

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Tyrone Grima

The Love that
Dares not Bless
its Rings:
*A Theological
Reflection on
Sacramentality in
Catholicism*

July/August 2021

The Love that Dares not Bless its Rings: *A Theological Reflection on Sacramentality in Catholicism*

Tyrone Grima

Interpersonal dynamics are a salient feature of human anthropology and inform our actions, thoughts and desires. The relational aspect has been the core of religious faith systems that have strived to understand these dynamics in the context of their theological belief. This article will explore relationality in the Catholic tradition, underlining the sacramentality that constitutes the nature of relationships, and the importance of comprehending this concept within a wider, universal and holistic manner that does justice, albeit partially, to the beauty of the depth of such a mystery.

OTHERNESS IN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Relationality is a fundamental aspect in the spiritual journey of the Christian towards perfection. All Christians are called to grow in love with others, particularly the significant others in their lives. This is because the person can only discover the authenticity of the self, and, as a consequence, mature, through the interaction with the others. In the words of Josef Ratzinger, ‘man is the more himself the more he is with ‘the other’Only through ‘the other’ and through ‘being’ with ‘the other’ does he come to himself.’¹ Ratzinger’s anthropology, reflecting the Christian heritage over the centuries, denotes that humanity can only find meaning and fulfilment in life through relationships since all ‘human beings are relational, and they possess their lives – themselves – only by way of relationship. I alone am not myself, but only in and with you am I myself. To be truly a human being means to be related in love, to be of and for.’² In the study of Christian spirituality, however, otherness is not only limited to the human realities

1 Ratzinger, J., *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004) p.234.

2 Ratzinger, J., *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the fall* (New York: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995) p.72

Tyrone Grima is an academic at the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). His interests are the interface between the theatre and spirituality; feminine mysticism and queer theory.

THE LOVE THAT DARES NOT BLESS ITS RINGS

but extends to the supernatural as well. There is an intimate link between the love for human beings and the love for God, and these two relationships cannot be separated. In *The New Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, the term ‘spirituality’ is defined as an expression of the relationship between God, neighbour and self.³ In fact, ‘whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen’ (1 Jn 4: 20). This is due to the fact that the human being has been created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1: 27). Each significant other becomes a tangible mirror of the intangible God, and by loving the other, the individual also loves God.

The importance that Christian spirituality gives to the relational originates from the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father through the Son. This mutual indwelling makes the Christian God the only God whose ontology is rooted in relationality. The Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are in a continuous and eternal relationship with each other, and their being is a relational ontology of love. Relationality is not only holy, but it is also eternal.⁴ Since human beings were created in the image of God, they cannot but need to follow the Trinitarian approach and grow spiritually by relating.

THE SACRAMENTALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

Within the Catholic framework, the relational is elevated even further since it is an integral aspect of sacramental theology. The seven sacraments are relational since they are a manifestation of the relationship between the person and God, witnessed by the community and within the parameters of the community. A sacrament is never a private enterprise either in its execution (the community is always present either physically or symbolically) or in its fruits (the benefits received by the person receiving the Sacrament enrich the community). The basis of the communal engagement in the Sacraments is a two-tiered reality. Primarily, Sacramental life is relational, and secondly, by investing in this reality, the relationships between community members are strengthened because of the spiritual nourishment that the Sacraments provide.

Furthermore, the Catholic framework emphasises the notion of relationality in realities that fall outside the parameters of the seven sacraments, but which are nonetheless sacramental. Post-conciliar theology accentuates that:

3 Pryce, M., “Relationships,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Sheldrake, P. (London: SCM, 2005) p.536.

4 Cusano, N., *La Dotta Ignoranza* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1991) p.70-1.

THE FURROW

... the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, the transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical. For Catholicism, therefore, all reality is sacred... human existence is already graced existence.⁵

This is reiterated by the Catechism of the Catholic Church that explains that sacramentals ‘prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it’ and ‘that there is scarcely any proper use of material things which cannot thus be directed toward the sanctification of men’. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1670). The Catechism also explains that ‘among sacramentals *blessings* (of persons, meals, objects, and places) come first. Every blessing praises God and prays for his gifts.’ (CCC, §1671).

These two references clearly indicate that the human is ‘capax Dei’. Since the relational elevates the human being to his or her highest form of maturity and development, it consequently follows that relationality is potentially the highest form of sacramentality that the Divine has gifted humanity with.

The French mystic Simone Weil develops the sacramentality of relationality by juxtaposing it with the notion of *metaxu*. This is the space in-between the reality of the Divine and the reality of humankind. *Metaxu* is the middle ground, bridging these two polarities.⁶ Weil compares this Platonic concept to the stick that the blind person uses to touch eternity⁷ emphasising that in the limitations of the human condition, *metaxu* can offer humanity the possibility of attaining wholeness. It is a bridging space between the reality of the Transcendent and the reality of humanity. In this framework, relationships are a form of *metaxu*, allowing the person to grapple with the *mysterium fascinans* through the intricacies and profundity of the human mystery of the other. Relationships are not only signs, but vehicles that lead the human being to the Divine. They become *opportunities* whereby in his/her woundedness the human being can respond to the intimacy that God creates us to partake in. Hence, a relationship cannot be intrinsically evil and always have the potential for spiritual growth.

ARE ALL RELATIONSHIPS SACRAMENTAL?

The concept of *metaxu*, however, should not lead to the fallacious conclusion that all relationships are sacramental. *Discernment* is key towards understanding whether a relationship is conducive

5 McBrien, R.P, *Catholicism* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994) p.9-10.

6 Plato, *Symposium and Phaedrus*, trans., Griffith, T. (London: Everyman Publishers, 1986), 203b-c, p.54-5.

7 Weil, S., “Cahier VI,” in *Œuvres Complètes : Cahiers (septembre 1941 – février 1942) : La Science et l’Impensable* (Paris : Gallimard, 1997) p.357.

to spiritual and psychological growth. A person enduring an abusive 'relationship' where violence and sexual exploitation are regular occurrences may probably be a case of a relationship that does not deepen the relationship with the Transcendent because of the psychological damage inherent in it. Other relational scenarios might be less clear-cut, and more challenging to discern, emphasising even further the importance of such a process in the spiritual life. Without a deep process of discernment, this approach could lead to misinterpretation and to the promotion of a culture of relativism. *Metaxu* is not an excuse to justify convenience in life. In Weilian spirituality, the starting point is neither the welfare nor the convenience of the individual. The well-being of the individual is the result of *metaxu*, and not its cause. The *point de départ* is the desire of the person to connect with God, without using this bridge as a form of consolation or compensation.⁸

Pauline theology offers guidance that can be used in the process of discernment to understand whether a relationship is a means for spiritual growth. In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle shows that any action or activity in which the fruits of the Spirit are manifested is by default coming from the Divine. This offers the individual a paradigm to be able to recognise the will of God in his or her engagement with the material world and with others for 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control; against such there is no law.' (Gal. 5: 22). These are the indicators of a person who is engaged wholeheartedly in the journey towards authenticity as s/he learns how to direct attention from the self to God, through the dynamics of the relationship.⁹

It is in this theological light that the responsum issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith concerning blessings of the unions of the same sex also needs to be challenged. The starting point of the argument presented is flawed, reflected in the semantic expression which stalls any form of dialogue or critical analysis. The persistent direct use of 'homosexual inclinations', as well as the indirect reference to a 'disordered reality' prevents the possibility of delving deeper in the reality of the loving relationships shared and experienced by people in the LGBTI community. Communication and meaningful reflection require an encounter whereby stories can be shared. The narratives of various LGBTI couples across time and cultures reveal inspiring and heart-warming experiences, and of course, struggles, of persons whose

8 Ibid., p.320.

9 Diogenes, P.A and Springsted, E.O., "Winch on Weil's Supernaturalism," in *Spirit, Nature, and Community: issues in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) p.81.

THE FURROW

rapport with the Divine has deepened through (and not in spite of) their intimate one-to-one relationships. These are the accounts that can truly help us understand how our mysterious God operates in a most beautiful way in our lives for as Aquinas states ‘ Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it.’¹⁰

Hence, the distinction of whether a relationship is sacramental, or not, does not lie in the ontological nature of the relationship. Any relationship requires the couple, as well as each individual, to enter into the process of discernment to reflect on whether that particular relationship, within that particular context, can serve as a vehicle for spiritual growth and therefore, be sacramental. Unfortunately, a narrow understanding of the theology of sacramentality in relationships has been the cause of much undue pain, and as a consequence, underdevelopment in the spiritual life of the individual. This theological perspective has justified the persistence of women or men in heterosexual relationships in remaining oppressed in the damage that their marriage is inflicting on them on the basis of sacramentality. The same theological perspective, which denies potential fruitful relationality to LGBTI people, has also resulted in several episodes of psychological breakdown and of countless suicides committed by young, and less young, individuals who not realising the sacramentality of their relationships, believed it to be a curse to be rid of.

CONCLUSION

This way of understanding the sacramentality of relationships is *inclusive* and *liberating*. Without underestimating the complexities of relationships, which no psychological, anthropological or theological framework can capture in its totality, it offers a perspective that permits us to ponder on the nature of relationships in a healthy and creative manner. It does not straitjacket the relational within closed, and often times, reductionistic boundaries. The Divine does not limit himself to these humanly created confines. The spiritual experience frees us by allowing us to peek into the immensity of the love of God. It allows humanity the possibility to enter the depth of the joyful mystery of otherness that makes us so human, and yet so akin to the Divine. It is, indeed, this mystery that spurs each one of us forward in our journey towards authenticity.

10 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume I, Q.1, A.8 (New York: Christian Classics, 1948) p. 6.