

Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages—II

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As John Noonan reads him, Thomas Aquinas is Aristotelian in everything except his sexology, in which he reverts to the rigours of the traditional Augustinianism. For the Angelic Doctor as for Augustine the marriage act is not a product of love and is not to be motivated by a desire for pleasure; it is justified only in its purpose of multiplying mankind. Noonan concedes (briefly, and reluctantly: 'A case can be made . . .', he says) that late medieval theologians, Thomas included, were 'somewhat in advance of their society in their declarations on the ideal of married love', but, he adds and emphasizes, they failed 'to incorporate love into the purposes of marital intercourse'. (*Contraception*, Mentor ed., pp. 299-311.) The purpose of this article is to summarize St Thomas's doctrine on marriage; to show that he did indeed teach that love and marriage go together, and did also teach that love—human, passionate, pleasurable love—not only entered into the purposes of the marriage act but was also the root and source of the act's ultimate beneficial value for the spouses.

St Thomas's reflections on love and marriage are found scattered here and there through his vast *opera*, but his teaching appears in full and concentrated form in his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Book IV, dists. xxvi-xlii. This early teaching of St Thomas was, in the middle of the fourteenth century, incorporated into a *Supplement* to the *Summa Theologiae* by an unknown Dominican friar in an attempt to complete the Saint's master work. Accordingly, it is these two *loci* that have served as the present paper's principal sources. But the *Summa Theologiae* itself together with that other great work of Thomas's maturity, the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, have also been called in evidence, for in these Thomas's doctrine on marriage is rounded out, deepened, and detailed. Questions left unanswered or undeveloped in the earlier, *ex professo* treatment of marriage are resolved when, in later tracts, charity, passion, love (*amor*), justice—all integral to the question of marriage—are each dealt with singly and in fulness of detail.

It is in the broad metaphysical and theological context of God and the universe that St Thomas treats of human love in general and as it is realized in marriage. The pattern is similar in the *Summae* and *Commentaria* of other medieval scholastics. There is an infinite God and a finite world. Within God there is a Trinity of Persons and

'beyond' God—but created, loved, supported, and directed by him—there is a universe of things, people, events, actions, institutions, and all is hierarchically ordered, though the order is often veiled in mystery. As part of this whole, as an instinct implanted by God and reflective of what is deepest in him, created love or desire of whatever sort is fundamentally good, and human love in particular is very good. Thus St Thomas argues that there is love (*amor*) in God from, of course, St John's *Deus caritas est*, but also by an argument that notes love to be the very first movement of the will, the 'prime root' of every other stirring of appetite (*S.T.*, 1a, 20, 1). Echoing an ancient and common theological tradition, he affirms that there is a 'vestige' of the Trinity in everything created, but especially in the rational creature in whom, as in the godhead, there is an intellectual awareness (*verbum conceptum*) and a consequent love (*amor procedens*) that reflects the Holy Spirit (1a, 45, 7). He asks if man's every desire is toward his ultimate end. The reply is affirmative, for whatever else a man may consciously desire is but a beginning (*inchoatio*) of the total perfection to be found in the final good, which in fact is God (1a 2ae, 1, 6).

But St Thomas, as much as some and more than most of his contemporaries, also viewed conjugal love in the less general, more immediate context of *natura*. The very first question he asks in his long treatise on marriage is: 'Whether marriage is natural?' (*S.T.*, suppl., 41, 1). The fact that it is the first question illustrates Thomas's all-pervading respect for the natural, and would have served to warn his medieval readers of the paramount importance of giving nature its due in any consideration of conjugal living. In his affirmative response Thomas first invokes the authority of Aristotle: man, says the Philosopher, is 'more naturally conjugal than political'. The argument proper explains and elaborates. First, since nature 'inclines' not just to the generation of the human species but also to the preservation, education, and advancement of the child to full maturity, man and woman are meant to live together in a permanent union, which, accordingly, is likewise of nature. Secondly, man and woman are by nature complementary, owe to each other a mutual service and obedience (*mutuum obsequium*), since neither alone is capable of coping with the large and varied business of living in which 'some matters are in the competence of men and others of women'. And, it is emphasized, it is this determinate union of the sexes, their communal life together, 'that makes for marriage'. In the Thomistic doctrine, therefore, the root relationship in the body politic is the 'community' (*obligatio, associatio*) of husband and wife in 'mutual service'. Out of this relationship grows that between parents and children, out of which in turn grow the complex relationships that constitute society at large.

This is the order required by nature. It is also for Thomas the order of grace. When speaking specifically of Christian marriage he asks

whether the *sacramentum*—the indissoluble union itself between husband and wife as reflective of the love bond between Christ and the Church—is principal among the marriage goods, his answer is that though in one sense progeny and fidelity are of prime importance (they are what marriage ‘intends’), the *sacramentum* is more noble (*dignius*) than either of the other two and, with respect to marriage as such (*secundum se*), it is more essential (*essentialius*). The first of the marriage goods (offspring), he says, ‘belongs to marriage insofar as man is animal, the second (fidelity or mutual service) insofar as man is human, and the third (*sacramentum*) insofar as he is Christian’ (*S.T.*, suppl., 49, 3; suppl. 65, 1). This, as has been indicated in a previous article, is a common teaching among the great scholastics and is reflected in the contemporary nuptial liturgy. It is a point overlooked by many of the critics of the medieval theology on marriage who, consequently, view that theology as justifying marriage only in its procreative intention. Certainly there is heavy stress placed by St Thomas, as by the other medieval theologians, on the *bonum prolis*, and it ever remains for him the chief (though never the only) *end* of marriage; but such stress does not preclude his further and perhaps larger emphasis upon the bond between the spouses themselves. Husband and wife are first and fundamentally for one another, though in and through their union they must also be for their children and for society.

This community or *sacramentum* between husband and wife is a matter of both justice and love, says St Thomas. Here again the modern critic of the medieval marriage theology is found wanting. F. Schlösser, for instance, claims that for medieval theologians generally, the conjugal union was merely a matter of justice. One might think, he says, that the *bonum sacramenti* left room for a mutual *love* between spouses. Not so, for according to St Augustine, who had originated the idea of the marriage goods, husband and wife were to love each other, not as spouses, but as creatures of God; and Schlösser cites the appropriate text. Then he suggests that perhaps the *bonum fidei* (fidelity) might have served the interests of love. Again, not so; and this time he recalls that even for so late a theologian as St Thomas *fides* as referring to the faithful union of husband and wife belonged, not to the virtue of charity or love, but to the virtue of justice (*Andreas Capellanus . . .*, Bonn, 1960, p. 266).

But this is to presume that the medieval theologian’s thinking was dichotomous, whereas in fact it was extraordinarily synthetic—the kind of thinking that could produce the great summations and encyclopedias of learning and experience that proliferated through the late medieval world and create such massive poems as *Le Roman de la Rose* and *Les Echecs Amoureux*. Thus, if St Thomas says that fidelity belongs to the virtue of justice, he is not thereby excluding the presence of charity or love. On the contrary, for him, just as the natural and supernatural, though radically distinct and worlds

apart, are nevertheless inseparable in the history of every man, so also, though there is a multiplicity of different virtues, in concrete human activity every virtue presupposes and requires every other; and this, notes Thomas, is not his own private opinion, but is held by almost everyone (*ut fere ab omnibus ponitur*) (*S.T.*, 1a 2ae, 65, 1). For Thomas, then, as for his contemporaries, if there is to be in marriage the supernatural or grace, there must also be, and be left intact, the natural; and if there is to be true justice in the union between husband and wife there must also be love. Why St Thomas prefers to think of conjugal fidelity specifically in terms of justice rather than of love is understandable, for marriage yesterday and today, Christian and non-Christian, has always been regarded distinctively as a *contract* involving the exchange of bodies and material goods, an exchange which for the good of society and the security of the spouses must be rooted in objective justice over and above subjective love. But it is also understandable in terms of love itself. Before marriage a man and woman might simply love each other for a day, a month, a year. But if their love reaches sufficient depth it itself will want to continue till their life's end (and beyond), and will seek assurance that it might. This is the moment of marriage, in which quite freely, quite willingly, the two lovers *swear* to be faithful to each other 'till death do them part'.

That St Thomas did in fact, and quite explicitly, teach the need and worth of love in marriage is amply evidenced. Consider this passage from the *Contra Gentiles* (iii, 123), where the question concerns the indissolubility of marriage:

The greater friendship is, the stronger and more lasting it is. But between a man and a woman there seems to be the greatest friendship; for they are united not only in the act of intercourse, which even among the animals produces a certain sweet society, but also throughout the whole of domestic living. In sign of this it is said in Genesis, ii, that 'for the sake of his wife a man leaves father and mother'. Thus it is fitting that marriage be altogether indissoluble.

Here not just friendship (or love, for—as noted in my previous article—in the Middle Ages *amicitia* was definitely a matter of love, and often of passionate, emotional love) but 'the greatest friendship' is postulated between husband and wife and it is quite definitely considered to involve the love act and all the 'sweetness' thereof. And it is on the basis of this friendship, and not from the point of view of justice this time, that St Thomas concludes that marriage must be indissoluble. Fidelity unto death is seen as a product of a great *love*.

In this same question of the *Contra Gentiles* another argument is presented linking love and fidelity. It is, to be sure, the same argument, only in reverse. If love of itself tends toward indissolubility, indissolubility quickens and confirms love: 'For so the love of the one for the other will be the more faithful, since they know they are

indivisibly united.' Lovers, Thomas believes, want to be bound (in justice) to each other precisely because they feel such a bond will preserve and deepen their love.

In the following question (124), which outlines the arguments for monogamous marriage, the theme of conjugal *love* is pursued, and enlarged, for the note of equality is introduced. 'The love of friendship comprises a certain equality.' But, observes Thomas, where one man has several wives 'the love between husband and wife is not free but, as it were, slavish'. In such marriages 'wives are treated as though they were servants'. Further, 'intense love cannot be exercised toward many'. Thus, the man who has several wives while they have only the one husband cannot love them as much as they love him. Consequently, the love between husband and wife 'will not be the friendship of equals . . . but a kind of servility'. The presuppositions are obvious and significant: there is to be an 'intense love' (*amicitia intensa*) between husband and wife; it should be a love that is free and equal (*liberalis, equalis*); and accordingly the wife is not to be treated as a servant (*ancillariter*).

What is meant here by 'intense love' may be gathered from the detailed treatment of human passion in the *Summa Theologiae* (1a 2ae, 26-28). Love, says Thomas, is manifestly a passion, since it affects the physical, concupiscible appetite, though it is also, *extenso nomine*, said to be lodged in the spiritual faculty of will. It is the first and most basic passion, and is the underlying motive of all that a person does, even when his action quite visibly emanates from another, even opposing passion, for 'every action that proceeds from any passion, proceeds also from love, as from a first cause'. The lover is *in* the one loved who is likewise in the lover. One who loves is not satisfied with a mere superficial knowledge of the beloved but 'strives to search within for a knowledge of everything about him, and so enters into the depths of him'. Ecstasy is a product of love: intense meditation upon the beloved distracts the lover, 'draws him away from other things', and to the extent that it is a love of friendship, i.e. other-directed, the ecstasy is even more complete, for then the lover is entirely (*simpliciter*) outside himself, being entirely within the beloved. Jealousy (*zelus*) is also an effect of love, for 'intense love seeks to exclude all that which is hostile to it', and the love of friendship sets a man 'against everything that is inimical to the good of one's friend'. And the love-passion, when its objective is right, far from being harmful to the lover, is perfective of him: 'Nothing . . . which is adapted to that which suits it is harmed thereby; rather, if it is possible, it is bettered and perfected.'

All of this is in the context of a purely natural love, which has St Thomas's approval and respect. It cannot be argued—as it has been argued when mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux and Gerard de Liège are in question—that Thomas is using the fervent language of love because he is really thinking of God. As a matter of fact, whereas the

mystics take over the notions of natural love and apply them to mystical love, Thomas, especially in his response concerning the perfective power of love where he expressly uses the language of the *Song of Songs*, does just the opposite: like many a troubadour and courtly poet of his own time, he adapts the language of the mystics to natural love. When he describes love as a *liquefactio*, i.e. a melting or softening of the heart in preparation for the entrance of the lover; when he speaks of enjoyment or pleasure (*delectatio, fruitio*) experienced in the presence and possession of the beloved; when he refers to the languishment (*languor*) caused by the absence of the beloved and the intense desire (*fervour*) to have and to hold him—he is thinking of human love, pure and simple. In other words, the conversion is not from earth to heaven, as with the mystics, but from heaven to earth, as with the poets of secular love. The context of the question, and the tenor as well as content of the reply, will allow for no other judgment. The appreciation is for human love precisely as such.

Further, when Thomas speaks of the love-passion as perfective of the lover he has in mind moral as well as aesthetic perfection. This is clear from his response to a question concerning human passion in general (1a 2ae, 24, 3). He asks: 'Whether passion increases or diminishes the goodness or malice of an act?' And he replies: 'As . . . it is better when a man both wills good and by act accomplishes it, so it is of the perfection of moral goodness for a man to be moved to good not only in his will but also in his sensitive appetite, as Psalm 92 has it: "Both my heart and my flesh have joyed in the living God", where heart stands for intellectual appetite or will, and flesh for the sensitive.' In answer to the objection that passion must be harmful since it impedes the judgment of reason, Thomas grants that, if passion 'precedes' reason, then it 'diminishes' (not necessarily destroys) the moral goodness of the act. But if passion follows reason (*se habet consequenter*), then it is both sign and cause of deeper moral worth. As we shall presently see, St Thomas in reply to another question concerning human passion will exonerate the most ardent passions and pleasure in the very love act of husband and wife. But here the implication is clear: it is better for a man to love his wife with his flesh as well as his spirit, with passion as well as will, since by *reason* of lawful marriage he has 'antecedently' judged that she is right and good for him.

In light of his golden rule that grace does not destroy but perfects nature, the naturalness and human quality of conjugal love are maintained as St Thomas considers the effects and demands of the specifically Christian *caritas* (*S.T.*, 2a 2ae, 26, 7). In reply to a question asking if we should love those nearer to us (because of some natural bond) with greater charity, he argues that those who are not naturally united to us we are the friends of 'simply' by the friendship of charity; but for those who are naturally one with us we have other kinds of love, and these natural loves, if they be 'honest', charity

draws to itself, not by absorbing them, much less by cancelling them out, but by 'imperating' or commanding them, by summoning them up and taking them into its service. They are left very much intact. Precisely by remaining what they are, they become the loves of charity. Only now they have an added, super-natural objective, but one which by no means eliminates the original natural one; otherwise they would not be the same original loves, and charity would have nothing to 'imperate'.

In this same context (2a 2ae, 26, 11) St Thomas singles out the love of husband and wife as the greatest of these 'imperated' loves. One's parents, he says, are to receive the greater reverential and appreciative love, but the 'more intense' love is to be reserved for one's wife (*intensius diligitur uxor*). Of all the love relationships under God that Thomas treats in his question *de ordine caritatis*—love between fellow-citizens, rulers and subjects, simple friends, children for parents, etc.—at the pinnacle stands conjugal love. There is only one other relationship, not mentioned by Thomas here, that might possibly be conceived of as superior: the love of parent for child. Is it, or should it be, greater than one's love for one's spouse? It is strange that St Thomas does not ask this question. But since the last question he does in fact ask in a series of questions that build toward a summit of love concerns the love of husband and wife, we are left to conclude that for St Thomas this is indeed meant to be the greatest love of them all. The greatest natural love, and therefore the greatest love of charity.

The physical sexual expression of conjugal love is treated by St Thomas in considerable detail, more indeed than the sensibilities of most modern readers might tolerate. But we must remember that Thomas was not writing for a large and popular audience, but for the professional theologian used to and requiring detailed, precision thinking. His first concern is to justify the marriage act in face of the Manichaean denial (*S.T.*, suppl., 41, 3). In reply to the question: 'Whether the act of marriage is always a sin?', he offers three texts from St Paul which he regards as obvious justification of marital intercourse: 'A virgin if she should marry does not sin. . . . I wish young people to marry, to beget children. . . . Let the husband surrender to his wife that which is due to her.' When he expounds this *sed contra* in the *corpus* of the reply proper, he is exceptionally definite and severe on the opposition. Twice he says that it is 'impossible' that the sexual act be universally sinful. Only those who follow the 'madness' (*insaniam*) of 'the worst of heresies' (*peissima haeresis*) claim that it is. Thomas would (and did, as we shall see) readily admit that the sexual act can, even within marriage, be sinful, but here he declares, what he is soon to prove, namely that in the act a 'mean of virtue' can be found.

In this same question Thomas lists and disposes of all the relevant objections. It is argued that because the conjugal act interrupts one's

union with God it is sinful. Thomas replies that though the act may interfere with one's immediate 'contemplative' union with God it need not sever one's habitual union with him 'by grace'. Another objection states that since the act is evidently shameful (*turpis*) it must be sinful. The reply is that the shame experienced in the act is not due to any 'moral' defect therein but to a disorder resulting from original sin. It is further argued that since the act has to be 'excused' by the marriage goods there must be something sinful about it. Thomas answers that not only do we speak of inordinate or illicit acts as requiring excuse but also those acts that 'appear' to be disordered, and such is the conjugal act which, therefore, is 'entirely (*ex toto*) excused by reason of the goodness of marriage, so that it is not a sin'. Finally, it is urged that since an excess of passion corrupts virtue, the marriage act, in which passion and pleasure are always in excess, must be sinful. Thomas replies as we would expect from what we have seen of his doctrine on human passion in general:

the excess of passion that corrupts virtue not only interferes with the act of reason but takes away the order of reason, which the intensity of pleasure in the marriage act does not do, because even if within the act a man is not ordered according to reason, he has been pre-ordered to it by reason.

Elsewhere (*S.T.*, suppl., 49, 4, *ad* 3) a still clearer and more forceful response is given to a similar objection:

Only when the limits of reason are exceeded is passion considered to be immoderate. But the delight experienced in the marriage act, although it be most intense quantitatively speaking, does not exceed the limits prefixed by reason prior to its inception. . . .

By *reason* of marriage the conjugal act is antecedently rectified. Therefore let passion and pleasure therein be 'most intense' (*intensissima*) and the 'act' of reason suspended, still the 'order' and 'limits' of reason are observed, and the act emerges as good and virtuous.

With the Manichees settled, the way lies open for a more positive approach to conjugal sexuality; and so the very next question asked is: 'Whether the marriage act is meritorious?' (suppl., 41, 4). Thomas's full answer to this question is spread out through a number of articles, and our understanding of it depends on a just consideration of the whole of his doctrine on love. His response in the present article is a qualified affirmation. First, the conjugal act is meritorious providing one is in grace and charity; that is, according to Thomas's general doctrine, he must be one with God (*gratia*) and must be disposed in love toward God and man (*caritas*), and, under God, he must love his spouse above all others with both natural and supernatural love (the *ordo caritatis*). Here the Thomistic teaching on the relevance of love to sexuality is apparent: not only marriage but the marriage act itself is ultimately a matter of love and is of real and lasting value only insofar as it is rooted in and

inspired by love. Secondly, the act must be motivated by one or other of two reasons: in order to beget children or to render to the other the love that is due to him. Note that one *or* other of these motives satisfies the requirement for merit: ‘*vel . . . ut debitum reddat, vel . . . ut proles . . . procreetur.*’ Both may be present, but need not be. Just as marriage in general is not only for the begetting of children, but is also for the personal good of the spouses themselves, so too the act of marriage is for generation, but is also for the love and well-being of husband and wife. That the *redditio debiti* here spoken of is a matter of love as well as justice should be evident from what has been noted above concerning the interrelationship of the virtues in the theology of St Thomas and his contemporaries. In the present article it is confirmed by the placement of *caritas* as the source and prime condition of a meritorious conjugal act. Because of our dichotomous dissociation of justice from love we do wrong to transliterate the expression as ‘paying one’s debt’. A real *translation* is called for, and ‘rendering a due love’ comes nearer St Thomas’s meaning, providing we understand the responsible, obligatory nature of the love he has in mind: it is the *amor amicitiae*, which looks to the needs and desires of the *other*, to what belongs to him or her rather than to oneself.

Not that there may not also be present the *amor concupiscentiae*, i.e. the love of self-fulfilment and self-satisfaction. We have already seen that St Thomas recognizes the place and value of passion and pleasure in the love act. But such self-directed love must not be the *only* motive for the act, and pleasure and self-satisfaction must not be sought for its own sake. Thus it is in the context of the question, ‘Whether a man sins mortally when he knows his wife without intending any of the marriage goods but desires pleasure alone’ (suppl., 49, 6), that Thomas offers the reply:

If pleasure is sought beyond the honesty of marriage, as when someone considers his wife not as his wife but merely as a woman, and is prepared to do the same with her even were she not his wife, he sins mortally. Such a one is said to be ‘too ardent a lover of his wife’, because his ardour overleaps the goods of marriage. If, however, pleasure is sought within the limits of marriage, as when it is sought in none but one’s wife, the sin is venial.

Herein is the marriage act vitiated: when one’s concern is neither for spouse nor progeny, but when pleasure ‘alone’ (*solam delectationem*) is ‘sought’ (*quaeratur*). Here is the lover who loves only himself and is after his own solitary pleasure. He is not interested in society at large, for he has no desire to procreate. He is not concerned for his partner, for he does not consider her person or needs. This is brute, and perhaps brutal sexuality. Such behaviour Thomas tolerates as venially sinful in the man who still has enough love for his spouse as to want to restrict his love-making to her alone. But for the man who has lost all love and consideration for his wife and is prepared

in his heart to seek his satisfaction in another woman, the judgment must be severe. Thus again, Thomas offers the *vitatio fornicationis* of St Paul as a meritorious motive for the conjugal act only when one is anxious to satisfy one's spouse so as to keep him (or her) chaste and faithful (suppl., 49, 5). Then indeed it is not only a meritorious motive but (like the *redditio debiti*) a morally and seriously compelling one, even, Thomas adds in conformity with a common teaching of his day, when the spouse's desires are, perhaps through modesty or shame, unexpressed: the husband must feel out, 'interpret' the sexual desires of his wife and fulfil them (suppl., 64, 2). But when one uses the act *simply* to guard (as he thinks) his own chastity, then he does wrong, though only slightly so if his desire does not over-reach his wife. In all of the casuistry that marks, and perhaps mars (at least for the modern mentality) much of St Thomas's sexology, his fundamental intention may be grasped, and lauded: to keep husband and wife looking to *each other* in genuine concern and courtesy, and beyond to society and God's kingdom. The 'mutual service', the 'sweet society', the 'love of friendship' that should be in marriage generally, must likewise be realized within the marriage act.

Nor can we say that Thomas is merely medieval in his psychology and morality concerning pleasure as an isolated force in sexual activity; that he was at fault for not having made, as Noonan would have it, the modern 'breakthrough' in which pleasure becomes a justifying motive for the marital act. I. A. Richards, relying on the authority of Ribot's *Problèmes de psychologie affective* and, of course, his own intelligence and sensitivity in art and literature, speaks of 'the exclusive quest of pleasure for itself' as 'a morbid form of activity and self-destructive': 'Instructed by experience man and animal alike place themselves in circumstances which will arouse desire and so through satisfaction lead to pleasure. The gourmet, the libertine, the aesthete, the mystic do so alike. But when the pleasure which is the result of satisfying the tendency becomes the end pursued rather than the satisfying of the tendency itself, then an *'inversion* of the psychological mechanism' comes about. In the one case the activity is propagated from below upwards, in the other from above downwards, from the brain to the organic functions. The result is often an exhaustion of the tendency, 'disillusionment' and the *blasé*, world-wearied attitude. . . . Every activity has its own specific goal. Pleasure very probably ensues in most cases when this goal is reached, but that is a different matter. . . . The orientation of attention is wrong if we put the pleasure in the forefront' (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, A Harvest Book, p. 96).

'The surest way to get pleasure is to forget about it', remarks Charles Bruehl, and he too admonishes against being actuated 'directly by the desire for pleasure', for 'pleasure seeking, when erected into an end, defeats itself, and is of all pursuits the most disappointing in which a man can engage'. Long before Ribot,

Richards, Bruehl (and all of us who really think about it), St Thomas knew this. This is why he could speak of pleasure as being a force implanted by God in sexual activity precisely to induce men to give themselves to it (*Contra Gentiles*, iii, 26, 83) and yet deny its validity as the *only* reason for making love and warn against pleasure *seeking* (not pleasure *experiencing*) in love. Love must continually open out into the other; to the extent that it becomes closed off and ingrown it ceases to be love, and takes on the viciousness of lust.

One final criticism of St Thomas's sexology should be met, if only to point out a few important particulars missed by the critics. He, along with medieval theologians generally, is accused of depreciating the worth of marriage and sex by an undue exaltation of virginity and sexual abstinence. It is indeed true that Thomas adheres to the long-standing ecclesiastical tradition that ranked the state of virginity above that of marriage. Yet we must recognize that he held virginity to be a worthier state *not* because of what is *surrendered* therein but because of what the virgin or celibate *aims at*. In reply to the question as to whether or not virginity is illicit (*S.T.*, 1a 2ae, 152, 2-3) Thomas says that if it is undertaken 'contrary to right reason, as in the case of the man who loathes pleasure (*quasi delectationes secundum se abhorrens*)', then it is wrong: it becomes the mark of the 'unfeeling boor' (*insensibilis, quasi agrestis*). But true virginity (*pia virginitas*) abstains from venereal delight in order that it might be 'the freer for the service of God' (*ut liberius divinae contemplationi vacet . . . ad vacandum rebus divinis*). The same positive motivation is found to underlie the ecclesiastical requirement of periodic sexual abstinence within marriage. He who abstains from sexual intercourse with his wife because he abhors sex (*detestatur mulierum usum*) sins. Such sin, Thomas says, has no proper name, but falls into the general category of 'insensibility' (2a 2ae, 153, 3, *ad 3*). But it is required, and is of virtue, for husband and wife to separate for a time for the sake of prayer: 'on days that are set aside as being particularly for worship it is not lawful to *ask* for intercourse (*petere debitum*)'. Though one must always fulfil the desires of the other whatever the day or hour: 'tenetur unus alteri debitum reddere quocumque tempore et quacumque hora' (suppl., 64, 5-7).

But though St Thomas prefers virginity as a state to that of marriage, the latter is allowed to suffer no disparagement in the comparison. Virginity is rarely mentioned in Thomas's 'long process' on marriage—and then only the more clearly and forcefully to secure the worth of marriage. Thus in reply to an objection that the marriage act cannot be meritorious because by it virginity, which is 'praiseworthy', is lost, Thomas argues:

a man can merit in lesser goods and in greater; thus when one leaves aside a lesser good that he might do the greater he is to be praised for having abstained from the less meritorious act (suppl. 41, 4, *ad 2*).

As noted at the beginning of this paper Thomas shares the world-view of his contemporaries, in which everything, great and small and in-between, has a proper and necessary place. Nothing good is to be despised, but all is rather to be encouraged and promoted for the benefit of all and of the whole. Thus to another objection—this time against the ‘sterility’ of virginity—Thomas replies:

The multitude of mankind will be secured if some give themselves to the work of generation; but others, abstaining from this, are thus free for the contemplation of divine things unto the beauty and welfare of the whole of mankind. Thus in an army there are those who guard the camp, those who carry the banners, those who fight with the sword. All is an obligation for the whole, but no one person can do everything (*omnia debita sunt multitudini, sed per unum impleri non possunt*) (1a 2ae, 152, 2, ad 1).

Finally, to the argument that since the marriage act (as distinct from virginity) is granted by way of ‘indulgence’, it is a gift (*beneficium*) and therefore cannot be a means of merit, Thomas significantly replies: ‘It is not incongruous that he who uses a “concession” should merit; because the good use of the gifts of God is meritorious’ (suppl., 41, 4, ad 3). Marriage and the marriage act are the gifts of God. He, then, who uses them rightly does well, and merits thereby the grace and the Kingdom of Heaven.

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