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## A CIVILIZATION OF VOWS AND THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN

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The inimitable G.K. Chesterton in *The Superstition of Divorce* characterizes the Christian Middle Ages as “the age of vows” and skeptical modernity as “the age of contracts”—contracts that are all too easily broken.<sup>1</sup> In his usual paradoxical way, Chesterton says, “It began with divorce for a king; and it is now ending in divorces for a whole kingdom.”<sup>2</sup> The monastic vows and the marriage vows together sustained Christian society, along with the voluntary submission of the craftsman to his guild and the knight to his lord. What is unique about the vow is that it “combine[s] the fixity that goes with finality with the self-respect that only goes with freedom.”<sup>3</sup> The vows themselves were “sustained by a sense of free will; and the feeling that its evils were not accepted but chosen.”<sup>4</sup> For Chesterton, the alternative to the freedom guaranteed by the vow is slavery. How he works this out in the economic sphere is not our concern. How the vow relates to the dignity of women as virgin, spouse, and mother *is* our concern and the theme of this Article.

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1. G.K. CHESTERTON, *THE SUPERSTITION OF DIVORCE* 89 (1920). In 2008, a *New York Times* book review suggested, “[W]hen more than 40 percent of all marriages end in divorce, why not simply move to a system of short-term leases?” Dahlia Lithwick, *I Now Pronounce You Totally Confused*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 7, 2008, at 19 (reviewing SUSAN SQUIRE, *I DON’T: A CONTRARIAN HISTORY OF MARRIAGE* (2008)).

2. CHESTERTON, *supra* note 1, at 98.

3. *Id.* at 95.

4. *Id.* at 96.

It was in the context of a vow of virginity that Mary conceived and bore her Son Jesus. John Paul II writes in *Mulieris Dignitatem* that unless one looks to the mother of God, it is impossible to understand the mystery of the “woman” or of the Church. “The Church *herself is a virgin*, who keeps whole and pure the fidelity she has pledged to her Spouse” in the Christ-Church union.<sup>5</sup> Mary as “woman” is a “singular exemplar” of the fruitfulness of both virginity and motherhood.<sup>6</sup> Her unique role underscores the unequivocal perspective of the feminine in understanding both the nature of the “human” and the divine economy of salvation history. The Church as Bride of Christ reveals woman fully to herself as virgin, mother, and spouse.

This Article explores on the one hand how our culture endangers woman’s fulfillment as virgin, mother, and spouse, and on the other, how the vows of consecrated virginity and marriage crowned by motherhood restore woman and marriage to their true dignity. The first part illustrates the danger presented by our contemporary culture, as shown in the hookup society, the culture of divorce, and the reproductive revolution. The second part (1) gives a brief analysis of the nature of a vow within the Christian context, (2) discusses the meaning of freedom in the context of a binding vow, (3) shows that woman is oriented by nature to the self-gift of the vow, and (4) views the “Great Mystery” of the union of Christ and the Church as the context for the vows of sacramental marriage and consecrated virginity. Finally, the Article concludes by drawing out some implications for restoring the dignity of woman, marriage, and motherhood in contemporary society.

## I. CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Let us begin with our contemporary culture, whose primary freedom is “the sort of sexual freedom which is covered by the legal fiction of divorce.”<sup>7</sup> Three aspects of our culture are: (1) the hookup society, (2) the culture of divorce, and (3) the reproductive revolution.

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5. Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women] ¶ 22 (1988) [hereinafter *Mulieris Dignitatem*] (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church] ¶ 64 (1964), reprinted in THE SIXTEEN DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II 107, 175 (Nat’l Catholic Welfare Conference trans., 1967)).

6. *Id.*

7. CHESTERTON, *supra* note 1, at 100.

A. *The Hookup Society*

A college student from California, in an article in the *New York Times*, reflects on his generation and their way of relating—or rather, not relating—to the opposite sex. His observations are entitled *Let's Not Get to Know Each Other Better*.<sup>8</sup> The young man had what he calls the “weird” desire to take a girl on a date with “flowers, dinner and all that.”<sup>9</sup> Somehow he thought it would make him “feel more like an adult and less like a dumb little boy.”<sup>10</sup> He contrasted this idea with casually asking the girl home where “you can sit around watching TV” and “you hardly even need to stand up, let alone put on a nice shirt.”<sup>11</sup> The occasion inevitably ends in sexual intercourse, since he subscribes to the popular adage, “Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?”<sup>12</sup> In other words, why make an effort or incur expense when you can get your pleasure for nothing? The young man goes on to give a graphic description of our hookup society: “Casual is sexy. Caring is creepy.”<sup>13</sup> Yet throughout the article, he expresses a yearning for something more, a desire to sacrifice for something better. “[D]eep down,” he says, “we crave the warm embrace of all-consuming love.”<sup>14</sup>

Women of today’s generation, the young man notes, are as implicated in the hookup culture as the men. He describes one friend as “a normal girl, who . . . engages in hookups unabashedly—she’s just doing what she wants and doesn’t regret or overthink it.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the twentieth century saw a dramatic rise in premarital sexual

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8. Joel Walkowski, *Let's Not Get to Know Each Other Better*, N.Y. TIMES, June 8, 2008, at 6.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.* A 2006 study states that by age twenty, 75% of Americans have had premarital sex. Lawrence B. Finer, *Trends in Premarital Sex in the United States, 1954–2003*, 122 PUB. HEALTH REP. 73, 75 (2007). The results are reported in a Guttmacher Institute news release for the purpose of calling into question government funding of abstinence programs. Rebecca Wind, News Release, Guttmacher Inst., *Premarital Sex Is Nearly Universal Among Americans, and Has Been for Decades* (Dec. 19, 2006), available at <http://www.guttmacher.org/media/nr/2006/12/19/index.html>. Lawrence Finer, director of domestic research at the Guttmacher Institute, the research arm of Planned Parenthood, is quoted as saying, “Premarital sex is normal behavior for the vast majority of Americans and has been for decades.” *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted).

13. Walkowski, *supra* note 8.

14. *Id.* He had the courage to ask the girl on a date but ended up at a Chili’s and never went out with her again. In an ironic play on his opening lines, he ends the article with “Welcome to adulthood.” *Id.*

15. *Id.*

experience among young women.<sup>16</sup> R. Richard Udry of the University of North Carolina conducted a survey of both black and white women in low income neighborhoods in sixteen U.S. cities in 1969 to 1970 and again in 1973 to 1974.<sup>17</sup> He asked selected decade-of-birth cohorts of women the age of their first intercourse and of their first marriage. The differences for each decade-of-birth cohort were striking. Of those born between 1920 and 1929, none of the white women had intercourse by age fifteen and only about 6% by age twenty. There was a marked increase in the 1930 and 1940 cohorts, but the rates for those born between 1950 and 1959 were more than double those born between 1940 and 1949. This reflected the “rapid increase in sexual experience for those who were between fifteen and nineteen in the late 1960s.”<sup>18</sup>

Both in terms of sexual beliefs and behavior, a new situation arose in the 1960s. Up to the 1960s, an equilibrium or balance, at least publicly, between sex for pleasure (sexual liberalism) and traditional Judeo-Christian condemnation of premarital and extramarital sex (fornication and adultery) and homosexuality prevailed. This equilibrium collapsed in the 1960s. Distinguished sociologist Catherine S. Chilman sets 1966 as the watershed when, in her words, the whole society “fell apart.”<sup>19</sup> Chilman, speaking for herself, is ambivalent about the new approach of “Do what you want but don’t get pregnant or a disease,” which she characterizes as “essentially dehumanizing.”<sup>20</sup> Yet she endorses contraception and alternative sexual lifestyles, which are endemic to the new “norms.”<sup>21</sup>

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16. J. Udry, Karl E. Bauman & Naomi M. Norris, *Changes in Premarital Coital Experience of Recent Decade-of-Birth Cohorts of Urban American Women*, 37 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 783 (1975).

17. *Id.* at 783.

18. *Id.* at 785. A report from the National Center for Health Statistics shows a similar trend. The proportion of those virgin at marriage declined from 48% in 1960–1964 to 21% in 1975–1979. Christine Bachrach & Marjorie C. Horn, *Marriage and First Intercourse, Marital Dissolution, and Remarriage: United States, 1982*, NCHS ADVANCE DATA (Nat’l Cent. for Health Statistics, U.S. Dep’t of Health & Human Servs., Washington, D.C.), Apr. 12, 1985, at 1, 2. The steepest decline occurred between 1965–1969 (42%) and 1970–1974 (28%). *Id.* at 3.

19. See CATHERINE S. CHILMAN ET AL., *ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY IN A CHANGING AMERICAN SOCIETY* 42–52, 93, 149 (2d ed. 1983). The 1960s were, of course, the decade the hormonal contraceptive pill came into widespread use.

20. *Id.* at 3.

21. See *id.* at 243–44, 254–63.

### B. *The Culture of Divorce*

One reason the California student gives for his generation's hookup behavior centers on the culture of divorce: "We've grown up in an age of rampant divorce and the accompanying tumult. The idea that two people can be happy together, maturing alongside each other, seems as false as a fairy tale."<sup>22</sup> Divorce statistics bear out this young man's plaint. The rate of divorce after a first marriage hovered between 40% and 50% during the last decade of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> According to a report from the National Center for Health Statistics in 2002, the probability of a first marriage ending in divorce within ten years is 33%.<sup>24</sup> While the probability of remarriage among women within five years after a divorce is 58% for white women, 44% for Hispanic women, and 32% for black women, there is a strong probability that a second marriage will end in separation or divorce (23% after five years and 39% after ten years).<sup>25</sup> We are indeed living in a culture of divorce with long-term consequences, especially for children.

Children of divorce are now speaking out, and researchers such as Judith Wallerstein have followed their fortunes for twenty-five years or more. To understand fully the consequences of divorce, it is necessary to look both at the statistics and the life experience of these people. Judith Wallerstein is one of the leading researchers on the consequences of divorce on children. In 1971, a core group of 131 children of divorce from middle-class families was selected for study over time.<sup>26</sup> Reports on the findings of Wallerstein and colleagues were made at eighteen months, five years, ten years, and fifteen years. At the twenty-five-year mark, 80% of the original participants were contacted.<sup>27</sup> In addition, a group of adults from intact families,

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22. Walkowski, *supra* note 8.

23. Americans for Divorce Reform, Divorce Rates, <http://www.divorcereform.org/rates.html> (last visited May 14, 2010).

24. MATTHEW D. BRAMLETT & WILLIAM D. MOSHER, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION, DEP'T OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVS., COHABITATION, MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND REMARRIAGE IN THE UNITED STATES 17 (Vital and Health Statistics Series 23, No. 22, 2002), available at [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr\\_23/sr23\\_022.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_022.pdf).

25. *Id.* at 22, 83 tbl.41.

26. JUDITH S. WALLERSTEIN, JULIA M. LEWIS & SANDRA BLAKESLEE, THE UNEXPECTED LEGACY OF DIVORCE xxxii (2000). The book also reports the results of work with six thousand children and their parents at the Judith Wallerstein Center for the Family in Transition, founded in 1980. *Id.* at xxxii-xxxiii.

27. *Id.* at xxxii.

including both those in conflicted and those in happy marriages, served as a comparison.<sup>28</sup>

Reviewing the findings of her study at the twenty-five-year mark, Wallerstein concluded that “divorce is a long-term crisis that [i]s affecting the psychological profile of an entire generation.”<sup>29</sup> It is a “life-transforming experience.”<sup>30</sup> Childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are all different after divorce.<sup>31</sup> The major impact is felt in adulthood, especially in choosing a mate and navigating married life.<sup>32</sup> The ability to trust in a long-term commitment is gravely damaged. The aftermath of the breakup severely compromises the normal transition to a lifelong commitment to marriage and family life.<sup>33</sup> The children of divorce lose the image of their parents as a couple forever, and they have no model for working through the inevitable difficulties and conflicts of married life.<sup>34</sup> Wallerstein states that “[t]he vision of a stable marriage in which two people have weathered small squalls and major storms is of critical importance to young people as they start out on their journey, especially in today’s unstable world.”<sup>35</sup>

No matter how much care divorcing parents take to spare their children the pain of separation, the *fact* of the broken marriage itself forever changes the child’s view of himself and his secure place in the world. A sense of homelessness is a theme running through the reminiscences of these children. The family home has been dismantled, with nothing comparable to take its place. Elizabeth Marquardt, herself a child of divorce, describes the dissolution of the home as a place of safety.<sup>36</sup> The children must constantly shuttle between one parent and the other, with no place to keep their “stuff.”<sup>37</sup> Often they

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28. *Id.* at xxxii–xxxiii.

29. *See id.* at xxxiii.

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.* at 62 (“Divorce in childhood creates an enduring identity.”).

32. *Id.* at xxxiii.

33. After divorce, adolescents remain tied to their parents’ emotional needs and have difficulty separating as a result. This leads to temporary relationships with the opposite sex. *Id.* at 37–38. Loneliness and fear can also lead to hasty marriages, successive affairs, and early divorce. *Id.* at 32.

34. *Id.* at 32. Note the finality of the word “forever.” By contrast, “[a]dults raised in intact families have been to ‘marriage school’ alongside their academic learning.” *Id.* at 74.

35. *Id.* at 83.

36. ELIZABETH MARQUARDT, BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: THE INNER LIVES OF CHILDREN OF DIVORCE 169–191 (2005).

37. *Id.* at 66–67.

feel like intruders in a remarried family, resented by the new step-parent and siblings alike.

At an early age, the children of divorce are forced to grow up and become little adults. Especially in a remarriage, they lose their central place in the family. Parents are less protective of their children with a reversal of roles often taking place. When presented with the biblical story of the prodigal son, they are apt to identify with the one who stayed home. Further, they regard the parent who left as the prodigal son.<sup>38</sup> Children even become caregivers of their parents, instead of the other way around as in an intact family.<sup>39</sup> As Wallerstein reports, the single parent often becomes emotionally dependent on the child, and their relationship evolves more into one between peers.<sup>40</sup> Fathers become less and less salient, since the mother is generally the custodial parent.<sup>41</sup>

There are challenges also on the moral, social, and spiritual level. The children must wrestle with moral judgments as to which parent is at fault in initiating a divorce that has wrenched their world apart: an intolerable burden to place on a child.<sup>42</sup> When two adults blend their lives in marriage, social and cultural differences inevitably surface. In an intact family, the parents address these differences. With divorce, that onerous task rests on the immature child, who combines both social and cultural backgrounds in his own person.<sup>43</sup> Marquardt found a strong connection between children of divorce and rejection of God.<sup>44</sup> Spiritual journeys are defined by loss, suffering, lack of trust in and anger toward our parents, and even anger toward God.<sup>45</sup> Children of divorce have an experience of exile and loss of wholeness, divided and torn between two worlds.<sup>46</sup> Marquardt concludes, "[T]o gain one parent always means to lose the other."<sup>47</sup> The trauma often leads the children to abandon religion altogether.<sup>48</sup>

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38. *Id.* at 161.

39. WALLERSTEIN, LEWIS & BLAKESLEE, *supra* note 26, at xx.

40. *Id.* at 11–12.

41. *Id.* at 135. A large national study confirms widespread anger with fathers. *Id.* at 138–39.

42. MARQUARDT, *supra* note 36, at 111–12. Unwillingness to ascribe moral fault to one or the other beloved parent may well lead to a form of moral relativism, and thus contribute unwittingly to the current moral relativism of society.

43. *Id.* at 24–28.

44. *Id.* at 135.

45. *Id.* at 135–39.

46. *Id.* at 167.

47. *Id.* at 168 (emphasis omitted).

48. *Id.* at 155.

### C. *The Reproductive Revolution*

Along with the pain of traditional divorce, there is a new kind of divorce of parents from their children: reproductive technologies. Women are choosing sperm donors on the Internet to father their children in and out of marriage. They are coining new words for surrogate mothers, describing them as “the Woonas who had you.”<sup>49</sup> In the meantime, children are left with the unenviable task of sorting out their identity and living in a new way with absentee fathers and mothers. One such child said, “Mommy, what did you do with my daddy? I need a daddy or I can’t be a kid!”<sup>50</sup>

The full implication of the revolution in reproductive technologies has yet to be seen and studied. However, many legal problems are already surfacing in the courts on the question of who the true parent is.

## II. A CIVILIZATION OF VOWS

The effects on children of a culture of divorce and unlimited sexual and reproductive freedom are clearly visible. How does this culture affect the dignity of women? Surely, as radical and not-so-radical feminists claim, the greater freedom of the hookup society, abandonment of difficult relationships, and reproductive choice in the name of personal fulfillment all enhance the dignity of women?<sup>51</sup> The rest of this Article proposes that, on the contrary, only a restoration of a civilization of vows fosters the true dignity of women. It also heals the hookup culture and stems the tide of divorce so detrimental to children and family life, as John Paul II so eloquently proclaims in *Mulieris Dignitatem*,<sup>52</sup> *Redemptoris Mater*,<sup>53</sup> *Letter to Women*,<sup>54</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*,<sup>55</sup> and *Letter to Families*.<sup>56</sup>

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49. Thea Singer, *Biological Mom: The Woonas Who Had You*, WASH. POST, Nov. 25, 2002, at C10.

50. KYLE D. PRUETT, FATHERNEED 15 (2000) (internal quotation marks omitted).

51. An egregious example of the popularity of this perspective is ELIZABETH GILBERT, *EAT, PRAY, LOVE* (2006), a *New York Times* best-seller for several months. The author, in her late twenties, left her husband after five years of marriage because she did not want to be tied down with children in suburbia. She embarked on a trip around the world to savor a variety of romantic, culinary, and “spiritual” experiences.

52. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 5.

53. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* [*Encyclical Letter on the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church*] (1987).

A. *The Nature of the Vow*

St. Thomas Aquinas defines the vow as “a promise made to God.”<sup>57</sup> For that reason, it is an act of religion. A work performed in fulfillment of a vow, Aquinas says, is more meritorious than one done outside of a vow, because it belongs to “divine worship” and is like a “sacrifice[] to God.”<sup>58</sup> The person who makes the vow commits not only the fruit of the action to God, but the entire tree, since he cannot do anything else in the future. His will is fixed.<sup>59</sup> From these few statements of Aquinas, it is clear that a vow is something sacred that pertains to God in its nature and fulfillment.

Perseverance is characteristic of the vow. In referring to the vows of consecrated religious, Aquinas explains why a vow is necessary:

[R]eligious perfection requires that a man give his whole life to God. But a man cannot actually give God his whole life, because that life taken as a whole is not simultaneous but successive. Hence a man cannot give his whole life to God otherwise than by the obligation of a vow.<sup>60</sup>

The vow is most acceptable to God because it is rendering to him our liberty, which, as Aquinas says, “is dearer to man than aught else.”<sup>61</sup> He also cites St. Augustine, “Happy the obligation that compels to better things.”<sup>62</sup>

Aquinas’s consideration of the vow primarily in the context of religious life does not bring out its full relationship to the very nature of love, according to Hans Urs von Balthasar. The Swiss theologian

54. Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (1995), reprinted in POPE JOHN PAUL II ON THE GENIUS OF WOMEN 45 (Comm. on Women in Soc’y & in the Church, U.S. Catholic Conference ed., 1997).

55. Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* [*Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*] (1981).

56. Pope John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane* [*Letter to Families*] (1994), in 23 ORIGINS 637 (1994) [hereinafter *Gratissimam Sane*].

57. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, SUMMA THEOLOGICA, Pt. II-II, Q. 88, Art. 2 (Fathers of the English Dominican Province trans., Christian Classics 1981) [hereinafter SUMMA THEOLOGICA].

58. *Id.* Pt. II-II, Q. 88, Art. 6.

59. *Id.*

60. *Id.* Pt. II-II, Q. 186, Art. 6 (emphasis omitted).

61. *Id.*

62. *Id.* (emphasis omitted) (quoting Letter of Augustine to Armentarius and Paulina [Letter 127] (411), reprinted in 2 ST. AUGUSTINE, LETTERS 356, 363 (Roy Joseph Deferrari et al. eds., Sr. Wilfrid Parsons, S.N.D. trans., Fathers of the Church Series No. 18, 1953)).

goes beyond Aquinas in maintaining that “every true love *has the inner form of a vow*: It binds itself to the beloved—and does so out of motives and in the spirit of love.”<sup>63</sup> In Aquinas’s analysis, the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, insofar as they are means to the perfection of charity, are an instrumental cause of charity (love) and not charity itself.<sup>64</sup> They are useful as tools, like the virtues, in directing life to the one thing necessary—love of God. As such, they are confined to the consecrated state, while charity itself is the call of every Christian. At the same time, however, Aquinas sees the counsels as a personal identification with Christ’s self-immolation.<sup>65</sup> Under this heading, they cease to be merely instrumental and constitute the actual “giving away of self in love.”<sup>66</sup> This view of the counsels as the very form of self-gift paves the way for seeing vows as *central* to all Christian identity flowing from the Gospel.

Theologian David Crawford draws out the implications of Balthasar’s thought for all true love that desires to give itself away in total self-gift. These implications include marriage, friendship, and parental love, although the paradigmatic state is consecrated virginity. Crawford’s exposition of Balthasar echoes Chesterton:

Only an irrevocable vow is capable of taking up the whole of a person, including his future, in such an act of open-ended self-commitment. We might say, then, that explicit vows are the “objective” actualization of love itself, because they do not simply lead to but in fact *constitute* love’s giving away of self. Love, in other words, is manifested outwardly and becomes a human action in the form of an explicit vow.<sup>67</sup>

Vowed love is not just one form of love but love’s inner form. Love, itself, has an interior ordination to vows. In its very structure and its deepest meaning it is “directed toward communion, which is finally only realized in explicit vows.”<sup>68</sup>

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63. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *THE CHRISTIAN STATE OF LIFE* 38, 39 (St. Mary Frances McCarthy trans., 1983) (1977), *see also* David S. Crawford, *Love, Action and Vows as “Inner Form” of the Moral Life*, 32 *COMMUNIO* 295, 296 (2005).

64. *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*, *supra* note 57, Pt. II-II, Q. 184, Art. 3.

65. *Id.* Pt. II-II, Q. 186, Arts. 1, 6.

66. Crawford, *supra* note 63, at 298.

67. *Id.* at 297.

68. *Id.* at 301.

B. *Liberty and Love*

Chesterton speaks of the “self-respect that only goes with freedom” in relation to the vow.<sup>69</sup> This is a paradoxical point of view, especially in our culture, which exalts freedom as its most cherished value. How can a vow that binds bring about freedom? Balthasar points out that “true love want[s] to outlast time and, for this purpose, to rid itself of its most dangerous enemy, its own freedom of choice.”<sup>70</sup> Open-ended or “indifferent” freedom is, in fact, the death of love.<sup>71</sup>

The Second Vatican Council, especially through *Gaudium et Spes*, brought a new emphasis on the human person as imaging God not only in his spiritual faculties but even more in communion with others.<sup>72</sup> John Paul II made this Trinitarian dimension a primary focus of his anthropology in addressing both consecrated celibacy and marriage. In *Vita Consecrata*, the Pope’s apostolic exhortation on consecrated life, he sees a reflection of Trinitarian life in the evangelical counsels:

The deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed in relation to the Holy Trinity, the source of holiness. They are in fact an expression of the love of the Son for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. By practicing the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person lives with particular intensity the Trinitarian and Christological dimension which marks the whole of Christian life.<sup>73</sup>

The “undivided heart” which is manifested by the *vow of chastity* reflects the “*infinite love* which links the three Divine Persons in the . . . Trinity”; *poverty* becomes “an expression of that *total gift of*

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69. CHESTERTON, *supra* note 1, at 95.

70. BALTHASAR, *supra* note 63, at 39.

71. Crawford, *supra* note 63, at 302.

72. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* [*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*] ¶ 24 (1965), reprinted in THE SIXTEEN DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II, *supra* note 5, at 513, 536 [hereinafter *Gaudium et Spes*] (“Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when he prayed to the Father, ‘that all may be one . . . as we are one’ (John 17:21–22), opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.” (ellipsis in original)).

73. Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* [*Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World*] ¶ 21 (1996) [hereinafter *Vita Consecrata*].

self which the three Divine Persons make to one another"; *obedience* reveals a trust, both "filial" and "liberating," which mirrors the "harmony between the three Divine Persons."<sup>74</sup>

Crawford reiterates that "[a] presupposition of our discussion of vows is that love finds its culmination in self-gift and that vows are the means by which human creatures, who are situated in a world of time and movement, can take up and give themselves away."<sup>75</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, in comparing the union of God's sons in truth and charity to the union of Divine Persons, says, "This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."<sup>76</sup> It is through this total self-gift, either to God or to a human spouse in consecrated marriage, that man and woman truly find themselves. Freedom is freedom for self-gift, and it is the vow that secures this freedom to realize the fullness of what it means to be human.

The vow of sacramental marriage and the vows taken by consecrated religious share in common the total, exclusive, and permanent commitment in self-gift to an other. All baptized Christians are required to love Christ above all others. But it is through the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience that the consecrated religious live and express an all-encompassing commitment to Christ.<sup>77</sup> This commitment is unconditional and permanent. In an address to consecrated religious, John Paul II counseled:

*The profound essence of your consecrated life* consists . . . in a permanent gift of God that translates itself into an *espoused and total gift of self to the Lord*. Your gift of self is an *unconditional response to a declaration of love*, a response which is nourished by faith and prayer, after the example of the Virgin Mary, the perfect model of union with Christ the Redeemer.<sup>78</sup>

Through this radical commitment to self-gift, consecrated religious participate in the indissolubility of the Christ-Church union. They

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74. *Id.* (emphasis omitted).

75. Crawford, *supra* note 63, at 303.

76. *Gaudium et Spes*, *supra* note 72, ¶ 24.

77. *Vita Consecrata*, *supra* note 73, ¶ 18.

78. FR. FIDELIS STÖCKL, O.R.C., MARY, MODEL AND MOTHER OF CONSECRATED LIFE: A MARIAN SYNTHESIS OF THE THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF JOHN PAUL II 170 (2002) (quoting Pope John Paul II, Address to Consecrated Women in Medellin, Colum. (July 5, 1986)).

give witness to “that wondrous marriage . . . in which the Church takes Christ as its only spouse.”<sup>79</sup> Their unconditional commitment is no less binding than the vow of sacramental marriage, with the exception that the Church reserves to itself the right in extreme cases to dispense the vows of religious profession.<sup>80</sup> The ceremony of religious profession for consecrated virgins makes evident the similarity with the permanence of the marriage vow. The bishop in giving a ring to the candidate says, “Receive the ring that marks you as bride of Christ. Keep unstained your fidelity to your bridegroom, that you may be admitted to the wedding of everlasting joy.”<sup>81</sup>

John Paul II points to the way the Second Vatican Council speaks of the vocation of married couples as a specific “consecration,” suggesting that consecrated religious may gain a deeper understanding of their own mystery from the sacramental marriage of a Christian couple.<sup>82</sup> Both are spousal consecrations. In the marriage rite, the priest receives the consent of the couple in the name of the Church and imparts the nuptial blessing. In religious profession, the designated authority receives the vows and gives the blessing also in the name of the Church.

### C. Woman’s Orientation to Self-Gift

In *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II notes that, although the spousal meaning of consecrated life applies to both men and women religious, it has a specific meaning for women, “who find therein their feminine identity and as it were discover the special genius of their relationship with the Lord.”<sup>83</sup> As he says in *Mulieris Dignitatem*:

Women, called from the very “beginning” to be loved and to love, in a vocation to virginity *find Christ* first of all as the Redeemer who “loved until the end” through his total gift of self; *and they respond to this gift with a “sincere gift”* of their whole lives.<sup>84</sup>

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79. Second Vatican Council, *Perfectae Caritatis* [Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life] ¶ 12 (1965), reprinted in THE SIXTEEN DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II, *supra* note 5, at 297, 306.

80. STÖCKL, *supra* note 78, at 170 n.476.

81. *Id.* at 169 (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity, in 3 RITES OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH 141 (1982) (emphasis added)).

82. *Id.* at 180.

83. *Vita Consecrata*, *supra* note 73, ¶ 34.

84. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 5, ¶ 20.

The evangelical counsel of perfect chastity expresses in a particular way the spousal union of the consecrated person to Christ. Thanks to her feminine nature, John Paul II says that the woman “has a particular capacity to live in a mystical spousal relationship with Christ and thus to reproduce in herself the face and heart of his Bride, the Church.”<sup>85</sup> Nearly three-fourths of consecrated religious are women.<sup>86</sup>

At the beginning of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Pope upholds Mary as the model for all women.<sup>87</sup> He finds a key to feminine identity in her exclamation, “He who is mighty has done great things for me.”<sup>88</sup> Although these words certainly refer to the conception of her Son, they also refer, the Pope says, to Mary’s “discovery of all the riches and personal resources of femininity, all the eternal originality of the ‘woman,’ just as God wanted her to be, a person for her own sake, who discovers herself ‘by means of a sincere gift of self.’”<sup>89</sup> In his catechesis on the Theology of the Body, John Paul II shows how the woman is the one who is given to the man and, through his acceptance, discovers herself. “She therefore finds herself in her own gift of self . . . .”<sup>90</sup> As he writes in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, “A woman’s dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love which she gives in return.”<sup>91</sup> It is her special vocation to love. Her openness to self-gift is expressed above all in motherhood. “Motherhood,” says John Paul II, “implies from the beginning a special openness to the new person . . . .”<sup>92</sup> God entrusts the human being to the woman in a special way. Her feminine dignity is bound up with fulfilling her vocation to physical and spiritual motherhood.<sup>93</sup>

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85. Pope John Paul II, General Audience at the Vatican (Mar. 15, 1995), in *Women Religiously Faithfully Serve Christ*, L’OSSERVATORE ROMANO (English ed.), Mar. 22, 1995, at 11.

86. STÖCKL, *supra* note 78, at 188.

87. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 5, ¶ 5.

88. *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting *Luke* 1:49).

89. *Id.* ¶ 11 (emphasis omitted).

90. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *MAN AND WOMAN HE CREATED THEM: A THEOLOGY OF THE BODY* 196 (Michael Waldstein trans., 2006).

91. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 5, ¶ 30 (emphasis omitted).

92. *Id.* ¶ 18.

93. *Id.* ¶ 30.

D. *The Great Mystery: The Christ-Church Union*

A sacramental marriage between two baptized Christians both images and participates in the “great mystery” of Christ and the Church when the spouses live their marriage in truth. That is the reason for its indissolubility. John Paul II shows us in *Mulieris Dignitatem* and in his *Letter to Families* how St. Paul’s “magnificent synthesis” in *Ephesians* 5:21–33 reveals the truth about man and woman and marriage, indeed about their place in the world itself.<sup>94</sup> Both man and woman are called to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. The *nature* of the woman’s submission in love to both Christ and her husband is given first in *Ephesians* because in the new order of Redemption, her submission, first in and for Christ, will draw forth from her husband the radical sacrifices he is called to make for his bride, sacrifices that mirror Christ’s death for the Church. Overshadowed by the love of the Holy Spirit, it was Mary’s *fiat* that preceded the radical commitment of God to man in the Incarnation.<sup>95</sup>

Christ is the bridegroom of the Church, who gives himself up for her so that she can be spotless and without wrinkle.<sup>96</sup> Husbands are called to imitate Christ in total self-gift.<sup>97</sup> As John Paul II says, in such love “there is a fundamental affirmation of the woman as a person.”<sup>98</sup> John Paul II calls this a “Gospel innovation.”<sup>99</sup> It makes it possible for her feminine personality to grow and flourish. Such love and affirmation makes it much easier for the woman to surrender to his leadership in a way that affirms him in turn in his masculinity. All too often this does not happen, due to childhood wounds or the enticements of the culture, which absolve him of responsibility through contraception and lure her away from the family to seek her primary affirmation in the outside world. In the play *The Jeweler’s Shop*, John Paul II portrays the suffering of just such a wife.<sup>100</sup> A mysterious figure points out when the wife is tempted to go after another man that behind every love there is another greater love,

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94. *Id.* ¶¶ 23–27; *Gratissimam Sane*, *supra* note 56, ¶ 19.

95. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 5, ¶ 4; *Luke* 1:26–38.

96. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 5, ¶ 24; *Ephesians* 5:25–27.

97. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 5, ¶ 24; *Ephesians* 5:25–28.

98. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 5, ¶ 24 (emphasis omitted).

99. *Id.*

100. KAROL WOJTYLA, *THE JEWELER’S SHOP*, act II, pt. 1, *reprinted in* THE COLLECTED PLAYS AND WRITINGS ON THEATER 267, 294–95 (Boleslaw Taborski trans., 1987).

Christ.<sup>101</sup> In the end, she returns to her husband resolved to live in the light of that love.<sup>102</sup>

Christ is the bridegroom of every person. As John Paul II says, Christ as the bridegroom “expresses the truth about God who ‘first loved us.’”<sup>103</sup> No earthly love can satisfy. The consecrated virgin reveals this truth. She is a witness to the transcendence of the divine love that is both behind and beyond every human love. As a virgin, she also witnesses to the primacy of personhood over masculine and feminine difference, even though her personhood is always expressed in a feminine way.

This Article would not be complete without reference to the increasing number of single women who through no fault or choice of their own remain outside the vowed states of either consecrated life or sacramental marriage. A return to a “civilization of vows” could not but be helpful in fostering a readiness to make a commitment to marriage on the part of young men with the fear of easy divorce diminished. It would also enhance a climate of chastity on the part of both men and women, conducive to the gravity of the vows. Every baptized person is called to a commitment to Christ, which brings forth fruitfulness when faithfully lived. The time of waiting can also be a time of service and for some suffering, which in itself can be fruitful when united to the sufferings of Christ.

### CONCLUSION

Woman’s true dignity first and foremost is fidelity to the vows of either sacramental marriage or consecrated virginity, which commit her to live as gift, ordered to self-gift in her vocation as virgin, spouse, and mother. “Motherhood,” says John Paul II, “is linked to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift . . . .”<sup>104</sup> In shared parenthood, the woman’s motherhood constitutes the most demanding part. “No program of ‘equal rights’ between women and men is valid unless it takes this fact fully into account.”<sup>105</sup> This would imply that the work she accomplishes in the public arena, no matter how lofty or evangelical, must not be at the expense of these primary commitments. Any feminism that does not

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101. *Id.* act II, pt. 3, at 305–306.

102. *Id.* act III, pt. 5, at 320.

103. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 5, ¶ 25 (citing 1 *John* 4:19).

104. *Id.* ¶ 18 (emphasis omitted).

105. *Id.*

take this into account does not foster the true welfare and dignity of women. Today, sadly, women are the ones most likely to initiate a divorce, which indicates a deep malaise in the way marriage is lived by both men and women.<sup>106</sup>

Divorce is too often seen as the way to resolve the underlying conflicts. Every effort is made to mitigate the effects on children, but the research and the experience of children shows that there is no such thing as a good divorce. Every divorce is a watershed event in a child's life, and its effects persist far into adulthood. Research also shows that when there is mild conflict and unhappiness between the parents, it has little impact on the children.<sup>107</sup> In other words, the vow of marriage, when fully lived amidst all the challenges of human frailty, protects the child and the family, and ultimately society, in ways that appear hidden but are in fact profound. On the other hand, when divorce takes place, the woman cannot fulfill her role as either spouse or mother. She becomes a single parent, burdened with the responsibility of providing for her child physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The mothering role inevitably suffers in spite of heroic efforts on her part. Interpreting *Genesis* 4:1, John Paul II writes, "[T]he mystery of femininity manifests and reveals itself in its full depth through motherhood."<sup>108</sup>

Our culture will flourish as a civilization of love when it returns to a civilization of vows, seen not as outmoded and unrealistic restrictions on freedom, but as an invitation to a new kind of freedom, freedom for fulfillment in self-gift. Mary is the supreme model of both marriage and consecrated virginity. The grace she received at the Incarnation was the grace of virginity *for* motherhood, both physical and spiritual. Her motherhood was to be exercised on the physical plane *within* her holy marriage to Joseph and on the spiritual within the union of Christ and the Church. It was her "yes" to motherhood at the Annunciation that ushered in the order of Redemption and undid the knot of disobedience tied by Eve, as the Fathers love to say.<sup>109</sup> It will be woman's "yes" to motherhood in

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106. David Popenoe & Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Information Brief, Nat'l Marriage Project, The Top Ten Myths of Divorce (Apr. 2001), <http://www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/tenthingsseries.html> ("Two-thirds of all divorce proceedings are initiated by women.").

107. WALLERSTEIN, LEWIS & BLAKESLEE, *supra* note 26, at 307.

108. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 90, at 210.

109. JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, MARY—THE SECOND EVE 4 (Eileen Breen ed., 1977). The extracts gathered by Newman from the Fathers of the Church consider different aspects of Mary, with Mary as "the Second Eve" comprising the first section. *Id.*

obedience to God in a spousal union that will begin to reverse the order—or rather the disorder—in our culture. Mary’s vow of virginity for the sake of her divine motherhood brought forth the corresponding vow in Joseph. In the same way it will be woman’s commitment to the vows of both virginity and marriage that will inspire men to take up and truly live their role as husbands and fathers.