

**Gift and Contract:  
Outlining a History of the West's Understanding of Marriage**

**Authors**

Antonio Moreno Almarcegui  
Germán Roberto Scalzo

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## Introduction

We never imagined we would write a book like this. Indeed, the family was not among our initial scholarly interests. We arrived here based on population studies and tracking the West's fertility decline, wherein we started to notice the importance of studying father and motherhood. In that context, marriage seemed to be an important issue, but not so fundamental as to devote a significant part of our research to it.

Yet, a research stay at the University of Navarra's Institute for Family Studies, which exposed us to the work of theologians and canonists, opened up a new and surprising panorama. For Christianity in general, and for the Catholic Church in particular, talking about the family means considering marriage, as well as fatherhood and motherhood. The Christian view of marriage is so surprisingly different from that of the Ancient World—with the family centered on parental authority (socially sanctioned male power)—that we were baffled. As we dove into this tradition, we discovered an increasingly disconcerting, yet exciting, landscape.

From a historical perspective, we were fascinated by the unity and continuity of the Christian tradition that—with its foundation in the Jewish tradition—implies stability over thousands of years, and aspires, no more and no less, to explain the history of man from his “origin,” combining myth and freedom, past and future in a totally original way. Moreover, for this tradition, marriage is the great instrument that makes historical transformation possible and is a natural way to renew man on a personal level and to realize humanity as a family.

One of history's greatest contributions is its effort to organize central ideas that humanity has thought about for thousands and thousands of years. In our opinion, these ideas' pluri-millennial permanence reflects their having captured and expressed deep anthropological truths.

And what is the core idea around which the Judeo-Christian tradition has tried to understand and live out marriage? That marriage, an everyday reality, is both a mystery and a symbol. As a mystery, it reflects the experience of a reality that surpasses our understanding and manifests the presence of the sacred in our lives. As a symbol, it illuminates in a way that can powerfully clarify people's lives, giving them a fully human meaning.

Indeed, in this tradition, marriage has singular signification as man's best image of the relationship between God and humanity. Seen from God's point of view, the metaphor he uses to express his love for man is that of conjugal love; thus, he expresses his will to seek out a personal relationship with man: he loves us madly, respecting, at the same time, as a decorous lover does, freedom. The core of this tradition holds that there is a mysterious resemblance between the God-humanity relationship and the relationship that results from a marriage between a man and a woman. In fact, and to the surprise of many, this tradition firmly believes that one is the “real image” of the other.

Thus, the perfection of this model reveals an infinite well of possibilities in the relationship between a man and a woman, an inexhaustible source of friendship, company and mutual self-giving that is always open to new limits of perfection. At the same time, within this tradition, the marital relationship completes the person as unique and unrepeatable, and realizes community as a fraternal unity destined to regenerate humanity.

In other words, the constitution of humanity from its origins excludes the idea of a solitary, scared, weak and deeply needy individual, as the founding myth of modernity has

postulated. Instead, it includes a relationship dear to God, an expression of his unconditional love, which is quintessentially expressed in the marital bond.

This postulate is so powerful that it is able to entirely relocate the pillars of social science.

With this claim, we see ourselves as faithfully building upon a fundamental part of Saint John Paul II's doctrine, which inspires this work. Yet, we claim full responsibility for this book's contents, as well as any limitations it may contain.

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Although this is a history of how marriage has been understood in the long-standing Judeo-Christian tradition, it is not structured chronologically. It starts in the present with twentieth century theological developments, especially as found in Saint John Paul II's work. With these advances established, we try to better understand the past.

The book has five parts. The first is dedicated to the meaning of the notion of *munus* in the contemporary Magisterium of the Church—especially as formulated by St. John Paul II. Therein, we anthropologically explore the notion of personal relationship according to this tradition, relying especially on Russell Hittinger's interpretation of St. John Paul II's social doctrine. We hold that the notion of *munus* reflects the intrinsically relational dimension of man's nature as gift. *Munus* is the expression of the “gift that we are, given to the other;” for this very reason, giving of oneself is proper to the gift in its fulfillment.

The second part, also based on the notion of *munus*, synthesizes St. John Paul II's thought on marriage. We understand his “theology of the body” as a development applied to marriage based on his notion of *munus*. For married people, marriage is the realization of their *munera Christi*, the foundation of their life in Christ. This doctrine sheds new light on the signification that the Judeo-Christian tradition gives to marriage.

The third and fourth chapters examine doctrinal development driven by theology and canon law between the ninth and eighteenth centuries. We try to understand why signification lost its importance, which once constituted this tradition's principle contribution to marriage. Partial abandonment of the doctrine of signification throughout these centuries derives from insufficient understanding of the signification of the body as an effective sign of the person, of the personal gift of self. Thus, St. John Paul II's doctrine permits us to revisit history, understanding with new light past developments.

The third chapter also pays special attention to St. Thomas Aquinas because of how enormously influential he has been. The fourth chapter traces the influence he had on theology and later on law. In general, the signification of marriage—as a mystery and a human and divine symbol—tended toward declining relevance throughout the Modern Age, resulting in supposedly unanimous agreement in the Christian world concerning the waning relevance of the human and divine signification of marriage proper to the ancient Judeo-Christian tradition. That unanimity was temporarily articulated around another category, namely marriage as a “natural” reality and, as such, its legitimate custodian became the state. Although this change most thoroughly occurred in the Protestant world, it also affected the Catholic world. In this process, marriage lost its status as the archetype and foundation of the relationship between God and humanity, between the personal and the common. The individual filled that space, in spite of his relationships, and became the foundation of humanity.

The third and fourth chapters rely on materials from the Marriage: Mystery and Sign project carried out between the 1970s and early 1980s at the University of Navarra under the direction of Javier Hervada and in collaboration with Eutiquiano Saldón, Tomás Ricón, Eloy Tejero and Juan Francisco Muñoz. We are in debt to each of them, especially to Eloy Tejero with whom we have conversed during many long hours. It would be impossible to repay him for his company, patience and cordiality in discussing all of our doubts.

The final chapter employs a historical point of view to show the social and economic consequences related to the loss of signification's relevance for the marital relationship. In our view, the transformation of property and money, which in the Judeo-Christian cultures were originally gifts from God to man (the gift of nature, the gift of community life) into mere merchandise during the foundation of capitalism uniquely influenced the transformations that the marital relationship underwent. The Church originally defined this relationship as a self-giving, contractual one; it morphed into a contractual relationship governed by the logic of commutative justice, the justice of the mercantile world that governs the exchange of things.

By recovering the original meaning of Christianity's signification of marriage, St. John Paul II not only shed new light on problems found in the modern world; he also revealed that the restoration of Western Christian culture is only possible if marriage is seen as the foundation and archetype of social life.<sup>1</sup>

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