

Marriage: A Story and A Sacrament

by Daniel Di Domizio

(Excerpted from 1981 January/February *Worldwide Family Spirit* magazine)

Stories are for children, or so we think. Stories entertain, they teach, they help us remember. People such as Jewish storyteller Elie Wiesel insist that we need stories to find ourselves and to be. For, as Wiesel suggests, "God made man because he loves stories."

The Word as Story and Sacrament

God loves stories because his own Word is a story, in fact, THE story; the story of creation of life of a continual loving care. For our Hebrew ancestors the word *dabar* had a different significance than it does for us. We live in a world inundated with words, both printed and spoken. As we say, talk is cheap. We experience the hollowness of many words spoken. We have come to regard with suspicion and cynicism the words of public officials; sometimes even of religious leaders and dear friends. The gap between the word and the deed seems often far too wide; occasionally it never gets bridged at all. Not so for the ancient Hebrews. The word was seen as quite active and concrete. The word stood for the power, even the very person of the speaker. A person's word was his/her commitment. The word was close to the deed itself; it represented the very beginning of the deed's coming forth. When the word was God's, then it contained the power of his very person; it was absolutely effective; it never returned to him empty, as the Scriptures tell us. God's word was the event of creation, or redemption and liberation. The Hebrew could look to his/her own human existence and perceive God's word as event. The universe itself testified to God's word. Thus, truly everyone and everything pointed to God, alluded to his loving, creative word.

I begin this discussion of the sacrament of marriage with a reflection on the story and the word because for me the theology of the word introduces us to an understanding of sacramentality which is basic to the meaning of all individual Christian sacraments. Only when we can view our own life story as opening us to the event of God's word, as revealing God's loving presence for us, only then can we begin to appreciate the real sacredness of all of our lives. The moments of our life, the pain, the joy, the relationships, and the word, all proclaim more than meets the eye of our day-to-day vision. Viewed with the expectation born of faith, the expectation that love and hope are present in life, these life experiences take on a richness that in fact transforms us and our world. *Life* itself is the *basic sacrament*, or encounter with the living God. Here we begin to grasp the meaning of our individual sacraments.

Within this total spectrum of life, certain moments betray a special power to bring us face to face with God's presence. These are "crisis" moments, times when the very marrow of life is uncovered, when the meaning of life hits us with a particularly forceful impact. They are moments of personal rebuilding and renewal. They are at times painful and sad, at other times joyful and ecstatic. In either case, God's presence becomes even more apparent than at other moments. We experience love, care, healing, and growth with much greater intensity.

The Church gives us ceremonies for these special times, not to make them sacred, but to acknowledge the sacredness that is already there. We instinctively want to ritualize, to remember and retell the events that are special to us. Christians have traditionally recognized birth, death, shared love, healing, and reconciliation, joining the community, the call to priestly service, and the experience of unity with each other and Christ as special, crisis moments, as sacraments. At these times we celebrate God with us, incarnate in the stuff of life.

Human Sexuality as Sacramental Event

Within this broader sacramental context, we speak of the sacred event of marriage. We all recognize our sexuality as one of the central experiences of life. By sexuality here we are not referring exclusively, or even mainly, to the biological, genital aspect. As we move beyond puberty, what speaks to us most profoundly about our sexuality is our relationality. Our sexuality, our maleness or femaleness, defines our manner of relating to others. Each of us relates as man or woman. In a real sense, our relationships determine our lives and their meaning. This is a fact of personal experience. If we are to grow toward wholeness and fulfillment, and therefore holiness, then we must prize our sexuality as the event of God-with us. In other words, our sexuality is a sacramental experience. It represents life's struggle for meaning, value, and fullness. At its deepest expression our sexuality moves toward intimacy with certain others. The ultimate goal of our sexuality is not necessarily physical orgasm; it is intimacy, or the profound sharing of love, care, and healing by which we experience our fullest self at the same time as we touch and affirm the other. Intimacy, therefore, is not merely a possible option in life; it is a human need. As such, it cuts across the so-called states in life; the single person and the vowed celibate as well as the married person must include the experience of intimacy in their journeys toward wholeness. In this sense, intimacy is the fullest sacramental expression of all human sexuality.

The sacramentality of marriage lies precisely in the experience of a particular sort of intimacy. Two persons, who have discerned that their lives are converging, encounter God's presence as they progress towards an intimacy which is expressed in a total response to each other, emotional, spiritual and genital. This intertwining of two lives which evolves only through the passage of years is the sacrament of marriage. It is both a commitment and an ongoing process. We are married and yet we are always marrying. Though permanent, the sacrament is always in process. Perhaps this tension in the marital relationship finds its best illustration in the nuptial imagery of the Scriptures. The prophets speak of the marriage between God and Israel as everlasting and yet as an on-again, off-again experience, at least on the part of Israel. The Song of Songs beautifully describes the approach withdrawal dynamic of the two lovers. The New Testament speaks of the consummation of the marriage between Christ and his Church in the blood of the Cross; yet St. Paul also alludes to the infidelity of the Church as spouse amid the tensions of everyday life. The point is that, as all married people know so well, the sacrament of marriage is happening throughout the relationship, not just on the wedding day. Several very important conclusions flow from this simple observation based on common experience.

Ritual and Event

First of all, it means that the ritual celebration of marriage before the community of believers can be seen only as a proclamation of the beginning of a sacred event, not as the final step. Two people who have discerned that a degree of intimacy and love are binding them together in a relationship stand before the community to witness to a sacramental process already underway. The ceremony is not the sacrament as such. The two people in their quest for deeper intimacy are already "sacramenting." Nevertheless, the ritual celebration remains important and awesome because it publicly proclaims the risky commitment of two people to a process which can never be fully completed.

Secondly, if the sacrament is an ongoing process, it clearly follows that the two married people are experiencing the dimensions of the sacrament throughout the relationship in every aspect of their daily lives. To put the matter in another framework, the partners because of their sacramental relationship are continually engaged, most often without direct awareness, in the encounter with the living God; this, after all, is the meaning of sacrament. Further, as we suggested earlier, God's presence is revealed as an event in human life. The event of God will take different shapes. Thus, for the two spouses, God will at one time be experienced as the event of warming joy, at another moment as the event of creative aloneness which nourishes a relationship; at still another moment as the healing event which makes touch possible after a falling out. In this sense, there are no neutral zones, no really non-sacramental moments in the healthy marriage relationship. Whether alone or together, the couple are engaged in the sacramental event of intimacy.

Marriage as Ongoing Story

In a more practical vein, I would like to broach several questions which pertain to the sacramental event of marriage in our contemporary setting. With marriage evolving from a basically authoritarian male-dominated relationship to a more egalitarian one, the inner dynamic of the relationship is changing. As two people come together on equal footing, the potential for conflict increases many fold. In fact, conflict is a requirement for intimacy, a sign that two people are indeed struggling to share their diverse richness. The absence of significant conflict probably indicates a pulling apart. Rather than decrying conflict, perhaps we ought to recognize it for what it potentially is, namely the sacramental event of intimacy in process. To be sure, like most creative events, conflict contains an ambivalence; it is dangerous and painful. Yet, for this reason, good communication and conflict resolution skills become requirements for a sacramental marriage. Therefore, movements and techniques such as Marriage Encounter, Couples Communication, Marriage Enrichment, and education in human sexuality take on a new significance and importance. They are not just neat tricks to get along better. They help create the sacrament which is intimacy. They play a role in the event of God in our lives together. Again, the encounter with real life is in fact our opening to God.

Marriage as Prophetic Event

Yet marriage is not just a private matter. Though the temptation towards privatism remains very captivating today, the obvious symbolism of the marriage ritual

bespeaks a public, communal event. The intimacy begun in the lives of two people is held up and proclaimed before the Christian community as a growing experience which has meaning for everyone present. Love, the bond of intimacy, is expansive. As an emotion and an attitude of life, love has cosmic proportions. Though experienced between two people, love needs to extend itself in order to grow in a healthy manner. To withhold love brings spiritual and eventually even physical death. Traditionally we have viewed children and family as the natural extension of the dynamic of love. Life itself verifies this truth. No one need doubt the potential power of family life to bring us from selfishness to self-giving love.

Yet even the family is not the final goal of marital intimacy. Our marriage is for the community. Our ties as human persons and as Christians extend to the entire human family. Hospitality, for instance, is the fruit of a healthy intimacy nourished by an awareness of the true scope of love. In a world in which possessions give people both identity and worth, hospitality becomes the symbol of a different lifestyle. Besides my family, who really has further claim on my time, my personal and material resources? Among the early Christians hospitality was a duty and a right of every committed follower of the Lord. In time, religious life took up the task of sharing food, love and shelter with those in need. Today hospitality has become the responsibility of so-called "radical" groups such as the Catholic Worker, Friendship House and rescue missions. This historical evolution of the practice of hospitality raises difficult questions, questions which challenge our understanding of the very sacramentality of our married life. Where in married life does God reveal his loving presence? We claim to meet God in the sacrament of our intimacy. But where does our intimacy really extend?

This last question leads me to a final observation. If what we have been saying here makes sense, then the sacrament which is married and family life becomes no less than a commitment to ministry in the beloved community of Christ. At a time when people either avoid touching others, or their touch is magnified into colossal means of global destruction, the vulnerability which intimacy demands and the outstretched arms of hospitality witness to a powerful counter sign. The challenge of the sacrament of marriage among Christians, in my mind, contains such prophetic potential. The task of the prophet in the Judeo-Christian tradition is to reveal to his/her brothers and sisters that God's word is indeed alive and is struggling to become event in their lives as the experience of healing love, of reconciliation, of salvation. God's word becomes sacrament in us precisely in our story as married people. But the story of our own marriage has many plots and countless characters. It is our story, but it is more than ours; for our story as married people becomes the *dabar*, the Event of God. Indeed God loves stories.

Article by: Daniel Di Domizio appearing in "New Catholic World"

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