

The Praxis of Agape: The Intrinsic Sacramentality of Family

“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and His disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine."

John 2:1-3

INTRODUCTION

“They have no wine.” (John 2:3) These are the words of our Lord’s Mother, spoken during a wedding reception that occurred in a small insignificant village in Galilee located about three hours journey from Nazareth. These words mark the introduction of Jesus’ public ministry and what St. John the Evangelist refers to as “the first of His signs” (John 2:11). While at first reticent to accept the tacit directive of His mother, Jesus utilizes the depletion of wine as an opportunity to disclose the Great Mystery of the Church.

The fourth gospel presents those who study it with two levels of revelation. There is (a) the simple surface story that can be easily retold, and understood, and (b) a deeper theological interpretation for those who eagerly search with the eye of faith. The pericope concerning the marriage at Cana is rich with both historical information and deep theological truths. As it is read during the celebration of every Orthodox Marriage, I have decided to utilize the Cana marriage miracle as the framework for my presentation which is entitled: *The Praxis of Agape: An Examination of the Intrinsic Sacramentality of the Christian Family*. While the first part of my study will conduct a general theological exegesis of the Johanine miracle story of Cana, the second portion of my presentation will discuss the significance of this material upon our understanding of the sacramental nature of the Orthodox Christian family.

PART I

The American family is in trouble! According to a recent interview article for a national magazine - Colin Powell, the famous general of the Gulf War who dedicated his entire career to defending America from external enemies – now believes the enemy is within. General Powell now thinks that “**we**” have now become our own worst enemy. Speaking of how dangerous America has become – Powell cited staggering statistics: 20 million young people wander the streets, take drugs, alcohol, participate in free sex, homosexuality, lesbianism, and teen-age gangs. The answer to these problems – Powell suggested – will not be found in economic or social reform. The answer lies in strengthening the American family. Our children, he insisted – have become violent because of a lack of family life, love and education

According to the US Government Census Report only 50% of American families are intact. In the last 50 years we have seen a marked increase in juvenile delinquency, discipline problems, and abortions. Since 1980 divorce rates are up 65%. The number of unmarried couples is up 157%. Children living with two parents are down 20% while children living with one parent are up 41%. These statistics reveal a serious problem facing the American family today.

In light of these staggering statistics, it is appropriate for us to gather as Orthodox Christians and to focus our theological and pastoral attention to the important subject of marriage and family. In so doing we acknowledge that the Church still sheds tears for those in need and distress. Since the occasion of her participation at the Wedding at Cana of Galilee - The Theotokos -- our Lord's Holy Mother -- continues to give attention to the *quantity* and *quality* of wine that is served at her children's sacramental gatherings. Unfortunately, like wine at Cana - the intrinsic sacramental nature of many Orthodox Marriages and their respective families, has indeed begun to be depleted and for some has tragically -- run dry!

Aside from the numerous deleterious consequences associated with society's relentless disrespect for marriage and family - many within the Church - have understood their participation in the marriage service as a formality that merely gives their marital union a sense of religious legitimacy and social respectability. Some, see their "Church" marriage as an alternative to civil marriage. Still others, consider their participation in the sacrament of marriage as inserting some type of special, yet elusive, mysterious power into their nuptial relationship.

In light of such an unfortunate situation - if we are perceptive - we can hear the cry of the Theotokos to her son. "They have no wine" "Help them my son – Transform the emptiness of their families into the fullness of your sacramental joy."

"They have no wine." The precious words spoken by our Lord's Mother and quoted during each Orthodox Marriage ceremony should not be considered as merely indicating the historical context for her son's first miracle. The Theotokos eternally scans the historical landscapes of marriage and family, for the Orthodox Family should understand itself as a symposiarch of the Church. Her words should form the invocation of each family's ministry to itself, the Christian community and the entire cosmos, namely, the Stewardship of the Vine!

Each family that has been established through the sacrament of marriage in every Orthodox Christian parish, must discover its lineage to the household that was inaugurated at the marriage at Cana. The contemporary Christian family should be granted the opportunity to quench its respective spiritual thirst with the wine of the Church's sacramental grace. Unfortunately, while the Bridegroom's guests have come desiring to taste of the very best from the Church's sacramental vine, many depart with the indecorous conclusion that "they have no wine."

The miracle of Cana provides the contemporary family with welcome theological and pastoral news. If we provide opportunities for our Lord to be at the center of our marriages, a new quality – a new vintage - will characterize family life. It will be like turning water into wine. Without Christ as our primary focus, means, and end, the sacramental nature of our families will at best, remain self-centered, and at worst – run out! When we properly understand and integrate the Grace that resides in all of the Church's Sacramental life, our families will most certainly be transformed from drab and thrill-less relationships to the most vivid and aromatic of experiences.

The miracle of Cana is one of seven signs or miracles described in the Gospel of St. John that inaugurates the sacramental nature of the Church and magnifies the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. These signs help to create the underlying presuppositions of the Church. The miracles performed by Jesus signal His identity as the Christ of Messiah. The New Testament Theological Lexicon refers to the basic meaning of the Greek word for sign (*semeion*) as something by which one recognizes a particular person or thing, a confirmatory, corroborative, authenticating mark or token. In general, it denotes a miracle, a divine epiphany. Through these signs, Jesus reveals His glory. What is significant, is that the miracles as signs have the power of revelation only for those whose eyes God Himself opens.

The testimony of Jesus' signs (miracles) in the fourth gospel points to the glory of the Word made flesh (John 1:14). It is a testimony that many were unwilling to accept (John 3:11). The first sign signals the mastery of the new covenant over the old – the sanctifying precedence of the Christian Church over and above that of the Nation of Israel. The miracle at Cana is a powerful testimony of God's love and power, a blending of the sacred with the secular, of the water of purification with the fragrant wine of the Kingdom of God.

Many Church Fathers have written extensively on the theological significance of this miracle: Among them are: St. John Chrysostom – St. Cyril of Alexandria – St. Romanos the Melodist, - Justin the Martyr – St. John of Kronstadt – and St. Ephraim the Syrian.

As we have briefly stated, the wedding at Cana is the setting for the first of the seven signs (miracles) performed by Jesus in the Gospel of St. John. These signs are: (a) changing water into wine, (b) curing the nobleman's son, (c) healing the paralytic, (d) feeding the multitude, (e) walking on the water, (f) giving sight to the blind man, and (g) raising Lazarus from the grave.

The seven signs of the Gospel of John point to something beyond themselves, namely, the mystery of the Incarnate God at work in His mighty and saving acts, the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus. The signs are a means by which Jesus' disciples and others come to recognize His Glory. His divine power reveals that He comes from the Father. Consequently, the signs further strengthen faith in Him. According to Cyril of Alexandria and Ephrem the Syrian, wine symbolizes the supreme revelation given by God to humanity. The water become wine is a powerful sign given by Jesus that manifests the superiority of His Divine Work. While good, the revelation communicated through the Old Testament prophets and the law is inferior to the sacred testimony manifested by Jesus through his Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection.

The setting of this miracle is significant as in the Old Testament marriage symbolizes the union of God with His Bride, Israel. It is interesting to note that Moses began his tenure by turning the water of the Nile into blood. Jesus, on the other hand, begins His ministry by turning water into wine, a symbol of salvation (Is. 25:6) and an indication of the joy and delight of His Kingdom being spread to all of the world. By this sign, Jesus likewise declares marriage to be holy and honorable (Heb. 13:4). It is here significant to note that apart from reading this pericope at the Orthodox sacrament of Holy Marriage it is also read on the

Monday after the Sunday of St. Thomas, a season of intense instruction in the early church for Christians who were baptized and chrismated during Pascha. Its selection in the latter is due to the story's liturgical and rich sacramental context.

The directive spoken to Jesus by His Mother indicates that she was interested in averting a calamity at the wedding that she, her Son and His disciples had been invited to attend. According to Jewish custom, it was the responsibility of the wedding couple to make the necessary arrangements to properly accommodate the needs of their invited guests. In fact, individuals had the right to sue the newlyweds if they as guests were not fed properly! Since most marriage festivities lasted for many days, the need for precise logistics was important. The unexpected large number of guests that was caused by the arrival of Jesus and His five disciples may have depleted the provision of wine. The problem may have been further compounded by the modest economic circumstances of the bride and groom.

In Palestine, wedding feasts often occupied a space of seven to fourteen days (Gen. 29:27; Judges 14:15). The marriage feast to which Jesus was invited might have been advanced, and may provide some explanation for the exhaustion of the supply of wine. It is significant and commonly accepted that the day that Jesus and his assemblage arrived at the wedding feast was the seventh day and thus corresponded with the solemn week of Passover (John 2:13).

Wine is an essential element at a Jewish feast. "Without wine," write the rabbis, "there is no joy." Since hospitality in the East was a sacred duty, any failure to extend an ample supply of provisions especially at a wedding feast would be a terrible humiliation for the bride and the bridegroom. The best wine was customarily provided to guests when their senses were at their keenest. When the climax of the gathering had past, then the weaker, poorer and less fragrant wine was produced.

Water, on the other hand, would have been used at the wedding reception for purifying purposes. According to ceremonial law, water was used to: (a) clean the feet on entry into a house, and (b) required for hand-washing. Strict Jewish custom required hand-washing before as well as between each course. It was for this foot and hand-washing that these stone jars were found in the house. In an effort to maintain cleanliness, water pots were usually made of stone. In this fashion the ritual purity that was advocated by rabbinical teaching was protected.

According to Jewish tradition, seven is a number that symbolizes completeness and perfection. On the other hand, six is a number that symbolizes something unfinished or imperfect. The six water pots used by Jesus to perform His first sign therefore symbolize the imperfections of the Jewish law. The number of water pots is often interpreted in terms of the Levitical Law (Lev. 11:29-38). The number six is one less than the number seven which typifies perfection and thus symbolizes the old dispensation. In order to complete and perfect this law Jesus manifests the new Wine of His Grace. While the Levitical Law was partial, incomplete, and imperfect, the abundance of wine is symbolic of the abundant Grace and truth in Christ. By transforming such a large quantity of water into wine John is informing his readers that in Jesus grace is perfect, limitless, and sufficient for every need.

It is extremely possible that that the five disciples who accompanied Jesus and His mother to the wedding feast were themselves the unnamed servants who were instructed to fill these six water pots with water. In all likelihood, the disciples, as deacons (ministers) and “stewards of the mysteries” (1 Cor. 4:1), were the ones to whom Mary directed her advice to do “whatever he tells you.” At Jesus’ command, therefore, the five newly called disciples filled and then provided the chief steward of the feast, with a cup of water now turned wine.

The “master of the table” was more than a typical wine steward. He was the chief steward, the symposiarch who presided over the arrangements of the entire feast. The large number of water pots of considerable magnitude suggests in part, a large number of guests and the great attention given to ceremonial purity. The alabaster jugs may have been different in shape according to their particular ceremonial purpose. The transformation of water into wine provided much more than a supply of drink for the wedding couple and their guests, but - as we will discuss in more detail in the second portion of this presentation – the water become wine provided the couple with an ample dowry of Sacramental Grace for their future family.

The ninth Proverb of Solomon unites wisdom, marriage and wine. “Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars; she has prepared her food, she has mixed her wine; She has also set her table; She has sent out her maidens, she calls from the tops of the heights of the city: "Whoever is naive, let him turn in here!" To him who lacks understanding she says, "Come, eat of my food and drink of the wine I have mixed” (Proverbs 9:1-5). The Church Fathers followed a similar pattern by interpreting the miraculous transformation of water into wine at Cana in sacramental terms. The water become wine was a sign of anticipation - of the sacred transformation of the bread and wine into Christ’s Body and Blood at the Eucharist. For them, the Eucharistic gathering is the Eternal Marriage Feast of True Wisdom – and consequently the living Icon of the Great Mystery – Christ the Bridegroom and His Bride, His Family - the Church.

Characteristic of this understanding, Clement of Alexandria suggests that “Christ turned water into wine at the marriage of Cana in order to “infuse life into the water of a lukewarm heart.” Clement continues by asserting that through this sign Jesus was “pouring the blood of the vine into the whole world and thereby supplying piety within a drink of Truth, a mixture of the Old Law and the New World, until the fulfillment of time.” However, while mankind has at every period of its experience enjoyed a degree of God’s Grace, the very best vintage is

realized in Christ and in the Church that he has inaugurated for this present age. He is the choicest Wine! As such, the enlargement of our experience of Him through the Praxis of marital Agape will progressively infuse more and more grace upon the family.

But what exactly do we mean by the societal designation “the family?” Is the family a biological entity, comprised of those who are genetically related to one another? Is it a legal designation of those that are related by law? Is the family primarily an economic relationship in which persons pay the expenses for each other or provide inheritance? Is it a place to draw upon the social capital of reputation? Is the Christian Family different from families who practice other religions or have no religion at all? The unfortunate consequence of the aforementioned deficient definitions of marriage is an overly pragmatic management of family life. Our understanding of the intrinsic sacramental nature of marriage and family would greatly benefit from a structure that would follow a theological scheme of placing the sanctifying grace of the Church squarely at the center of each!

The miracle of Cana may be used to illustrate how our efforts to sustain the notion of Christian family are slender and soon exhausted when offered without the transformative presence of Christ. As symposiarchs of the Wine of Sacred Tradition, it is important that our efforts to protect the sacred character of Christian marriage and family follow the process implicit in Jesus’ first sign. Today, the Christian family should, like Mary, continue to direct its attention to the commands of her Son. Divine manifestation is always associated with serving need in love. Families express their intrinsic sacramental nature when as servants its members understand their relationship to one another, to the community and the world as primarily a stewardship of the vine. Married couples and their respective families must strive to hearken to the direction of Mary and obediently “do whatever the Lord commands.” To be obedient to our Lord’s Word as expressed through Sacred Tradition, parents should employ every effort to

provide their children with catechetical opportunities for the Holy Spirit to establish wisdom, illumination, and most importantly, love in their hearts and souls.

The most valuable gift that was offered to the wedding couple at the marriage at Cana was the One provided by the Theotokos. By contributing the Gift of her Son, Mary provides the Sacred Marriage-Feast of the Church the greatest Dowry one could ever receive. Jesus is the Wine of Life that every family inaugurated by the sacrament of Holy Marriage throughout history should strive to receive and in turn offer the guests of the Bridegroom. This, in the final analysis, is the sacred trust of every family. As such, if we truly desire to honor the guests who are invited to attend the contemporary marriage feast of the Church each family would do well to make certain that we provide the “good wine first.”

Understood in this fashion, the miracle of Cana is not a miracle of luxury. It is, rather, a miracle of selfless love. It is a mystalogical miracle, a divine sign that provides a Praxis of sacramentality that every Christian family would do well to emulate.

PART II: The Family

It is not uncommon to hear a conversation among Orthodox Christians who describe marriage as “also” a sacrament of the Church. The phrase betrays a sort of liturgical ambiguity as if the Grace of the sacrament is somehow added to the institution of marriage. Be that as it may, the marriage of two baptized Orthodox Christians is inherently a “mysterion” a Holy sacrament, a sign of the Kingdom of God which, - as we have begun to see - supports, enriches and mystically transforms the water-filled pots of natural marriage into the wine of a sacred family life!

I would like to now focus on a series of six affirmations that disclose the intrinsic sacramentality of the Christian family. The six affirmations focus on the: (a) design, (b) destiny, (c) diakonia, (d) dignity (e) dialectic, and (f) delight of the Christian family. The six affirmations correspond to the six water-filled pots of the Marriage in Cana at Galilee. Our task, therefore, will be to show how Christ can transform the water of our incomplete and secularized contemporary notions of marriage and family - into the rich wine of a more complete and dynamic praxis of nuptial love.

1. The first affirmation that discloses the intrinsic sacramental character of the family is the issue of its *Divine design*.

Marriage, and hence the family unit, is a reality created by God. By affirming the divine design of marriage and its institutions, we are underscoring the fact that as a creation of God, the family is not - as some social scientists or politicians might suggest – an economic or societal construction. This is an important issue, in that, if from the onset, we determine marriage to be a social construct, then society has the privilege to deconstruct and then reconstruct the notion of family at will.

The entire notion of “Civil” as opposed to “Church” marriage introduces a secularity unknown to the ancient world that did not accept a dichotomy between the holy and the profane, the sacred and the secular. Marriage is a communal matter that always involves the entire tribal family. Consequently, as I have described earlier, marriage is a sacrament, a transcendent sign of the Kingdom of God, emphasizing the fact that whether or not we are married in the presence of a thousand guests or if we elope to Las Vegas for a “private ceremony” – the institution of marriage – the unity of two individuals – takes place before God, spirits, angels, saints – we might say – all of humanity’s ancestors!

Understood in such a fashion, God is the Father of both individuals – presenting the husband as well as the Bride to one another as He did when He introduced Ishah, Eve’s original Hebrew name, to Adam. Consider for a moment that Eve was already a part of Adam – She was, in fact, an integral part – of his skeletal body - one of his ribs. God, however, describes Adam’s condition as “being alone.” It was not until God presented Eve to Adam “in a sacred relationship” – that the marriage union – the sacrament of the Kingdom was inaugurated – requiring individuals to be united into linked families.

This description of marriage differs greatly from the current secular understanding. Although the ritual of marriage may differ from culture to culture, religion to religion, it is interesting to note essential similarities across the historic and cultural divide. The stagnant anthropocentric waters of the secular ontological water-pot of marriage must be transformed into a wine that inspires the understanding that the idea of marriage and family emanates from a divine origin and not from the architecture of man. It is, in the final analysis, a co-creative, synergistic process between God and Man.

The wine of such a sacramental understanding of marriage and the family unit it presupposes is implicit in the Genesis creation accounts. One need only to study the two creation accounts in Genesis alongside the lofty prayers of the Orthodox marriage service to see the nuptial themes that are found in later OT stories. The grand themes of monogamy, fidelity, and the indissolubility of marriage are invoked by Jesus Himself in the New Testament.

The joy of the Genesis couple found in the first two chapters of the Old Testament is gradually eclipsed with the disastrous choices described in Chapter 3. The *fall*, or for the purposes of Orthodox Patristic thought specifically – the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden - and their subsequent separation from God, - is the result of wrong choices. Improper volitions have disastrous consequences: shame, anger, blaming, pain in childbirth, enmity with the soil, the

alienation of Adam and Eve, and the rift between humanity and God. Understood in this ontological fashion, original sin had a direct and harmful consequence on domestic life – on marriage and consequently on the family. The Genesis passage concludes with a new name for Ishah -- She is now called Eve – mother of all living things created by God. It is within this alienated household separated from God that the first couple brought forth Cain and Abel – good and evil. Hence, the first dysfunctional family.

The aforementioned brief exegesis of Genesis opens the way for St. Paul to describe the “Great Mystery of marriage”. Through the work of Christ the institution of marriage and family is healed. It is elevated to its original primordial position in the created order through Grace.

This image is discussed in the 21st Chapter of the Book of Revelation as the Bride of the Lamb – the metaphysical archetype of the Church – the New Jerusalem. As Yahweh was the stilted Bridegroom of Israel – Jesus is the faithful Bridegroom of the New Israel. In its original intent, marriage is, therefore, the union of two baptized individuals, a man and a woman, who live as one in the Church – the extended family of the Kingdom. The contemporary Christian couple that enters this Mystery does not do so in order to proclaim the teaching of a doctrine, but for the purpose of participating in self-giving act of Jesus who sacrificed Himself on the cross.

2. The second affirmation that discloses the intrinsic sacramental character of Marriage and Family deals with its *destiny*.

The Family is destined to be a living icon of the Church. According to the Four-Source Theory that ascribes four different literary sources for the material found in the Pentateuch - the creation accounts found in Genesis Chapters 1-3 are comprised of four distinct explanations of human origin. The first and perhaps most popular account of creation (Genesis 1:26-31) is a priestly version.

According to this theory, the first creation account expresses the Levitical teaching concerning mankind's origins and, as such, insists that the human person was created by and in the image and likeness of God. Humanity is expressed in a complementary fashion as seen in the phrase "male and female he created them."

According to the Four-Source Hypothesis Theory, the second creation account (Gen 2:15-25) is the product of the Yahwist tradition and consequently provides a more psychological vision of the divine origins of marriage and family. Adam is referred to as "ISH" which means "the one who chooses." Ish, however, is incomplete. Although there are other living things in the Garden, that have been directed to serve the needs of "ISH" he remains incomplete. God, consequently, creates woman --"ISHAH" from the same essence as ISH. Through this conjoining, Adam experiences completeness. The entire process of Eve's creation during Adam's sleep will be later used by numerous Church Fathers and allegorically adjoined to the Passion of Christ, the messianic Bridegroom on the Cross. It is ultimately this juxtaposition – this theological connection - that provides the ultimate foundation for any understanding of the sacramentality of marriage and family. This is what St. Paul describes as the Great Mystery – the equivalence of marriage and family with the Church.

It is easy to see how and why Orthodox Theology utilizes the priestly creation account as the lynchpin for its theological imagery which understands the union and ensuing representations of the marriage family in the same way that God ordained Adam and Eve as Lord and Lady of their respective Kingdom-Family. Crowned as King and Queen of their respective domestic Kingdom, the Orthodox couple vividly reflects the eschatological thrust of the priestly genesis account of creation.

When the celebrant removes the crowns from the heads of the bride and groom at the conclusion of the Orthodox Marriage ceremony, he does so by invoking the

protection of God. Once again, it is significant that the priest asks God to bless the marriage as he blessed the marriage at Cana of Galilee. Turning away from the couple, the celebrant enters the sanctuary with their crowns. "Receive their crowns into your kingdom," he asks "and preserve their marriage undefiled, blameless, and beyond reproach to the ages of ages." In the end, the crowns signify the means as well as the goal of their marriage for it is in and through the Church, the Eternal Kingdom, that the family, the Domestic Kingdom, will be sustained and preserved. Only by accepting to live a life of sacrificial love within their family can the couple expect to receive their crowns once again at the conclusion of this life. This time, however, they will receive them from the hands of God who will not re-crown as king and queen but rather as faithful martyrs with the wreaths of marital victory.

Understood in this fashion, the Church, is thus the means as well as the primordial destiny of family. It is at the very heart of the creative act of God. Within this institution Adam and Eve are ontologically created for self-giving. In becoming one flesh, Ish and Ishah are intrinsically linked to the Kingdom of God in the image of divine family in the same fashion as the hypostatic relationships are expressed in the Holy Trinity.

In every family, the mystery of redemption becomes present when its members truly participate in the Cross of the Savior, accepting the Christian paradox that joins joy with the bearing of suffering in the spirit of faith. To offer such fidelity of heart to one's spouse or children, the family itself must have recourse to God in the certainty of receiving assistance. The way of true agapic love, therefore, must pass through the grace of Christ's charity. Only in this fashion can the family hope to become an epiphany of Christ's eternal faithfulness.

Jesus calls Himself the Bridegroom of the Church. He is the Messianic Bridegroom (Mark 2:18-20; Mat 9:14-15; 22:1-14; 25:1-13). In so doing, He invites His listeners to recall the dysfunctional marital relationship between God

and Israel. Jesus points to John the Baptist as his Best Man (Paranympchos) or friend of the Bridegroom (John 1:27). Although Christ refers to Himself as the Bridegroom, it is significant that He never divulges the identity of His bride. It is St. Paul who resolves the question that, in the Gospels, is not directly answered. Paul reveals that it is the Church – the entire spiritual family – that is the bride of Christ. This is the Great Mystery to which St. Paul equates marriage and family. In so doing, St. Paul is not merely indicating a loftier doctrine of marriage and family than that which was followed by the Jews. He is doing much more. By linking the messianic bridegroom to Christian marriage, Paul is directing the family to its Divine design and pan-ultimate destiny - the Kingdom of God.

The apostles followed Christ as friends, as witnesses to the supernatural nuptials of His Passion. If the contemporary family wishes to express its intrinsic sacramentality, it can do no less, for it is through His self-giving on the cross that Jesus transforms, and redeems human marriage into a New Israel. He transforms the water-filled pot of the Old Covenant, our inadequate and imperfect understanding of family, into the Eternal Wine of the Kingdom of Heaven – the Church.

3. The Third Affirmation that discloses the intrinsic sacramental nature of the family concerns its *diakonia*.

As the Domestic Church - the diakonia (the ministry) of the Christian Family must reflect the saving work of Christ. If the contemporary Christian family desires to express this most important characteristic, however, it must become a living icon of the Church as prophet, priest and king. These three components of the family as church can be connected to the three most vivid rubrics of the marriage ceremony, namely the rings, candles, and the crowns. These three elements of the ceremony should be understood as much more than merely liturgical props. The rings, candles, and crowns are sacred liturgical elements that reflect the axiological praxis of marriage and its intrinsic family structure.

Through the three sacramental articles of the rings, candles and crowns, the family is summoned to be a permanent historical reminder of the saving work of Christ. Parents are called to be witnesses to their children of the salvation in which the sacrament of marriage makes them sharers. Of this salvation, the sacramental nature of family, like every sacrament, entails three interrelated components: (a) anamnesis (recollection), (b) actuation (activity), and (c) divination (expectation).

As anamnesis, the sacramentality of family gives its members the grace and duty of commemorating through education and worship the salvific actions of God. The rubric of blessing the wedding rings both on the Holy Gospel and the foreheads of the Bride and Groom symbolizes the need for the family to recollect, and proclaim the sacred actions of God. The couple is invited to develop the mind of Christ. As such, if the newlyweds desire to properly express the intrinsic diakonia of marriage they must strive to faithfully witness the truth of the Gospel to their children, to the extended families within the Church and finally to the historical family of humanity.

As actuation, the sacramentality of the family provides the grace and duty of living a praxis of selfless love, forgiveness and care in their current historical context. The crowns that the bride and groom wear during the wedding ceremony bear witness to two theological truths. As we have seen, apart from expressing the royalty and dignity of marriage, the crowns bear witness to love's sacrificial character, its diakonia. Consequently, the family actuates (activates) its sacramental nature whenever selfless love, forgiveness and care are expressed in its daily activities.

Finally, as divination, the sacramental nature of family provides the grace and duty of bearing witness to the eschatological hope and expectation of the future encounter of the Parousia of Christ's Kingdom. By holding candles during their

wedding ceremony, the Bride and Groom, (a) proclaim their baptismal identities, and (b) accept the invitation to vigilantly prepare their family for the Coming Kingdom. Like the 5 wise virgins, the family must always be prepared to properly welcome the Eternal Bridegroom into their midst. Only by assuming such an expectant posture can the family experience the sweet New Wine of His Kingdom.

Needless to say, much more could be added here concerning these three components of the diakonia of the Christian Family. However, it is important to encourage the contemporary Christian family to strive for spiritual vigilance at a time when postmodernism seeks to deconstruct its sacramental dignity.

As we have observed thus far, marriage, like the other six major sacraments, is a sacred sign, an “epiphenomenon” of Christ and His Church. It is through anamnesis, actuation and eschatological hope that each family reveals the grace of its sacramental nature. Each spouse as individual, together as couple, and united through mutual fertility with their children as family is called to faithfully reflect the great mystery of Christ’s incarnation, passion and resurrection. The two - the bride and groom - mystically become one flesh (an incarnation) a unity that entails much more than physicality. Such incarnational indissolubility entails that each spouse is prepared to live a life of sacrifice and true selflessness which can only be possible through personal participation in Christ’s passion. Finally, by reason of its association with the wider community of marriage throughout humanity, the Christian family bears witness to the hope of a significantly new understanding, a foretaste of “new wine”, of eschatological unity through conjugal faithfulness.

Family, therefore, and the issue of Fertility that it presupposes, embraces much more the notion of procreation. It is a sacred act through which every couple collaborates in the continuation of the process of creation itself. Such an orientation arises from God’s creative intention. Through the act of child bearing

a couple continues the creative process of God. Consequently, family is the sign, the icon of mankind's co-creative work, synergia with God. In a real sense, the orientation towards fertility and family is intrinsic to marriage itself. It is a sacred consequence of the marital dynamic between a man and a woman whose relationship is based on a shared dignity, partnership and sacred diakonia with God.

4. The Fourth Affirmation that discloses the sacramental nature of the family concerns its intrinsic *dignity*.

As we have observed, St. Paul dignifies the institution of marriage, and by extension the family by referring to it as a Great Mystery. To interpret to what exactly St. Paul refers by the word "mysterion" – we must briefly look to the witness of Patristic literature. For the Church Fathers the term *mystery* refers to the entire work of Salvation wrought by God for His entire Creation. Consequently, whenever the Fathers examined the issue of the Mystery of the Church they discussed three interdependent theological concepts, namely: (A) the incarnation, (b) cross, and (c) the resurrection. In order to understand the true dignity of marriage and family we should examine them in light of these three theological components.

1. According to the Church Fathers, the incarnation provides the basis for the sacramental indissolubility of marriage. By assuming our human nature, Christ – "Marries us". God takes on our very flesh. This is the incarnation espousal of the Messiah and the new Israel- His bride. All sacraments are grounded and are extensions of this Incarnational economy of God.

2. If the incarnation is the espousal, the Cross is the Praxis of the Great Mystery, for it is an extension of the self-giving of Christ for His Beloved Bride. Understood in this fashion, the miracle of Cana prepares humanity for the new

wine of the Kingdom. Jesus freely consents to the union of His self-giving on the Cross. His consent to die for His Bride, the Church, is a specific choice. To achieve a complete and lasting union, at Golgotha, Christ, the new Adam sleeps in much the same fashion as the Adam of old slept. From Christ's side, however, the Holy Church is formed. Consequently, we are all part of the Bride of the bridegroom.

The significance of this rich patristic tradition can not be overstated as it is used to weave the very fabric of our understanding of the sacramental nature of marriage – and by extension – the sacramental dignity of the family. The Messianic Bridegroom calls all married couples to make the same choice – to freely choose faithfulness and selfless love – the agape of Jesus – as the lynchpin of the marital praxis of their familial expression.

3. Finally, it is through the Resurrection that the Great Mystery and the Dowry of the Vine is made permanent. The resurrection is therefore a Cosmic Crowning – which reintroduces us to the pedigree of our original spiritual nobility. As such, we may now enter the Banquet of the Lamb which is described in the 19th Chapter of Revelation. Every marriage, church or secular includes this eschatological hope.

In one of the prayers offered by the celebrant during the marriage ceremony, God is revealed as “the Author of mystical and pure marriage” who communicates transformational life to every couple. What is most significant for us, is not merely the understanding that marriage in the Lord signifies the saving work of Christ, but most importantly – that marriage communicates grace to and through the married couple and through their respective family. This, in the final analysis, is the nobility – the great dignity of the family.

5. The fifth affirmation that discloses the intrinsic sacramental nature of the family is its sacred *dialectic*.

The Christian family is rooted in the sacred dialectic, the idiom of sacrificial love.

However, what exactly do we mean when we as Orthodox Christians make such a bold affirmation? Unlike its Roman Catholic counterpart the Orthodox Marriage ceremony does not include a predetermined set of vows that are brokered between the Bride and Groom by the officiating clergyman. Although the rubrics for the ceremony indicates that the couple should approach the altar of their own free choice, the ceremony focuses rather on the acknowledgment of the vertical, rather than the horizontal covenant relationship in marriage.

While always a possibility in every marriage relationship, the sacred – sacramental nature of marriage is not based on the contractual or mutual consent of the bride and groom. It is not the byproduct of a horizontal agreement but rather a sacred dialectic of sacrificial love that begins with the consent of the couple with God. The manner of a couple's shared life will be determined by their respective relationship with God. The "I do!" of Orthodox marriage is not to each other – but it is in the image of Christ's Gethsemane prayer – the "I do" to the "will of God!" As Christ the Eternal Bridegroom consented to His Father's Will in the Betrothal of Gethsemane – the mutual consent of the Bride and Groom with God their Father inaugurates a life of Passion – a Praxis – a Sacred Dialectic of sacrificial love – replete with transformational Grace – within the Mystical Body of the Church.

Such an interpersonal, self-sacrificial relationship between man and woman, every Bride and Groom, should be understood in terms of the image of the hypostatic union of God and man as "Theanthropos" in Jesus Christ. Every married couple is therefore called to be a permanent (preferably an unrepeatable) sign of Christ's sacrificial love for His Bride – the Church. It is to this mystery that St. Paul points his pastorally sympathetic, yet theologically precise pen. Every family, therefore, has the potential to be sacramental if in fact it consents to enter into the Dialectic of Christ's economic work – to be a sign of healing and

redemption to the wounded humanity described in the opening chapters of Genesis.

The family is thus consecrated, sacred – it is sacrificial - not as event – but as a relationship of potential – through which the couple and their children both experience and express the Love that provides access to God's holiness. Understood in this fashion, the family as a unit, as well as each individual within the family, may be considered distinct yet interrelated organs in the mystical Body of the Church. Only by accepting such an understanding can we guard family life from despotic structures that enable personal credos of self-centeredness. The Christian Family must therefore choose conciliar frameworks that express the Dialectic of self-giving agape.

It is the dialectic, the idiom, the Praxis of sacrificial love (of Agape) that inaugurates, sustains, and perfects the sacramental nature of marriage. Unlike the covenant established and sustained between God and Humanity in the Old Testament, the Orthodox understanding of marriage and family are modeled on the New Covenant which calls for a synergetic response of fidelity by the bride and groom, husband and wife, mother and father, king and queen. They are invited to reign, not as tyrants but as servants with love by means of the Grace provided to them by God for the benefit of their immediate and extended family, as well as the entire cosmic order. The Epistle lesson read at the Orthodox Wedding Ceremony underscores this sacrificial praxis of family life by asserting the need for the husband to love his wife as Christ loved the Church. While often misunderstood as securing an autocratic rule of the husband over his wife, the Epistle lesson genuinely underscores the reverse position. It is the husband and not the wife who is called to love the other to the point of sacrificial death!

Speaking in the voice of the husband, St. John Chrysostom provides advice to couples on self-giving love. "I have taken you into my arms, I love you and prefer you to my life. In this present life my most burning desire is to spend it with you

in such a way that we will be sure not to be separated in the future life that is reserved for us. I put your love above everything!"

6. The sixth and final affirmation that discloses the true nature of the family pertains to its intrinsic *sacramental delight*.

The faithful Christian Family is a sacramental delight. Unlike its natural, incomplete counterpart, Christian marriage draws its strength from a different cistern from a Divine vintage that provides immeasurable delight and eternal life.

I have always wondered what the Wine Steward, the Symposiarch who tasted the water which became wine at the wedding at Cana of Galilee said to himself upon drinking it. Perhaps he put it to his lips prepared to taste even poorer wine than that originally provided. I am sure he was caught off guard. The Time has come for the Orthodox Family in America to provide the "WOW experience" ("WOW" -- acronym for the "**W**ine of **O**rthodox **W**itness")

As a contemporary Symposiarch of God's Grace, the Orthodox Family is called to extend the wine of Cana to the spiritually thirsty. As we have observed, the family finds, in the original plan of God, information concerning its *design* = what it is . . . and its *destiny* = what it should do. If properly understood, therefore, the miracle of Cana summons the contemporary family to its ontological dignity and to its intrinsic responsibility. Family becomes sacramental when, through the Grace of God, the stagnant water-pots of its natural identity and praxis, are transformed into the dynamic sacred wine of the kingdom of God - the primary community of intimate life and love.

As a living historical icon of the new-wine of Cana, the Christian family reveals and communicates sacramentalized love and life – that is love and life the way it was originally intended to be lived and shared by God. It is a living reflection of everything that is created and redeemed in the Church - the Bride of God.

Understood in this fashion the family is grafted into the mystery of the Church to such a degree - that it is a sign – an epiphany, a sacrament in the truest sense - of a “saved community”. As such, it has the responsibility of communicating God’s love by continually becoming a “saving community”. In the end, the family is both the fruit and the tree of the Church.

The family based the marriage of one man and one woman, as a natural institution is the primary cell of society. The sacramental dimensions of marriage briefly examined in this study provide abundant riches for the family. Although our postmodern society implies many models of the family, the sacramental foundation of family life bases its existence on marriage as a community of love and life between one man and one woman. By accepting a model that proposes that the family is willed by God as a natural institution of creation, we guard ourselves against accepting any view that conceives marriage and family as the product of ever-changing societal consensus which ultimately results in extensive instability and successive forms of philosophical erosions and deterioration.

The Christian Family has a responsibility to therefore be a “delightful” reflection of Christ’s economic work. By sharing a life of intimate selfless love the members of each family participates in the (a) prophetic, (b) priestly, and (c) kingly mission of Jesus Christ as expressed and realized in the Church. Understood in this fashion the Christian Family is an icon of the “Best Wine” reflecting the sweet loving covenant of Christ with the Church.

Listen to a famous statement by the early Church Father Tertullian who beautifully captures the essence of the delight of marriage and family life. “How can I adequately express the happiness of marriage” he insists “that is joined together by the Church, strengthened by an offering, sealed by a blessing, announced by angels and ratified by our Heavenly Father? How wonderful the bond between two believers, with a single hope, a single desire, a single observance, a single service. They are both brethren and both fellow servants.

There is no separation between them in spirit or flesh. In fact, they are truly two in one flesh, and where the flesh is one, one is the spirit.”

The sacramental delight of the Christian family expresses itself primarily through love and discipleship both in service to the Church and in service to the world. Marital relationships provide a model of such discipleship by providing both the participants and their family unit with a unique way of encountering each other, the immediate community and the wider society. As we have observed humanity was originally created to share in “agapic love” . . . a love that effectively wills the good of the other. It is important, however, not to sentimentalize such love, for to effectively will the good of another may in fact mean to challenge not only one’s self, but the subject of one’s love quite forcefully. It is within the praxis of such a rich understanding of love as sacrificial agape that the intrinsic sacramentality of family life and love is manifested. In the end, those of us that are married and have families in the Church are summoned to be sacraments for both the church and the world. By their very existence, such families visibly manifest God’s love for the world. It is a contemporary epiphany of the Wine of Cana. It is a Delight in the truest sense of the word.

CONCLUSION

On September 15th, the day after the Feast Day of the Elevation of the Holy Cross, the Museum of the Academia in Florence, Italy, began a most ambitious yet controversial project. It began the restoration of the famous marble statue created by Michelangelo called David. The sculptor completed the statue on September 15, 1504. Consequently David will celebrate his 500-year birthday next year.

Should the 500 year-old statue of David preparing for battle Goliath be restored to his original youthful beauty? Should the marble, ravaged by the external forces of 5 centuries, which have left it with streaks and blotches, be cleaned of

the grime? Although a heated battle had ensued by 39 world-renowned international scholars as to if and how David should be cleaned, the decision was finally made by an independent panel of experts to clean the statue using nothing more than sterilized water and cotton swabs.

Michelangelo created David from an 18-foot high block of marble that was originally abandoned by other sculptors in a quarry in Florence. For 40 years the marble block was passed over by numerous artists because of its apparent imperfections. Finally, Michelangelo chose to begin work on the marble block because he saw something that he later would say was “struggling” to free itself from the stone. Today, the statue of David is displayed in a special room flanked by 4 other statues that have been called the Four Prisoners. What is significant about the Prisoners is the fact that they are unfinished. Not, as some have insisted, that Michelangelo did not have the time to complete them, but rather – because he intentionally wanted to make a theological statement.

As visitors approach David, they must file past the Prisoners – they view four figures struggling to escape the clutches of the cold stone. The prisoners are wading wearily through murky darkness bending their heads under the heard truth of their mortality. Legs and heads disappear in the marble, their chests and their bellies shine as Michelangelo considered the belly to be the “handhold of the soul”. In this epigastric fashion the great sculptor intended to show man’s soul imprisoned in the temporal world.

Finally, after passing the unfinished Prisoners, visitors stand before the statue of David - the image of the perfect (finished) man – naked but standing ever confident to confront Goliath. Each individual departs - having been summoned to intensely struggle to escape their respective prisons – to become what God – the eternal sculptor originally intended for us to become.

In conclusion I would humbly suggest that many of us have been meditating upon the sacramentality of marriage and family in a way that typifies the manner in which visitors gaze upon the statues displayed in the Florence Museum of the Academia.

The Family is the magnificent sculpture of the Holy Trinity. Like Michelangelo's 4 prisoners, the image of the contemporary family is in need of liberation. Since the time of Adam, the family has been struggling to escape the cold marble prisons of the natural order – to transcend the biological, economic, material and social theories and definitions that currently entrap it and to become the living image of its Eternal Sculptor. Unlike the statue of David which is currently being restored by water – the contemporary family requires the Sacred Wine of the Bridegroom. In the final analysis, only by continually bathing itself in the Transformative Wine miraculously anticipated at the Wedding in Cana in Galilee can the contemporary family successfully express the six affirmations of its intrinsic sacramental nature.

The notion of an intrinsic sacramentality of family is not grounded in the position of the priest to impart a separate mystical capacity on the couple during the celebration of sacrament of marriage. While liturgical and canonical fidelity are indeed important, elements in the communication of the reality of God's love and kingdom to persons, the sacramental nature of family is grounded in the reality of the mystery of God's love and the profound life-giving force of faithfulness which are potentially present in all marriages.

The family is not sacramental because the Grace of God has been somehow imparted to it through marriage by the Church, but because marriage and family were originally created by God in order that His eternal love and faithfulness may become historically present and revealed fully in Christ. Understood in this fashion, every family is connected to the promise of God to create the Kingdom of God in its midst. Each family has, in the final analysis, the potential to become

an epiphenomenon of the love and faithfulness of Jesus Christ as it is expressed in the Church.

Our hope and prayer is that the contemporary family will regain its original nature - to simultaneously be a saved and saving community of love - lies in the expectation that our Lord continues to heed the admonition of His Mother. By claiming such a trust in God's abundant providence – we may rest assured that the Wine of the Sacramental Family will indeed never run dry.

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