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## Married Love as a Member of the Lasallian Community

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### Introduction

*When you looked at me  
your eyes imprinted your grace in me;  
for this you loved me ardently;  
and thus my eyes deserved  
to adore what they beheld in you . . . .<sup>2</sup>*

Like those who have gone before us, we struggle to discover how to live our lives guided by full awareness of our faith in Christ, God's faith in us. We seek ways to fan the embers of truth and love which burn within us. We long to become visible as true and faithful witnesses to the holy presence of God and God's reign among us. Such a call by God determines major decisions in life. Our call to vocation is clearly on a higher plain of decision-making than other choices. It springs from an energy of God's Spirit within us which is deeper, closer to the still point of God's holy presence within us. Vocation can turn one's life upside down.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle certainly felt upended after his first meeting with Adrien Nyel. He was led decision by decision into founding the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The Brother's mission for the human and Christian education of the young, especially the poor, flowed from De La Salle's new understanding of his own vocation. De La Salle affirms repeatedly in his meditations that God's love is the fire that lights his faith and ours. God's holy presence is the spiritual glue that binds us in the Lasallian community. In the words of Brother Gerard Rummery, De La Salle "came to see that this calling of God's presence was the cement that would bond teacher and student again and again in their common relationship with God."<sup>3</sup>

God's work becomes our passion in our zeal to serve the people to whom we are sent. For De La Salle God's love is God's radical proximity to us. It is the ground zero of our spirituality; our contemplative life and our ministry to the poor. We are caught in the breath of God's self communication, where in the words of Karl Rahner, "the giver is the gift."

God's gift has opened me into the summons of the Lasallian mission. Like the Brothers who taught me as a youth and who continue to shine the light of the gospel upon my life in this present moment, I minister "together and by association." I dedicate my life to the service and education of youth, especially the poor. I listen to the call of God echoing in my being to establish the kingdom of God with and for the people I serve. I do this not as a De La Salle Christian Brother, but as a married man. Like De La Salle, my life has been turned upside down in listening to God's word, in knowing the fire of Christ's love in my life. My prayer life, family life and active ministry have been cast in the rock of God's will, purified by the fire of love, discipline and service. Married life, too, is my vocation.

The vocations to the married life and to the celibate life are complementary gifts of God. The Holy Spirit strengthens both with a strong wind and tongues of fire. To elucidate how God is present in one is to invite greater clarity in how God's presence blesses the other. Both vocations offer the gift of complete union with God. They share a common goal, but offer a distinct way of life to that end. Taking a closer look at the ways the vocation to married life has shaped my life, mind, will, emotion, and vision will shed light on my life as a Lasallian. This awareness may uncover the secret ways that God so often penetrates the lives of Brothers and lay partners with the balm of His love that we may be witnesses to the glory of God in our lives.

### **Image of the Incarnation**

How is God present to those who are called in the Lasallian mission “together and by association”? “Ultimately, practicing interior prayer and cultivating an ever deeper awareness of the presence of God are two dimensions of the life of faith, which constituted the core of De La Salle's spirituality.”<sup>4</sup> Lasallian spirituality is incarnational.

The Christian made explicit acts of faith in the “principal Christian mysteries” ... incarnating the very being of Jesus by adopting actions and interior attitudes similar to those Christ first brought to reality by his every deed, every feeling, and every outlook – in terms used by the French School, his every “mystery” and “disposition.” By entering into Christ's sentiments and dispositions, one entered into Christ's mystical reality of salvation and thereby came to act, and to be, more and more like Him.<sup>5</sup>

Married love is also incarnational. A vision of the incarnational character of married love, of putting on Christ, opens before us in the “Exhortation before Marriage.” This Exhortation from the 1962 *Roman Ritual [Rituale Romanum]* was in common usage before the Second Vatican Council replacing the homily.

As you know, you are about to enter into a union which is most sacred and most serious, a union that was established by God ...

Because God is thus its author, marriage is of its very nature a holy institution, requiring of those who enter into it a complete and unreserved giving of self. But Christ our Lord added to the holiness of marriage an even deeper meaning and higher beauty. Christ referred to the love of marriage to describe his own love for his Church, that is, for the people of God who were redeemed by his own blood. Christ gave to Christians new vision of what married life ought to be, “*a life of self-sacrificing love.*” It is for this reason that the apostle Saint Paul, clearly states that marriage is now and for all time to be considered *a great mystery*, intimately bound up with the supernatural union of Christ and the Church, which union is also to be its pattern.

In scripture, the “great mystery” unveils the love of the eternal God for the Church through the sacred union of wife and husband in marital love. What is truly human reveals what is truly divine.<sup>6</sup> The sacrament of marriage flashes a brilliant light on the manner God has chosen to be known as God with us an epiphany of mercy and a heart of longing love. The mystery of married love

embodies its supreme human value by expressing a divine mystery, the delicate character of the soul's intimacy to God. In the words of Edith Stein,

The relationship of the soul to God as God foresaw it from all eternity as the goal of her creation, simply cannot be more fittingly designated than as a nuptial bond ... Its actual reality has its highest reason for existence in that it can give expression to a divine mystery.<sup>7</sup>

The new and lasting unity between God and humanity through the Incarnation is a foundation of Christian belief. In the words of Irenaeus of Lyons, "Jesus Christ in his infinite love has become what we are, in order that he may make us what He is."<sup>8</sup> Being christened in the mystery of Christ's love has profound consequences for the marital life and for the sexual union of the spouses. They join not as a subject and object, but from their spiritual center as persons in Christ. In the words of Thomas Merton,

The real mystery of Christian agape is this power that the person of the Word, in coming to us has given to us. The power of direct and simple contact with Him, not as with an object only, a thing seen or imagined, but in the trans-subjective union of love which does not unite an object with a subject but two subjects in one affective union.<sup>9</sup>

Their longing for each other embraces their longing for union with God.

Through their sexual union in self-forgetful intimacy they know God as the source, presence, and fulfillment of their love as well as their longing for each other. There is only unity, only love. Seeking direct union with God through their physical union leads the decision to rise from "the central point in the soul where the yes can be nothing less than eternal."<sup>10</sup> This center cannot be thought or grasped by the will or the intellect, but is realized in times of contemplative union. The "yes" to each other and to God arises from the depth of their being expressed through sexual union where the act of giving and receiving is one.

Sexual union is an expression of the union of persons. The mind, body, emotions, imaginations, and Christian faith of the couple are one in their love and in God's love. They surrender to each other at the center of their being, creating a new unity between husband and wife forever. Not as subject and object but as two subjects now one in God.

The "*life of self-sacrificing love*" described in the "Exhortation before Marriage" begins here. The act of conjugal love images the Incarnation. Jesus became one of us by emptying Himself of the glory due Him as God. In His kenosis, His self-emptying, "He became obedient unto death, even death on the cross."<sup>11</sup> It is in their kenosis, their own self emptying unfolding and forged in the crucible of their life together that the wife and husband open themselves to the miracle of selflessness becoming a unity in their sexual union with each other and in their life together. This is the source of the vision and zeal in the service of God's people with simplicity, sacrifice, and conviction.

The emptying of self, present in sexual union, is practiced daily. It may be holding the hand of a parent confronting a cancer diagnosis, or praying at midnight while comforting a child experiencing nightmares. It may be the sweat and suffering of giving birth or the exhaustion that

follows hours of correcting school work and reviewing the classes planned for the next day. Work in the field, factory, office, or classroom is an expression of the love and transformation experienced by a couple in the holy act of sexual union. Joining the work for nuclear disarmament, reducing the carbon footprint in efforts to heal the planet from global climate change, standing by those suffering from systemic injustice – whether a result of race, religion, or sexual orientation – calls for radical self-forgetfulness in the service of God’s people.

The mystery of the Incarnation is captured in the *Gospel of Saint John*, “and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”<sup>12</sup> This dwelling of God with us is characteristic of married love. The invitation of the spouse, “enter me,” whispered in the intimacy of marital embrace, echoes God’s invitation to humanity proclaimed by Christ through the Incarnation. In the free, mutual giving and receiving of their *fiat*, inclusive of all they are, Christ once again enters humanity. It is reflective of Mary’s, “Be it done unto me according to your word.”<sup>13</sup> To be in the arms of the beloved is to be held by the love, the presence of God. My wife reminded me of this when I sought too quickly to leave her for quiet prayer after our lovemaking. “We just did that,” she said. She was not denying the need for quiet prayer, but was asserting that the union with God I was seeking in solitude had already been realized through the grace of our sacramental union. The words of Karl Rahner say it with beauty:

Here we have the incarnation, as it were, the real symbol, the manifestation, the space-time dimension, the expression of the most interior and most personal union in love of two individuals at the roots of their being as orientated in freedom toward God.<sup>14</sup>

Sexual union is the finest prayer a married couple can offer to God. As expressive of God’s love it creates unity and joy, which are the surest signs of God’s presence. As expressive of the couples love for each other, it is the clearest affirmation that love is their vocation, a call to generous service to and with those in need to build the kingdom of God.

### **Sacramental World and the Call of Faithful Love: The Holy Presence of God**

“Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.”<sup>15</sup> These words are repeated day and night by members of the Lasallian Family serving God’s people throughout the world. These words are spoken bold and brassy or gently in a whisper. To be conscious of God’s presence is dynamic and not static. It invites the one praying to discover new boundaries in mission, to expand mind, heart and imagination. Such remembering is not knowing God as an object, or as an article of faith although God’s presence is one, or as an object which we seek and find. It is the call from God to his children, his friends. The call echoes in us to respond completely with fullness of heart, mind, imagination and will.

The nourishing spring of God’s life is the rapids and current of ours. God’s holy presence is trinitarian. We hold faith in the three-ness and trust in the oneness; this is the marrow of our spiritual bones. It invites us to a complete surrender of our wills to God and nourishes our decisions each day to say “yes” to that invitation – to the bright days and dark nights of the call of faith.

God’s presence is sometimes like a tiny whisper that the prophet Elijah witnessed while hiding his face outside the cave<sup>16</sup> and sometimes it transforms all human expectations like the splendor of

Christ on the day of the Transfiguration.<sup>17</sup> It is a presence that can be uncovered in the rainbow of colors on a butterfly's wing or in the eyes of your mother looking at you from a wrinkled face, grasping your hand as tightly as the death she faces from Alzheimer's disease.

In marriage, the couple honors God's presence by embracing a shared dream for the future, in welcoming a newborn if blessed with birth, in the joy of watching a little one ride a bike for the first time or in the intimacy of your prayer repeated while holding closely your child suffering an earache in the middle of the night. God's presence is found in the practice of resolving family conflicts nonviolently, and in disciplining children with love and consistency. It is learning to listen when one wants to speak and to ask for forgiveness when a harm is done. God speaks in the word 'hush' spoken softly to ease the hurt of a teenager's broken heart.

After the words of the marriage vows, the "Exhortation before Marriage" describes the manner of living centered on God,

Truly then, these words are most serious ... It is a beautiful tribute to your undoubted faith in each other, that, recognizing their full import, you are nevertheless so willing and ready to pronounce them. And because these words involve such solemn obligations, it is most fitting that you rest the security of your wedded life upon the great principle of self-sacrifice. So you begin your married life by the voluntary and complete surrender of your individual lives in the interest of that deeper and wider life which you are to have in common. Henceforth, you belong entirely to each other; you will be one in mind, one in heart, one in affections. And whatever sacrifices you may be hereafter be required to make to preserve this common life, always make them generously. Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. *Only love can make it easy; and perfect love can make it a joy.* We are willing to give in proportion as we love. And when love is perfect, the sacrifice is complete. God so loved the world that we were given the gift of his only begotten Son, and the Son so loved us that He gave Himself for our salvation.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle sought complete abandonment of the Brothers to the divine will in his instruction on prayer. Abandonment to God was not an act of will power but the "consent," the willingness to embrace God's will for us especially in the messy circumstances of daily life. The intention to abandon one's will to God through the intimacy of marriage finds expression in the voluntary and complete surrender of one's individual life into the life of another while remaining a unique individual responsible before God for your decisions and actions. This union is the ground and being of the couples' unity and their witness to God's presence in the world. They recognize the Holy Spirit is the source of this union calling them to service and reconciliation in their daily ministry to God's people.

This gift of self in God's grace becomes like sunlight, brightening every aspect of daily life with the transforming power of God's holy presence. All is holy ground because God's presence is with them, in them, around them wherever they go. The gift of the wife and husband to each other is rooted in their faith that sees all as a gift from God, all from God and leading to God.

The spirit of this community is, first, a spirit of faith, which should induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but with a view to God and to attribute all to God.<sup>18</sup>

The self-surrender of Jesus finds new expression in the intoxicating mystery of sexual love. The surrender of husband and wife to each other is affirmed in their gift of sexual love and in their encounter of a shared destiny in the sacrament of matrimony. This is not a sudden event; but like De La Salle's journey of faith, it becomes visible in decisions that honor a lifelong struggle of deliberate attention to God's holy presence and the desire to celebrate that presence through words and works of their lives. Unlike Adam and Eve in the garden who hid from each other and from God after their sin,<sup>19</sup> the couple meet each other naked. The couple desire to meet stripped of deceit and pretense, all that is exclusive, my or mine, all that is self-centered whether social identity or class privilege. The words of Adriene Von Spyer grasp the gift of the couple to each other,

If a man loves a woman, he will do everything that he can to be transparent to the one he loves and to grant her an insight into him, and the beloved, the moment she receives his love will do the same. In this way a unity of being and of will grows between them though it does not violate their personhood or eliminate the boundaries that separate them.<sup>20</sup>

Through their transparency they know themselves individually and as a couple in a unique manner no one else shares. The presence of God touching their minds and hearts flows with their words and empowers their touch with the intimate tenderness in their sacred union. By their gift to each other and the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, which nourishes their desires and actions, they are prepared for the work of love for God's people, which can often be as Dostoyevsky wrote "a harsh and dreadful thing."<sup>21</sup> They put on the gown of grace to serve all of God's people united in Christ's love for the Church in the complete and unreserved gift of presence by which Christ loves the Church. "Only love can make it easy; and perfect love can make it a joy."<sup>22</sup>

### **The Fecundity of Marriage, Touching Hearts, & Service of the Poor: To Be Evangelized by Them**

To be loved with completeness by another, holding nothing back, affects one at the deepest center of personhood. In sexual union as with all prayer words are not necessary. It is in the security of this union – this still point – the heart of their identity appears. It is not a mirror of who they are or a thought of who they are, it is the real deal. It is not the screen upon which the thoughts, imaginings, and desires of the ego play out each day. Rather it is the appearance of the Christ who appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" and proclaiming to the apostles, "We have seen the Lord."<sup>23</sup> It is in their holding nothing back that the couple touch the flame of love burning within and proclaimed by the witness of their lives, "We have seen the Lord."

New awareness, knowledge, renewed vision and energy and a new power to love ignite vitality in living, a desire to share and a thirst for the life of love to be known and experienced by all. Their sexual sharing, carried out in the name of Christ and united to his work of redemption through the sacrament of matrimony, informs all they do.

From union with each other and Christ, a true compassion for the poor develops. It begins in the recognition within the couple themselves. Each knows the brokenness and emptiness they have experienced in life. In the day-to-day sharing of married life and in the self-revelation accompanying sexual union, one's poverty and contingency are exposed. We know the persistence of the weight of the ego.

In the maturing of married love, the couple comes to recognize within themselves the poor, the homeless, and the exiles that live in our cities and walk on our country roads. As my beloved has embraced me in my poverty and affirmed my being, I understand I do not need to be perfect to experience God's mercy for I am wrapped in the love and mercy of God each minute of my life. The couple comes to stand with those who know brokenness in their lives, who have the fewest options, who live on the margins of society, whose poverty is often hidden and most debilitating to their humanity.

Their greatest need is to know they are loved. The love of marriage leads the couple to support neighbors near and far who lack basic human needs. Marriage is a life-transforming event. It is a taste of God's kingdom in our midst. God calls out for a response of service to those who know exclusion due to racism, sexism, and religious bigotry in their lives. This may mean showing up in the courtroom to challenge unjust social structures regarding health care, housing, and rent control. It means that as ambassadors of Christ the married couple refuses to hand over mind, will, or conscience to the forces of social, economic, or political tyranny in our world. It is to seek to reveal Christ in every person and to help to liberate in every person the freedom to love. We are called by Christ to touch hearts and we always begin by encountering the person who stands before me right here, right now. Always, we come to see and to understand that we are evangelized by those we serve.

### **Love as Strong as Death: The Cosmic Dance**

Sexual love transforms, as does prayer, not through the promise of immediate results, but through a gradually deepened intimacy. Like a new wine that blossoms in aroma and taste and color with slow and faithful attention to the aging process, so too sexual union gradually transforms infatuated sweethearts into whole-bodied, full spirited lovers. The secret to joyful sexual embrace is like the key to all joy-filled prayer. It is surrender. To the degree that you love, you give yourself over to the other. You let go of all defenses and you release yourself into their care. You become totally vulnerable; love is a threat. Without becoming vulnerable, one cannot love; without surrender, there can be no intimacy. It is at the point of surrender that the vocation to the celibate life and the married life meet and support one another.

Is it too much to suggest that the mystical character of conjugal love has cosmic consequences? The health and life of our planet is in jeopardy and longs for our healing response. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who writes of the cosmic Christ as coextensive with the universe connects the union of man and woman and the final consummation when all will be completed in Christ,

Thus through woman the universe is really advancing toward man . . . Woman is put before him as the attraction and the symbol of the world. He can unite with this only by enlarging himself in turn to the scale of the world. And because the world is always larger and always

unfinished and always in advance of us, to achieve his love man finds himself embarked on a limitless conquest of the universe. In this sense man can reach woman only through the consummation of the universal union.<sup>24</sup>

In writing about the French School of Spirituality, Brother George Van Grieken describes the action of God bringing the universe and all things to humanity through the person of Jesus. We may imagine that each of us has our place in the cosmic dance. In every dance, there is a still point where you begin and where you end, but not a place you stand still. De La Salle learned early in life that there is a still point from which you begin and to which you return. It is a moving center of life – the mean – not just where the action is, but the center of the action. For De La Salle and for us as Lasallians, the still point is Christ. It is the *shewing* of God in a point.<sup>25</sup> Its poetic expression is insightful.<sup>26</sup> It is precisely in realizing Christ as still point of the universe in the vocation as De La Salle Christian Brother or in the call to married love that unity is found. There “will be neither marriage nor giving in marriage,”<sup>27</sup> for fullness of love in the kingdom will be realized equally through marriage or the celibate state.

The Lord plays ... in the garden of his creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might [like De La Salle] be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far to hear the echoes of that game and of that dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a globe of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they really are children; when we know love in our hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Basho we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash – at such times the awakening, the unraveling and turning inside out of all values, the “newness,” the emptiness and the purity of vision make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance ... Yet, the fact remains that we are to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance!<sup>28</sup>

It is precisely in realizing that God is the center of the universe that we experience sexual love as an act of profound worship and praise. It is an act of adoration that both the life of celibacy and the life of conjugal love bear witness, a transcendent God and a timeless kingdom. The promise of celibacy and married love become fruitful by expressing the fullness of humanity. We all are invited to wet our lips in jubilation of song, to wave our arms high with tambourines in hand, to skip, twirl and bow in the freedom of the dance. All will then echo the voice of the Spirit dwelling in our hearts and throughout the universe:

*Bind me as a seal upon your heart  
a sign upon your arm,  
for love is as fierce as death,  
its jealousy as bitter as the grave,  
even its sparks are a raging fire  
a devouring flame.*<sup>29</sup>



## Endnotes

1. Kevin Regan serves as a counselor at The San Miguel School in Providence, Rhode Island (USA). He previously served for many years as a religion teacher at La Salle Academy in Providence, Rhode Island (USA). He earned a master's degree in counseling from Rhode Island College and a master's degree in religious studies from Providence College.

2. From *Spiritual Canticle* by Saint John of the Cross and translated by Edgar Allison Peers (Image Books, 1961).

3. George Van Grieken FSC, editor, in *Let Us Remember: Stories of the Holy Presence of God* (Washington, DC: Christian Brothers Conference, 2018), pages 21, 22.

4. Van Grieken, page, 20.

5. Van Grieken, page 17, footnote 33.

6. *Ephesians* 5:32.

7. Edith Stein (Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), *The Science of the Cross* (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2002, pages 242, 243.

8. *Against Heresies* by Irenaeus and edited by Anthony Uyl and originally edited by Philip Shaff (W.B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1885).

9. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New Directions, 1991), page 153.

10. Simon Weil, *Waiting for God* (Harper and Row, 1951), page 172. "What can be more horrible than not to respect the consent of a being in whom one is seeking, though unconsciously, for an equivalent of God. Whether there is physical union or not, the exchange is unlawful if, on both sides, the consent does not come from that central point in the soul where the yes can be nothing less than eternal."

11. Cf. *Philippians* 2:5-11.

12. *John* 1:14.

13. *Luke* 1:38.

14. Karl Rahner, "Marriage as a Sacrament" in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 10, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), page 202. Note on page 206 how this love shares in the virtue of *caritas*.

15. Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 2015), #64.1; also, *Collection of Various Short Treatises* by John Baptist de La Salle and edited by Daniel Burke FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1993), page 50. "We must practice application to the holy presence of God."

16. Cf. *1 Kings* 19:11-13.
17. Cf. *Matthew* 17:2; *Mark* 9:2-3; *Luke* 9:28-36.
18. Van Grieken, pages 20, 21.
19. Cf. *Genesis* 3.
20. Adrienne Von Speyr, *Light and Images: Elements of Contemplation* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), page 18.
21. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-1880).
22. “Exhortation before Marriage.”
23. *Luke* 24:32, 35.
24. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Building the Earth* (Wilkes-Barre, PA: Dimension Books, 1965), pages 46, 49.
25. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Penguin Publishing Group), chapter 5.
26. *The Voices of Silence: Meditations on T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets* (Createspace.com), page 44. “At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity. Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. I can only say there we have been: but I cannot say where. And I cannot say how long, for that would place it in time.” (II 62-69).
27. Cf. *Mark* 12:25; *Luke* 20:34-36.
28. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New Directions, 1972, and reissued in 2007), pages 296, 297.
29. Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch, *The Song of Songs: The World’s First Great Love Poem* (Modern Library, 2006), page 111.