we can learn much by looking to Mary, who received this vocation before we did. We see it as a vocation of love and compassion. Mary has always been for Christians a sign of compassion and mercy. In this she reflects the character of her son, and God. That is where we too can and should begin. Seek today the occasions when you can show compassion or mercy to another. You will be walking in the footsteps of Mary, who always walks in the footsteps of her son, who does only what he sees his Heavenly Father doing. We have the same Father and the same mother as Jesus and he has told us that whoever sees him sees the Father. Look to Jesus and you will never go astray.