

Jacek Goleń
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
jacek.golen@kul.pl
ORCID: 0000-0001-9724-6936

Strengthening the Conjugal Bond

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The Scientific Reflection and the Practical Ministry of the Church

(ed. Jacek Goleń, Ryszard Kamiński, Grzegorz Pyżlak)

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CATHOLIC FAMILY MINISTRY

*The Scientific Reflection
and the Practical Ministry of the Church*

Edited by
JACEK GOLEŃ

in collaboration with
RYSZARD KAMIŃSKI
GRZEGORZ PYŻLAK

Preface of Kevin Cardinal Farrell

Prefect of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life

Translated from Polish by
Sister Pascale-Dominique Nau, OP

Reviewers

Rev. Prof. Adam Przybecki,
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan

Rev. Prof. Paweł Mąkosza,
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

Typesetting

Ewa Karaś

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Agnieszka Gawryszuk

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Wydawnictwo KUL, ul. Konstantynów 1 H, 20-708 Lublin, phone +48 81 740-93-40, fax+48 81 740-93-50,
e-mail: wydawnictwo@kul.lublin.pl, <http://wydawnictwo.kul.lublin.pl>

Print and cover: volumina.pl Daniel Krzanowski
ul. Ks. Witolda 7-9, 71-063 Szczecin, phone +48 91 812 09 08, e-mail: druk@volumina.pl

means stressing the importance of faith in when people enter into and pursue the conjugal vocation. Thus, the mystagogical aspect of marriage preparation does not aim at conveying content – knowledge about marriage and the family, along with their consequences and duties – but strives to lay the foundation for their responsibilities, seen in a renewed and deepened relationship of the person with God, and hence ultimately in faith. The primary task here is to help people to discover and embrace their vocation. Hence, one of its main aims is to help them to recognize this calling in faith and accept it as the “great mystery” of God’s presence in life.

6. Strengthening the Conjugal Bond

JACEK GOLEŃ

Human love is simultaneously the work of God and a human act. On the one hand, it is God’s work and His gift – this led Pope Benedict XVI to speak of God’s love revealed in the Heart of Jesus Christ as the only source of human love.¹⁸⁶ The creation and strengthening of the bond of conjugal love, therefore, require awareness, openness, and trust in the unceasing work of the grace received in the sacrament of marriage (cf. FC 13, 19). On the other hand, building the bond of conjugal love is the work of the spouses, the process of mutual self-giving by spouses of different sexes. The spouses’ engagement in mutual self-giving is an expression of the life of conjugal sacramentality.¹⁸⁷

Pope Benedict XV stated that love is never “finished” and complete but changes and grows throughout life.¹⁸⁸ After receiving the sacrament of marriage, the bond of love, in order to develop and reach maturity, requires care. Joined together by the sacramental bond, the spouses unite and become creators of their common history and project, which they must develop together. With the help of God’s grace, they build their future day after day (cf. AL 218). New spouses set out on a path that requires the awareness of the dynamic character of the sacrament of marriage, of their own commitment to building a bond of conjugal love, and of the pastoral support from believers and the community of the Church.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. DCE 7, 12, 17 and 19.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. K. Wojaczek, *Więź małżeńska w sytuacji rozłąki z przyczyn ekonomicznych*, Opole, 2007, 19–26, 43–9.

¹⁸⁸ DCE 17; cf. AL 218.

Pastoral support, in the light of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, consists not so much in helping the spouses to reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church perfectly but in leading them to understand that marriage is a dynamic process that progresses slowly, through the gradual incorporation of God's gifts (AL 122). The exhortation explicitly states that "we cannot encourage a path of fidelity and mutual self-giving without encouraging the growth, strengthening and deepening of conjugal and family love. Indeed, the grace of the sacrament of marriage is intended before all else 'to perfect the couple's love'" (AL 89). Consequently, it is necessary to identify all the pastoral activities that help spouses to grow in love and to live the Gospel of the family (cf. AL 208).

Pastoral support for the development of conjugal love does not omit or disregard proposing the divine plan for marriage and the family in all its splendor and presenting it as the ideal and light of life. On the contrary, it is intended to encourage and motivate the baptized "to understand that the sacrament of marriage can enrich their prospects of love and that they can be sustained by the grace of Christ in the sacrament and by the possibility of participating fully in the life of the Church." The objective of the pastoral effort is to strengthen marriages (see AL 307). Pope Francis points out that, when at times the Church's teaching on marriage is a sign of opposition, "Married couples are grateful that their pastors uphold the high ideal of a love that is strong, solid, enduring and capable of sustaining them through whatever trials they may have to face" (AL 200).

The specificity of the pastoral care for the engaged and for married couples expected today implies establishing pastoral bonds that help them to grow in love and to overcome difficult periods. In addition to valuable spiritual resources, the pastoral care must be practical, offering help based on experience as well as on psychological and pedagogical knowledge (AL 211). Given the large number of conflict situations in marriage—according to *Amoris Laetitia*—, the most important pastoral task with regard to families is to strengthen their love and help them to heal the wounds and, so, to keep the tragedy of divorce from spreading (AL 246).

Pastoral ministry can support the development of love in marriage in several ways, including especially a positive presentation of the Gospel of the family, in response to the deepest needs of the human heart, and motivating generosity, commitment, and courage in the face of the challenges of marriage (see AL 40); appreciation for the witness of love in the pastoral care of engaged and married couples, thus making it easier to freely accept and deepen the demands of the Gospel (cf. AL 38); pastoral accompaniment and spiritual direction for spouses (see AL 230), as well as specialized family accompaniment.

At this point, it is worth showing first of all the role of the witness of love in the pastoral care for engaged couples and for married spouses.

6.1. *A Witness that Supports the Love of the Spouses*

JACEK GOLEŃ

The deep relationship between truth and love is rooted in humanity and in the Trinity of the Divine Persons.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, the witness of love seems to be the key to strengthening conjugal love. This witness, by its very nature, consists in the unveiling of one person by another, who allows him/her into his or her world and to experience it in an interpersonal relationship.¹⁹⁰ In a marriage-family relationship, the person reveals himself/herself and allows another to experience him or her as a human being and a Christian. Now, given that the ability to love is inseparable from and constitutes the person's character, the witness of love reveals his or her inner truth, thus awakening love in the human heart. Spouses, who truly live their human and Christian marriage, give each other and other married couples a loving witness that, in many ways, stimulates love.

Today, the witness of spouses is an appreciated and expected form of support for the development of conjugal love. Pope Francis highlighted its role when he said that the witness of persevering married couples who continue developing a joint project and maintain mutual respect are greatly appreciated in our time. This is a form of pastoral activity that encourages the gradual deepening of the demands of the Gospel (see AL 38).

The witness of the love of the spouses encompasses both the human and the Christian dimensions, which interpenetrate one another. It is worth noting some of the particular aspects of this witness, such as discovering one's self and the meaning of one's own sexuality in the communion of persons, the respect for the dignity of the person and the human body, concern for fidelity and the permanence of marriage, building a marital bond on the foundation of mutual self-giving, and love and responsible parenting. To this must be added the high value of the witness of love in connection with the profession of faith.¹⁹¹ Moreover, experienced spouses can share practical skills with younger couples and help them create family habits.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. GS 24; LfF 8.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. J. Mastej, "Świadectwo w argumentacji za wiarygodnością chrześcijaństwa," *Verbum Vitae* 27:2015, 239.

¹⁹¹ Cf. J. Goleń, "Rola świadectwa w rodzinie," *Verbum Vitae* 28:2015, 441-54.

Discovering One's Self and the Meaning of One's Own Sexuality in the Communion of Persons

Humanity as a whole can only be represented by a man and a woman, with their specific genders (DCE 11); and, as couples, they are the image of God.¹⁹² Hence, the man and the woman can fully know each other and their own sexuality only in their mutual conjugal union. The Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* emphasizes that, in loving, a man and a woman have the important task of helping “one another become, respectively, more a man and more a woman [...] Fostering growth means helping a person to shape his or her own identity” (AL 221).

Discovering the sense of one's own body in marriage makes it possible not only to shape one's own identity but also to discover the orientation of one's body and sexuality as a gift of self in the communion of persons.¹⁹³ The formation of the communion of persons in marriage consists in mutual giving, manifested in the permanent union – being “one flesh” – of indissoluble marriage.¹⁹⁴ The gift of self, which is the only way for a person to find himself fully (cf. GS 24), is expressed in the conjugal love of the spouses and in a lasting marital communion. The witness of sexuality experienced fully, in a manner subordinated to the dynamics of mutual self-giving and the communion of persons, is possible with the help of the grace of the sacrament of marriage.¹⁹⁵ Supported by this grace, the spouses can give a sublime and clear witness that a man and a woman united in marriage find themselves and the meaning of their own sexuality, as well as the value of loving self-giving in the communion of persons.

Respect for the Dignity of the Person and the Human Body

The strengthening of conjugal love serves as a witness of the respect for the dignity of the person and the human body, which is a para-sacrament – a tangible sign of God's presence.¹⁹⁶ The human being is a soul that expresses itself

¹⁹² Francis, *Creativity and Boldness*. General Audience on 15 Apr. 2015: <https://translate.google.pl/#pl/en/Kreatywno%C5%9B%C4%87%20i%20%C5%9Bmia%C5%82o%C5%9B%C4%87>.

¹⁹³ John Paul II, *Mężczyznę i niewiastę stworzył ich*, vol. 1: *Chrystus odwołuje się do początku. O Jana Pawła II teologii ciała*, Lublin, 2001, 41–2.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. M.H. McCarthy, “Miłość oblubieńcza w świetle ‘doświadczenia elementarnego’,” in: L. Melina – S. Grygiel (eds.), *Miłować ludzką miłość. Dziedzictwo myśli Jana Pawła II o małżeństwie i rodzinie*, Warsaw, 2010, 144–5.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Y. Semen, *Seksualność według Jana Pawła II*, transl. by Z. Denkowska and J. Urbaniak, Poznań, 2008, 14, 144.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. J. Merecki, “Ciało jako sakrament osoby,” in: *Miłować ludzką miłość. Dziedzictwo myśli Jana Pawła II o małżeństwie i rodzinie*, 183.

in a body and a body that is animated by an immortal spirit.¹⁹⁷ The human body bears the original intention of God; it is a redeemed body that is destined to resurrection.¹⁹⁸

The witness of respect for the dignity of the person, just as the acceptance and treatment of the body (one's own and the partner's) as a gift and a sign of God's activity, is primarily expressed in the preservation of chastity by young people, the sexual abstinence of the engaged, and the purity of the married couple.¹⁹⁹ This witness increases the awareness of the dignity of the person and the human body while strengthening the value of the gifts of sexuality and fertility. John Paul II pointed out the different fruits of purity, in courtship and in marriage, that serve the love of matrimony and the family.²⁰⁰ He also noted that "a conjugal act, deprived of its inner truth, artificially devoid of potential parenthood, ceases to be also an act of love."²⁰¹ Conjugal love's greatest enemy – that undermines and weakens the witness of respect for the dignity of the person and for the human body with its fertility – is selfishness.

Concern for Fidelity and the Permanence of Marriage

Strengthened by the grace of the sacrament, the spouses can reveal to each other and to other people the inherent dignity and the extraordinary value of sacramental matrimony (cf. GS 47-48). The witness of their indissoluble communion highlights the value of marriage and shows the sanctity of the conjugal bond. This witness must, therefore, be considered the most important aspect of the spouses' apostolate (cf. AA 11). Pope John Paul II stated that "to bear witness to the inestimable value of the indissolubility and fidelity of marriage is one of the most precious and most urgent tasks of Christian couples in our time" and the sign of "the unfailing fidelity with which God and Jesus Christ love each and every human being" (FC 20). Pope Benedict

¹⁹⁷ Benedict XVI, The Christian family is community of education and faith. Address to the participants of the Diocesan Convention of Rome, 6 June 2005: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/june/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050606_convegno-famiglia.html; cf. LfF 19.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Y. Semen, *Seksualność według Jana Pawła II*, 48, 110.

¹⁹⁹ CIC 51; HV 21; FC 33; CCC 2349-2350.

²⁰⁰ See John Paul II, Annunziate al mondo la "buona Novella" sulla purezza del cuore e trasmettete il messaggio della civiltà dell'amore, Sandomierz (12.06.1999), in: IGP t. XXII, 1:1999, 1313-7; FC 33; LP 20.

²⁰¹ John Paul II, What is man's true good? General Audience on 22 Aug. 1984, no. 6: <https://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP840822.htm> (consulted on 27.06.2017).

XVI noted that this witness of the spouses also has an educational dimension, because it allows children, the fruit of love, to believe in human beings and in their future.²⁰²

Building a Marital Bond on the Foundation of Mutual Self-Giving

The grace of the sacrament of marriage, of the established sacramental sign, can develop in married life. Through their bond of love, the spouses manifest the bond of love between Christ the Church. The more fully each is given to the other and receive the other spouse's gift, the more the *communio personarum* (which participates in Christ's love for the Church and renders it present) becomes clear and legible, for them and for others. At the same time, as the spouses work to build the bond based on their mutual self-giving, the sacramentality of their marriage is developed.²⁰³ The dynamic nature of the marital sacrament requires the activity of the spouses themselves in the consolidation of the conjugal bond. Yet, it is important for the spouses to know how this bond must be formed in order to grow. Their commitment, each one's readiness for self-giving and to receive the partner's gift, depends on spouses' relationship with God, the first Giver, and, simultaneously, on their own activity in the construction of conjugal, with its cognitive, emotional, and active dimensions.²⁰⁴

This witness makes it possible to understand the essence of conjugal love and the dynamics of the development of the conjugal bond, which is based on the right to receive the gift of another and to give oneself. Especially in today's world, where so many young people are afraid of failing in durable marriage, the witness of the spouses in God's presence, the dynamic character of the grace of the marital sacrament, and the significance of the process of mutual self-giving in the development of the bond of conjugal love appears very valuable.

Engagement of Spouses in the Maturation of Love

In the context described above, conjugal love can clearly be strengthened by the witness of the spouses' striving to love's maturation. In Vatican II's

²⁰² Cf. Benedict XVI, *The Christian family is community of education and faith*.

²⁰³ Cf. K. Wojaczek, *Więź małżeńska w sytuacji rozłąki z przyczyn ekonomicznych*, 43.

²⁰⁴ See *ibid.*, 20–6, 43–9.

Pastoral Constitution on the Church *Gaudium et Spes*, we read that conjugal love is perfected and grows by virtue of its noble action. It should surpass the purely erotic tendency, which is selfish and quickly wretchedly disappears (cf. GS 49). The love of eros, which imposes itself on a man and a woman, is merely a prelude to the summit of life and happiness toward which man strives. It does not originate in the mind and will, but it is earthly, lustful, and possessive love. As such, it can become inhuman and lead to using people and degrading them. It needs to mature in the encounter with the love of agape that discovers the other person, cares for and serves him or her, seeks the good of the beloved, and for which one is ready to make sacrifices and to offer oneself. *Eros* can reach its true dimension through discipline, renunciation, purification, and healing (see DCE 3-7). A person truly becomes himself/herself by loving as a person. The real nature of love manifests itself when *eros* and *agape* find their right union in the true and unique love of people.²⁰⁵

The maturation process of conjugal love has several stages. The first is the internalization of *eros*. Sexual and sensual affective love gradually frees itself from desire's pressure and becomes increasingly dependent on the person's spiritual faculty, i.e., it is conscious and free. The second stage is the purification of *eros* from selfishness so that it recedes before deepening friendship *philia*. Love's ever deeper perception, through the prism of the spouse's expectations and needs, makes it possible to progressively move from egocentricity to selfless tenderness and affection and unconditional self-giving. The third stage goes beyond natural human tendencies. Often, one lacks the strength to go beyond own's natural capacity and motivation, to free oneself from the attachment one's physical and psychological needs. At this point in marriage, the need to open conjugal love to the supernatural love of *agape*, which is the gift of God, becomes clear. This, in fact, means opening up and uniting conjugal life with the life of God. God's love, then, gradually encompasses the cognitive, volitional, physical, and emotional sphere, thus anticipating eternal life with God.²⁰⁶ Pope Benedict XVI notes that faith in love develops because *agape*, which transforms *eros*, is based on faith and is shaped by it (DCE 7). Faith is, therefore, helpful in the development of love (cf. AL 29).

In marriage, entering the space of faith in God is not unnatural, distant, or difficult, for, as Pope Benedict XVI said, "only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well" (DCE 18).

²⁰⁵ Cf. W. Wieczorek, "Życie duchowe małżeństwa i rodziny," in: R. Kamiński, G. Pyźlak, J. Goleń (eds.), *Duszpasterstwo rodzin. Refleksja naukowa i działalność pastoralna*, Lublin, 2013, 107.

²⁰⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 109-10.

So, the concern for the maturing of conjugal love not only strengthens the bond and the conjugal and family community, but it can also lead to faith in God who is love (1 Jn 4:8) and works through human love. Involvement of fiancées and spouses in the maturing of love can help them in the mystical discovery of the presence of the Lord in the history of their common love.²⁰⁷

Purifying and perfecting love serves not only to understand and mature “one’s own” conjugal love better, but it is also an excellent antidote to crises in conjugal relationships and the threat of separation (see AL 246, 310). Pope Francis points out that many marriages fail because of the lack of commitment to maturing conjugal love and its underdevelopment on the spiritual level. Spouses lack courage, patience, mutual forgiveness, and sacrifice (cf. AL 41). Today’s engaged couples urgently need and are expecting the witness of engaged and married couples of the past who were committed to cultivating their conjugal love, a witness that can encourage them to strive more reach a fuller love.

Responsible Parenting

Responsible parenting is also an expression of conjugal love (see HV 10). “The Creator made man and woman share in the work of his creation and, at the same time, made them instruments of his love, entrusting to them the responsibility for the future of mankind, through the transmission of human life” (AL 81). Especially in this time marked by the spread of a mentality against having children (cf. AL 42) and reducing the generation of life to a variable of an individual or a married couple, the fidelity to the teaching of the Church helps the married couple to live their communion in the respect of the dignity of the person and the responsibility for procreating (cf. AL 82). The service of life is a way to witness to Christ’s love in the family (see EV 87). As domestic church, the family is called to proclaim, to praise, and to serve the Gospel of life. Spouses are asked to receive, with respect and gratitude, the gift of human life and to educate children to respect for life. An eloquent witness of love that serves and respects human life in the family is the adoption or care for abandoned children or those living in difficult conditions (cf. EV 92-93). The Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* values the witness of love for and of fidelity to the gift of life given by families who accept the challenge of a disabled child (AL 47). Responsible, generous, and selfless parental love is a noble witness of love that strengthens the love of couples and families.

²⁰⁷ Cf. M. Polak, *Od teologii do eklezjologii pastoralnej. Zagadnienia fundamentalne*, Poznan, 2014, 73.

The Witness of Faith

As we recalled, faith helps to strengthen the love of the spouses. Pope Francis develops this thought when he says that “the family is called to join in daily prayer, to read the word of God and to share in Eucharistic communion, and thus to grow in love and become ever more fully a temple in which the Spirit dwells” (AL 29). At the same time, the domestic church, by the witness of its faith before children, the engaged, and other married couples, can help them to strengthen their love in marriage and the family. The witness of faith given in the family and through the family encompasses life with the Word of God and its proclamation, the exercise of the Baptismal priesthood, and an attitude of charity and commitment to building the ecclesial community.²⁰⁸

The witness of faithful love for God and for all people given by consecrated persons is not without significance for the strengthening of conjugal love. They anticipate, in their bodies, the future resurrection. Pope John Paul II wrote that “by virtue of this witness, virginity or celibacy keeps alive in the Church a consciousness of the mystery of marriage and defends it from any reduction and impoverishment [...] Just as fidelity at times becomes difficult for married people and requires sacrifice, mortification and self-denial, the same can happen to celibate persons, and their fidelity, even in the trials that may occur, should strengthen the fidelity of married couples” (FC 16).

Sharing Practical Skills

Experienced married couples can also share their practical skills with younger and less mature couples, thus helping them in their daily lives as spouses. While this sharing may take place in within the extended family, a couple will more likely accept it from spouses who are friends and with whom they have no family ties. Good places for sharing practical skills are family associations, formation meetings for couples, and accompaniment in the parish community.

The content of this sharing can include planning time unselfishly in order to stay together, helping to organize leisure time with children, showing different ways of celebrating important events and experiences in the family, and common forms of spiritual development. In particular, young spouses sometimes urgently need the help of experienced spouses to learn communication skills (AL 225).

²⁰⁸ Cf. J. Goleń, “Rola świadectwa w rodzinie,” 442–54.

While helping, experienced spouses can also motivate young couples to develop personal habits that give them a healthy sense of stability and protection, is built up through a series of common daily rituals expressing love or faith. They can also help them learn to celebrate, commemorate and cherish important moments in family life. Celebrating renews the energy of love, frees it from monotony, and colors daily life with hope (AL 226).

Strengthening the bond of conjugal love requires a variety of supports and especially pastoral care. In this context, the role played by love is priceless. The appreciation, in family ministry, for the significance of bearing witness to love in different ways can inspire greater interest and gratitude for the witness given by engaged, married, and consecrated persons in the life of the Church. There is, moreover, a deep, justified need to link the exercise of pastoral ministry for the engaged and spouses with the witness of love given by brothers and sisters in the faith.

6.2. *The Couple's Care for Their Mutual Bond*

JULIA SAK

Marriage is a gift and, at the same time, a vocation received from God. In the divine plan, marriage is intended to be a communion of persons in love, modeled on the relationship of the Divine Persons in the Trinity and supported by God's grace. The mystery of marriage is that "God makes of the two spouses one single existence" (AL 121). In the dynamic concept of marriage, the conjugal relationship is a process of the spouses' mutual self-giving, which leads to the marriage bond, i.e., to a permanent structure of shared values.²⁰⁹ Marriage is a unique communion of two persons—a man and a woman—, of two exceptional personalities who, while maintaining their difference, become an indissoluble entity for life. The basis on which spouses bind themselves to one another is determined by the marital vows made before God and lived out with His help and blessing (cf. OSM 27-28). All the elements of the vow are valid and constitute the foundation of the conjugal bond.

In practice, marriage is not the destination of a journey but rather a path leading to a "promised land" called happiness or a sense of fulfillment. This path is not a kind of "lottery" in which the human person can remain inactive.

²⁰⁹ K. Wojaczek, *Więź małżeńska w sytuacji rozłąki z przyczyn ekonomicznych*, 17, 53.