

## The Excellence of Marriage

### *Marriage: The First Bond of Society*

1, 1. Every human being is part of the human race, and human nature is a social entity, and has naturally the great benefit and power of friendship. For this reason God wished to produce all persons out of one, so that they would be held together in their social relationships not only by similarity of race, but also by the bond of kinship. The first natural bond of human society, therefore, is that of husband and wife.<sup>1</sup> God did not create them as separate individuals and bring them together as persons of a different race, but he created one from the other, making the side, from which the woman was taken and formed,<sup>2</sup> a sign of the strength of their union. For those who walk together, and look ahead together to where they are walking, do so at each other's side. The result is the bonding of society in its children, and this is the one honorable fruit, not of the union of husband and wife, but of their sexual conjunction. For even without that kind of intimacy, there could have been between the two sexes a certain relationship of friendship and kinship where one is in charge and the other compliant.

### *Human Procreation Before the Fall*

2, 2. There is no need at present for us to investigate, and offer a definite opinion on the question, how could there have been descendants of the first human beings, if they had not sinned? God had blessed them with the words, *Increase and multiply and fill the earth* (Gn 1:28), but it was by sinning that their bodies incurred mortality, and sexual union is possible only for mortal bodies. Many different opinions have been held on this topic; and if we had to consider which of them accords best with the truth of the divine scriptures, it would be a task requiring long drawn-out discussion.<sup>3</sup> Was it then that if they had not sinned, they were destined to have children in some other way, without physical union, as a favor from the all-powerful Creator? He was able to produce the first human beings without parents, and was able to form Christ's flesh in the womb of a virgin, and (to address myself even to the unbelievers) he was able to give offspring to the bees without any sexual union. Or is it that in that passage many things were said in a mystical and figurative sense, and the text, *Fill the earth and rule over it* (Gn 1:28), has to be understood differently, in such a way, namely, that it would be fulfilled by there being abundance and perfection of life and power, and so the increase and multiplication of the words, *Increase and multiply*, is also under-

stood in terms of development of mind and resources of spiritual strength, as in the words of the psalm, *You will make me grow strong in my soul* (Ps 138:3)?<sup>4</sup> That continuation by having descendants would be accorded to mankind only after sin brought it about that there would be the passing away by death. Or is it that the body made for those persons was at first a material one, so that as the reward for obedience it would later become spiritual in order to acquire immortality without first dying? *Death came into the world through the devil's hatred* (Wis 2:24), and it became the punishment for sin. The body would become spiritual, however, through that change which the apostle refers to when he says: *Then those of us who are still living will be taken up in the clouds together with them, to meet Christ in the sky* (1 Thes 4:17). So our understanding would be that the bodies of the first parents both were mortal in their original state and yet were not going to die unless they committed sin, as God had warned. It would be the same as if an injury was threatened, since the body was susceptible to injury, but this would not happen, unless something was done that God had forbidden. In this way, therefore, even through the sexual union of bodies like that there could be offspring. They would grow to a certain stage, but they would not approach or reach old age, nor death either, until the earth was filled by that multiplying spoken of in the blessing. For, if God maintained the garments of the Israelites in their original condition without any deterioration for forty years,<sup>5</sup> how much more readily would he maintain the bodies of those who obeyed his commands in a very happy and stable state, until they were changed into a better one not by the person's death, whereby the body is separated from the soul, but by a blessed transformation from mortality to immortality, from animal nature to spiritual!

### *Various Benefits of Marriage*

3. To investigate and discuss which of these opinions is the true one, or whether even one or more other opinions can be carved out of those words, would take a long time.

3. We can say now that in that condition of being born and dying with which we are acquainted, and in which we were created, the union of man and woman is something of value. The divine Scripture is so much in favor of this union that it is not lawful for a woman put aside by her husband to marry another as long as the husband lives, nor for a man put aside by his wife to take another, unless the woman who has separated from him has died. As even in the Gospel the Lord confirmed that marriage is something of value, not only because he forbade divorce except for the reason of adultery,<sup>6</sup> but also because he attended a wedding as a guest,<sup>7</sup> so with good reason one asks in what lies its value.<sup>8</sup> It seems to me to be not only because of the procreation of children, but also because of the natural sociability that exists between the different sexes. Otherwise in the elderly it

would no longer be called marriage, especially if they had lost their children or had not had any. As it is, however, in a good marriage, even with older people, although the passion of youth between man and woman has waned, the relationship of love between husband and wife continues strong, and the better persons they are, the earlier they begin by mutual consent to abstain from carnal union. So what happens is not that later on, by necessity, they are not able to do what they would like to do, but that beforehand, to their credit, they choose not to do what they are able to do. If, therefore, they are faithful to the duty of honor and respect of one sex for the other, even though their bodies are feeble and death-like, the chastity of minds properly joined in marriage is so much more honorable for being more genuine, so much more secure for being more fully accepted.

Marriages also have the benefit that sensual or youthful incontinence, even though it is wrong, is redirected to the honorable purpose of having children, and so out of the evil of lust sexual union in marriage achieves something good. Furthermore, parental feeling brings about a moderation in sensual desire, since it is held back and in a certain way burns more modestly. For a certain seriousness attaches to the ardor of the pleasure, when in the act whereby man and woman come together with each other, they have the thought of being father and mother.

### *The Mutual Fidelity of Spouses*

4. 4. Furthermore, in performing their duty to each other, even if this is claimed somewhat excessively and without due restraint, husband and wife also have a duty of fidelity to each other. The apostle considered this duty of fidelity to be so binding that he spoke of it as a power of authority, when he said: *The wife does not have authority over her own body, but her husband does; and likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but his wife does* (1 Cor 7:4). A breach of this duty of fidelity is called adultery, when, either because of the urge of one's own sensuality or by consenting to the other person's, one violates the marriage contract by sleeping with someone else. In this way there is a betrayal of trust, and even in base material matters trust is a spiritual good of great value, and so it certainly should be put ahead of bodily well-being, including even our material life. Although a tiny straw is almost nothing in comparison with a large weight of gold, the trust that is dutifully respected in a transaction about the straw, just as in one about the gold, is not thereby a smaller thing because it is respected in relation to a smaller matter.<sup>9</sup>

When, however, trust is invoked for the purpose of committing sin, it is a wonder it is called trust. Whatever its nature, however, a sin is worse if it is committed in breach of trust. An exception is when trust is forsaken in order to return to true and legitimate trust, that is, in order to rectify bad will and undo the sin.

An example would be the case of someone who is unable to rob a person by himself, but finds a companion in wickedness and makes an agreement for them to do it together and share the booty, and then, when the crime has been committed, goes off by himself with all of it. The other is certainly upset, and complains that his trust has been betrayed. Even while complaining, however, he ought to be thinking rather that if he feels how unfair it is that his trust was betrayed in a sinful association, then for life to be good human society should not have been betrayed in its trust that people would not be robbed. To be sure, the other one, who was untrustworthy on both counts, is a worse sinner. On the other hand, if he had regretted the wrong he had done, and consequently had refused to share the plunder with his accomplice in order to give it back to the person from whom it was stolen, then not even the untrustworthy one would call him untrustworthy. In the same way, if a woman violates conjugal fidelity but is faithful to the adulterer, she is certainly blameworthy; but if she is not even faithful to the adulterer, she is worse. If then she repents of her shameful conduct, and terminates the adulterous agreement and arrangement and returns to conjugal chastity, I should be surprised if even the adulterer thinks she is unfaithful.

#### *What Constitutes a True Marriage?*

5. 5. It is often asked whether one should call it a marriage when a man and woman, neither of whom is married to anyone else, form a union solely for the purpose of giving in to their desires by sleeping together, and not for the purpose of having children, though with the understanding that neither of them will sleep with anyone else. It is not absurd perhaps to call this a marriage, provided they maintain the arrangement until the death of one or other of them, and provided they do not avoid having children either by being unwilling to have children or even by doing something wrong to prevent the birth of children. On the other hand, if one, or both, of these conditions is lacking, I do not see how we can call these marriages. If a man makes use of a woman for a time, until he finds someone else more suited to his wealth and social standing to take as his partner, that state of mind makes him an adulterer, not with regard to the woman he is on the lookout for but with regard to the one he is sleeping with without being married to her.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, if the woman is aware of this and still consents to it, then she too is unchaste in her relationship with the man with whom she is not united in marriage. Nevertheless, if she is faithful to him, and when he takes a wife she does not also think about marrying, but sets herself entirely against such a course of action, then I would not dare to call her an adulteress, easy enough though it might be to do so. Yet who would say that she does not sin, since she knows she is involved with a man who is not her husband? Just the same, if for her part all she wants from that union is to have children, and whatever she puts

up with over and above what serves the purpose of having children she puts up with unwillingly, she is certainly to be preferred to many married women. Although these are not adulteresses, they often constrain their husbands to perform their marital duty, even when they wish to abstain, not out of desire to have children but making unreasonable use of their rights because of passion. In their marriages, just the same, there is at least the good feature that they are married. It was for this reason that they married, so that by being confined to the lawful bond sensuality might not wander around ugly and degenerate.<sup>11</sup> In itself sensuality has the unbridled weakness of the flesh, but from marriage it has the permanent union of fidelity; in itself it leads to uncontrolled intercourse, but from marriage it has the restraint of chaste child-bearing. Although it is a shameful thing to intend to make use of one's husband for passion, it is proper nevertheless to want to have union only with one's husband and to have children only by one's husband.

#### *Marriage as a Remedy for Sensuality*

6. In the same way there are men who are so lacking in self-control that they do not spare their wives even when they are pregnant. Whatever married people do between themselves that is impure or shameful or sordid, therefore, is a sin of the persons, not the fault of marriage.

6. When the performance of the marriage duty is insisted on unreasonably, so that they have intercourse even when it is not for the purpose of having children, the apostle allows this as something that can be excused, though it is not something he lays down as a command.<sup>12</sup> So, even if a perverted morality motivates them to have intercourse like that, marriage still saves them from adultery or fornication. It is not that conduct of that kind is accepted because of marriage, but it is forgiven because of marriage. Married people, therefore, not only owe each other fidelity in relation to sexual union for the sake of having children, which in this mortal state is the human race's first social union, but also in a certain way they owe each other a mutual service to relieve each other's weakness, and thereby avoid illicit unions. As a result even if one of them favors permanent abstinence, this is not possible unless the other agrees to it. It is for this reason that *the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does* (1 Cor 7:4), so that they will not refuse each other what the husband looks for from the marriage or the wife looks for from the husband, even when it is not for the sake of having children but because of weakness and lack of self-control. In this way, with Satan tempting them, they will not lapse into depraved conduct deserving of damnation because of the lack of restraint of one or other or both of them.<sup>13</sup> Marital intercourse for the sake of procreating is not sinful. When it is for

the purpose of satisfying sensuality, but still with one's spouse, because there is marital fidelity it is a venial sin. Adultery or fornication, however, is a mortal sin.<sup>14</sup> For this reason abstinence from all sexual union is better even than marital intercourse performed for the sake of procreating.]

### *The Indissolubility of Marriage*

7. While complete abstinence is more meritorious, performing one's conjugal duty is not sinful, although demanding it more than is necessary for procreation is a venial sin, whereas committing fornication or adultery is a punishable offense. Consequently, while seeking to do something that brings greater honor to itself, conjugal love should be careful not to do anything that causes the spouse to incur damnation. *Anyone who puts his wife aside, except in the case of adultery, causes her to commit adultery* (Mt 5:32). Entering into the marriage contract is a matter of such sacredness that it is not annulled by that separation. While the man lives, the woman he has left commits adultery if she marries someone else, and he who left her is the cause of that wrongdoing.

7. Although it is lawful to put aside a wife who commits adultery, I should be surprised if this meant it is also lawful to take another wife. On this point sacred scripture raises a difficult problem, as the apostle says that it is the Lord's command that a woman should not leave her husband, but if she does leave him, she should either remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.<sup>15</sup> At the same time she should not go away and remain unmarried unless it is to separate from a husband who has committed adultery, lest by leaving a husband who has not committed adultery she cause him to commit adultery. Perhaps, however, she can act justly by being reconciled with her husband, either by putting up with him, if she herself is unable to practice abstinence, or because he has reformed. Nevertheless, I do not see how a man can be allowed to marry someone else, if he leaves a wife who has committed adultery, while a woman is not allowed to marry someone else, if she leaves a husband who has committed adultery. If this is so, then that bond of association between spouses is so strong that although it is tied for the purpose of having children, it is not untied for the same purpose of having children.<sup>16</sup>

It could happen that a man divorced a wife who was sterile to marry one with whom he would have children, but this is not allowed. In our own times, as well as by Roman custom, it is not even allowed to take a second wife, so as to have more than one wife living at the same time. No doubt there could be more children born, if an adulterer or adulteress married someone else after being divorced. But if that is not allowed, as seems to be what God commands, is there anyone who does not wonder what is the purpose of having the marriage bond so inflexible? I do not think it could have been so strong at all, except that some-

thing from this weak mortal condition of mankind was being used as a symbol of something greater.<sup>17</sup> If people abandon it or desire to abandon it, it remains intact as a symbol calling for them to be punished. That marital partnership is not destroyed by the intrusion of divorce, so that even when they are separated they are still each other's husband and wife, and they commit adultery with anyone with whom they have union even after they have been divorced, whether it is the wife with another man or the husband with another woman. This is the status of marriage, however, only *in the city of our God, on his holy mountain* (Ps 48:1).<sup>18</sup>

### *Marriage Is Not Merely the Lesser of Two Evils*

8. For the rest, who is there who is not aware that the law of the Gentiles is different? There, when there has been a divorce, both the woman and the man marry anyone they choose without being liable for any punishment from society. Moses seems to have allowed something similar to this custom with the bill of divorce, because of the Israelites' stubbornness.<sup>19</sup> In this case, however, disapproval of divorce is more in evidence than approval of it.

8. *Marriage therefore is honorable and the marriage bed pure* (Heb 13:4). We do not call it good merely because it is good in comparison with fornication. In that case they would be two evils, one worse than the other. Also fornication would be good because adultery is worse; for violating another's marriage is worse than being with a mistress. Adultery would be good because incest is worse, as sleeping with one's mother is worse than sleeping with someone else's wife. Until we reach what in the apostle's words *is abominable even to mention* (Eph 5:12), everything would be good in comparison with things that are worse. Who, however, has any doubt that this is an error? Therefore marriage and fornication are not two evils, one worse than the other, but marriage and abstinence are two good things, one better than the other. In the same way health and sickness in this life are not two evils, one worse than the other; but health and immortality are two good things, one better than the other. Likewise knowledge and illusion are not two evils, with illusion worse; but knowledge and love are two good things, with love better. For *knowledge will end*, the apostle says, although at present there is need for it; but *love will never fail* (1 Cor 13:8).

So too that procreation of mortal beings, which is the reason why there are marriages, will be brought to an end; but the freedom from sexual union is both an angelic practice now and will last for eternity. Just as the meals of good people are better than the fasts of the sacrilegious, so too the marriages of the faithful are superior to the virginity of irreligious women. In the first case, it is not that dining is preferred to fasting, but being good is preferred to being sacrilegious; and in the second case it is not that marriage is preferred to virginity, but faith is preferred to being irreligious. Good people eat when it is necessary, in order to

act as good masters providing what is right and proper for the bodies which are their slaves; but sacrilegious persons fast to serve the devils. Similarly, women of faith marry for the purpose of having chaste sexual union with their husbands, but unbelievers are virgins for the purpose of being unfaithful to the true God.

Therefore, just as what Martha did was good when she was busy attending to the saints, but what her sister Mary did, *sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to his words* (Lk 10:39), was better, so too we praise the excellence of Susanna in her married chastity,<sup>20</sup> but value more highly the excellence of the widow Anna,<sup>21</sup> and even more that of the virgin Mary.<sup>22</sup> Those who attended to the needs of Christ and his disciples, and did so out of their own resources, did something good, but those who gave up all their possessions, in order to follow that Lord without that encumbrance, did something better. With each of the two good ways of acting, both in the latter case and in the case of Martha and Mary, the one that is better is not possible without forgoing or abandoning the other. Accordingly, one has to understand that marriage is not to be considered bad because one cannot have the chastity of widowhood or virginal integrity without forgoing it. In the same way, what Martha did was not bad because her sister could do what was better only by refraining from doing the same. Otherwise, welcoming a good person or a prophet into one's home would be bad, because, in order to do what is better, someone who wants to be perfect in following Christ ought not to have a home.<sup>23</sup>

### *Marriage Is a Good Necessary for the Sake of Other Goods*

9, 9. Undoubtedly we should take note that God gives us some benefits that are to be sought after for their own sake, such as wisdom, health and friendship, and others that are necessary for the sake of something else, such as learning, food, drink, marriage and sleeping together. Some of these, such as learning, are necessary for wisdom; others, such as food, drink and sleep, are necessary for health; others, such as marriage and sleeping together, are necessary for friendship. The latter also contribute to the continuation of the human race, in which loving relationships are of great benefit. Anyone, therefore, who makes use of these benefits, the ones necessary for the sake of something else, for purposes other than those they were established for, commits a sin, sometimes a venial sin, sometimes a mortal sin. On the other hand, whoever makes use of them for the purpose for which they were bestowed does well. But if someone who has no need for them does not make any use of them, he or she does better. Hence we do well to want good things when we have need of them; but we do better not wanting them than wanting them, because we are better off when we do not find them necessary.

So too marriage is good, because it is good to bear children and be the mother of a family;<sup>24</sup> but not marrying is better because to have no need of this task is better even for human society. The condition of the human race is already such that with others (that is, those who do not practice abstinence) not only active in marriage but also indulging their sensuality in illicit love-making, and the good Creator bringing good out of their evil, there is no shortage of offspring or lack of heirs in abundance, and so holy friendships may be fostered. What this means is that in the earliest ages of the human race, especially because of the need to propagate the people of God, through whom the Prince and Savior of all peoples would be proclaimed and be born, holy persons had a duty to make use of that benefit of marriage that is not desirable for its own sake but necessary on account of something else. Now, however, since among all peoples everywhere there is an abundant provision of the spiritual kinship required for creating a true and holy society, even those who desire to marry solely for the sake of having children should be advised to avail themselves rather of the greater benefit of abstinence.

### *Marriage Is for Those Who Lack Self-Control*

10, 10. But I know what they are muttering: "What if everyone chose to abstain from all sexual union," they say, "how would the human race survive?" Would that everyone did want this, provided it is based on a love that comes *from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith* (1 Tm 1:5)! Then the city of God would reach fulfillment much sooner and the end of the world would come more quickly. What else, clearly, was the apostle advising, when speaking about this matter he said, *I should like everyone to be like me* (1 Cor 7:7)? Or when in the same place he said: *I say this to you, my brothers and sisters: The time is short; it remains only for those who have wives to be as if they do not have them, and those who are in sorrow to be as if they were not in sorrow, and those who rejoice to be as if they were not rejoicing, and those who buy things to be as if they were not buying things, and those who use this world to be as if they did not use it; for this world in its present form is passing away. I do not want you be worried about anything.*

Then he adds: *A man who does not have a wife thinks about what concerns the Lord, how to please the Lord. One who is married, however, thinks about the affairs of the world, and how to please his wife. A woman too who is unmarried and a virgin is set apart. One who is not married is concerned with what has to do with the Lord, to be holy both in body and mind; but one who is married is concerned about the affairs of the world and how to please her husband* (1 Cor 7:29-34).

It seems to me, therefore, that at the present time the only ones who should marry are those who are unable to be continent, in accordance with that advice of the same apostle: *If they are unable to be continent, they should marry; for it is better to marry than to burn* (1 Cor 7:9).

11. In their case marriage is not a sin, although if it were chosen as an alternative to fornication, it would be less of a sin than the fornication, but it would still be a sin. Now, however, what are we to say in the face of the clear words of the apostle? He says, *Let him do as he chooses; if he marries, he does not commit a sin* (1 Cor 7:36), and, *If you have married, you have not committed a sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not commit a sin* (1 Cor 7:28). It clearly follows from this that it is wrong to have any doubt about the sinlessness of marriage. Therefore, it is not marriage that the apostle allows as excusable; for who fails to see the absurdity of saying that persons are excused when they have not done anything wrong? Rather, what he allows as excusable is sexual intercourse that occurs because of a lack of self-control, not solely for the purpose of having children and sometimes not for the purpose of having children at all. Marriage does not make this happen, but it wins forgiveness for it. It must not be so excessive that it encroaches on time that should be set aside for prayer,<sup>25</sup> and it must not degenerate into the unnatural practice, about which the apostle could not remain silent, when he spoke about the depraved conduct of impure and immoral persons.<sup>26</sup> Sexual union that is necessary for the purpose of having children is blameless, and it alone is part of marriage. If it goes beyond that necessity, it is no longer ruled by reason but by sensuality. Nevertheless, it is proper for married persons to accord this to their spouses, so that the spouses will not commit a mortal sin of adultery, though it is not proper to require it for themselves. If they are both overcome by this kind of sensuality, clearly they are not doing something that is part of marriage. Nevertheless, if in their intimacy they value what is honorable more than what is dishonorable, that is to say, what is part of marriage rather than what is not part of marriage, then on the authority of the apostle this is allowed to them as something excusable. Marriage does not encourage this fault, but it pleads for it. They must not turn away God's mercy, either by failing to abstain on certain days in order to be free for prayer and to support their prayers with this abstinence in the same way as one does by fasting, or by transforming the natural practice into that unnatural practice, which is even more deserving of damnation when it is done with one's spouse.

### *Unnatural Sexual Relations and Marital Holiness*

11, 12. Indeed when that natural practice slips beyond the bounds of the marriage contract, that is, beyond what is needed for procreation, with a wife it is a venial sin, but with a mistress it is a mortal sin. On the other hand, that unnatural

practice is deplorable when it takes place with a mistress, but more deplorable when it takes place with one's wife. So important is the Creator's plan and the order in creation, that even when moderation is exceeded with things that are allowed to be done, this is far more acceptable than even a single or isolated deviation into things that are not allowed. Consequently, one has to put up with a spouse's lack of moderation in the thing that is allowed, lest sensuality break out to do something that is not allowed. Hence too, however frequently a man is with his wife, he sins far less than by committing adultery even though only on a very rare occasion. When, however, a man wants to use a part of the woman's body that was not given for this purpose, the wife is more shameful if she allows this to be done to herself than if she allows it to be done to some other woman. What is honorable in marriage, therefore, is chastity in having children and fidelity in performing the conjugal duty. This is what marriage is for, and this is what the apostle defends against every charge, when he says, *If you have married, you have not committed a sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not commit a sin* (1 Cor 7:28), and, *Let him do as he chooses; if he marries, he does not commit a sin* (1 Cor 7:36). For the reasons already mentioned, however, some lack of moderation in demanding the performance of the conjugal duty, by either partner, is allowed to married persons as something excusable.

13. When, therefore, he says, *A woman who is not married is concerned with what has to do with the Lord, in order to be holy both in body and mind* (1 Cor 7:34), we should not understand from this that a chaste Christian wife does not have a holy body. It has been said indeed to all the faithful, *Do you not know that your bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have received from God?* (1 Cor 6:19). Accordingly the bodies of married persons who are faithful to each other and to the Lord are also holy. The holiness of anyone like that is not hindered by having a husband or wife who does not have the faith. On the contrary, the holiness of the wife benefits the husband who does not have the faith, or the holiness of the husband benefits the wife who does not have the faith, as the same apostle testifies, when he says, *An unbelieving husband is made holy in his wife, and an unbelieving wife is made holy in the husband* (1 Cor 7:14). Hence that other text is referring to the greater holiness of women who are not married in comparison with the holiness of those who are married. It also deserves a greater reward because of its superior excellence in being concerned only about how to please the Lord. It is not that a woman of faith who maintains conjugal chastity does not think about how to please the Lord, but she certainly does it less, because she also thinks about the affairs of the world and how to please her husband. He wanted to say this about married women, because to a certain extent marriage can require them to be concerned about worldly affairs and how to please their husbands.

### *A Married Woman Entirely Devoted to God Is Rare*

12, 14. It is not unreasonable to wonder whether he said this about all married women, or about a type so numerous that it can almost be thought to be all of them. What he said about the unmarried ones, *A woman who is not married is concerned with what has to do with the Lord, in order to be holy both in body and mind* (1 Cor 7:34), does not apply to all unmarried women, since there are certain “dead” widows who live a life of pleasure.<sup>27</sup> In any case, as far as concerns the distinction and essential characteristics, as it were, of unmarried and married women, just as there is the extremely despicable woman who holds back from marriage, which is something permitted, but does not hold back from the pleasures of sensuality or pride or curiosity or gossiping, so too there is the rare married woman who even in complying with the demands of marriage thinks only of how to please God, and does not adorn herself *with plaits in her hair or with gold and pearls and expensive clothes, but in the manner appropriate for women who show their devotion by their good conduct* (1 Tm 2:9-10). The apostle Peter also describes and commends this kind of marriage, saying, *In the same way women should be obedient to their husbands, so that someone who does not believe the word can be won by the way the woman acts without anything being said, by observing your respectful and chaste way of acting. So they will not be the ones with the external adornment of curls in their hair, or who wear gold or fashionable clothes, but the kind of person who keeps herself hidden within her own heart with the stability of a uniformly tranquil and humble soul, which is true riches even in God’s eyes. This was the way some holy women, who hoped in the Lord, adorned themselves, and were obedient to their husbands, as Sarah was obedient to Abraham and called him her Lord. By doing good and not worrying about trivial things you are her daughters. Likewise you husbands must live with your wives in peace and chastity, and, while they are physically weaker and subordinate, give them the respect due to coheirs of grace, and see that your prayers do not suffer any hindrance* (1 Pt 3:1-7). So then, is it true that marriages like this are not concerned about what has to do with the Lord, how to please the Lord? Who could deny, though, that they are an extremely rare occurrence? Moreover, even in these rare cases almost always people like this did not marry intending to be like this, but they became like this after they were already married.

### *The Old Testament Saints Married Out of Duty*

13, 15. In our time when Christians who are free from the bond of marriage and strong enough to abstain from all sexual union perceive that, as it was written, *it is now not the time for embracing, but the time for refraining from all embracing* (Eccl 3:5), and it is no longer required as a duty to human society, who

among them would not choose to keep the celibate state of virginity or widowhood rather than endure the tribulation of the flesh that is inseparable from marriage (to say nothing of other things not mentioned by the apostle)? When, however, under the influence of passion they marry, if later they overcome this, they do not then have the freedom to dissolve the bond, in the way they had freedom not to enter into it. They then become the kind of persons that marriage formally proclaims them to be. Either they climb to a higher level of sanctity by mutual consent, or if they are not both like that, the one who is will grant what the other has a right to, but will not ask for it, all the time maintaining a chaste and devout harmony. On the other hand, in the times when the mystery of our salvation was still hidden under the veil of prophetic symbols, even those who were like that before marriage entered into marriage because of the duty to continue the race. They did not do this under the domination of lust, but in response to their sense of duty. If they had been offered the same alternative as is offered now with the revelation of the New Testament, when the Lord says, *Let anyone who is able to accept this accept it* (Mt 19:12), they would have accepted it even with joy.

No one will doubt this who reads with care and attention how they treated their wives. Even when one man was allowed to have several wives, they behaved toward them with greater chastity than is shown now toward one wife by any of those others, when we see what the apostle allows them as something excusable.<sup>28</sup> They had those wives because of their task of having children, *not because of unhealthy passion like the people who do not know God* (1 Thes 4:5). This is such a big thing that many people today find it easier to abstain completely from sexual union for their whole lives than to observe the restriction of not having intercourse except for the sake of having offspring, if they marry. Certainly we have many brothers and sisters, and partners in the heavenly inheritance, persons indeed of both sexes, who practice celibacy, either after the experience of marriage or while still untouched by any such relationship. Indeed there is a very large number of such people. Yet in private conversations, either with married persons or those who have been married, have we ever heard any people give any indication that they never have relations with their wives except with the hope of conceiving? What the apostles command married people to do, therefore, is essential for marriage; but what they allow as something excusable, or what hinders prayer, is not something marriage demands, but something it puts up with.

### *Desire for Children Does Not Legitimate Concubinage*

14, 16. As a consequence, if by chance—I do not know whether this can happen, and I am inclined to think it cannot happen—but if by chance it happens that



one takes a concubine for a certain period and seeks only to have children from that relationship, that union is still not preferable to the marriage of those who behave in that way that is excusable. It is the nature of marriage that has to be considered, not the nature of the persons who get married and make wrong use of the marriage. In the same way, if anyone unfairly and wrongly usurped some land so as to give generously to charity with its produce, that would not justify the theft; and if another selfish and greedy person occupies land as a family estate or by legitimate acquisition, this is no reason to blame the legal regulation that makes him the legitimate owner. Similarly, the illegitimacy of a tyrannical government will not become praiseworthy, because a tyrant treats the subject people with regal gentleness, nor the institution of royalty become detestable, because a king rages with tyrannical cruelty. Choosing to use unjust power justly is one thing; using just power unjustly is another. So too if temporary concubines have intercourse for the sake of having children, they do not thereby make their concubinage right; and married women who are lascivious with their husbands do not make the institution of marriage responsible for their guilt.

17. It is quite evident, however, that between persons in an improper union a marriage can come about if later on they enter into a proper commitment.

### *Sterility Does Not Dissolve a Marriage*

15. In the city of our God, however, where marriage is sealed by the first act of intercourse between the two persons, once marriage has been entered into it cannot be dissolved by any means except by the death of one of them. The marriage bond remains, even if because of evident infertility no children result, despite the fact that this was the reason for entering into the marriage. Although the husband and wife now know that they will not have children, they are still not allowed to divorce and enter a relationship with someone else, not even for the purpose of having children. If they do this, they commit adultery with the ones with whom they have the new relationship, but they themselves remain husband and wife. It is clear that for the ancient fathers it was not wrong, with their wife's consent, to take another woman in order to have children from her. The child would belong to both women, to one because of her physical contribution, and to the other because of her rights and position.<sup>29</sup> Whether this is allowed now, I would not be quick to say. Now there is not the same need for offspring as there was then. At that time, in order to have a larger number of descendants, even when one's wife was able to have children, one was allowed to marry others as well, but this is certainly not allowed now. Making a clear distinction between the different circumstances of the times has such an effect on whether it is right or wrong to do something that, unless celibacy is impossible, it is now better not to have even one wife, whereas then even those who would much more readily have stayed

celibate, had not piety demanded otherwise at that time, were blameless in having several wives. A good and wise person, who already longs to die and be with Christ and takes pleasure in the prospect of that supreme good,<sup>30</sup> no longer takes nourishment because of a desire to go on living here but out of duty, in order to remain in the body because of the needs of others. In the same way for holy men at that time the lawful act of intercourse in marriage was an act of duty, not sensuality.

### *Procreation an Act of Piety in the Old Testament*

16, 18. What food is for the health of a person, sexual union is for the health of the race. Neither is devoid of pleasure for the senses, and when this is regulated and put to its natural use under the restraint of moderation there cannot be passion.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, what forbidden food is in relation to sustaining life, fornication and adultery are in relation to seeking to have offspring; and what forbidden food is in the case of gluttony, unlawful intercourse is in the case of passion without desire for offspring; and what excessive appetite for lawful food is for some people, the intercourse that is excusable is for married persons. Accordingly, just as it is better to die of hunger than to eat food that has been sacrificed to idols, so too it is better to die without children than to look for descendants by an illicit union.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, whatever the circumstances of their birth, if people do not copy the vices of their parents and give God due worship, they will be honorable and will be saved. Whatever person it comes from, the human seed is created by God, and while it will go badly for anyone who uses it badly, it will never itself be bad. Even so, just as the good children of adulterers do not justify the adulteries, so too the bad children of married persons are not the fault of marriage. There is no comparison at all between the fathers of New Testament times who took nourishment because it was their duty, even though they ate it with natural physical enjoyment, and the pleasure of those who ate the food from sacrifices,<sup>33</sup> or those who over-indulged even in food that was not forbidden. So too the fathers of the Old Testament had intercourse because it was their duty, and their natural enjoyment of it was never let go to the point of becoming irrational or sinful passion, and there is no comparison between this and the depravity of adultery or married persons' excesses. Children have had to be provided for our mother Jerusalem, now spiritually and at that time physically, but always from the same source, love. The deeds of the fathers were different only because the times were different. It was necessary even for the prophets, who were not carnal persons, to participate in carnal union, just as it was necessary for the apostles, who were not carnal persons, to eat in a carnal way.<sup>34</sup>



### *Marriage Today Is Not Comparable to Marriage in the Past*

17, 19. There is no comparison between any of those women to whom it is now said, *If they are unable to be continent, they should marry; for it is better to marry than to burn* (1 Cor 7:9), and the holy women of those times, even the married ones. Among all peoples marriage exists for the same purpose, namely to have children, and however they turn out, marriage is instituted for them to be born in a regulated and honorable way. Persons, however, who are not chaste move up on the ladder of respectability, as it were, by marrying. On the other hand, those who would undoubtedly have remained celibate, had the demands of those times allowed it, in a certain sense went down a step in holiness by marrying. For this reason, although their marriages are equally good as marriages, since for both the purpose is to produce children, there can be no comparison between the two kinds of married person. In one case, but not in the other, there is that practice that goes beyond what is needed for procreation, which is accepted as excusable, although it is not what marriage is for. On the other hand, if there happen to be persons now who do not look for or desire in marriage anything except what marriage was instituted for, even these are not to be compared with those people in the past. In their case [that is, in the present] even the desire for children is carnal in nature, whereas with those others [in the Old Testament] it was spiritual, because it accorded with the institution as it was at that time. Now no one who is perfect seeks to have children except in a spiritual way; but then it was also a work of piety to conceive children physically, because producing children for that people was a sign of what was to come and was part of the prophetic arrangement.

20. Therefore, although it was right for one man to have several wives at the one time, it was not also right for a woman to have several husbands, even for the sake of having children, if it happened that she was able to have children but he was not. By a mysterious law of nature dominant forces love singularity; but in the case of subordinate ones it is appropriate not only for each to be subject to one superior, but, if natural or social considerations allow it, even for several to be subject to the same superior. One slave does not have several masters, though one master may have several slaves. So we do not read of any holy woman ministering at the same time to two or more husbands; but we do read of several women ministering to the one man, when the social condition of the race and the nature of the times made it advisable; and this was not contrary to the nature of marriage. This is because it is possible for several women to be pregnant by one man, but it is not possible for the one woman to be pregnant by several men (this is what gives the principles their strength). In the same way, it is right for many souls to be subject to the one God, and so souls have only one true God. One soul can indeed be unfaithful with many false gods, but it cannot be made fruitful with them.

### *Monogamous Marriage Is a Sacrament of Unity*

18, 21. Out of many souls there will arise a city of people with a single soul and single heart turned to God.<sup>35</sup> This perfection of our unity will come about after this pilgrimage, when no longer will anyone's thoughts be hidden from another, and no longer will anyone be in conflict with anyone about anything. For this reason in our age the sacrament of marriage has been restored to being a union between one man and one woman, so much so that no one is allowed to be ordained a minister of the Church except a man who has had only one wife.<sup>36</sup> This was well understood by those who held the view that even someone who had a second wife while still a catechumen or a pagan should not be ordained. What is at issue is not sinfulness, but the sacrament, as all sins are taken away in baptism. He who said, *If you have married, you have not committed a sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not commit a sin* (1 Cor 7:28), and *Let him do as he chooses; if he marries, he does not commit a sin* (1 Cor 7:36), made it sufficiently clear that marriage is no sin. Because of the sanctity of the sacrament, however, just as a woman who has been violated, even while she was a catechumen, cannot be consecrated as one of God's virgins after she has been baptized, so too the view has been, without any absurdity, that although he has not committed a sin, someone who has had more than one wife has lost a certain prerequisite for receiving that sacrament. It is not a requirement for obtaining the reward of a good life, but a requirement for receiving the seal of ecclesiastical ordination. For this reason, just as the several wives of the ancient fathers were a symbol of our future Churches arising from all nations though subject to the one man Christ, so too the fact that our ecclesiastical leader is a man who has had only one wife symbolizes the union of all races in submission to the one man Christ. This will be perfected when he reveals the *things hidden in the dark*, and makes known the *secrets of the heart*, and *then everyone will have his praise from God* (1 Cor 4:5).

At present, among those who are going to be united in the one person there are open disagreements, as well as hidden disagreements, even without any failing in charity; but then there will be none of this at all. Therefore, just as the sacrament of polygamous marriage of that age was a symbol of the plurality of people who would be subject to God in all nations of the earth, so too the sacrament of monogamous marriage of our time is a symbol that in the future we shall all be united and subject to God in the one heavenly city. Accordingly, leaving a living husband to marry someone else is like serving two or more masters. It was not allowed then, it is not allowed now, and it never will be allowed. To renounce the one God and go over to the adulterous superstition of another god is always wrong. Hence our saints did not do what the Roman Cato is said to have done, handed over his wife during his own lifetime so that she could fill someone else's house with children.<sup>37</sup> In the marriages of our women the sanctity of the sacrament is worth more than the fecundity of the womb.

22. So then not even those who marry solely for the purpose of having children, which is the purpose for which marriage was instituted, are to be compared with the fathers. They sought to have children with a very different attitude, as we see with Abraham. When he was commanded to sacrifice his son, he would not have spared him, even though he was his only son whom he had fathered contrary to all hope; and he only lowered his hand when stopped by the one at whose command he had raised it.<sup>38</sup>

### *Old Testament Marriage Possessed a Prophetic Character*

19. It remains for us to see whether at least those of our time who are celibate are comparable to those fathers who were married, if not perhaps even to be considered superior to them (even though we have not yet found anyone even comparable to them). Undeniably celibacy is superior to marriage as such, but in the marriages of the fathers there was something else of greater value. Their motive in wanting children from their marriages out of duty was different from what drives people today under the influence of a certain feeling that mortal nature requires them to have successors after they have gone. Anyone who denies that even this is good shows ignorance of the fact that God is the creator of everything good, from the heavens to the earth and from the immortal to the mortal. This instinct for procreation is not entirely absent in animals, especially in the case of birds, which have an obvious concern for building nests and a similarity to married people in working together to have young and provide food for them. That natural inclination of a mortal being has its own kind of chastity, and, as some have come to understand, when it is accompanied by worship of God it is destined to be fruitful thirty times over.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, those people of former times rose above this with a much holier attitude of mind, as they looked to have children from their marriages because of Christ, so that the race that he belonged to in the flesh would be set apart from other races, in accordance with God's plan. This was so that it could be the special bearer of prophecy concerning him, in particular by foretelling what race and what nation he would come from in the flesh.<sup>40</sup> It was, therefore, something of much greater value than the chaste marriages of the faithful of our times. Our father Abraham acknowledged this in relation to his own thigh when he ordered the servant to place his hand on it to make an oath concerning the wife his son was to marry.<sup>41</sup> For what else did it mean when someone placed a hand on his thigh and swore by the God of heaven, except that the God of heaven was to come in flesh that would have its origin in that thigh? Marriage therefore is something good, and the more chastely and more faithfully they have respect for God in their marriage the better the spouses are, especially if they also nourish spiritually the children they desire physically.

### *Sex and the Levitical Purity Laws*

20, 23. The fact that the law commands a person to be purified even after intercourse in marriage does not show that it is a sin, if it is not that intercourse that is allowed as excusable and is an excessive obstacle to prayer.<sup>42</sup> The law lays down many things by way of signs and shadows of the future. So a certain formlessness in the seed, which will take on form to become a human body, stands as a symbol of an unruly and undeveloped life. Since people must have this disorderliness corrected by formation and development through education, purification after the emission of seed was prescribed as a sign of this. There is no sin either when it happens in sleep; but the purification is still prescribed then.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, if anyone thinks that this is a sin too, in the belief that it does not happen without some kind of desire for it (which is certainly not true), surely at least women's normal menstruation is not a sin? Yet the same ancient law requires them to be cleansed from that.<sup>44</sup> This is only because there is in the menstrual flow the same lack of physical form which is acquired, as it were, for the construction of a body when conception takes place. In this way the law intended that formless flow to symbolize a mind that lacks the formation that comes from education and is unstable and uncontrolled, and it symbolizes the need for it to be put in shape by insisting on purification for that bodily flow. Finally, surely it is not a sin to die? Surely burying the dead is even a good and humane deed? Yet purification is prescribed after that too,<sup>45</sup> because although the dead body is not sinful when life abandons it, it is nevertheless a symbol of the sinfulness of a soul that has been abandoned by justice.

24. Marriage, I say, is good, and it can be defended by sound arguments against all the lies about it. Yet I do not ask what marriages are comparable to the marriages of the holy fathers, but what life of celibacy is comparable to them. It is not that I do not find marriages comparable to their marriages (for the same gift to mortal human nature is present in all of them equally); but I do not find persons making use of marriage whom I would compare to the persons of those times who made use of marriage in a very different way. For this reason we have to go further, and ask what celibate persons might be comparable to those married persons. The alternative is to think that Abraham could not refrain from marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, although for the sake of the kingdom of heaven he could resolutely sacrifice his only guarantee of descendants, which is the reason why marriage is held dear.

### *Virtues May Be Present without Being Manifest in Action*

21, 25. Celibacy, to be sure, is a virtue of the mind, not of the body. Virtues of the mind, however, sometimes manifest themselves in deeds, sometimes lie hidden as a habitual disposition.<sup>46</sup> The virtue of martyrdom shone and became visi-

ble when suffering was endured. Yet how many there are who possess the same virtue of mind, but miss out on the trial whereby what lies within them seen by God comes out also into human view! It is not that it comes into being then, but that is when it becomes known. Job already possessed patience, and it was known to God and attested to by God, but it became known to mankind by the test of temptation. What lay hidden within did not come into being because of the things inflicted on him externally, but was revealed by them.<sup>47</sup> Timothy too certainly had the virtue of abstaining from wine, and Paul did not take this away from him by advising him to take *a little wine for his stomach's sake on account of his frequent illnesses*.<sup>48</sup> (Otherwise he would have been teaching a pernicious doctrine, to do something for the health of the body that was detrimental to spiritual virtue.) On the contrary, because the advice could be followed without loss of that virtue, the body was accorded the benefit that comes from drinking while the mind retained the disposition of abstinence. Of itself a disposition has the effect that something is done when it is needed, and when it is not done, it is still able to be done, but there is no need for it. Those who are told, *If they are unable to be continent, they should marry; for it is better to marry than to burn* (1 Cor 7:9), do not have this disposition to refrain from intercourse. Those, however, who are told, *Let anyone who is able to accept this accept it* (Mt 19:12), do have it. By means of this abstinence in disposition perfect souls have used the earthly goods needed as a means to other things without becoming attached to them, remaining able to refrain from using them when there is not that need. No one uses them well except the one who is able not to use them. Many indeed find it easier to abstain from making use of them than to control their use and use them properly. No one can use them wisely, unless he or she also is able to refrain from using them. It was because of this habitual disposition that Paul was able to say, *I know how to be well off and how to suffer want* (Phil 4:12). Anyone indeed can suffer want, but knowing how to suffer want is a quality of the great. Similarly, who is there who is incapable of being wealthy? But knowing how to be wealthy is a quality only of those whom wealth does not corrupt.

26. For a clearer understanding of how virtue exists as a disposition, even when it does not exist in deeds, I can mention an example which no one among Catholic Christians would question. No one who has received the faith from his gospel has any doubt that our Lord Jesus Christ experienced bodily hunger and thirst, and ate and drank. Was it then that he did not have the virtue of restraint in eating and drinking to the same degree as John the Baptist? *For when John came he did not eat and drink, and they said, "He has a devil." When the Son of Man came, he ate and drank, and they said, "See the glutton and wine bibber, the friend of tax-collectors and sinners"* (Mt 11:18). Were not similar things said about his kinfolk, our ancestors, with regard to the use of earthly goods of another kind, in the matter of sexual intercourse: "Look at those people, licentious

and impure, obsessed with women and obscenity"? What they said about him, however, was not true, however true it was that unlike John he did not fast from food and drink. He himself said with absolute candor and truth: *"When John came, he did not eat and drink; when the Son of Man came, he ate and drank."*

Likewise what they say about those fathers is not true. Christ's apostle has come now unmarried and without children; and the pagans say, "He was a magician." In the past Christ's prophet came, and was married and had children; and the Manichees say, "He was a womanizer." *And wisdom is justified by her children* (Mt 11:19); this was the Lord's comment after saying those things about John and himself. *Wisdom, he said, is justified by her children*. They see that the virtue of celibacy ought always be present as a habitual disposition of mind, but it has to manifest itself in behavior according to the demands of different times and circumstances. In the same way, the virtue of patience in the holy martyrs showed itself in action, but is equally present in the other saints in their disposition. For this reason, just as the patience of Peter, who endured suffering, was not superior to that of John, who did not suffer, so too the chastity of John, who did not have the experience of marriage, was not superior to that of Abraham, who fathered children. The one's celibacy and the other's marriage were both practiced in the service of Christ in response to the different demands of the times. John, however, also practiced celibacy, whereas Abraham had it only as a disposition of mind.

#### *Old Testament Saints Possessed Celibacy in Disposition*

22, 27. At that time, therefore, when subsequent to the period of the patriarchs the law still declared that anyone who did not emit seed for Israel was accursed,<sup>49</sup> even those with the capacity for celibacy gave no outward evidence of this, but it was there just the same. When, however, *the fullness of time came* (Gal 4:1), the time for saying, *Let anyone who is able to accept this accept it* (Mt 19:12), from that time on, up to the present and henceforth until the end of time, whoever has the virtue puts it into practice, and if anyone is not prepared to put it into practice, let him not lie and say he does have it.<sup>50</sup> Because of this, with futile and shallow sophistry those who corrupt good morals with evil discourse<sup>51</sup> say to the Christian who is celibate and declines to marry, "Are you, then, better than Abraham?" The Christian must not be upset by this, and must neither be so rash as to say, "Yes; better," nor lapse from his resolution. To say the former would be to speak an untruth, and to do the latter would be to act wrongly. Rather, he should say this: "I am certainly not better than Abraham, but the chastity of a celibate person is better than the chastity of a married person, and Abraham had one of these in deed and both in disposition. Certainly he lived a chaste married life. Even so, he was capable of being chaste outside of marriage, but it was not the

right thing to do at that time. Although Abraham made use of marriage, I myself would find it easier not to make use of it than to make use of it in the way Abraham did. Therefore I am better than those who because of lack of self-control are incapable of doing what I am capable of doing, but not better than those who, because of the different circumstances of the time, did not do what I do. What I now do they would have done more perfectly, if that was what had to be done then; but what they did I would not do so well, even if that were what has to be done now.”

On the other hand, it may be that he feels that he is like that, and knows that if, while keeping intact the virtue of celibacy as a disposition of mind, he had consented to make use of marriage because of some religious duty, he would have been the kind of husband and father that Abraham was. In that case he should be bold enough to say this in reply to his crafty interrogator: “I am certainly not better than Abraham, in relation to this kind of celibacy in particular. He did not lack it, even though it was not apparent. I am the same as he, no different in what I am, but only acting differently.” Let him say this openly, since even if he chooses to boast, he will not be acting foolishly, as he will be speaking the truth. If, however, he declines to do that, not wanting anyone to think he is better than what they see in him, or what they hear about him,<sup>52</sup> he can turn the thrust of the question away from himself as an individual by giving an answer in terms of the subject matter rather than the person, and say: “Anyone who is capable of acting like that is like Abraham.” It is possible, though, that the virtue of celibacy is less perfect in the mentality of the one who does not make use of marriage as Abraham did. Even so, it is still more perfect than in the mentality of the one who maintained conjugal chastity because he was not capable of anything more than that. Similarly, when a single woman who *is concerned about what has to do with the Lord, in order to be holy both in body and mind* (1 Cor 7:34), hears that foolish and meddling person saying, “Are you better than Sarah?” she should answer: “On the contrary, I am better than those who lack the virtue of chastity of this kind, but I do not believe this to be true of Sarah. While she had that virtue, she did what was appropriate for that time. Because I am spared this, what she preserved spiritually is able to be seen in me in a bodily way as well.”<sup>53</sup>

### *The Virtues of Celibacy and of Marriage Are Compared*

23, 28. If, therefore, we compare the actual reality in each case, there can be no doubt that the chastity of celibacy is superior to the chastity of marriage, although both are good. When, however, we compare persons, the one who has the greater good than the other is better. Moreover, someone who has a higher degree of a goodness also has the lower degree of it. Sixty includes thirty, but thirty does not include sixty. If one does not put into practice the goodness one pos-

sesses, this is explained by the way duties are allocated, not by lack of virtue; someone who does not find any unfortunate people to whom to give compassionate help is not thereby lacking in the good quality of compassion.

29. A further consideration is that individuals are not compared with respect to just one perfection. It can happen that someone does not have some perfection that someone else does have, but has another of greater worth. Obedience is a greater perfection than celibacy. Nowhere is marriage ever condemned by the authority of our scripture, but nowhere is disobedience ever condoned. If, therefore, we were asked to consider a woman who is going to remain a virgin, though she is disobedient, and a married woman who could not remain a virgin, but who is obedient, which would we say is better? The one who is less commendable than if she were a virgin, or the one who is damnable though a virgin? Likewise, if you compared a drunken virgin with a sober married woman, who would hesitate to make the same judgment? Marriage and virginity are indeed both good, though one better than the other; but sobriety and drunkenness, like obedience and insolence, are respectively good and bad. It is better to have only good things, even though lesser ones, than to have a great good together with a great evil. Even with bodily goods, it is better to have the stature of Zacchaeus and good health than that of Goliath and a fever.

30. Clearly the right question to ask is not whether a virgin who is utterly disobedient is comparable to an obedient wife, but whether a less obedient virgin is comparable to a more obedient wife; for married chastity is still chastity, and therefore a good thing, although it is inferior to virginal chastity. The virgin is as inferior in the good of obedience as she is superior in the good of chastity. To compare the two, and decide which is the better, one must first compare obedience and chastity themselves and see how obedience is the mother of all the virtues. The reason why there can be obedience without virginity is that virginity is a counsel, not a command. I am speaking of that obedience whereby the commandments are obeyed. Accordingly, there can be obedience to the commandments without virginity, but not without chastity. For chastity there must be no fornicating, no adultery, no defiling oneself with unlawful intercourse. Whoever does not abide by this acts contrary to God’s commandments, and on that account is excluded from the virtue of obedience. On the other hand, virginity is possible without obedience, because a woman who accepts the counsel of virginity and preserves her virginity can show contempt for the commandments, like the many consecrated virgins we know who are gossipers, inquisitive, drunkards, quarrelsome, avaricious and proud; all these things are forbidden by the commandments, and, as happened with Eve, they will bring destruction for the offense of disobedience. Therefore, not only should an obedient woman be more highly regarded than a disobedient one, but a more obedient married woman should be more highly regarded than a less obedient virgin.

31. Because of this obedience that father, who was not without a wife, was prepared to lose his only son by killing him himself.<sup>54</sup> It is not wrong for me to call him his only son, as he heard the Lord say about him, *Your line will take its name from Isaac* (Gn 21:12). How much more would he have been swift to take heed if the command had been to remain unmarried? Hence we are often astonished, with good cause, that some celibate persons, of both sexes, who so zealously undertake not to avail themselves of what is permitted, do not trouble to obey the commandments. Who, therefore, can have any doubt that the men and women of our time, celibate though they may be, who are less perfect in the virtue of obedience, cannot rightly be compared in degree of perfection to the holy fathers and mothers, parents of children, of those times, even if these lacked even in mental attitude the virtue that is clearly practiced by those others? Let the young ones, therefore, who, in the words of the Book of Revelation, *have not defiled themselves with women* (Rv 14:4), follow the Lamb singing a new hymn, and do so only because they have remained virgins. But let them not think that this makes them better than the first holy fathers, who, if I may so put it, used matrimony in an unmatrimonial way. Its proper use is such that, if anything occurs there by way of bodily union that goes beyond what is required for the purpose of having children, pardonable though it may be, it is an imperfection. What does the pardon absolve, if that excess is no imperfection at all? It would be surprising if the youths who follow the Lamb could avoid that imperfection, if they did not remain virgins.

#### *Summary: The Three Goods of Marriage*

24, 32. The value of marriage, therefore, for all races and all people, lies in the objective of procreation and the faithful observance of chastity. For the people of God, however, it lies also in the sanctity of the sacrament, and this has the consequence that it is forbidden for a woman to marry anyone else while her husband is still living, even if she has been divorced by him, and even if it is only for the purpose of having children. Although this is the only purpose there can be for a marriage, the bond of matrimony is not broken when its purpose is not achieved, but only by the death of husband or wife. It is like ordination to the priesthood, which takes place for the purpose of forming a community of the faithful, but even if the community of faithful does not eventuate, the sacrament of ordination remains in those who were ordained. If anyone is dismissed from office for some wrongdoing, he will not be deprived of the Lord's sacrament once it has been received, although it will remain as something he must answer for at the judgment. The apostle, therefore, bore witness that the purpose of marriage is procreation, when he said, *I want the younger ones to marry. As though someone had said, "Why?" he immediately adds: To have children and be moth-*

*ers of families* (1 Tm 5:14). Concerning faithful observance of chastity, there is the text, *The wife does not have authority over her own body, but her husband does; and likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but his wife does* (1 Cor 7:4); and concerning the sanctity of the sacrament, the text, *a wife should not leave her husband, but if she does leave him, she should either remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband, and a husband should not divorce his wife* (1 Cor 7:10-11). These things, namely, offspring, fidelity and the sacrament, are all good, and because of them marriage is good. In this age, however, it is certainly better and holier not to set out to have children physically, and so to keep oneself free from any activity of that kind, and to be subject spiritually to only one man, Christ. One must use this freedom, however, in the way scripture says, to think about *the Lord's interests*, how to please God.<sup>55</sup> In other words, celibacy will be concerned that obedience should not be diminished. Being the fundamental virtue, and, as is commonly said, the source of all the others, the ancient fathers put this virtue into actual practice. Celibacy, on the other hand, they maintained as a state of mind, and no doubt, because they were righteous and holy, if they had been commanded to abstain from all intercourse, out of obedience they would have done so. When they were capable of sacrificing the offspring which was the only reason for having intercourse, how much more readily could they have held back from intercourse if that were God's command or request?

#### *The Heretical Rejection of Marriage Has Been Refuted*

25, 33. This being the position, the heretics have been answered more than adequately, both the Manichees and any others who slander the fathers of the Old Testament for having more than one wife by putting forward as evidence that they were lacking in self-control. They must appreciate that there was no sin committed. What they did was not contrary to nature, as they did not have union with those women for sensual pleasure but for the sake of having children. Nor was it contrary to custom, as that was the common practice in those times. Nor was it in breach of any commandment, as there was no law forbidding it. On the other hand, those who had relations with women unlawfully either have judgment pronounced on them by God in scripture, or else the account is presented for us to read in order for us to judge them and avoid doing what they do, not to approve or imitate them.

#### *Conclusion*

26, 34. As strongly as possible, however, we exhort our faithful who have wives not to be so bold as to judge those holy fathers by their own weakness,

comparing *themselves with one another* (2 Cor 10:12), as the apostle says. They would fail to understand the strength a soul has in the service of righteousness against lust. It has to prevent itself from acquiescing in those sensual feelings and allowing them to develop and insinuate themselves into intercourse to a greater degree than is needed for procreation. This is what is required by nature's plan, required by social custom, and required by the decrees of the law. The reason why they have these doubts about those fathers is that through lack of self-control they themselves have either chosen marriage or are immoderate in their relations with their wives. Nevertheless, married men and women who are celibate, because they have vowed their chastity to God, either by mutual agreement or after the death of their spouse, should realize that they have a greater reward due to them than conjugal chastity can claim. Just the same, not only should they not lose respect for the marriages of the fathers in the light of their own commitment, but they should not hesitate to hold them in higher esteem, despite their own commitment. They married as a prophetic sign, and in intercourse they sought only to have offspring, and in their offspring sought only to contribute to the coming of Christ in his humanity.

35. In a very special way we also urge young men and women who dedicate their virginity to God to be conscious of the need to be careful about how they live while still here on earth, with humility all the greater because what they have vowed is more heavenly. Was it not written, *The greater you are, the more you must make yourself lowly in all things* (Sir 3:18)? It is for us, therefore, to speak about their greatness, and for them to think about great humility. Even though they are not married, they are not better than some married persons, namely those holy fathers and mothers in the past, because if they did marry, they would not be as good as those were. With that exception, however, they should be in no doubt that they surpass all other married persons, including all at the present time, even those who are celibate after having had the experience of marital relations. They do not surpass them as much as Susanna was surpassed by Anna, but as much as both were by Mary.<sup>56</sup> I speak only with reference to the holy integrity of the body; for who is there who is unaware of Mary's other merits? Let them, therefore, adopt a way of life befitting such a lofty undertaking. They will live then in full assurance of receiving a magnificent reward. They will know indeed that, although the splendor with which they will shine in glory will vary according to their differing merits, they and all the faithful, the chosen and beloved members of Christ, who will come in great numbers from East and West, will all be granted the same great privilege. They will recline at table in the kingdom of God with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob,<sup>57</sup> those who did not marry for this world but for Christ, and for Christ became fathers.

## Notes

1. Augustine's notion that the husband and wife form the primary bond of society is reminiscent of traditional Roman, especially Stoic, ideals. See, for example, Cicero, *On Duties* I, 54.

2. See Gn 2:21-22.

3. Augustine here declines to offer an opinion on the nature of human procreation before the fall. In his earlier writings, for example, *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manicheans*, he was inclined to interpret Genesis 1:28 in a figurative sense. By the time he completed his *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine had determined that God originally intended Adam and Eve to populate the earth physically, even before sin and death intervened. For a full discussion see Elizabeth Clark, "Heresy, Asceticism, Adam and Eve. Interpretation of Genesis 1-3 in the Later Latin Fathers," in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith. Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986) 353-385.

4. [Translator] In the Latin the point is more incisive as the text from Genesis and the psalm have the same word "multiply" (*multiplicare*). A literal rendering of the text from the Psalm might be: "You will multiply me for strength in my soul."

5. See Dt 29:5.

6. See Mt 19:9.

7. See Jn 2:2.

8. Jesus' teaching on divorce and his presence at the Cana wedding were frequently used in the early Church to defend the value of marriage. See, for example, Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* III, 6, 47; Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 9, 2; *Answer to Adimantus* 3, 1-3.

9. The idea of "trust" or "fidelity" (*fides*) was important in Roman social relations. It connoted the loyalty required in reciprocal relationships, such as those between patrons and clients. See Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage. Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 237.

10. The situation Augustine has described is the relationship of concubinage, in which he himself was engaged for many years. See *Confessions* IV, 2, 2 and VI, 15, 25.

11. Augustine's term *concupiscentia* has been translated here as "sensuality." It refers to the tendency for sexual desire, after being damaged by the sin of Adam and Eve, to run contrary to the control of reason and will. An excellent discussion can be found in Gerald Bonner, "Libido and Concupiscentia in St. Augustine," *Studia Patristica* 6 (1962) 303-314.

12. See 1 Cor 7:6.

13. See 1 Cor 7:4-6.

14. When Augustine speaks of the "venial sin" in marital intercourse apart from the intention to procreate, he means that the fault (*culpa*) involved is forgiven because of the good of marital fidelity.

15. See 1 Cor 7:10-11.

16. In *Adulterous Marriages* Augustine examines in detail these biblical texts dealing with the indissolubility of marriage. See below, pp. 145-153, 168-179.

17. [Translator] The word *sacramentum*, translated here as "symbol," originally referred to something that not only symbolized a duty or commitment, but also made it effective, as for example, money deposited by parties to a lawsuit to insure compliance with the eventual judgment. So the word, and its English equivalent, "sacrament," acquired its theological meaning of a ritual that effects what it symbolizes. The translation as "sacrament" will be used where this is the meaning.

18. Here Augustine seems to suggest that only Christian marriage bears the "sacrament" of indissolubility. In later writings he will recognize an indissoluble character in all human marriages, but "especially among Christians." See *Answer to Julian* V, 12, 46 and the discussion in Émile Schmitt, *Le mariage chrétien dans l'oeuvre de saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1983) 244-225.

19. See Dt 24:1; Mt 19:8.

20. See Dn 13:22.

21. See Lk 2:36-37.

22. See Lk 1:27.

23. Augustine's argument in this chapter appears to be directed against the views of Saint Jerome. In his treatise *Against Jovinian* I, 7: PL 23, 229, Jerome had argued: "If it is good not to touch a woman, it is bad to touch one; for there is no opposite to goodness but badness."

24. See 1 Tm 5:14.

25. See 1 Cor 7:5.

26. See Rom 1:26-27.  
 27. See 1 Tm 5:6.  
 28. See 1 Cor 7:6.  
 29. Augustine has in mind the situations described in Genesis when Abraham produced a child by Sarah's slave Hagar (Gn 16:1-4) and Jacob produced a child by Rachel's slave Bilhah (Gn 30:1-5).  
 30. See Phil 1:23.  
 31. In his *Revisions* II, 22 (48), 2: CCL 57, 108, Augustine later modified his view on this matter. There he explained: "I said this because the right and proper use of passion (*libido*) is not passion. For just as it is evil to use good things in the wrong way, so it is good to use evil things in the right way. At another time I argued more carefully on this subject, especially against the new Pelagian heretics." Augustine has in mind his writings against Julian of Eclanum.  
 32. In Letter 47, 6 to Publicola Augustine briefly discusses the case of eating food sacrificed to idols.  
 33. See 1 Cor 8:7.  
 34. Augustine's argument about the sexual morality of the Old Testament saints was originally deployed to defend them against the criticism of the Manichees. Here the same argument is used to demonstrate against Jovinian that marriage in the Christian dispensation is not as virtuous as in the past.  
 35. See Acts 4:32.  
 36. See 1 Tm 3:2; Ti 1:6. The exclusion from the clergy of those who had been married more than once was a long-standing tradition among the early Christians. See Tertullian, *To His Wife* I, 7.  
 37. The story is found in Plutarch, *Cato the Younger* 25, who indicates that the incident was a matter of some controversy. Cato divorced his wife Marcia, so that she could marry his friend, Quintus Hortensius, and bear him children. See Augustine, *Faith and Works* 7, 10.  
 38. See Gn 22:12.  
 39. Augustine refers to a traditional interpretation of Matthew 13:23. The thirtyfold fruit is that of marriage; the sixtyfold is that of widowhood; the hundredfold is that of virginity. See *Holy Virginity* 45, 46, where he offers a variety of different interpretations of the manifold fruits.  
 40. See Mi 5:2.  
 41. See Gn 24:2-4.  
 42. Augustine is commenting on the purity laws in Leviticus 15:16-18.  
 43. Augustine discusses the morality of nocturnal emissions in *Confessions* X, 30, 41. He argues that a person is not responsible for actions to which the conscious mind does not assent. See also *Literal Meaning of Genesis* XII, 15, 31.  
 44. See Lv 15:19-24.  
 45. See Nm 19:11.  
 46. Augustine's term *habitus* has been translated here as a "habitual disposition" and, later, simply as a "disposition." The word suggests a settled trait of character, one that may be present internally without necessarily being evident in external action. See A. Blaise, *Lexicon latinitatis medii aevi* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975) 432.  
 47. See Jb 1.  
 48. See 1 Tm 5:23.  
 49. See Dt 25:5-10.  
 50. [Translator] As the comparison is with Abraham, Augustine is considering men specifically. Women are compared to Sarah separately further on.  
 51. See 1 Cor 15:33.  
 52. See 2 Cor 12:16.  
 53. In this paragraph Augustine has responded to the arguments of Jovinian, who maintained that the dignity of marriage in the Old Testament indicates that it should be equally valued in the New. Celibate Christians, Jovinian argued, would not dare to maintain that they are superior to Abraham or Sarah.  
 54. In his *Revisions* II, 22 (48), 2: CCL 57, 108, Augustine later corrected his comment on Abraham: "Even if his son were slain, one ought to believe that Abraham believed that he would soon be returned to him by being raised from the dead, as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews." Augustine is referring to Hebrews 11:19: *He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking—he did receive him back.*  
 55. See 1 Cor 7:32.

56. In *Holy Virginity* 20, 20 Augustine appeals to the story of Susanna, falsely accused of adultery by two elders (Daniel 13), as an example of marital fidelity. Anna, who had lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four and spent day and night in the temple (Lk 2:36-37), is the model of the piety of the widow.

57. See Mt 8:11.



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