

The Augustinian Foundations of the Theology of the Body:

“He Who Created Both Sexes Will Restore Both”

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A. Embodied Nuptial Sexuality: Does it Matter?

The place and importance of nuptial sexuality in Christian revelation is greatly questioned today. By nuptial sexuality I mean the reciprocity between man and woman whereby in their sexual existence each one of them is placed in relation to the other in a special way. What special way? I mean in the way that both man and woman experience the other as a different personal embodiment of human identity; in that man is made for woman and woman for man.¹ What some dispute, including some theologians, is whether this nuptial ordering of sexuality is of any importance for Christian revelation.

1. Two Modern Responses

For example, the well known theologian Elizabeth Johnson seems to think, for a number of reasons, that nuptial sexuality has very little theological significance.² For one thing, Johnson argues that being a male or female is no more important than many other things that are said to be part of a person’s identity. It is “short-sighted” to think of sexuality as more important and more

fundamental than the elements of race, of culture and of politics as well as a whole host of other elements said to be intrinsic to personal identity. Sexuality is one among many essential anthropological elements that make up personal identity. For Johnson what is important about sexuality is not that it has an enduring theological determination or meaning in Christian revelation but that it is a part of set of combinations that make up and celebrate the one human nature. According to Johnson only if sexuality is conceived as integrated into a holistic vision as one anthropological element among many, will sexuality avoid being distorted as a ‘touchstone of personal identity.’³

Another theologian, Fr. David Power⁴ has argued that sexuality is part of the limiting condition of our human enfleshment which the Risen Christ now somehow transcends. Thus Power distinguishes between “a historical Jesus from the past” who was sexually determined from the risen Christ who is not. At the resurrection, Christ over came the negative and limiting conditions of human existence including that of maleness and entered into solidarity with the whole human race. Transformed in the resurrection by the power of the Spirit, Christ takes body in the Church-communion where there is no male or female, Greek or Jew. Power therefore proposes that it is more fitting to see Christ as the renewed human rather than “as the male unit of a renewed male-female unity in one body.” Here again nuptial sexuality is judged to have little if any lasting importance for Christian revelation.

The theological significance of the fact that human persons are created in two different bodily incarnations has been disputed for some time in the history of Christian thought. Already in the 4th and 5th centuries a common view among many of the Fathers of the Church was that sexual differentiation was something God in his mercy gave to a humanity threatened by death because

of the Fall of Adam. Some of the Fathers thought that originally Adam and Eve, were sexless angelic, like creatures who had no need of reproduction as we know it now. Sexuality after the Fall was important for one reason and one reason only: that the human race might continue to live and that God's command "Be fruitful and multiply" might be obeyed. The role sexuality played in the cosmic drama was temporary and instrumental. This was, albeit with some variation, the view of Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa, and Jerome.⁵

2. An Older Response: Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa was particularly insistent about the temporary nature of sexuality. In his interpretation of the creation of humanity in the Genesis accounts, Gregory distinguished between an ideal, angelic like humanity and an actual humanity. In his original design, God saw humanity as collective whole destined for Christ in whom there is neither male or female. In a process unknown to us, humanity would have grown and multiplied in an angelic way, rather than through bodily sexual union. Why then an actual creation of humanity as male and female? Gregory explains that God foresaw that humanity as a whole would sin against its spiritual nature by turning away from God and toward material realities. The human race, no longer existing in an angelic way, would have stopped reproducing and would have faced extinction. Therefore God in his mercy divided humanity into male and female with bodies of flesh in order that they might multiply by way of carnal generation like the animals. Thus, for Gregory sexual differentiation is secondary and temporary. Sexuality and procreation serve God's original design for humanity but only because they prevent the extinction of a sinful humanity.⁶ While Gregory believes that humanity is created in the image of God, he argues that the creation of humanity as *male and female* in no way pertains to the divine image and likeness.⁷ He holds that in the resurrection we

will all be one in Christ and that our risen bodies will be divested of all signs of sexual differentiation.⁸ The ideal humanity of God's original design will be fulfilled eschatologically. Ultimately, sexuality is something alien to the both original divine design and the final definition of humanity.

The common element between these theologians, both ancient and modern, is that nuptial sexuality is disconnected from the supernatural insofar as it is considered to be without any real theological significance in Christian revelation. Whether one thinks of nuptial sexuality as temporary, or a limitation, or just another part of a socially constructed identity, it is supposed that Christ and the redemption he brings has very little to say about something that is important to embodied human existence. Surely this is something of a problem. For instance, if as the Christian tradition teaches us about the resurrection, our whole bodies will rise and not just some part of our bodies, then, our risen bodies will be masculine and feminine. If we will be raised as men and women, then sexuality is in some way a redeemed reality. If sexuality is a redeemed reality, it must bear some theological meaning. Surely, it is the case that it at least someone among the Fathers saw this and thought about it. I believe there is someone but oddly enough someone we might least suspect.

3. A Different Response: Augustine of Hippo.

An important exception to the understanding in his day of sexuality as a temporary and instrumental remedy against death and therefore of little or no theological meaning was Augustine of Hippo. He saw the sexual differentiation of the first couple as a part of God's original creative plan and as something that foreshadowed the unity between Christ and the Church. The idea that Augustine has anything to say of importance to us today about sexuality may strike some of you

as something of a howler. After all, we often hear, wrongly I might add, wasn't it Augustine who taught that sexual relations between a husband and wife always involved at least a venial sin?⁹

B. Sexual Differentiation: A Sacramental Reality

The real Augustine is far more complicated. As his great 20th century biographer Peter Brown reminds us: we should not demonize Augustine on the issue of sexuality.¹⁰ Brown has pointed out that Augustine's thought on sexuality evolved and developed over time – the result of a long inner journey that the North African saint underwent. I believe that we can learn something today from Augustine's journey, particularly as it touches on the theological significance of the creation of human persons as sexually differentiated. It shows us that the context for thinking about the place and meaning of nuptial sexuality in Christian anthropology is sacramental. Augustine saw that if marriage is in some sense a sacrament, and if the union between Christ and the Church is understood nuptially, then sexuality cannot be regarded simply as given for biological survival. It has a significance intrinsic to our salvation. I believe that Augustine's journey anticipated, in a way, today's struggle over the sacramental meaning of sexuality. Augustine's insights to be sure are incomplete. Nevertheless he grasped, with unusual perceptivity something about how nuptial sexuality is a central part of human existence that is really addressed by divine revelation, really addressed by Christ. **In terms of contributing to the current discussion about the significance of nuptial sexuality in Christian revelation, Augustine's journey shows us that to think of it as theologically neutral is to put in question the sacramentality of marriage and the nature of the relationship between Christ and the Church. It is to put in question sacramental realism; it is to put in question the belief that the sacramental acts of the Church reflect and correspond to the truth of existence as effected by God.**

At the same time Augustine explained the married unity of couples as a sacrament of Christ and the Church, he was also explaining how the unity between Christ and his Church should be understood as a personal unity like that of marriage. There is a real relation between Augustine's theology of marriage and his ecclesiology. Thanks to a number of factors, Augustine's thought was sharpened over time. His rethinking of the significance of the sexuality of Adam and Eve in paradise, as well as his explanation of the relationship between Christ and the Church as a nuptial reality, is an intellectual journey that is instructive for us today. In what follows I will sketch in broad strokes this journey of Augustine. Of course I will have to be brief. I make no pretense of giving a comprehensive description of Augustine's complicated views on human sexuality. Still, I believe that Augustine can show us some important things.

My presentation will unfold in four parts. In the first part, I will give a brief overview of Augustine's early attempt to articulate the sacramentality of marriage in the history of salvation. Augustine saw that understanding marriage as a sacrament inevitably raised questions about the role of nuptial sexuality in God's plan of creation even prior to the Fall. In the second part, I will describe how Augustine rethought his views on the place and importance of the sexual differentiation of the first couple in paradise and how he came to the conclusion that the first man and woman foreshadowed the future reality of Christ and the Church. So strongly did Augustine connect nuptial sexuality to the supernatural that he insisted that the unity between Christ and the Church should be understood in terms of personal unity like that of marriage. Thus in the third part, I will give a brief overview of how Augustine described Christ and the Church as joined in a bodily union as bridegroom and bride. In the fourth and final section of my presentation I will indicate how I believe Augustine's thought is helpful for the contemporary discussion about

theological significance of nuptial sexuality.

1. Augustine and the Sacramentality of Marriage

In 401 Augustine wrote a treatise entitled *On The Good of Marriage*.¹¹ In his *Retractions*, Augustine says that he wrote the work in response to the heresy of the monk Jovinian. The writings of Jovinian rejected the doctrine that the merit of virginity was superior to the merit of marriage. Jovinian argued that to hold virginity as superior to marriage involved a negative, Manichean understanding of marriage. These views of Jovinian were very influential and persuaded some nuns in Rome to give up celibacy for marriage. Jovinian's teachings commanded a following even after they were condemned in 393 by a Roman Synod headed by Pope Siricus and by a synod in Milan headed by Ambrose. Augustine tells us that the supporters of Jovinian bragged that he could only be answered by censuring marriage not by praising it. Augustine disagreed. For this reason he wrote the *On Good of Marriage*. But there was also another reason. He tells us that there were previous unsuccessful attempts to refute Jovinian. One of these that Augustine surely had in mind was an infamous treatise by Jerome, *Against Jovinian*. Jerome, perhaps the most accomplished Christian polemicist of all time, was so harsh and negative in his rhetoric that his response to Jovinian was rightly regarded by many as an attack on marriage itself. Some of Jerome's friends even tried to have copies of his treatise withdrawn from circulation.

Augustine's treatise *On the Good of Marriage* is an effort to sail a middle way between the claim of Jovinian that gift of virginity is in no way superior to marriage and Jerome's belittling of marriage. Augustine argued on the one hand, that the gift of virginity is of greater merit than the married state and, on the other hand, that marriage was good, holy and instituted by God.¹² He presented marriage as a form of friendship and "the first natural bond of human society."¹³ In

defense of marriage, Augustine identified three goods destined to become classic for the Catholic theology of marriage: offspring,¹⁴ mutual fidelity,¹⁵ and the *sacramentum* or the sacramental bond.¹⁶

It is this third good that is of particular interest for the present purposes because the holiness of the *sacramentum* is something specific to the marriage of Christians. While we should be careful not to read back into Augustine's thought a later and more developed understanding of sacraments and sacramental causality, it should be remembered that Augustine's theology of the sacraments was quite advanced for its time and proved to be very influential. He understood sacraments broadly as visible signs that corresponded to an invisible sacred reality.¹⁷ He could also make more precise distinctions with regard to the sacraments such as Baptism and Eucharist. Augustine could distinguish between the sacramental sign itself [*sacramentum tantum*] and the effect of the sacrament or the *res sacramenti*. Water, for example washes the body and signifies what occurs in the soul.¹⁸ Moreover, Augustine argued that sacraments are not arbitrary sacred signs. They have a likeness to the reality that they signify.¹⁹

Augustine could also speak of a sacrament in terms of a binding oath or sacred religious commitment. In *On the Good of Marriage* Augustine seems to understand the sacramentum of marriage in this way although he sees it too as symbol capable of signifying a plurality of sacred realities. He could even speak of the polygamous marriages of the Old Testament patriarchs as *sacramentum*. They signified "the plurality of people who would one day be subject to God in all nations of the earth."²⁰ The many wives of the patriarchs also signified the future Churches arising from all nations subject to one husband, Christ. What made the sacramentum of monogamous marriages in the Christian dispensation different had to do with the fact that

indissolubility was fundamental to it. The holiness or sanctity of the sacramentum of Christian marriage did not permit divorce and remarriage even in the case of adultery on the part of one of the spouses or for reason of sterility.

Augustine thought that the Christian signification of marriage brought about an indissoluble bond that was more binding than the bond of non-Christian marriage.²¹ What brings about this sacramentum, this indissoluble bond? Augustine takes it almost for granted that it comes from Christ in his union with the Church. Although he does not explicitly cite Ephesians 5:31-32 -- where the one flesh union of Genesis 2:24 is said to be a great mystery in reference to Christ and the Church -- this passage lurks in the background of Augustine's discussion of the indissolubility of Christian marriage. Augustine supposes that Christ and the Church is the great sacramentum which contains the holiness of indissolubility. This can be seen in a fascinating and often overlooked passage in the 18th chapter of *On the Good of Marriage* where Augustine makes an interesting argument from the liturgical practice of the Church of his day comparing holy orders to marriage.²² He explains that after our pilgrimage on earth there will be a perfection of human unity in heaven where there will be a city of people with a single heart and soul turned toward God. For this reason, he thinks that with the coming of Christ, marriage has been restored to a union of one man and one woman to the extent that a man who has been married more than once should not be ordained. A presiding priest [*antiste*] who is able to symbolize the union of all nations in submission to Christ is a man who has had only one wife or who has not been married at all. Augustine argues that a man who has married more than once, even though he has not sinned, has lost a certain standard or prerequisite for the seal of ordination. He seems to think of him as unable to symbolize the great sacramentum, the indissoluble union of Christ and the

Church.

It is not too surprising that Augustine almost as a matter of fact assumes in *On the Good of Marriage* that the unity of all nations or the Church with Christ is a nuptial kind of unity. In earlier works Augustine had already spoken of the church as a wife created from the side of Christ²³ and of “the marriage of the catholic Church to the Lord.”²⁴

Augustine goes on to say in the chapter 18 of *On the Good of Marriage* that this unity of all nations in submission to Christ will be perfected in the future. The sacrament of monogamous marriage he claims symbolically signifies this future reality in the heavenly city. But Augustine supposes too that marriage is able to signify this reality because it signifies the indissolubility of Christ and the Church and in way participates in it. Augustine thinks of the symbolic signification of Christian marriage in more than one way but always in reference to the Christ-Church unity.”²⁵ That the sacramentum of Christian marriage signifies this nuptial reality is an idea that Augustine will return to again in his later works.

2. Rethinking the place of embodied sexuality in paradise

A keen interpreter of Augustine’s thought once observed that it would have never occurred to Augustine, who was biblical to his fingertips, to use any other basis for evaluating marriage other than the history of salvation in its eschatological movement.²⁶ For eschatological things cast light on first things. This approach also prods Augustine into raising a question in *On the Good of Marriage*, that he only answers in a later work. The question had to do with whether the begetting of children by means of sexual intercourse was a part of God’s original plan for the first man and the first woman even if they had not sinned. A number of Church Fathers, as I mentioned earlier, asked the same question answering it in the negative. Bodily reproduction was thought to

be tied up with being a fallen creature. Augustine is not so sure and leaves the question open in *On the Good of Marriage* only to answer it later in an important way in another work, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*. Augustine began this commentary on Genesis around 401 soon after he completed *On the Good of Marriage*. He did not finish his commentary on Genesis until about 415. In this work there is an important shift in his understanding of marriage and sexuality, a shift that put Augustine in stark contrast with some prominent Christian thinkers up to that time. The shift in Augustine's thinking in this work is an important moment in the intellectual movement of his thought about marriage and sexuality.

Augustine himself, in an earlier commentary on Genesis prior to 401, gave a highly spiritualized interpretation of Adam and Eve in paradise. In his commentary *On Genesis against the Manichees*, written around 389, Augustine is more interested in about what the first man and woman spiritually symbolize than he is about the first couple's corporeal reality. For instance in one passage, Augustine seems to say that prior to the Fall, human souls had no need for spoken words but drank directly from the Word of God, the fountain of truth.²⁷ Commenting, on the creation of woman (Gen 2:22) Augustine was less interested in the bodily reality of the first man and woman and more interested in how as male and female they symbolize certain parts of the soul and how these parts are related to one another. The first woman illustrates how the soul's appetites should be subject to the virile mind.²⁸ The command in Gen 1:28 to be fruitful and multiply according to Augustine refers to a spiritual, not a corporeal union, which would produce the fruit of good works.²⁹ Prior to the Fall the first man and woman would not have produced children in a carnal, fleshy way in keeping with their quasi-angelic condition. Sexual reproduction was something that happened only after Adam and Eve had incurred the penalty of

death for their sin.

But in his *Literal Interpretation of Genesis* Augustine embarked upon a very different reading. He admits that his interpretation in *On Genesis against the Manichees* was overly allegorical and did not explain the text according to its proper historical meaning.³⁰ Augustine now insists that paradise must not be interpreted in an exclusively spiritual sense. It should be taken to refer to a spiritual and a literal, corporeal sense.³¹ He explicitly rejects the opinion of some authors who think that history in the proper sense did not begin until Adam and Eve sinned, fell into tunics of skin, were joined in sexual union and bore children.³²

This new approach to reading Genesis allows Augustine to take up the question he had previously left unanswered in *On the Good of Marriage*: whether the begetting of children through sexual intercourse was a part of God's original plan for the first man and woman even if they had not sinned. Augustine now explains that Adam and Eve were fully physical, sexual, and social human beings before the Fall. The bodies of Adam and Eve, although unlike ours and not subject to death, would have been earthly ones, not heavenly, angelic like ones.³³

Augustine acknowledged that there was no actual sexual union before the Fall of the first couple, but he insisted there was nothing in paradise that would have forbidden it. He contended that Adam and Eve chose to sin before they had a chance to know the corporeal union of sexual intercourse.³⁴ Had they avoided sin, the intercourse they could have enjoyed would have been free from any lust or compulsion. They would not have known of that inner struggle that the Apostle Paul wrote about between the law in our members and the law of our minds making us captive to the law of sin.³⁵ Childbirth would have been free from any pain and labor. Children would have been born not to make up for dead parents but for the purpose of populating the City

of God. Once a certain determined number of people were born, they all would have been given an additional gift: the transformation of their bodies into a new higher, heavenly form of bodily existence without having to first pass through death, the punishment for sin.³⁶ Far from being asexual souls who fell from an angelic state into a physical one, Augustine now presented Adam and Eve as physical, sexual and social creatures whom God placed in paradise to establish a people for the City of God. This vision of God's original plan for man before the Fall was a bold one and very different from the ascetic interpretation of Genesis in which marriage and sexuality were basically alien to the man's original state.

Augustine continues to champion the goodness of marital sexual relations and procreation in paradise in his famous work, the *City of God*. In Book XIV, written around 418-19, shortly after he completed *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, he argues that it is absurd to think that were it not for sin there would be no need for sexual relations and procreation. This is tantamount, he objects, to asserting that sin is necessary to complete the number of saints. No, marriage and children were worthy of the happiness of paradise. Rejecting an over spiritualized interpretation of God's creation of humanity as male and female as described in the book of Genesis, Augustine continues to insist that sexuality, the gift of marriage and procreation were all instituted by God before Adam and Eve sinned. As proof for this claim he appeals to Christ's reply to the Pharisees concerning divorce: "Have you not read that He who made them from beginning made them male and female and said, For this reason shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be no longer two but one flesh."³⁷

Augustine goes on to a discussion of what sexual relations between Adam and Eve would have been like had there been no sin and no Fall. He argues that there would have been a complete

harmony between the bodies and souls of Adam and Eve. They would have enjoyed a calmness of mind and integrity of body. There would have been an absence not only of lust but of impotence as well. Augustine draws a picture of the first couple with a freedom, a freedom for the good; that is, a greater freedom where spontaneity is not divorced from the mind. This is something Augustine thinks is largely unknown to us. We know only fallen freedom weighed down by concupiscence, disordered desire.³⁸

For Augustine, the sexual existence of humanity as male and female was not limited to the original state and the fallen state. In Book 22 of the *City of God* Augustine contends that although there will be no marriage and procreation in heaven, nevertheless, those just men and women who are risen with Christ will keep their sexuality. In chapter 17 entitled “Whether the bodies of women shall retain their own sex in the resurrection”³⁹ Augustine refutes those who thought that because Romans 7:29 spoke of human creatures as being “Conformed to the image of the Son” it must mean women would rise as men. Against this idea, Augustine says that the trouble is not that there exist women but that there is lust. He says “For before they sinned, the man and the woman were naked, and were not ashamed.”⁴⁰ The woman is a part of the good creation as is the man and her creation from man expresses that God intends a unity between them. Furthermore, Augustine explains that the creation of woman foreshadowed Christ and the Church. For just as the woman was made from the side of Adam as he slept, so the Church was created from the side of Christ who was asleep in death on the cross. Augustine goes on to claim “He, then, who created both sexes will restore both.” In other words, if risen bodies were asexual they would not be the resurrection of *our* bodies, the bodies that God made in the good creation.

Augustine has gone far beyond his earlier, highly spiritualized interpretation of the original

state of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. The contrast with his earlier views could not be more striking. Augustine now presents Adam and Eve in the original plan of God as fully embodied sexual beings who are to procreate and raise up citizens for the City of God. Sexual reproduction is something God intended prior to the Fall. Therefore it is not something that can be simply understood as a merciful remedy against death. Augustine, in affirming sexuality and procreation not only as compatible with paradise but a part of it, detached sexuality and procreation from any necessary link with the Fall. Human sexuality and procreation now had a meaning independent from the Fall and its consequences. While marriage and procreation do not constitute the eschatological future of humanity, nevertheless masculinity and femininity – part of God’s good creation– will not pass away in the risen life.

Augustine continues this line of thought in another work entitled *On Marriage and Concupiscence* written around 419-420. This work was addressed to Valerius, an officer of the Imperial court. In the first book of this work, Augustine repeats his claim that marriage is good and was instituted in paradise prior to the Fall and that sexual reproduction could have taken place. Marriage after the Fall labors under the burden of concupiscence. This is illustrated by the fact that the sexual organs are not completely obedient to fallen man whether in the case of compulsive copulation or in the case of impotence.⁴¹ Augustine answers his Pelagian opponents who accused him of teaching, in effect, that marriage was sinful because it produced children who inherit the fallen condition of Adam. Against these opponents he is adamant about the fact that even though marriage produces children who have been corrupted by the sin of Adam and need to be reborn in baptism, marriage is nevertheless good. The three goods of offspring, mutual fidelity, and the sacramental bond still mark marriage after the Fall. At one point, Augustine rhetorically

interrogates the three goods to show that sin does not arise from them but that they would have been more secure in marriage had sin not wounded them. What is of particular interest for my purpose is what Augustine says about the sacramental bond:

And then this will be the answer of the sacramental bond of marriage,--the third good: Of me was that word spoken in paradise before the entrance of sin: 'A man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.' This the apostle applies to the case of Christ and of the Church, and calls it then 'a great sacrament.' What, then, in Christ and in the Church is great, in the instances of each married pair it is but very small, but even then it is the sacrament of an inseparable union.⁴²

This passage shows that for Augustine the great nuptial mystery is the one flesh union of Christ and the Church. The full meaning and significance of the 'small' one flesh union between man and woman is known from the 'great' one flesh union of Christ and his Church. It is *the* paradigm for the nuptial union between the sexes. This is the reason for the indissolubility of Christian marriage. In another passage, Augustine explains that married believers as members of the Body of Christ are never permitted to divorce and remarry. Just as there can be no separation or divorce in the case of Christ and the Church, so there can be no separation between married believers while both are still alive. Augustine compares the marriage bond with the sacrament of baptism. Just as the apostate retains his baptism after his apostasy, so the marriage partners retain their marriage bond even if one or both of them sins or divorces and remarries. Clearly, for Augustine marriage between believers involves a participation in the nuptial union of Christ and the Church which in turn creates an indissoluble bond between the partners. But again, Christ, the Bridegroom and his Bride function as the norm and paradigm for marriage.

In the second book of *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, Augustine makes a short comment about marriage prior to the Fall that builds on this point.⁴³ It occurs in the course of his

answer to his Pelagian opponent Julian of Eclanum who accused him of teaching that marriage after the Fall was changed into something evil. In defense of his views, Augustine argues again that what is changed after the sin of Adam and Eve is not the nature of marriage but the nature of humanity. He says that marriage was instituted by God in paradise and that marriage remains something instituted by God even after sin. At one point in this explanation, Augustine makes an additional claim about marriage in paradise. He says that the marriage instituted in paradise was a figure of the great mystery between Christ and the Church. Now an important part of the holiness and goodness of Adam and Eve in their nuptial union is that they are a figure of a reality that is to come.⁴⁴ The goodness of marriage and sexuality, far from being something alien in paradise, is most fitting because it is a figure of how man and woman will be further blessed in Christ.⁴⁵ It seems too that here again for Augustine, Christ and the Church is the nuptial union par excellence, the one flesh union and the paradigm for every nuptial union.

3. *Totus Christus*: A Nuptial Reality

There is strong evidence that shows while Augustine rethought his views on sexuality in paradise he was also thinking more deeply about the nuptial union between Christ and the Church. Over 50 percent of the occurrences of the term, *sponsa Christi*, referring to the Church as spouse of Christ are found in works that Augustine wrote between 401 and 420.⁴⁶ For instance in his homilies on the first epistle of John written around 406-407, Augustine proclaimed: “The spouse of Christ is the whole Church, whose principle and first fruit is the flesh of Christ: there the bridegroom is joined to the bride in bodily union.”⁴⁷ In the *Tractates on the gospel according to John*, Augustine says that the marriage at Cana is a reflection of the virginal marriage between Christ and the Church.⁴⁸ Thus even women who vow virginity have a share in marriage “For they

too, together with the whole Church, attain to a marriage, a marriage in which Christ is the Bridegroom.”⁴⁹

Still, more telling at this time is how Augustine appealed to the nuptial, marital relation to explain the nature of unity between the head and body of the *totus Christus*. Earlier I spoke of how I believe that there is a real relation between Augustine’s theology of marriage and his ecclesiology. At the center of Augustine’s doctrine of the Church is the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ which encompasses the head and body. The eternal Son of God made man is the head while the body is made up of the baptized who are the members. Together the head and body is the *totus Christus*. After his death and resurrection, Christ the head is present and embodied on earth in the body which is the Church. The head and the body are always united and are never apart or divided. The union of the body with the head is a unity that is freely chosen out of love. T.J. van Bavel, one of the great Augustinian scholars of our time observes that this unity for Augustine is a personal unity like that of a bridegroom and bride.⁵⁰ Christ the head is to the body as bridegroom is to bride.

Van Bavel notices that Augustine makes the point repeatedly in his writings that the head and body seem to be two but they are also one, one flesh that is. There is a certain unity through identification but not an identity between the Church and Christ. For instance, in a commentary on Psalm 30 probably written around 411 Augustine says:

I want you to understand that the Head and body together are called one Christ. To make this quite clear he [the Lord] says, when speaking of marriage, *They will be two in one flesh; so they are two no longer, but one flesh* (Mt 19:5-5) But perhaps it might be thought that he only means this to apply to any ordinary marriage? No, because listen to what Paul tells us: They shall be two in one flesh, he says. *This is a great mystery, but I am referring it to Christ and the Church* (Eph 5:31-32). So out of two, one single person comes to be, the Head and body, Bridegroom and Bride.⁵¹

In another sermon that Augustine preached around 417, he explains that Christ can be understood in the scriptures as named in three ways. The first way is before his assumption of the flesh as according to the divine nature in which he is God coeternal with Father. The second way is after the Son assumed flesh and became the mediator and head of the Church. Augustine says about the third way:

The third way is how the whole Christ is predicted with reference to the Church, that is as head and body . . . Where do we find this, that head and body form one Christ, that is, the body together with its head? In Isaiah he is speaking as if in the singular, [and it is one and the same speaking] and see what is said: “As for a bridegroom he has bound a turban on my head, and as for a bride he has decked me out with ornaments” (Isa 61:10) As bridegroom and bride; he calls one and the same bridegroom with reference to the head, bride with reference to the body. They are seen as two, and are one.⁵²

Augustine goes on to say a little while later in the same sermon “So whether I say head and body, or whether I say bridegroom and bride, you must understand the same thing.”⁵³

What is of interest for the present purpose is that some of the most profound texts in which Augustine explained the Head-Body relationship in nuptial terms occur around the same time he claimed that marriage was part of the original plan of God and insisted upon its sacramentality. It may well be that as Augustine thought about and explained the eschatological reality of Christ and the Church as nuptial, he was stirred up to think about the place of marriage and sexuality in God’s original plan. Whatever the case may be, Augustine’s claim that the sexual differentiation of created humanity⁵⁴ is something that is a part of the eschatological reality of Christ and the Church is absolutely indispensable for Augustine’s understanding of the sacramentality of marriage. Sacramental signs for Augustine were not arbitrary. They have a likeness to the reality that they signify. Augustine once explained to a puzzled bishop that “If the sacred rites had no resemblance to the things which they represent, they would not be sacred rites; they generally take

their names from the mysteries they represent.”⁵⁵ It seems sound to conclude then that for Augustine unless the union between Christ and his Church is in some sense nuptial, unless the bipolarity of man and woman is in some way a part of the Christ-Church relationship, marriage would not be a sacrament.

If we look back over Augustine’s intellectual journey, from his early work *On Genesis against the Manichees* to his later work *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, we see that he went from a disinterest in sexuality in the original plan of God to a profound affirmation of the religious significance of the masculine-feminine bipolarity of sexuality that embraces the order of creation and the order of redemption. His thinking about the sacramentality of marriage inevitably raised the question about the place of nuptial sexuality in God’s original plan of creation. For Augustine, the complete meaning of the one flesh union of man and woman written about in Gen 2:24 is found in the one flesh union of Christ and his Church (Eph 5:32). Nuptial sexuality is thus sacramental. Ultimately, the truth of sexuality, the truth of masculine-feminine bipolarity of the good creation, is a matter of mystery that is best known and discovered in the light of the eschatological relationship of Christ and his Church. This means, of course, that the masculine-feminine distinction is something intrinsic to the New Covenant, the new creation in Christ. Finally, by insisting on the created goodness and permanency of sexuality, Augustine could not avoid the conclusion that human persons will enjoy the full perfection of sexuality in heaven that is in the perfected unity of Christ and the Church. Nuptial sexuality is therefore a supernaturally redeemed reality. Augustine, unlike Gregory of Nyssa, could not regard sexuality as instrumental and temporary and as a mere remedy for death.

4. Embodied Nuptial Sexuality: A Redeemed Reality

What conclusions might be drawn from Augustine's intellectual journey for the current discussion about the theological significance or insignificance of nuptial sexuality? First and foremost, Augustine's thought points us in the direction of sacramental realism. Marriage as a sacrament tells us something real and true about our salvation. If marriage is a sacrament in which the union of one man and one woman **really and truly** signifies and participates in the unity between Christ and his Church, then it communicates the truth that the union between Christ and the Church is a nuptial one. It means, as Augustine knew, that the masculinity and femininity of created humanity is a redeemed reality and ultimately an eschatological reality because its exemplar, its archetype is Christ, the Bridegroom and the Church his Bride.

If on the other hand, as some contemporary theologians have proposed, we should think of the unity between Christ and the Church as beyond all masculinity and femininity, then the nuptial relation of man and woman cannot signify it, or any other intrinsically differentiated symbol for that matter. There would be nothing of intrinsic significance in nuptial sexuality with its masculine-feminine bipolarity that would be capable of really and truly signifying a Christ-Church unity that is beyond sexuality, that is not nuptial. The only signification of such a Christ-Church relation would be nominalist one at best. One theologian has pointed out that fallen humanity would have nothing to say to such a Christ-Church union, the most complete union it would presumably know, because it is utterly transcended by it. This theologian remarks: "Sacramental signs have been reduced to programmatic gesturing, of some real social and psychological value but without any intrinsic relation to our salvation ..."⁵⁶

In other words, there has been for nearly two millennia the sacramental worship of marriage. What would it mean to repudiate nearly two millennia of worship? But this is what we would have to do if we would think that sexuality is simply one “anthropological element” like race, politics or culture that makes up human identity or if masculinity and femininity is some limitation that is overcome in the resurrection. On the contrary, if the man-woman relation in Christian marriage is a sacramentally real and true sign of a heavenly, eschatological reality then it has a greater meaning and theological importance than the racial, the cultural and the political.

Close attention to Augustine’s journey shows us that if human sexuality with its masculine feminine bipolarity has no intrinsic relation to the Christ-Church union and therefore no intrinsic relation to our salvation then sexuality is indeed temporary and instrumental as Gregory of Nyssa in a more innocent age than ours envisioned it. On the other hand, if the masculine-feminine bipolarity is of the good creation and if the meaning of it is given and found in the one flesh union of Christ and the Church, then embodied nuptial sexuality is not only of prime significance for Christian revelation, but its full splendor will be manifested and made known when in the words of the Second Vatican Council “that mystical marriage established by God” will be “fully revealed” in the future resurrection.⁵⁷

1. This reciprocity is asymmetrical in the sense that the sexual difference of the other can never be overcome or transcended by me. In other words, the reciprocal relation between the sexes is between two beings each of whom have certain irreducible identity. There can be a union between the two ways of being in the body as man or woman but this union is not an absorption of one into the other or a union unto a third way of being in a body. The other always remains “other” for me. On this point see Angelo Scola, “The Nuptial Mystery at the Heart of the Church,” 25 (Winter 1998): 630-662 at 645.
2. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, (New York: Crossroads, 1993) 154-155. Johnson also objects what she calls the “prevailing dualistic model” that imagines each sex as “bearing unique characteristics from which the other sex is excluded.” She rejects any idea of the complementarity of the sexes as rigidly determining the qualities and roles each should cultivate and play and as functioning as a “smoke screen for the subordination of women.”
3. Johnson explains that the sexuality of Jesus is important for his personal and historical identity, “but is not theologically determinative for his identity as the Christ nor normative for the identity of Christian community.” *She Who Is*, 156.
4. See for example David Power, “Representing Christ in Community and Sacrament,” in *Being a Priest Today*, ed. Donald Goergan, (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1992): 97-123, at 116.
5. See Jerome, *Against Jovianian*, 1, 29 [*Adversus Jovinianum*, PL 23, 211-338. For an English translation see *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Jerome, Against Jovinianus* ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, 2/6 (Oxford and London reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) Hereafter referred to as NPNF]; Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 17. [*De opificio hominis*, PG 44, 125-256; SC 6, (1943)]; For an English translation see NPNF 2/5, *Gregory of Nyssa, On the Making of Man*. Ambrose, *Exhortation on Virginity*, 6, 36 [*Exhortatio uirginitatis*, PL 16, 197-244; E. Cazzaniga, *Sancti Ambrosii De Virginibus*, Turin, 1948] For a English translation see *On virginity, by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan*, tr. Daniel Callam. (Toronto: Peregrina Pub. Co., 1980)
6. The following account is taken from the work *On the Making of Man*, 16-17. See also the Oration “On Those Who have Fallen Asleep” [GNO 9, 63.] where Gregory repeats his opinion that the differences between the sexes was given solely for the purpose of procreation. Gregory’s views proved to be influential for some of the Greek Fathers that followed him. For instance, Hans Urs von Balthasar cites this interesting passage from Maximus the Confessor: “I repeat what the great Gregory of Nyssa taught me: the first thing to happen when man fell from perfection was that *pathe* were introduced, growing up in the irrational part of man's nature; only then did that manner of procreation enter into human existence that is connected to fleshly pleasure, on the one hand and death on the other.” *Questiones ad Thalassium* 1 (PG 90, 296A) Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatic*, tr. Graham Harrison, v.2, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990) 380.
7. In his *On the Making of Man*, 16.14, Gregory claims that the distinction between male and female “has no reference to the Divine Archetype, but, as we have said, is an approximation to the

less rational nature.” For Gregory man, male and female, shares the likeness of animals. See *On the Making of Man*, 17.5. For a good summary of Gregory of Nyssa’s understanding of sexuality see Verna E F. Harrison, “Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (October 1990): 441-471, at 465-471. Harrison points out that “For Gregory, this second likeness includes a whole complex of non-rational and biological characteristics – gender and the corresponding mode of reproduction, childhood and old age, nutrition and elimination, passions such as desire and aggressiveness, and mortality itself.” See Harrison, 467.

8. See his *Homilies on the Canticle of Canticles*, 3.1 [PG, 44, 755-1120; *Gregory Nysseni Opera*, VI, Leiden, 1960]

9. Augustine actually held that intercourse for the purpose of procreation is not sinful. He thought that when married couples engaged in intercourse beyond the need for generation it was venially sinful. This may be rigorist but it is not the same thing as saying all intercourse between married men and women is a venial sin. See *On the Good of Marriage*, 5.6 and *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, 1.12.13. For an excellent discussion of this issue see John Hugo, *Augustine on Nature, Sex, and Marriage*, (Chicago: Scepter, 1969) 109-115.

10. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, (Los Angeles: University of California, 1967, 2000) 502. See also *The Body and Society*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 399-408.

11. All quotes are taken from the English translation, *Marriage and Virginitly: The Excellence of Marriage, Holy Virginitly, The Excellence of Widowhood, Adulterous Marriages, Continence*, tr. Ray Kearney, ed. David Hunter, in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle, v 1/9 (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1999) 33-61. Although I make use of this translation in this paper, I have chosen not to follow its Englishing of *De bono conjugali* into the *Excellence of Marriage*. I prefer to translate the title *De bono conjugali* into *On the Good of Marriage*. This has been the more common way of translating *De bono conjugali* in earlier and familiar English translations. Latin. For the Latin texts see *De bono conjugali*, PL 40, 373-396; CSEL 41.

12. Augustine believed that virginity was of higher merit because of its intense eschatological character. Virginity anticipated the life of the world to come. In *On Holy Virginitly*, Augustine could describe it as a sharing in the life of the angels (13.12). Virgins, Augustine contends, preserve in their bodies that spiritual integrity that the whole Church preserves in the faith, imitating the Mother of the Lord. At the same time Augustine said that those who have the gift of virginity needed sound instruction so that they might be humble and not become puffed up with pride so that love might not be offended the greatest of all gifts. He also points out that the gift of martyrdom is even higher than the gift of virginity. (46.46-47).

13. *On the Good of Marriage*, 1.1

14. *On the Good of Marriage*, 1.1; 6; 24, 32. Thanks to children, who are the worthy fruit of the union of man and wife, human persons are held together in society not only by similarity of race but also of the bond of kinship.

15. *On the Good of Marriage*, 4.4; 24, 32. This good of marriage referred to that power of authority each spouse has over the body of his or her partner. A husband or wife was not to abstain from sexual relations except with the approval of their spouse. The violation of fidelity of course is adultery. Augustine understood husband and wife as giving one another the mutual service of sustaining each other in weakness for the avoidance of the illicit sexual union.

16. *On the Good of Marriage*, 18.21; 24, 32.

17. See Letter 138 (*Epistula 138*, CSEL 44.131) “. . . It would take too long to discuss adequately the variety of signs which are called sacraments when they applied [pertinent] to divine things. Fathers of the Church, v.20., tr. Sr. Wilfrid Parsons, (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc.) 40. Cf. *City of God*, 10, 5 “A sacrifice, therefore, is the visible sacrament or sacred sign of an invisible sacrifice.” All quotations of the *Civitas Dei* [PL. 41; CSEL, 40] are taken from, *The City of God*, tr. Marcus Dods, (New York: The Modern Library, 1950).

18. See *Tractates on the First Letter of John*, 6.3.11 in NPNF, 1/7 [*In epistulam Ioannis ad Parthos*, PL 35; SC 75]. “Consequently, the water of the sacrament is one thing: another, the water which betokens the Spirit of God. The water of the sacrament is visible: the water of the Spirit invisible. That washes the body, and betokens that which is done in the soul. By this Spirit the soul itself is cleansed and fed.”

19. For example, Letter 98, [*Epistula 98*, CSEL 34.520] in *Fathers of the Church*, v.18, 137-138. “If the sacred rites had no resemblance to the things which they represent, they would not be sacred rites; they generally take their names from the mysteries they represent.”

20. *On the Good of Marriage*, 18.21.

21. *On the Good of Marriage*, 24, 32.

22. Augustine also compares the bond of marriage to the permanency of ordination. See *On the Good of Marriage*, 24.32. He makes the point there are times when one of the purposes of marriage is not achieved and yet the sacrament remains. Something like this can happen with the sacrament of ordination as well. Ordination, the bishop of Hippo says, is given for the purpose of forming the community of the faithful. Nevertheless, sometimes communities fall apart or cannot be formed. Still, the sacrament of ordination remains. So, too, in the cases where an ordained man is dismissed from the clerical state. The Lord’s sacrament still remains, although the unworthy man must answer for his wrongdoing at the judgment. Similarly, if a man or woman divorces his or her spouse and marries another the marriage bond is not broken. The Lord’s sacrament is still intact and will remain so until the death of one of the marriage partners. Augustine’s comments show that he had some idea that the sacrament of marriage brought about a bond that had certain kind of sacramental objectivity to it.

23. *On Genesis against the Manichees*, 2.24.11. [*De Genesi contra Manichaeos, libri II*, PL 34, 173-220; CSEL 91] For an English translation see *Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees*, tr. Roland J. Teske, in *Fathers of the Church*, v.84, (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1991). This

early work was written from 388-389. See also *Reply to Faustus the Manichean*, 15.3 [*Contra Faustum Manicheum*, PL 42, CSEL 25.1] For an English translation see NPNF 1/4. This theme appears in later works of Augustine as well. For instance, *The City of God*, 22.17.

24. *Reply to Faustus the Manichean*, 15.5.

25. One scholar of Augustine has remarked, rightly, that while Augustine “never draws the explicit conclusion that matrimony is a grace-giving sacrament of the New Law, as subsequently has become defined Catholic doctrine, *but* everything he says on this point has sacramental connotations, and makes such a conclusion almost inevitable.” See Augustine Regan, “The Perennial Value of Augustine’s Theology of the Goods of Marriage,” *Studia Moralia* 21 (1983): 351-376, at 358.

26. Regan, 353.

27. *On Genesis against the Manichees*, 2.4.5. Even in his *Confessions*, XIII, 24, 37, he interprets Gen 1:28 as referring to the spiritual production of thoughts produced by the mind.

28. *On Genesis against the Manichees*, 2.11.15.

29. *Ibid.*, I, 19, 30.

30. *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, 8.2.5. [*De Genesi ad litteram libri XII*, PL 34, 245-486; CSEL 28, 1] For an English translation see, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, tr. John Hammond Taylor, 2 vols., in *Ancient Christian Writers*, (New York: Newman Press, 1992)

31. *Ibid.*, 8.1.1

32. *Ibid.*, 8.1.2

33. *Ibid.*, 9.10.17

34. *Ibid.*, 9.3.5

35. *Ibid.*, 9.10.16

36. *Ibid.*, 9.3.5; 9.6.10

37. *City of God*, 14.22

38. *Ibid.*, 14.23.

39. *Ibid.*, 22.17.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, 1.6.7 [*De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia*, PL 44; CSEL 42] All quotations are taken from NPNF 1/5.

42. *Ibid.*, 1.23.21

43. *Ibid.*, 2.54.32.

44. It is true that in *On Genesis against the Manichees*, 2.24.37 he says what was fulfilled as history in Adam and the woman signifies as prophecy Christ in his one flesh union with the Church. The important difference between this affirmation and the one in *On Marriage and Concupiscence* is that in *On Genesis Against the Manichees* Adam and Eve prophesied Christ and the Church not from the very beginning but only after sin. In 1.19.30 Augustine, commenting on Gen 1:28, "Increase be fruitful and multiply," claims that the bodily union between Adam and the woman occurred only after the first sin. Prior to sin there would have been a union of virile reason and a lower part of the soul that would have brought forth spiritual children. It would seem then that Adam and the woman did not prophesy Christ and the Church until their one flesh bodily union and thus after the first sin. This is what Augustine refers to as "what was fulfilled in history in Adam." At least in *On Genesis Against the Manichees*, Augustine saw a link between bodily union and procreation and the first sin. On the other hand, this notion is completely absent in *On Marriage and Concupiscence* where there could have been a bodily union prior to sin and where nuptial relationship between Adam and Eve even before sin prefigured the mystery of Christ and the Church.

45. In several of his other works written after *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, Augustine continues to proclaim the presence of marriage in paradise. For instance, there is a letter discovered only in 1975, known as Letter 6* [CSEL 88.32-38] in which Augustine wrote to Atticus of Constantinople defending his understanding of marriage and sexuality. Not only does Augustine affirm that marriage and sexuality were a part of God's original plan he tries to imagine what intercourse might have been like in paradise. Sexual desire in paradise would have been different from sexual desire as man now knows it as there would have been absent any sort of compulsiveness about it.

46. A search of the entire corpus of Augustine run on the database *Cetedoc Library of Christian Texts* shows 23 out of 44 occurrences of *sponsa Christi* occur in works written between 401 and 420.

47. *Tractates on the First Letter of John*, 2.2, in NPNF, 1/7 "Nor are those women who vow virginity to God, although they hold a higher place of honor and sanctity in the Church, without marriage. For they too, together with the whole Church, attain to a marriage, a marriage in which Christ is the Bridegroom. And for this cause, therefore, did the Lord, on being invited, come to the marriage, to confirm conjugal chastity, and to show forth the sacrament of marriage. For the bridegroom in that marriage, to whom it was said, 'Thou hast kept the good wine until now,' represented the person of the Lord. For the good wine-namely, the gospel-Christ has kept until now."

48. *Tractates on the Gospel according to John*, 9.2.2 [In *Johannis evangelium tractus*, PL 35;CCL 36] All quotations are taken from NPNF, 1/7.

49. Ibid.

50. s.v. "Church," *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. Alan Fitzgerald, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 169-179, at 171.

51. *Exposition of the Psalms*, 30.2, 4; [Ennarrationes in Psalms, PL 36-7; CCL 38-40] All quotations are taken from the English translations in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A translation of the 21 Century*, ed. J. E. Rotelle v.3, 14-17 (New York: New City Press, 1990) Hereafter as WSA. The translation above is from WSA 3/15. I have also slightly reworked it eliminating the word "person" where it does not appear in the Latin original. This is Augustine's second commentary on Psalm 30. Augustine's commentary on the Psalms can be hard to date. On the basis of internal evidence, scholars believe that Augustine possibly preached this commentary at a church near Carthage possibly in 411. See WSA, 3/15, 321.

52. Sermon 341, 19 (Dolbeau, 22). WSA, 3/11.

53. Ibid., 20 Augustine also argues that the one flesh union spoken of Gen 2:24 applies to Christ and the Church. We should also understand Christ as referring Gen 2:24 to the one flesh union between himself and the Church in Mt 19:5-6 where Christ says "They shall be two in one flesh; they are not now two, but there is one flesh."

54. By bi-polarity I mean what Angelo Scola means when he writes about a 'constitutive polarity': The reciprocity that springs from sexual difference thus shows that the "I" emerges into existence from within a kind of constitutive polarity. In order to be able to say 'I' in the fullest sense. I need to take the other into account; I have the possibility of (that is, the resource for) taking the other into account." "The Nuptial Mystery at the Heart of the Church," 643. See also Hans urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, v.2, 346-394.

55. Letter 98, [Epistula 98, CSEL 34.520] in *Fathers of the Church*, v.18, 137-138. Augustine writes to Boniface, the bishop.

56. Donald Keefe, "Sacramental sexuality and the Ordination of Women," *Communio*, 3 (1978): 228-51, at 240.

57. "Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests," no.16