

SEXUALITY
AND THE
U.S. CATHOLIC
CHURCH

Crisis and Renewal

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Chapter 4

Being in Love and Begetting a Child

*A Greek Myth of Eros and the
Christian Mystery of Marriage*

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Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents. (*Gaudium et spes*, 50)

TO MANY CONTEMPORARY EARS, these words are shocking. It may come as a surprise to learn that they come from the Second Vatican Council, and not Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, or another teacher of centuries ago. As a culture, we do not tend to view children as the “supreme gift of marriage.” Although good parents contribute very substantially to the welfare of their children, we do not instinctively think that children contribute “very substantially to the welfare of their parents.” Perhaps in an agricultural society, children might contribute to the welfare of their parents, or perhaps when the parents need care in advanced old age, but normally we tend to think of the benefit traveling one way from mother and father to offspring. The parents provide; the children receive. And although it is the norm for married couples to have children, the links between love, sexual activity, children, and the welfare of their parents are not always easy to see.¹

Of course, “love” is a multifaceted concept that includes what the Greeks would distinguish as *eros* and *philia*, erotic love and friendly

love. A good marriage enjoys both kinds of love, as well as a healthy dose of *storge* or affection and *agape* or self-giving love. In an ideal situation, husband and wife are lovers and best friends and give of themselves in service to each other. Here, I would like to focus especially on erotic love and its relationship to the procreation and education of children.

It is important to consider erotic love as an aspect of the flourishing of spouses, in part because it can be especially difficult to see the link between erotic love and the procreation and education of children. It might seem at first glance that the education and procreation of children are an afterthought to the cozy arrangement of lover and beloved, an unwanted intrusion on the intimacy of the marital couple. Children are an option, an option one may not want to exercise.

In some traditions, erotic longing and procreation appear closely linked. In Genesis, for example, we can perhaps see an account of love that would provide a close link between erotic longing and procreation. Adam finds no partner among the beasts, and his yearning for union is completed only in Eve. This yearning and its completion “at last this is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone” (Gn 2:23) take place before the fall. The blessing and commission “Be fruitful and multiply” also occur before the fall (Gn 1:28). In Genesis, the *eros* between Adam and Eve is part of the divine plan from the beginning and is in no way connected with punishment. Nothing satisfies the erotic longing of Adam until the creation of Eve. Following the fall, this relationship is tarnished. Adam, who failed to confront the threatening serpent with Eve, blames Eve for their situation and implicitly also blames God: “The woman you [God] put here with me — she gave me some fruit from the tree” (Gn 3:12).² Marital relations become martial for the first time. The first man fails to see his wife as a blessing from God. However, the erotic love of man and woman is a part of the original blessing of creation, an original blessing damaged but not removed by original sin, a blessing linked from the beginning with a (partial) re-creation of the original unity of man and woman in their sexual acts and the fruit of these acts, their offspring.

For an apparent contrast to this account, I would like to focus in particular on the nature of *eros* by turning to Plato's *Symposium*, a dialogue in which friends and lovers at a drinking party give speeches in praise of love. The comic playwright Aristophanes delivers the most memorable oration, a speech about the genesis of *eros*. This mythic account of *eros* has drawn high praise from a wide variety of contemporary critics as capturing essential insights about the nature of erotic love. After surveying the literature, James Rhodes notes: "[N]early everyone . . . becomes lyrical about the superior truth and beauty of Aristophanes' account of *eros*."³ What then is Aristophanes' account of *eros*?

Originally, Aristophanes says, there were three kinds of human beings in circular shape, pure males arising from the sun, pure females from the earth, and a mixed creature half-female and half-male from the moon.⁴ These primordial human beings roughly resembled cylindrically shaped conjoined twins. Joined at the back, these elemental humans had four arms, four legs, and two faces. Their round shape enabled them to travel with great speed by rolling around like tires in a manner akin to acrobats or gymnasts cart-wheeling. Although their appearance may seem bizarre to us, they were powerful creatures whose pride led them to rebel against the gods. As punishment, in order to weaken and disorder these creatures making them less of a threat and more useful to the gods, Zeus split them in two. The scene is both comical and sad:

Now, when the work of bisection was complete it left each half with a desperate yearning for the other, and they ran together and flung their arms around each other's necks, and asked for nothing better than to be rolled into one. So much so, that they began to die of hunger and general inertia, for neither would do anything without the other. And whenever one half was left alone by the death of its mate, it wandered about questing and clasping in the hope of finding a spare half-woman — or a whole woman, as we should call her nowadays — or half a man. And so the race was dying out.⁵

As a result, erotic desire of three kinds arose as each creature yearned to find its lost half. The split of the original male/male humans brought about individual males with erotic yearning for a lost male half. The split of the original female/female humans brought about individual females with erotic longing for a lost female half. The split of the original male/female humans brought about individual females with erotic yearning for males and males with erotic longing for females. *Eros* in all its forms is a hunger to be reunited with our lost half — to find our “soul mate,” one could say. When we fall in love, we find the one who completes us. But this arrangement could not continue since the newly created race of humans was dying, leaving the gods bereft of their sacrifices and service:

Zeus felt so sorry for them that he devised another scheme. He moved their privates round to the front, for of course they had originally been on the outside — which was now the back — and they had begotten and conceived not upon each other, but, like the grasshoppers, upon the earth. So now, as I say, he moved their members round to the front and made them propagate among themselves, the male begetting upon the female — the idea being that if, in all these clippings and claspings, a man should chance upon a woman, conception would take place and the race would be continued, while if man should conjugate with man, he might at least obtain such satisfaction as would allow him to turn his attention and his energies to the everyday affairs of life. So you see, gentlemen, how far back we can trace our innate love for one another, and how this love is always trying to reintegrate our former nature, to make two into one, and to bridge the gulf between one human being and another.⁶

The longing for union is given a specific outlet in this new arrangement, sexual intercourse. The craving to be united leads erotic lovers to ardently desire to be together, within each other’s sight, and to enjoy sexual intercourse with one another. If this coupling takes place between members of the opposite sex, procreation may result.

Aristophanes’ account of *eros* differs significantly from the account of Adam and Eve present in Genesis though both accounts share a

sense of love as yearning for completion. In Genesis, *eros* is part of the original blessing of creation. For Aristophanes, by contrast, *eros* arose as a result of a divine punishment for wrongdoing. Before rebellion, and before punishment by the gods, there was no *eros* and indeed no procreation. God enjoins Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. By contrast in Aristophanes' account, "*eros*, in its aspiration to heal our dividedness, is therefore a force in opposition to the rule of Zeus (i.e., to civilizing law and custom)."⁷ Indeed, as another scholar notes, "sexual generation is thus the mark of imperfection in man's current nature."⁸

Aristophanes also differs from the Genesis account in giving an explanation of the origin of erotic love between members of the same sex. Indeed, the comic orders various kinds of erotic love (gay, straight, and lesbian) as better or worse, explicitly and implicitly. The Platonic Aristophanes suggests that erotic love between men (or more precisely between a grown man and a youth) is superior, for the male yearning for the male is "the most hopeful of the nation's youth, for theirs [the males'] is the most virile constitution."⁹ Men attracted to men are the "only men who show any real manliness in public life."¹⁰ By contrast, those desiring heterosexual unions, Aristophanes characterizes as unfaithful and adulterous.¹¹ Implicitly, the Platonic Aristophanes indicates the superiority of male homosexuality over heterosexuality by suggesting that the origin of the male-male primordial humans is the most noble of heavenly bodies—the sun—while those desiring heterosexual unions arose from the moon, an inferior heavenly body. *Eros*, in its most exulted form, excludes procreation.

What does the tale of Aristophanes teach? The popularity of Platonic Aristophanes has certainly not led to uniformity of interpretation. According to Bloom:

Plato makes Aristophanes the expositor of the truest and most satisfying account of *eros* we find in the *Symposium*. There has probably never been a speech or poem about love that so captures what men and women actually feel when they embrace each other. To say, "I feel so powerfully attracted and believe I want to hold on forever because this is my lost other half,"

gives word to what we actually feel and seems to be sufficient. It does not go beyond our experience to some higher principle, which has the effect of diluting our connection to another human being, nor does it take us down beneath our experience to certain animal impulses or physical processes of which our feelings are only an illusory superstructure.¹²

For Bloom, the speech of Aristophanes both captures our lived experience of erotic love as well as saves us from two mistakes in conceptualizing this experience.

The first mistake is to so elevate *eros* that it becomes divine (as the previous speakers in the *Symposium* had contended). In this view, the deeply *human* character of erotic love becomes obscured, and it turns out that we are not so much in love with the beloved as such, rather we love the divine transcendent in which the beloved somehow participates. Love and sex can become on this view utterly serious, the closest link to the divine possible. Sex and love may be viewed as a sort of savior that, when enjoyed, satisfies the deepest longing of the human heart and leads to perfect human fulfillment.¹³

The other mistake reduces erotic love to animal instincts, physical processes, and biological chemistry. The human experience of being in love is nothing more than a mistaken apprehension of physical, animal desire with no more real significance than any other desire shared with animals — such as being hungry. In this view, the distinctly human character of erotic love again disappears from view, for *eros* is nothing else than the desire animals have for one another. The first mistake errs by considering those in love as under the divine power of an erotic god, the second mistake errs by reducing lovers (*qua* lovers) to nothing more than beasts in heat.

Martha Nussbaum corrects the first type of error, treating love and *eros* with a divine solemnity, by highlighting the comedic aspect of *eros*. “As we hear Aristophanes’ distant myth of this passionate groping and grasping, we are invited to think how odd, after all, it is that bodies should have these holes and projections in them, odd that the insertion of a projection into an opening should be thought, by ambitious and intelligent beings, a matter of the deepest concern. . . . From

the outside we cannot help laughing. They want to be gods — and here they are, running around anxiously trying to thrust a piece of themselves inside a hole; or perhaps more comical still, waiting in the hope that some hole of theirs will have something thrust into it.”¹⁴

It is funny to rethink sexuality and *eros* in these terms. The comedian Aristophanes plies his trade in depicting a side of *eros* that thus far had been underappreciated by the earlier speeches in the *Symposium* that solemnly divinized *eros*. The seriousness with which we take *eros* and its distinctive act, the thrusting of a piece of ourselves in a hole or the receiving of a piece of another into ourselves, would be utterly ridiculous were we to substitute for the coupling of sexual organs putting one’s ear lobe into another’s outer ear canal. It is hard to imagine intense jealousy, devastating betrayals, or soaring feelings of unity resulting from the intercourse of ear lobe and ear canal. Indeed, the unity of ears utterly lacks even the intimacy and excitement of kissing. Great drama can hinge on unity between some human organs, but not all.

However, this indicates that in love and sex, something else is going on besides simply the unity of holes and projections as comic as it is to consider (and sometimes to perform). Without denying a comedic aspect to *eros* and its acts, to see *only* comedy is also to fail to capture much of human experience. There is a power and drive to *eros* not easily captured by an understanding of *eros* as comedic alone. In emphasizing this aspect of *eros*, it might be concluded that *eros* is nothing else than the primordial urge of animal attraction.

This characterization of *eros* (the second “mistake” described above) is perhaps more common today than thinking *eros* to be a kind of god. Erotic love, being “in love,” can be reduced to a mere kind of animal magnetism, a physical attraction. In connection with the question with which the essay began, it must be immediately admitted that children do not contribute much, if anything, to erotic love if it is understood in this sense. Sexual attraction arises between the couple and never extends to children, save among the most perverse. Although sexual attraction has a biological basis in signs of fertility,¹⁵ procreation and sexual attraction are not necessarily related; indeed sometimes they are inversely related. Bearing children often renders a

woman less physically attractive, at least according to the standards set by flashy magazines, both those catering to the adolescent male as well as those aimed at young women. And, if the procreation of children does not undermine the “zing” a couple once shared, there is a good chance that the education of children will constrain the joys of the marital bed. The education of children, understood in its broadest sense of properly caring for them and raising them, very often stands in the way of enjoying bodily pleasures. Indeed, the cost and attention required to raise a child properly channels energy and attention away from devotion to seeking bodily pleasures. Those who follow their pleasures and devote themselves wholeheartedly to bodily attractions — be they of food, drink, drugs, or sex — will find it difficult if not impossible to provide the good moral example to his or her children that is certainly an element of “education” in its proper and fullest sense. Physical attraction and the procreation and education of children stand in no small tension.

It is easy to understand the confusion of *eros* and physical attraction because the two have much in common. Both are intense, passionate, and deeply sexual. Both can intoxicate, addict, and spur to valiant action. Both can begin with a glance and can be entirely spent in nine and a half weeks. Each aspect of this commonality merits its own attention.

Eros and sexual attraction share intensity. By intensity, I mean, that both *eros* and sexual attraction can fully grip our attention. We are drawn, as if by tractor beam, to the beautiful person. When an extremely gorgeous person or our beloved enters the room, we watch and everyone else disappears from view. This passion is the polar opposite of a casual indifference and is linked in important ways to sexuality. *Eros* and sexual attraction are for the beautiful, and we desire to possess, enjoy, and have intercourse with the beautiful.

Eros and physical attraction can intoxicate the mind, warping a normal sense of time and judgment. To be with the beautiful or the beloved is a goal the achievement of which can seem worth virtually any price. A face can launch a thousand ships. And as anyone who has asked out a person of doubtful reply will tell, beauty and *eros* are worth risking humiliation. Love dares all.

Eros and physical attraction can also both share immediacy. One knows, generally immediately and almost always after a few minutes of conversation, whether one finds another person sexually attractive. *Eros* can be similarly immediate. Although some couples fall in love over time, it is also true that we speak of “love at first sight.” How often have we heard people say that they knew right away that their beloved was “the one.”¹⁶

But the alacrity of the genesis of *eros* and physical attraction is sometimes matched by the brevity of their duration. Although *eros* and physical attraction can begin immediately, they can also both run their course in a very short time. We can fall in love in a flash, but we can also fall out of love before we know it. Physical beauty alone, even among the most beautiful, hardly ensures a long-lasting or satisfying relationship, as a host of super-beautiful, short-lived celebrity couples makes clear.

Although *eros* and physical attraction have much in common, it is important not to overlook the *differences* between mere sexual magnetism and erotic love. Erotic love yearns for expression in sexual acts; mere attraction is exhausted in sexual acts. Erotic love focuses on one particular beautiful person; mere attraction is for any number of beautiful people. Erotic love is a preoccupation with the whole person of the beloved — the way he or she laughs, writes letters, and cares for friends. Mere sexual attraction focuses on a reduced conception of the person as an actual or potential sexual partner. This kind of desire is akin to other animal desires, such as hunger for food. It is precisely here that we can find the difference between mere sexual desire and love. We hunger for any kind of food, but love only one particular person. If I want nachos, any given plate of nachos will do. If I love Jennifer Turner Kaczor, only Jennifer Turner Kaczor will do. Mere sexual desire seeks any given attractive partner; erotic love seeks the beloved and the beloved alone. A final way to consider the difference between erotic love and mere sexual attraction is in terms of the *desired duration of relationship*. Although both sexual attraction and erotic love are notoriously short-lived in duration, erotic love *wishes* to be with the beloved *forever*. Mere sexual attraction, on the other hand, wants its object of affection

right now. *Eros* seeks eternity; mere sexual attraction seeks rapidity. So although mere sexual attraction and the procreation and education of children have no necessary relationship, we might still find some link between the procreation of children and erotic love.

Of course it is also possible to artificially sever the links of *eros* and physical attraction. In correction of Freudian interpretations, C. S. Lewis, for example, sometimes obscures the links among *eros*, beauty, and sexuality. In laudable efforts to combat a reductionism of *eros* to animal sexuality, Lewis overstates his case when he writes: “A man in this state [of *eros*] hasn’t the leisure to think of sex. He is too busy thinking of a person. . . . He is full of desire but the desire may not be sexually toned.”¹⁷

However, erotic love, unless the term is used in an idiosyncratic sense, cannot be removed from the context of sexuality. *Eros* is *more than* mere sexual desire, but it is certainly not *unrelated* to sexual desire. Can we really imagine a person deeply in love who was indifferent about having sexual intercourse with his or her beloved? Lewis notes the erotic lover desires to “go on thinking about” the beloved, but this thinking cannot be entirely separated from the beauty of the beloved — a beauty hardly unrelated to sexuality (though, as he rightly notes, is *more than* mere sexuality).

Indeed, the Platonic Aristophanes provides an erotic account of *eros* in which, according to Bloom, sexual acts are at the very core of “what *eros* is about and are splendid as ends in themselves.”¹⁸ This sexual activity has no connection to procreation. Since according to Aristophanes, *eros* in its purest and best form is between males, the most divine form of erotic love entirely forecloses the possibility of procreation. The “best sort” of people have no inclination to procreate.

I know there are some people who call them shameless, but they are wrong. It is not immodesty that leads them to such pleasures, but daring, fortitude, and masculinity — the very virtues that they recognize and welcome in their lovers — which is proved by the fact that . . . they are the only men who show any real manliness in public life. And so, when they themselves have come

to manhood, their love in turn is lavished on boys. They have no natural inclination to marry and beget children. Indeed, they only do so in deference to the usage of society, for they would just as soon renounce marriage altogether and spend their lives with one another.¹⁹

The best kind of *eros* excludes procreation, but even between a man and woman under the spell of *eros*, there is no *necessary* link between *eros* and procreation drawn by Aristophanes. Indeed, Bloom contrasts the biblical conception of love, tied so closely to procreation and family, with the Greek conception.²⁰ If Aristophanes is right about *eros*, then the procreation and education of children would not be expected to contribute substantially to the welfare of spouses, at least in terms of their erotic love. And this view is often believed today — which may partially explain the ongoing popularity of the account of *eros* given by the Platonic Aristophanes.

And yet, perhaps the relationship of *eros* and procreation is not as straightforward as this reading of the text might suggest.²¹ Aristophanes claims that the couple touched by *eros* wishes for nothing less than complete unity — to be together forever, forged into one. Near the conclusion of his speech, Aristophanes says:

Now, supposing Hephaestus [the god of the blacksmith's fire] were to come and stand over [the lovers] with his tool bag as they lay there side by side, and suppose he were to ask, Tell me, my dear creatures, what do you really want with one another. And suppose they didn't know what to say, and he went on, How would you like to be rolled into one, so that you could always be together day and night, and never be parted again? Because if that's what you want, I can easily weld you together, and then you can live your two lives in one, and, when the time comes, you can die a common death and still be two-in-one in the lower world. Now, what do you say? Is that what you'd like me to do? And would you be happy if I did? We may be sure, gentlemen, that no lover on earth would dream of refusing such an offer, for not one of them could imagine a happier fate. Indeed, they would be convinced that this was just what they'd

been waiting for — to be merged, that is, into an utter oneness with the beloved.²²

So *eros*, according to Aristophanes, is most fundamentally the desire for unity with the beloved. For this reason, those under the spell of *eros* desire sexual relations, for in the sexual act bodies become intimately joined and during orgasm even the psychic distinction between lover and beloved becomes blurred. Sexual relations aim at and partially achieve the goal of *eros* — unity with the beloved — but it is this desire for union that is at the core of *eros*, and not merely a desire for sexual relations.

Taken at face value, Aristophanes' view of erotic love is ultimately tragic, for complete and lasting unity of lovers can, in fact, never be achieved. *Eros* drives a couple together, but that which they seek to achieve through sexual intercourse can never be obtained. Fractional, fleeting unity of body in sexual intercourse can by itself never overcome its partiality or its brevity. If Aristophanes is right, sexual acts cannot fully satisfy the yearnings of *eros*. As James Rhodes notes:

Aristophanes does not say that the coitus actually makes two lovers one, even for a moment. Perhaps we should assume that it temporarily alleviates their pain by affording them a pleasurable illusion of wholeness. The illusion, however, is fleeting, the yearning resumes and the delusive wholeness looks more like another of the tortures inflicted on human beings by Zeus than a genuine cure of our ailments.²³

Erotic love forever pursues what it can never grasp — unending unity with the other. *Eros* dooms us to the tragic unhappiness of compulsively seeking what can never be found. Bloom himself recognizes that even soaring *eros* leaves something left unsatisfied:

Aristophanes' loves are pointed toward each other horizontally, with no upwardness or transcendence implied in them. Socrates' loves, as we shall see, are vertical, pointing upward and beyond. Aristophanes allows us to take our beloveds with the utmost seriousness, and this is what we seem to want in love. But, for

those who have really plumbed the depth of the erotic experience, there is a haunting awareness that one wants something beyond, something that can poison our embraces. . . . Socrates' entering wedge against Aristophanes is made here, at the point where our consciousnesses tell that our loves are enchanting, but. . . .²⁴

Here Bloom leaves the reader to complete the thought that *eros* as unconnected to anything beyond the two lovers is, *on erotic grounds*, not completely satisfying.

Even if we could have unending unity with the beloved, the kind talked about by Hephaestus, it is unclear that this fusion is what we really want. If we accept that *eros* is a yearning for unity with the beloved,²⁵ must we also accept that the lovers most deeply desire to be united, merged into one? In other words, do couples in love really desire to be fused together? Would the offer of Hephaestus satisfy erotic lovers?

At best, literal unity with the beloved would be a comical solution to the desire for union as illustrated by Steve Martin and Lily Tomlin in *All of Me*. Two psyches sharing one body is not bliss but schizophrenia. Couples under the spell of *eros* do not wish to become conjoined twins. Indeed, to be fused into one would probably be more penitential than comedic.

Thus, perhaps the real point of Aristophanes' tale is to highlight the "dark side" of *eros*. *Eros*, and its act of sex, has been considered in various times and places (especially those dominated by Manicheans of various kinds) as a demonic force that leads to pain, suffering, and ultimately death. William F. May notes that our Victorian forebears held this view,²⁶ but the movie genre of "erotic thriller" (*Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct*, *Dangerous Liaisons*) indicates that at the very least our imaginations are still much taken by *eros* considered as a powerful malevolent force.

Considering the original context of the *Symposium*, the reference to Hephaestus by Aristophanes may be meant to move the consideration of *eros* in this direction. Original readers of the *Symposium* would be intimately familiar with the works of Homer. In Homer's

Odyssey, Hephaestus comes upon his wife Aphrodite in an adulterous union with the god Ares. Using his blacksmith talents, Hephaestus makes the marriage bed a trap from which Aphrodite and Ares cannot leave nor move apart from one another. When the adulterous pair gets caught in the trap, unable to move from each other, Hephaestus remarks, "I think they may not care to lie much longer, pressing on one another, passionate lovers; they'll have enough of bed together soon."²⁷ Echoing this scene, Dante in the *Divine Comedy* places a couple, Francesca and Paulo, in an eternal sexual embrace. But their permanent merger into one takes place not in Heaven, but rather in the second circle of Hell as a punishment for their adultery.²⁸ And justly so. To be partially united with the beloved for a time can be heavenly. But to be completely united with the beloved for all time would not be self-fulfillment, but rather self-extinction.

So *eros* may turn out to be something of a curse. As Stanley Rosen notes, "Man is perpetually restrained within the self-contradictory dimension of desire and satisfaction: self-contradictory because perpetually cyclic."²⁹ In other words, "Man is perpetually at war with self, gods, and cosmos."³⁰ Rosen continues, "If *eros* were to succeed in making one from two, he would not heal human nature but destroy it. Aristophanes' real teaching is that cure and ailment constitute a perpetual cycle wherein human genesis gives birth to disease in the act of quenching it. *Eros* is not merely man's friend, but his enemy as well."³¹ An *eros* that does not transcend itself can become a kind of death wish, for in desiring to become one with the other, one wishes for self-destruction. Orgasm has been called *le petit mort*, the little death, and *eros* is perhaps ultimately on this view linked to war and self-destruction.

But perhaps this is too dark a reading of *eros* and Aristophanes. Can these difficulties and tensions be eased? How can self-identity be retained, and yet deep and lasting unity of lover and beloved be achieved? Is *eros* a tragic desire for what cannot ever be attained and for what, if attained, would lead to death?

Perhaps *eros* leads to life. The desire to be one with the beloved and yet retain self-identity can be fulfilled at least in part through procreation. Every child of a couple creates a unique unity between

them, a unity that not only preserves the individuality of husband and wife but manifests that individuality in a new way. Each child is an enduring expression of a unique union of the couple. In their offspring, a couple realizes the dream offered by Hephaestus to be “rolled into one,” “fused together,” and “never to be parted.” So long as the child shall live, he or she, every one of us, is a living sign, a sacrament if you will, of the union of man and woman — a realization of the dream of eternal unity of lover and beloved. They become one flesh and dwell among us.

The unity achieved by a married couple in procreation includes but also transcends a merely physical unity of various DNA strands. Each child creates in the parents a new unity, for man and woman together become parents to this child. A new and shared dimension is added to them both. She makes him a father; he makes her a mother. They share a lifelong unity as parents of their child. By begetting a child, they will forever be related to one another in a bond that remains as long as the child lives.

In addition to the physical unity achieved in the child, and the familial unity of becoming parents to this child, characteristically a unity of affection and desire also arises between the parents ordered to the care of their child. Among happily married couples, this is most obvious as both mother and father busy themselves in direct and indirect collaboration in raising children. They coordinate plans and cooperate in the running of a home. But even among those who are unhappily married or divorced, characteristically there remains a unity of affection and desire for the well-being of their children. A divorced mother and father may positively hate one another, but with an equal ferocity both parents love and desire the well-being of their children. Indeed, the unity of love and affection for children is sometimes enough to overcome or at least check marital hatred, as when a divorced pair both act “on their best behavior” so as not to spoil a special event for a child or when a couple in crisis gives yet another chance to their marriage so as to save the offspring from a broken home. Even turbulent marital strife characteristically does not shatter the unity of affection and desire achieved through procreation. The procreation and education of children realizes in its own way the

deepest desires of *eros* for enduring unity, even after *eros* itself has long since departed.

United physically in the body of the child, united by parenthood in the begetting of the child, united by affection in the care of the child, the procreation and education of offspring realizes, in a certain way, the dream of Aristophanes — that the two shall become one. The procreation and education of children should not be understood therefore in opposition to *eros* but rather as a fulfillment of the deepest aspirations of *eros*.

Vatican II captures the fundamental insights of Aristophanes about *eros* as a drive for unity more than twenty centuries later in teaching that conjugal love is by nature ordained towards the begetting and educating of children who are the supreme gift of marriage. When the Council in *Gaudium et spes* speaks of children contributing substantially to the welfare of the parents, this contribution can be understood to include achieving the goals of *eros*. Now if we understand marital love to include *philia* and *agape*, the procreation and education of children make an even more profound contribution to enhancing love and achieving love's aims, but that is a topic for another occasion.