

## Marriage as a Discipline of Sanctification

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In what follows I argue that Christian theologians best understand marriage as a form of sanctification in community over time. Marriage takes time both to expose faults for healing and to develop virtues for incorporation into the trinitarian life. God can use marriage as a means to incorporate human beings into the life of the Trinity. Both same-sex couples and cross-sex couples need that. I argue that by addressing a pair of objections. First an objection from the left that the New Testament devalues marriage, so that alternate patterns of friendship best represent its intent. Then one from the right that same-sex couples are unfit for sanctification. Both deny that same-sex marriages can sanctify: the left because marriage cannot do the job, the right because the job cannot be done.

Against the claim that marriage would satisfy urges to which a same-sex couple would not be morally entitled, I have countered that Christian theologians understand marriage only shallowly as the making licit of sexual satisfaction. They understand it better as a form of sanctification. Sanctification practices a structure that liberates, a discipline or asceticism such as monks and committed couples undertake, in which God uses the perceptions of others from whom one cannot easily escape to transform difficulty into growth, into faith, hope, and charity.<sup>1</sup> No conservative has yet seriously argued that gay and lesbian couples need sanctification any less than heterosexual ones.

(Indeed, what moves conservatives is a desire to see *visible holiness*.<sup>2</sup> Both conservatives and liberals want that; they want to see the holiness that God is; they want to *see God*—or, as the Westminster Catechism famously puts it, “to enjoy God forever.” To see and enjoy: those are sexual metaphors, metaphors of consummation. They imply that consummation lies finally in God, that sex is created not only by God but for God, to be a means by which God brings us to Godself.)

I rehearse that argument below. But I begin with the objection on the left.

### I

Its critics describe marriage as an exclusive, sexist, heterosexist, bourgeois, capitalist institution. Hopelessly co-opted by structures of power, marriage can no longer carry forward Jesus’s identification of friendship as the greatest value,<sup>3</sup> if it ever could. New Testament scholars find Jesus notably anti-family—he refuses to see his mother,<sup>4</sup> regards the family as a source of unbelief<sup>5</sup> and strife,<sup>6</sup> prefers the company of prostitutes and adulterers, and commends not only love of enemies but hatred of families.<sup>7</sup> Paul too describes marriage as remedial or

second-best and manages to mention children hardly at all.<sup>8</sup> The New Testament's critique of existing social structures suggests, according to those scholars, that same-sex partnerships would make better sense as liberating alternatives to bourgeois marriage.

Such a critique can suffer from sociological naïveté. Arguments on the right suggest that committed same-sex couples should go away, because the partners look the same. Arguments on the left suggest that committed same-sex couples should go away, because the commitment looks bourgeois. In each case the aesthetic finishedness of the argument strains against observable features of socially constructed reality. Given that same-sex couples are not going to go away, two questions press the theologian: How is the Church under the Holy Spirit going to turn the phenomenon to salvific purposes, that is, under what concrete liturgical form?

Obviously, the Holy Spirit can construct human pairs in many and various ways. I have no wish to deny the diversity of social forms that have come and gone, under and without the name of "marriage," in the history of Christianity and other religions. I want to insist on that variety.

But sometimes the critics of marriage sound as if only they know what marriage really is (a bourgeois power structure), curiously echoing the conservatives who also claim to know what marriage is (a lifelong public union of one man and one woman for the procreation of children). The trouble is, both sides make pseudo-historical arguments that smuggle in an essence. Both sides essentialize something fairly recent and class-bound.<sup>9</sup> The critics of same-sex marriage, left *and* right, ask society either to reject or to reprimarinate an upper-class 19<sup>th</sup> C. form.

Furthermore, both sides reject same-sex marriage—whether as same-sex, or as marriage—because they take offense at what they see as a kind of parody. Rightists take offense because they regard same-sex couples as aping conventional forms that should lead to biological procreation. Leftists take offense because they see same-sex couples losing their capacity for improving conventional forms that replicate oppressive power and economic relations.

Yet trinitarians ought to suspect all sorts of binarism. Apply the following remark of Judith Butler's to marriage:

[My procedure with] the concept of matter or that of bodies [or marriage] is not to negate or refuse either term. [My use of] these terms means, rather, to continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power. Here it is of course necessary to state quite plainly that the options for theory are not exhausted by presuming materiality [or marriage], on the one hand, and negating it, on the other. It is my purpose to do precisely neither of these. . . . [My procedure] does not freeze, banish, render useless, or deplete of meaning the usage of the term; on the contrary, it provides the conditions to mobilize the signifier in the service of an alternative production.<sup>10</sup>

The present essay undertakes to acknowledge the work of the *Holy Spirit* in mobilizing signifiers for the production of grace. It is, after all, the Holy Spirit, in Christian discourse, who renews and diversifies, the Spirit who produces sanctification, human beings transformed by grace.

So if, in Butler's terms, one can only subvert or redeploy, but never freeze or banish a troublesome term, a Christian theologian will ask after the soteriological and trinitarian

principles for redeploying this one. Or if, in the terms of Michel de Certeau, marriage now has a margin policed by meanings generated at other sites, how can it become once again a site generating meanings of its own?<sup>11</sup> That is: marriage is now something whose meaning preachers and legislators try desperately to *protect* from draining away. But that is very odd. Marriage should be a *source* of meaning, something from which meaning flows, not something from which meaning drains away. Why should marriage need protecting? Marriage should protect—shelter—other things (couples, children, hospitality): it's odd that the protector should need protection.

## II.

Christianity, in several traditions, enacts and deploys a nuptial mystery. In the Bible, God espouses God's people, with an earthly fidelity and an eschatological fulfillment:

“I will betrothe you to me forever. . . I will betrothe you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know [who I am].”<sup>12</sup>

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son.”<sup>13</sup>

“Why do [others] fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?”

“Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.”<sup>14</sup>

Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his Bride has made herself ready . . . .

Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.<sup>15</sup>

The central nuptial mystery in Christianity occurs when Jesus remarks, “This is my body, given for you.” With that, he subverts and redeploys a structure of violent oppression—crucifixion—and turns it to a peaceful feast. He reverses the movement of the Fall, which began by counting divinity a thing to be grasped and ended by scorning the body. The body at first tells Adam the truth, that he remains a creature, not yet divine; only then does Adam betray the body by treating it with scorn.<sup>16</sup> Adam enacts a pattern of seizure followed by scorn, the pattern not of the lover but of the rapist. But Jesus re-befriends the body, and creates the bread of heaven, by counting divinity not a thing to be grasped. At the last supper, he performs a deathbed wedding: “You can't take my body,” he says: “I'll give it to you.”<sup>17</sup>

Jesus' eucharistic redeployment and subversion of structures of violence mobilizes

nuptial metaphors not only here. The Syriac theologian Jacob of Serugh also tropes the Eucharist as deathbed wedding:

The King's Son made a marriage feast in blood at Golgotha;  
there the daughter of the day was betrothed to him, to be his,  
and the royal ring was beaten out in the nails of his hands;  
with his holy blood was this betrothal made. . .  
he led her into the Garden--the bridal chamber he had prepared for her.<sup>18</sup>  
At what wedding feast apart from this did they break  
the body of the groom for the guests in place of other food?  
Wives are separated from their husbands by death,  
but this Bride is joined to her Beloved by death!<sup>19</sup>

Bloodthirsty, yes. But no more bloodthirsty than the eucharistic meal. And not a model that joins the bride to her beloved in death by suttee, or by a man's violence against a woman, but by a man's refusal of violence, on behalf of a woman. No womanly self-sacrifice reigns here. But that is not the main point. Rather, Christianity constructs marriage here as a social form loaded with more meaning than it can bear, a tide of redemption and sacrifice. Further, what you might call nuptial atonement theories make clear that Christ's sacrifice involves no denial of desire, rather an overwhelming love.

Theologians deploy nuptial metaphors to suggest how God joins human beings into community with God by initiating them into that mystery. Among Catholics, Thomas Aquinas describes the incarnation as a *coniunctio*, or marriage, of God and the human being. Karl Barth writes that "Because the election of God is real, there is such a thing as love and marriage":<sup>20</sup> that is, he derives love and marriage as secondary, analogous forms of God's love for God's people. From the Syriac tradition we have already seen the passionate poetry of Jacob of Serugh. The Russian theologian Paul Evdokimov devotes an entire book to interpreting Christianity by what you might call a "nuptial hermeneutics." He seeks to rescue marriage from what he calls two functionalisms, whether controlling lust (Protestant) or procreating children (Catholic), in order to save it for participation in the divine life, not by Christian tantra, but by the ascetic heightening of desire for goods still more desirable, the pearl of great price.. Marriage and monasticism make for Evdokimov two forms of the same discipline, whereby Christians give themselves over to one or more others—either a spouse or a monastic community—from whom they cannot easily escape. [REPEAT.] In Eastern Orthodoxy, as some of you know, the couple being married are "crowned": these are the crowns of martyrdom. Like all asceticism, this is a high-risk endeavor to make them better people.<sup>21</sup>

Jeffrey Stout has explained how Christianity gives social meaning to natural bodies:

What is it, then, for a Christian to be sanctified?... [I]t is to be taken up by means of God's grace into the inner life of God, into the communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with one another. When speaking of this, most of the Church's analogies have to do with bodies. God the Father, maker of heaven and earth, creates the bodies we have by nature, the natural bodies we are. But [God] also

incorporates us into social bodies, which then transform what our natural bodies mean, by making them represent something socially.<sup>22</sup>

What does God or the Church cause bodies socially to mean? That, as Stout sees it, depends on the multiple levels of communities that incorporate those bodies. The ascetic commitment of both monogamy or monasticism “incorporates a person into a series of communities: first, the community with one’s marital partner [or fellow monastics]; second, the community of Christ’s body, the Church; and third, the community of interpersonal love and joyous beholding that constitutes God’s inner Trinitarian life.”

Sexuality, in short, is for sanctification, that is, for God. It is to be a means (and not only a means) by which God catches human beings up into the community of God’s Spirit and the identity of God’s child.<sup>23</sup> In that case, too, the “means” reduces to no mere functionalism, but itself already participates in the end: in community, in joy, in growth in virtue.<sup>24</sup> Monogamy and monasticism are just two ways of donating the body to represent in society, and to practice by asceticism, features of the triune life in which God initiates, responds to, and celebrates love, a wedding feast in which God invites human beings to take part. At a wedding the partners represent the love of two, while the congregation participates in the rejoicing of a third, caught up into the office of the Spirit in the trinitarian life. Weddings analogize the Trinity, for “the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding feast.” In a marital or monastic community, the parties commit themselves to practicing faith, hope, and charity in a form of life that will require plenty of exercise.

Human beings participate in those multiple communities—the Trinity, the Church, and the domestic church, or marriage bond—by giving their bodies over to the community as communicative signs. Many gay and lesbian people already practice something like that donation of the body to be publicly known. They call it coming out. According to Catholic moral theologian David McCarthy:

The communicative acts of coming out . . . come through surrender to an interpretive community. Coming out is opening one’s life to be told by others. This exposure is the source of dread and panic in coming out. It is also the outcome of a desire to be known, a desire for wholeness and a promise of unity of oneself and the world. Coming out articulates the sign-giving character of human, bodily life.

For the church, a similar statement of identity and desire is at stake when the members of the body come out with their sexual commitments. Marriage and the celibate life write the body into the story of redemption. Both are communicative, sexual acts. They are means by which the story of redemption is written through human lives, as signs of God’s reconciliation, a reconciliation of the body. Coming out is a wager, opening the body to a language of redemption, opening a way for the body’s agency not only in the movement of desire but in the donation of one’s agency as an interpretive sign.

A nuptial hermeneutics, it goes almost without saying, requires embodiment. Embodiment, in turn, requires diversity. The Holy Spirit characteristically rests on bodies: the body of Christ in Jesus, the church, the sacraments, and the saints.<sup>25</sup> As the Spirit forms human bodies into the body of Christ, she gathers the diverse, and diversifies the corporate, making

members of one body. At creation, too, Christians see the Holy Spirit gathering and diversifying as she hovers over the waters. Suppose “be fruitful and multiply” belongs with “let the earth put forth vegetation” and “Let the waters bring forth swarms” and “let the earth bring forth everything that creeps upon the ground” (Genesis 1:26, 1:11, 1:20, 1:24): In all those cases, the earth and the waters bring forth things different from themselves, not just more dirt and more water. In all those cases, they bring forth multiply different kinds of things. One might almost translate, “Be fruitful and diversify.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed Christian thinkers had to fight against the notion that the diversity of creatures and persons resulted from the Fall rather than from God. In Aquinas, a manifold of creatures fills the earth, so that God’s creation will show no gaps:

The distinction and multiplicity of things is from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For [God] brought things into being to communicate [God’s] goodness to creatures, and to be represented by them. And since [God’s] goodness could not be adequately represented by any creature alone, [God] produced creatures many and diverse, so that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness could be supplied by another. For the goodness which in God is simple and uniform is in creatures multiply and distributively.<sup>27</sup>

Maximus the Confessor makes the argument from christology. Created distinction displays a good not only of creation, but a backwards-effect of the incarnation. Human diversity especially shows how individual logoi participate in the Logos:

[If by reason and wisdom a person has come to understand that what exists was brought out of non-being into being by God, if he intelligently directs the soul’s imagination to the infinite differences and variety of things as they exist by nature and turns his questing eye with understanding towards the intelligible model (logos) according to which things have been made, would he not know that the one Logos is many logoi? This is evident in the incomparable differences among created things. For each is unmistakably unique in itself and its identity remains distinct [“without confusion,” using the Chalcedonian word asunchutos] in relation to other things. He will also know that the many logoi are the one Logos to whom all things are related and who exists in himself without confusion, the essential and individually distinctive God, the Logos of God the Father.<sup>28</sup>]

Creatures require the diversity that the Spirit rejoices to evoke. Multiplication lies always in God’s hand, so that the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes, the fruit of the virgin’s womb, the diversity of the natural world, and God’s husbandry alongside (para) nature in grafting the wild olive onto the domestic does not overturn nature but parallels, diversifies, and celebrates it.<sup>29</sup> The Spirit’s transformation of the elements of a sacrament just makes a special case of the Spirit’s rule over all of God’s creation.

But what kind of diversity or otherness does the Spirit evoke? Or what kind of logoi participate in the Logos? Serious majority opinion in earlier ages hardly regarded the sort of diversity represented by sexual minorities as the work of the Spirit or the logoi in the Logos. Yet it is not at all clear that such a determination follows. Conservatives will suppose that by referring to the diversity of creation I am begging the question. And yet, if the earth is to bring forth not according to its kind, more dirt, but creatures different from dirt and from each other; and if bodily differences among creatures are to manifest a plenum in which God leaves no niche

unfilled; then the burden of proof lies on the other side, and weighs heavily, to show that one of God's existing things somehow cannot do its part in communicating and exhibiting God's goodness.

What controls such diversity? Conservatives and liberals would agree that the Holy Spirit would evoke only a holy diversity, ordered to the good, bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit, faith, hope, and charity. Since no human beings practice faith, hope, and charity on their own, but only in community, it is hard to argue for leaving lesbian and gay people out of social arrangements that alone train those virtues. [REPEAT.] In the words of Gregory of Nazianzus from which Maximus develops his theory of logoi in the Logos, God intends individual human limitations for our good. So too then the limitations pointed out against same-sex couples, or for that matter against cross-sex couples: Their “very limitations are a form of training” in sharing the good. The trick is to turn manifold created limits (as between those who can bear children and who can adopt them) toward the appreciation of others, so that the human being “in the future age when graced with divinization . . . will affectionately love and cleave to the logoi, . . . or rather, that one will love God's own self, in whom the logoi of beautiful things are securely grounded.”<sup>30</sup> Differences are meant to make us yearn for and love one another as beautiful. “The life of the Christian community has as its rationale—it not invariably its practical reality—the task of teaching us to so order our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.”<sup>31</sup>

Specifically, the Spirit illuminates the goods she sanctifies, so that human beings may come, over time, to recognize them. Properly formed members of the community can discern the Spirit at work, because they can recognize characters in stories by narration. What controls the diversity worked by the Spirit? Particular narratives with moral content enabling community members to recognize her at work.

In the signal narrative of blessing diversity, God promises Abraham that by him all the nations of the earth will become blessings to one another (Genesis 18:18). The promise to Abraham interprets “otherness” as primarily moral, in the sense that God makes the other the one that sanctifies, God identifies otherness as intended for blessing.<sup>32</sup> Under conditions of sin, otherness can lead to curse rather than blessing, to hostility rather than hospitality; certainly there has been enough cursing and hostility to go around in the sexuality debates. But God created otherness for blessing and hospitality. So the Eucharist turns the story of a violently hostile dealing of death into a hospitably blessing granting of life: You can't take my body, Jesus says: I give it to you.

In the best traditional Christian exegesis, human otherness reflects Trinitarian otherness. Human beings image God by loving one another (1 John 4:7-12). So interpreters as different as Augustine, Calvin, and the Orthodox take the three visitors to Abraham in Genesis 18 as the persons of the Trinity. There the blessing of otherness fosters hospitality and thanksgiving, so that Christians see eucharistic overtones. The hospitality of Abraham, like the Eucharist, anticipates the eschatological feast, the wedding of the Lamb, where human beings take part in the Trinitarian life. Three persons in communion, one who blesses, one who receives blessing, and one who delights in their mutual blessing, the Trinity both grounds and draws in created distinctions.<sup>33</sup>

In concrete liturgical practices like the Eucharist, human participation in the trinitarian

life does not bypass but involves the body. For large sectors of multiple Christian traditions, blessing does not float overhead but brings sanctification through particular practices of asceticism, a discipline or training through which lesser goods serve greater ones. This is no bizarre, antiquated Christian weirdness, but something in which American society already deeply if sometimes mistakenly invests: dieting and working out at the gym also discipline the body for spiritual benefits. Indeed, they do so for the greatest of these, love. Surely there are more effective disciplines than those.

Sanctification, to reflect trinitarian holiness, must involve community. It does not happen alone. It involves commitments to a community from which one can't easily escape, whether monastic, nuptial, or congregational. Even hermits and solitaries tend to follow the liturgy, the community's prayer. The solitude of the first hermit, Anthony the Great, brought him the gift of sociality, drawing people to him, because his "heart had achieved total transparency to others."<sup>34</sup> Symeon the Stylite retreated from society to the top of a pillar—which drew a church around him with him on his pillar at the crossing.<sup>35</sup>

But sanctification is a community matter also in traditions not thought of as particularly ascetic. So Karl Barth interprets the creation of the human being in the image of God as Mitmenschlichkeit, co-humanity.<sup>36</sup> The Catholic tradition after Aquinas tends to interpret sanctification with metaphors of Aristotelian friendship, in which the purpose of friends is to make one better.<sup>37</sup> In multiple Christian traditions, sanctification necessarily involves others.

Gay and lesbian people who commit themselves to a community—to those who have come out, to a church, or to one another in a domestic community—do so to seek greater goods, to embark upon a discipline, to donate themselves to a greater social meaning. But under conditions of sin, a community from which one can't easily escape—especially marriage and monasticism—is not likely to be *straightforwardly* improving. The community from which one can't easily escape makes moral risk. It tends to expose the worst in people. The hope is that community exposes the worst in people, so that it can be healed. So multiple Christian traditions portray Christ as a physician exposing and probing the wounds. Unlike modern medicine, however, the physician shares the patient's vulnerability; in ancient practice, the physician undresses to examine the patient; in this poem, the instruments of the examination and cure are those by which Christ himself suffered, as he explains to his mother at the foot of the cross:

“Be patient a little longer, Mother, and you will see  
how, like a physician, I undress and reach the place where they lie and I treat their  
wounds,  
cutting with the lance their calluses and their scabs.  
And I take [the] vinegar, I apply it as astringent to the wound,  
when with the probe of the nails I have investigated the cut, I shall plug it with the  
cloak.  
And, with my cross as a splint,  
I shall make use of it, Mother, so that you may chant with understanding,

‘By suffering he has abolished suffering,’  
my Son and my God.’”<sup>38</sup>

For the risk to be worth it and to have the best chance of success, the community must have plenty of time and be made up of the right sort of people. The right sort of people will succeed in exposing and healing each other’s flaws over time.

For gay and lesbian people, someone of the *opposite* sex is unlikely to represent the right sort of otherness for marriage, because only someone of the *apposite*, not opposite sex will get in deep enough to expose their vulnerabilities and inspire the trust that healing requires. The question is, what sort of created diversity will lead one to holiness? The answer will vary with creation itself. But certainly same-sex couples find in someone of the same sex the right spur to vulnerability and self-exposure. With someone of the same sex they can undertake the long and difficult commitment over time and place to find themselves in the perceptions of another. A homosexual orientation, theologically understood, is this: “gay men and lesbians are persons who encounter the other (and thus discover themselves) in relation to persons of the same sex.”<sup>39</sup>

That is no “merely psychological” difference, but also embodied difference, if only because sexual response is nothing if not bodily. (Difference cannot be reduced to male-female complementarity, because then lack of a wife would leave Jesus a deficient human being.) Some people, therefore, are called to same-sex partnerships for their own sanctification.

On this account, conservatives do not wish to deprive same-sex couples of satisfaction so much as to deprive them of sanctification. But that is self-contradictory, because so far as I know no conservative has ever seriously argued that same-sex couples need sanctification any less than cross-sex couples.<sup>40</sup> It is more than contradictory, it is evil to attempt to deprive people of the means of their own sanctification.

I have already answered one objection—what about Genesis, what are the limits of created diversity. Let me now go on to answer two more, by recovering the positive, constructive sense of each. (1) What about biblical strictures such as those in Romans 1? (2) And what about the moral risk in changing the tradition? In each case, I do not try to narrow the resources of the Christian tradition by attempting to silence difficult passages and arguments: I try to enlarge those resources by rescuing text and tradition from usages that constrain their theological meaning. Aquinas quoted Augustine that it is wrong, in interpretation of the bible, so to constrain (*cogere*) the text to one meaning as to expose the faith to ridicule.<sup>41</sup>

1. We need a word for the body that is both an instrument of salvation and exceeds itself, neither ceasing to be body nor limited to this life. One such word is the humanity of God, the instrument by which God saves, from which the body is ineliminable and yet comes to mean more than itself, because the Word incarnate does divine things humanly and human things divinely. The Apostle Paul suggests another such word in his epistle to the Romans. Romans 11 is the most important instance. Fascinated with the embodied difference of Jews and Gentiles, circumcised and uncircumcised, Paul describes God’s salvation of Gentiles as physical and yet more than physical: it comes *para phusin*, in excess of the physical. In such words as “parallel” and “paragraph,” the word indicates accompaniment. In such modern combinations as “paramedic” and “paralegal,” it indicates assistance. In such words as “paragon” and

“paradigm,” it indicates an excellent case. In such words as “parable” and “parabolic” it indicates an excess of meaning. So it is that Paul uses the word in Romans 11:24. God does something excessive, almost promiscuous, in grafting the Gentiles into the Jewish olive. God does something that exceeds the “natural” love of the God of Israel for God’s people: God loves also, in excess, other peoples, the nations. This use has a soteriological sense. It could not have escaped Paul’s intention, of course, to recall, in that soteriological use, his earlier, more famous use of the phrase in Romans 1, also to describe an excessive sexuality, the excessive sexuality of Gentiles. Paul revels in the irony that God takes on a Gentile characteristic, excessive sexuality, to save precisely the Gentiles.<sup>42</sup>

Later Greek writers did not miss that implication. In the liturgical poetry of Romanos the Melodist, that phrase is situated in its soteriological sense in another sexually suspicious or auspicious place, the womb of Mary:

Mary’s eyes beholding Eve  
and looking down on Adam, were impelled to tears;  
but she stays them and hastens  
to conquer nature she who *para phusin* gave birth to Christ her son.  
Yet her entrails were stirred in suffering with her parents  
--a compassionate mother accorded with the Merciful one  
So she tells them [Adam and Eve] --Cease your lamentations,  
and I will be your ambassador to him born from me.<sup>43</sup>

So too in another instance:

[At your conceiving without seed, O Mother of God,  
Joseph was struck with wonder as he contemplated what was *hyper phusin*,  
and he brought to mind the rain on the fleece,  
the bush unburned by fire,  
Aaron’s rod which blossomed.  
And your betrothed and guardian bore witness and cried to the priests,  
“A Virgin gives birth, and after childbirth remains still a virgin.”<sup>44</sup>]

We do violence to Paul’s meaning when we reduce it to contrariety and to sex. Paul’s meaning is first of all about God’s excess in saving the Gentiles—saving *us*, the great majority of Christians who are not Jews—and only then irony, in describing God’s love for us as characteristic of our Gentile Christianity.<sup>45</sup> In Romans 1, sexuality in excess of nature was a Gentile characterization.

In God’s economy of salvation according to Romans 11, in the womb of Mary according to Romanos the Melodist, and in the resurrection body according to I Cor. 15 (vv. 44-45), what is *para phusin* is not what we are saved *from*; it is what we are saved *by* or *for*. In the Fall, the mind overreached itself, desiring to be like God; the body continued, at least for a little while, to tell

the first couple the truth, that they were creatures. But desiring to be gods, they scorned the body instead of befriending it, so that the fall of the mind took the body with it. The salvation wrought in the incarnation reverses that fall, “counting divinity not a thing to be grasped,” but re-befriends the body, glorifying it as the means of our salvation and the crown of our resurrection. That is too great a truth to lose to the sexuality debates.<sup>46</sup>

2. Conservatives have also often claimed to fear a moral risk in sanctioning same-sex marriages. I want to point out that we also undergo a moral risk in refusing to celebrate them. Consider Jesus’s parable about those who refuse to celebrate a wedding. Granted, the parable implies a messianic application. But human weddings recall, analogize, and bear witness to the love of the messianic wedding feast. At a wedding, the parties with the congregation recall, too, the triune love by which the Father loves the Son, and the Spirit celebrates and bears witness to the love of two, the congregation caught up in the Spirit’s proper office of bearing witness to love. The Spirit—and the congregation after it—does more than bear witness to love, but serves as guarantor of it. The Spirit of faithfulness reunites the Father and the Son in the Resurrection (Rom. 8:11). Analogously, the congregation helps the wedding couple keep faith in times of difficulty. Sp wedding feasts represent and anticipate the Trinitarian life. If you want to know what the Trinity is like, go to a wedding. Refusal to bear witness to and keep faith with love refuses to participate in the work of the Spirit. Refusal to celebrate weddings incurs a moral risk indeed:

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast to his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come. . . . Then he said to his servants, . . . ‘Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find.’ And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good: so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’”<sup>47</sup>

Refusal to celebrate weddings may also be morally dangerous.<sup>48</sup>

We might like to end there. But if Amy Pauw is right, we dare not. That is classic them-exegesis. She challenges us to prefer us-exegesis. For that we turn back to the Syriac tradition.

In the Syriac tradition, the wedding garment is also a *robe of glory*: the robe that Adam and Eve gave up when they left the Garden, and the robe that they would wear again at the wedding of the Lamb.<sup>49</sup> It is also the robe that Christ brought down from heaven at the incarnation and took *off* when he disrobed to be baptized in the Jordan.<sup>50</sup> He left it in the water, according to Syriac tradition, for us to find there, for all the baptized, for all who weep and gnash their teeth. The resurrection rebounds from the incarnation not only from earth: that’s not low enough; the resurrection rebounds from hell. Christ rises from hell as from the baptismal water not alone, but bringing Adam and Eve out by the hand. So the one without a wedding garment is Christ; and the one without a wedding garment is us; and the one without a wedding garment is

the one for whom Christ left the robe of glory in the water, the one who emerges from baptism clothed for the wedding of the Lamb.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I owe my attention to the transformative perceptions of others to Thomas Nagel, “Sexual Perversion” and its application in Rowan Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” both in Rogers, ed. Theology and Sexuality, pp. 125-136 and 309-321.

<sup>2</sup> For a typology of how liberals hear conservative arguments and how conservatives hear liberal arguments, see “The Politics of the People of God,” in Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body* (Blackwell, 1999), pp. 17-36.

<sup>3</sup> John 15:13, 21:15.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 3:31-35 and parallels.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 13:53-58.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 10:21, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 14:26.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 7.

<sup>9</sup> See the history in Adrian Thatcher, Marriage After Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations,” in Seyla Benhabib, et al., Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 35-57; here, pp. 51-52, paragraph boundary elided.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Michel de Certeau, “The Weakness of Believing: From the Body to Writing, a Christian Transit,” in The Certeau Reader, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 218.

<sup>12</sup> Hos. 2:19a, 20. For argumentative context, see Sexuality and the Christian Body, pp. 219-36.

<sup>13</sup> Mt. 22:2 (parallel Luke 14:16-24).

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<sup>14</sup> Mt. 25:1 (parallel Luke 12:35, Mark 13:34).

<sup>15</sup> Rev. 19:6-9.

<sup>16</sup> See Sebastian Moore, “The Crisis of an Ethic Without Desire,” in Jesus the Liberator of Desire (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 89-107, reprinted in Rogers, Theology and Sexuality, pp. 157-69.

<sup>17</sup> For a longer account, see Sexuality and the Christian Body, pp. 249-268 and Rogers, “Nature with Water and the Spirit: A Response to Rowan Williams,” Scottish Journal of Theology 56 (2003): 89-100; here, pp. 92-96.

<sup>18</sup> Jacob of Serugh, translated as “Jacob of Serugh II,” in Sebastian Brock, The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life (Kalamzoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. 287.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob of Serugh, Homily on the Veil of Moses, ll. 141-151, translated in Sebastian Brock, Studies in Syriac Spirituality, Syrian Churches Series 13 (Poonah, India: Anita Printers, 1988), p. 95.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, III/1, 318.

<sup>21</sup> Evdokimov, Sacrament of Love, pp. 16-43. For this use of Evdokimov, cf. Sexuality and the Christian Body, pp. 67-86.

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey Stout, “How Charity Transcends the Culture Wars: Eugene Rogers and Others on Same-Sex Marriage,” Journal of Religious Ethics 31 (2003): 169-80; here, 173-74.

<sup>23</sup> Rowan Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” in Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., ed., Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 309-21; here, 317.

<sup>24</sup> Contrary to reviewers who have supposed that any means must be a means only.

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<sup>25</sup> For more on this topic, see Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *After the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> These two sentences come from “Nature with Water and the Spirit,” p. 99, and depend on Sergei. Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 65-66; the exegesis can stand even without the conceptual context.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I. 47.1. For commentary see recently Willis Jenkins, “Biodiversity and Salvation: Thomistic Roots for Environmental Ethics,” *Journal of Religion* 83 (2003): 401-420.

<sup>28</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum 7: On the Beginning and End of Rational Creatures*, in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Paul Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), pp. 45-74; here, p. 54. Greek, PG 91:1068D-1101C. For commentary see Polycarp Sherwood, *The Earlier Ambigua of Saint Maximus the Confessor and His Refutation of Origenism*, *Studia Anselmiana* 36 (Rome: Herder, 1955), pp. 155-80.

<sup>29</sup> This sentence comes from “With Water and the Spirit,” pp. 99-100. Among human beings, this diversity does not yield a common vocation for gay and lesbian people as a group, but one that demands discernment by each person if it is not to be washed out. So John of the Cross counsels the discernment of loves, if recent research is correct; see Christopher Hinkle, “A Delicate Knowledge: Epistemology, Homosexuality, and St. John of the Cross,” *Modern Theology* 17 (2001): 427-440; here, p. 436; for a critique of more prescriptive readings of John, see Sarah Coakley, “Traditions of Spiritual Guidance” in her *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality*.

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Philosophy and Gender (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 40-54. The vocation to sanctification, even on Catholic accounts, depends on individual discernment, so that it does not follow that homosexually oriented Catholics ipso facto have a call to priestly or religious celibacy.

<sup>30</sup> Maximus the Confessor, Ambiguum 7, pp. 59-60, pronouns modified.

<sup>31</sup> Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace," p. 312.

<sup>32</sup> Kendall Soulen, "YHWH the Triune God," Modern Theology 15 (1999): 25-54.

<sup>33</sup> I owe this way of putting the matter to a similar formulation in Soulen.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Brown, The Body and Society (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 225-6, citing Athanasius, Life of Anthony 67.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Harvey, "The Stylite's Liturgy: Ritual and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity," Journal of Early Christian Studies 6 (1998): 523-39.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. III, part-vol. 4 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961).

<sup>37</sup> Nichomachean Ethics IX.12, 1172a11-14, John 15:15.

<sup>38</sup> On the Lament of the Mother of God 13, in St. Romanos the Melodist, Kontakia on the Life of Christ, p. 148. I owe the insight that Christ is both physician and patient to Stephania Gianulis.

<sup>39</sup> David Matzko McCarthy, "The Relationship of Bodies: A Nuptial Hermeneutics of Same-sex Unions," in Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., ed., Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 200-216; here, 212-13.

<sup>40</sup> But see Stanley Hauerwas, "Why Gays (as a Group) Are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)," in John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, eds., The Hauerwas Reader (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 519-21.

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia* 4.1. For application to this issue, see *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, pp. 127-39.

<sup>42</sup> For *para phusin* in Romans 1, see Dale B. Martin, “Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18-32,” *Biblical Interpretation* 3 (1995): 322-55.

<sup>43</sup> Romanos the Melodist, Hymn XI (Nativity II), strophe 4, in José Grodidiers de Matons, ed., *Romanos le Mélode, Hymns II*, Sources Chrétiennes 110 (Paris: Cerf, 1965), trans. by Margaret Alexiou, *After Antiquity: Greek Language, Myth, and Metaphor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 422-23.

<sup>44</sup> Romanos the Melodist, Hymn XII (Nativity III), proemium 1-7, in Grodidiers, pp. 118-19, translated as “On the Mother of God,” in *On the Life of Christ: Kontakia*, trans. Ephrem Lash (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), p. 17. For a discussion of these and another passage in Romanos, see Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *After the Spirit*, pp. 97-103.

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of the Vulgate translation of *para phusin* as *contra naturam*, and Thomas Aquinas’s (more correct) understanding of it as nevertheless about *luxus* or excess rather than reversal, see *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, pp. 101-102, 137-38, where “paraphysicality” becomes not a negative description of homosexual acts but a positive description of the work of the Spirit. For the role of the phrase in Aquinas’s commentary *In Romanos*, see “The Storied Context of the Vice Against Nature,” chapter 4 in *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, pp. 91-126.

<sup>46</sup> For this account of the Fall, see Sebastian Moore, “The Crisis of an Ethic Without Desire,” in *Jesus the Liberator of Desire* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), esp. pp. 100-104; now reprinted in Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford:

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Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 157-69. For a classical source, see Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis* 3.26. For commentary on Moore, see *After the Spirit*, pp. 167-70.

<sup>47</sup> Matthew 22:1-3, 9-13.

<sup>48</sup> The wideness of Christ's nuptial embrace also has much to do with his singleness (applying a modern category), but that is a paper for another day. See McCarthy, "Nuptial Hermeneutics," p. 214, n. 12, and Dale B. Martin, "Sex and the Single Savior," *Svensk exegetisk arsbok* 67 (2002): 47-60.

<sup>49</sup> For texts, see Rogers, "Baptism," in *After the Spirit* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 137-71, esp. pp. 137-39. For the robe in the garden, see Sebastian P. Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition* (Kerala, India: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1989), p. 64, citing Jacob of Serugh, *Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, 5 vols., ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris and Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1908-10) vol. 3, p. 593. Cf. also Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Joseph of Serugh," in *Symposium Syriacum 1976*, ed. Arthur Vööbus (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1978), pp. 325-47.

<sup>50</sup> Francis Acharya, ed., *Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit: The Prayer of the Asian Churches*, 4 vols. (Vagamon, India: Kurisumala Ashram, 1982-86), vol. III, p. 496, in Brock, *Spirituality*, p. 64.

<sup>51</sup> Then the baptized may "recline with confidence at the royal feast, as [they] eat this spiritual banquet, and so [they] will not have to hear those gloomy words, 'Friend, how did you enter here without a wedding garment?'" Severus, *Homily 43 on John 1:16*, *Patrologia Orientalia* 84-86, translated in Sebastian P. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, The Syrian Churches Series, vol. 9, 2d ed. (Poona, India: Anita Printers, 1998) p. 87.

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Severus does not identify Christ as also and preeminently the one without the wedding garment:  
for that you would have to combine him with Karl Barth on Christ as the rejected one elected;  
see *Church Dogmatics* II/2, §33.