7. Chrysostom, Augustine, and the Holiness of Matrimony

William Haines, August 28, 2026

> Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this Congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency …
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> — Church of England, *The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony*

The idea that marriage is inferior to a life of celibate devotion (commonly taking the form of a community of "brothers," or "sisters" married to Christ, under a "father" or "mother") came in for criticism early on. At least one of the Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria, held that human marriage is the proper course to which scripture and nature guide us, though he thought sexual relations within marriage should not extend past the years of procreation.[1] Christian thinkers who went farther and opposed the celibate life for clerics, notably Jovinian (d. 405) and Vigilantius (fl. c. 400), were attacked as heretical by St. Jerome, and the Catholic tradition has not regarded them as Fathers. But this is not to say that marriage was ignored or frowned upon. For most people, the alternative to marriage was not holy orders.

Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom (c.345-407), Archbishop of Constantinople, has been influential especially in the eastern tradition. He agrees that celibate holy orders

[1] Witte 2012, pp. 55ff.

are superior, but also holds that when a Christian marriage is very well conducted, "your perfection will rival the holiest of monks."[2]

Chrysostom offers a great deal of sensitive advice to husbands and wives about how to conduct a proper marriage (and courtship and wedding), emphasizing mutual love, open communication, "equal dignity," and the renunciation of individual ownership of property or even bodies.[3] He says more generally:

> Since [Paul] is describing the duties of love, he addresses the man. He speaks to the woman concerning respect, saying that the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church. …[4]
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> And when you hear Paul say "fear" or "respect," ask for the respect due you from a free woman, not the fear you would demand from a slave. She is your body; if you do this, you dishonor yourself by dishonoring your own body. What does this "respect" entail? She should not stubbornly contradict you, and not rebel against your authority as if she were the head of the house; this is enough. If you desire greater respect, you must love as you are commanded. Then there will be no need for fear; love itself will accomplish everything. …[5]
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> The wife … possesses real authority and equality of dignity while the husband still retains the role of headship. … Paul uses the example of Christ to show that we should not only love but also govern, "that she might be holy and without blemish." … Seek the things which please God, and those which please man will follow soon enough. Instruct your wife, and your whole household will be in order and harmony … If we regulate our households in this way, we will also be fit to oversee the Church, for indeed the household is a little Church. Therefore, it is possible for us to surpass all others in virtue by becoming good husbands and wives.[6]

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2 Chrysostom 1985, p. 62.
3 Witte 2019, pp. 20-29.
4 Chrysostom 1985, p. 55.
5 Chrysostom 1985, p. 56.
6 Chrysostom 1985, p. 57.

Chrysostom did not say that the state of matrimony is holy, in so many words. But John Witte comments that according to Chrystostom,

> Christian marriage … symbolizes the mystery of the incarnation. The union of a Christian couple in "one flesh" and "one spirit" reflects and participates in the mysterious dual nature of Christ himself. Christ is a God who became a man, a spirit who took upon himself human flesh. Christian marriage … elevates the life of the flesh into the life of the spirit. "Paul does well here to talk of flesh and bones" in comparing our marriages with the incarnation, Chrysostom declared. "For the Lord has exalted our material substance by partaking of it Himself," by "loving, redeeming, and elevating" our human nature, by showing us how the life of the flesh can be united with the life of the spirit. … "This is not a human accomplishment," Chrysostom wrote. "It is God who sows love in men and women. He causes both those who give in marriage and those who are married to do this with joy. Therefore Paul said, 'This is a great mystery'."[7]

Augustine

St. Augustine (354-430) too accepted the orthodox view that a certain kind of celibate life is better than marriage for those who can manage it. But he held that Jerome went too far in attacking the anti-celibates, denigrating married life as though it were a bad thing.

Augustine argued, most famously in his book *On the Good of Marriage*, that the married state is good. "Marriage and continence are two goods, whereof the second is better, even as … health and immortality are two goods, whereof the second is better." The point may sound quite modest, since for the great majority of the flock, the alternative to marriage was never holy orders. But John Witte comments,

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7 Witte 2019, p. 22.

> Like other church fathers, Augustine called marriage the most "intimate and sincere" form of "human fellowship," "an order of charity," "a faithful friendship," "a friendly and true union," "a fellowship of faith," a "bond of love" that fosters "domestic peace" and "household bliss" if properly nurtured and maintained. … Like Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Roman jurists, in turn, Augustine called marriage "the first natural bond of human society," the "first step in the organization of men," the "first school" of justice, virtue, and order—a veritable "seedbed of the republic." …[8]

On the Good of Marriage begins thus:

> Since every man is a part of the human race, and human nature is something social and possesses the capacity for friendship as a great and natural good, for this reason God wished to create all men from one, so that they might be held together in their society, not only by the similarity of race, but also by the bond of blood relationship. And so it is that the first natural tie of human society is man and wife. Even these God did not create separately and join them as if strangers, but He made the one from the other, indicating also the power of union in the side from where she was drawn and formed. They are joined to each other side by side who walk together and observe together where they are walking.[9]

Philip L. Reynolds explains that in Augustine's view, "Sexual intercourse and procreation within marriage are … essentially good and natural. They were, indeed, part of God's original plan for human kind even before sin entered into the world," i.e. his plan for a sinless world; though our fallen nature is now

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8 Witte 2012, p. 66.

9 Augustine 1955, p. 9. At the end Augustine seems to be alluding to a brief passage in the *Iliad* (quoted and discussed at https://warpweftandway.com/when-two-go-together), perhaps suggesting that the two people's affairs be managed by discussion rather than command or separate decision-making.

especially apparent in connection with sex.[10] After the expulsion from Eden but before Jesus, we were all under divine command to procreate, and marriage was the proper vehicle. By Jesus' time, the world was well populated, so that the duty to procreate now applies only to people who already happen to be married.[11]

Augustine identifies three basic goods of the state of matrimony: the good of children, the good of faith, and the good of sacrament (*sacramentum*). Marriage generates children, physically through sex and morally or spiritually through parental child-rearing. The good of faith pertains to the quality of community between spouses, grounded in their sexual faithfulness in particular. Augustine's view of the third good of married life, the good of sacrament, is harder to interpret; but the word tended to connote both sacredness and the permanence of covenant. On one reading at least, Augustine's view is that the matrimonial state is a holy image, a sacred sign, of the union between Christ and the Church, and is therefore indissoluble.[12]

The Holiness of Matrimony

Augustine's works fell out of circulation for a time. A widespread idea of the following centuries, expounded by e.g. Jonas of Orléans (writing in the early 800s), was that the Church of the faithful is divided into three orders, each of them holy in its way, outside which there is no salvation: the order of the ascetics or contemplatives, the order of ministers of the church, and (as the lowest of the three) the order of the married. For the laity, marriage is necessary for salvation.[13]

According to Reynolds in his study *How Marriage Became One of the Sacraments,*

[10] Reynolds 2016, p. 102, cf. p. 132.
[11] Witte 2012, p. 67.
[12] Reynolds 2016, p. 142.
[13] Reynolds 2016, pp. 12ff.

> To show that marriage was holy and divinely instituted, authors before 1100 turned chiefly to the creation of Adam and Eve and the primordial marriage, to Genesis 2:24, and to Jesus' gloss on Genesis 2:24 in Matthew 19:6: "What God has joined together, let not man separate." Weddings prompted churchmen to reflect not only on Eve's formation from Adam's rib but also on the creation of everything, as if the world began again ritually whenever spouses plighted their troth. … The association of the holiness of marriage with the primordial union endured throughout the Middle Ages. Protestants and Catholics during the sixteenth century were equally attached to it.[14]

According to Reynolds, one of the more theologically fruitful and often-quoted claims about marriage in the 1100s and 1200s was that "whereas all the sacraments were instituted after sin and because of sin, marriage alone was also instituted before sin occurred, and not as remedy, like the others, but as a duty."[15]

After 1100, the rediscovery of Augustine's works and his theory of the sacramental quality of the state of matrimony seeded the Church's gradual adoption of the doctrine that marriage (act and state) is one of the Seven Sacraments. By initiating matrimony, which is a sacred image of invisible grace, the act is an effective channel of that saving grace to the participants, i.e. a supernaturally efficacious ritual form.[16] John Witte comments on what the sacramental status of marriage meant for medieval writers:

> Like the other sacraments, medieval writers argued, marriage was an instrument of sanctification, a channel of grace …. It sanctified their children by welcoming them as legitimate members of the church, state, and society and by providing them with a chrysalis of nurture, support, and education that sustained them until they reached adulthood. … [It]

[14] Reynolds 2016, p. 16.
[15] Reynolds 2016, p. 11.
[16] Reynolds 2016, p. 101.

> transformed the relationship of a married couple, much [as] baptism transformed the character of the baptized. … removing the sin of sexual intercourse, inviting them into the new creative act of procreation, promising them divine help in fulfilling their marital and parental duties, and welcoming them into the hierarchy of institutions that comprised the church.[17]

These ideas received various levels of official acceptance over four centuries, until in the mid-1500s they became official dogmas of the Catholic faith at the Council of Trent.[18]

[17] Witte 2012, p. 92f.

[18] Some scholars report that most Christian thinkers have an intolerably dim view of family on the grounds that matrimony is not holy and is not as good as life in celibate holy orders.

> A few Christian savants have made tolerable remarks about the institution of marriage and the family, but to most of them married life, being profane, is decidedly inferior to the lofty existence of the monk or nun, who, because of their abstinence from worldly desires and pursuits, are—or should be—closer to God. (Ames & Rosemont 2014, p. 17; Rosemont 2015, p. 118)

The above report is offered without limitation of century or sect, and without evidence. But the Protestant Reformation rejected monasticism and pastoral celibacy, and in general Protestants call marriage "holy," though I cannot speak to what they mean by that.

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