

THERE WILL BE NO MARRIAGE IN HEAVEN

Augustinian Thoughts on Procreation and Same-Sex Partnerships

For in the resurrection they neither
marry nor are given in marriage,
but are like angels in heaven.

If there will be no marriage in heaven, then, if we knew more specifically what Jesus thought there would *not* be, we would know more specifically what marriage was. What do humans do that angels do not do? Or, more provocatively, what do heterosexuals do that angels do not do and what does it mean that they will one day do it no longer. According to St. Augustine, they will no longer procreate, although they will still have sexually differentiated bodies. This answer has several possible implications, among them the fact that procreative marriage grounded in creation has *less* and eschatologically grounded non-procreative sexual partnerships might have *more* significance after Christ than before. They are two overlapping but separate and non-identical vocations. The purpose of this paper is to explore what theological grounds there might be for such a view within Augustine's doctrine of marriage.

Before turning to his description of the goods of marriage, we should note that prior to Augustine there does not appear to have been anything like the consensus concerning the nature or spiritual value of material, non-angelic reality that there was after his time, largely on account of the widely accepted authority of his writings in the following centuries. We should briefly explore this issue since it relates to the possibility that we are now witnessing a return to an incipient Gnosticism or premature heavenly spiritualism in modern conceptions of the nuptial mystery in an otherwise estimable, though problematic, attempt to find an equality of status for same-sex partnerships.

Before Augustine there was a tendency, not shared by all early theologians but widespread enough to be a matter of concern, among Gnostics and Catholics alike to repudiate Judaism, in the one case denying the authority of the Hebrew Bible and in the other allegorizing away its material fleshly meaning. But, radicalizing the celebration of material bodily existence to be found in Justin Martyr and Tertullian, Augustine definitively expressed the ongoing historical and theologically positive role of the Jews as the incarnate fleshly people of God, as, in the words of Paula Fredriksen, 'God-given, as God-protected, and as good for the church' (*Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*, 339). He underscored both the traditional, carnal Judaism of Jesus and his apostles and the continuity of Catholic sacraments with the body-oriented rites of the Old Testament. For Augustine an anti-docetic doctrine of incarnation and resurrection *secundum carnem*, according to the flesh, was related to a positive valuation of all things Jewish, including biological materiality, festivals of meat and drink, circumcision, sexual differentiation, procreation, and so forth. These basic Old Testament affirmations required him to dematerialize evil, locating it in the will rather than in the body. 'The cause of our being pressed down is not the nature and substance of the body' and consequently 'the procreation of children pertains to the glory of marriage, not to the punishment of sin' (*The City of God*, 14/3, 14/21).

Turning to marriage, this anti-Gnostic reluctance to embrace overly spiritualistic allegorical readings of the Old Testament led him to make five fundamental assertions about marriage, the first three of which have come down to us as definitive for the catholic tradition. First, and most important for this paper, by the time he came to write *The City of God*, Augustine was offering an unambiguous affirmation of the created goodness of sexual differentiation. In this he was opposed to those theologians who identified sexual differentiation with a fall from spiritual to material reality, if not in

fact from an original state of androgyny. Indeed, he insisted, material sexual differentiation will still be present in the new creation and the sexual organs will be, if possible, more beautiful there than they are here. The other two dimensions are, of course, faithfulness in marriage as an antidote to the sexual disorientations that result from the introduction of evil into the world and the bond of permanence that becomes a sacrament of the union between Christ and his Church.

The other two Augustinian accents, like the first, deserve special notice in the context of my argument. In the opening paragraph to *The Excellence of Marriage* Augustine argues that sociality is at the heart of all human experience such that it 'has naturally the great benefit and power of friendship.' Noting that procreation is not always possible in marriage and that Jesus' presence as a wedding guest at Cana of Galilee is as important as his teaching about divorce, Augustine avers that natural sociability or companionship is one of the goods of marriage. Later in the same book, noting the pleasure involved in intercourse, Augustine follows St. Paul in allowing it where it is desired, even where there is no intention of procreation, arguing that marriage partners have a sexual duty toward one another even where one partner might prefer celibacy. Non-procreative sexual activity within marriage is not a mortal sin.

With these five Augustinian elements in mind, we may draw some tentative conclusions. What is not present in the resurrection? Procreation. Where there is no death, there is no marriage, to paraphrase St. Chrysostom. In *The Excellence of Marriage* Augustine makes a key move that many of his readers probably find surprising: the different circumstances of different times bear upon what is and is not good in relation to human sexuality. He implicitly divides history into four parts: creation, salvation history prior to Christ, salvation history after Christ, and the new creation. Procreation has a fundamental role in establishing the city

of God in creation and in compensating for death during salvation history, but beginning from Christ celibacy points to a different reality that will come to fruition in the Kingdom of God. Sacrament, faithfulness, and perhaps desire (in some form - for the beauty of sexual differentiation will certainly continue, says Augustine, contrary to what we suppose his hyper spiritualist opponents might have thought), all of these remain. However, they remain only in the sense that they are fulfilled and in that sense we may suppose that for Augustine they cease to be themselves. They are destined finally to be realized and so to be overcome in the perfection of future bliss. Or perhaps we could say that they remain implicitly in the same way that they were implicit in creation while taking their reality fundamentally from the dynamics of salvation history. All three of these elements are more or less consistent with celibacy or other forms of human relationships like those contemplated in philosophical accounts of homosexuality. But sociality and procreation are different. Procreation, while it predates the fall, is the one original element of marriage that is not essential in the life to come, as Jesus and Paul intimate in their references to celibacy. Procreation is missing in the end state, as non-procreative relationships are missing in the original, while sociality binds beginning and end, fully present in both as ingredient to the meaning of human nature. Paradise then is not simply reduplicated in paradise regained; bodies remain in their male-female complementarity but procreation does not. There is a radical newness after the coming of Christ that Augustine does not hesitate to name though its implications puzzle him. Material creation and spiritual fulfillment both must receive their due.

Now if we develop a theology of the goods of homosexual unions as included in the 'revisionist' trajectory initiated both in the unambiguous affirmation of celibacy in the present and in the stated absence of procreation in the resurrection, we should have to grant that these goods are part of the new reality instituted in the coming of Christ but that they

are not part of the original creation ordinance, just as we must grant that procreative marriage, although grounded in creation, is not unambiguously part of the new creation. That is, the Augustinian view necessitates an overlapping view of human sexuality, the procreative predating the non-procreative reality yet continuing into the future in its now non-procreative-sexual differentiation and, on the other hand, celibate and perhaps same-sex non-procreative relationships, anticipated in original creation-sociality but emerging into view in post-christic salvation history, arriving upon their angelic destiny only in the final appearing of the city of God.

One of the problems with this view, however, is how to overcome the injustice, real and perceived, embedded in the fact that the waning reality of procreative marriage nevertheless, by virtue of its precedence in time, casts a shadow over non-procreative relationships - such that the status of marriage becomes a prize to be won or privilege to be denied - without an implicit Gnostic marginalization of procreation, and the sexual differentiation that makes it possible, despite its obvious necessity in this continuing realm of death. Furthermore, while justice is a fundamental Christian concern, equality is not. 'Same sex marriage on the liberal egalitarian model, whereby all difference is erased, might end up ironically being the most conservative of options' (Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships*, Ch.5 Kindle ed.). Consider the inescapable logic of the male/female polarity: if the difference between attraction to the opposite sex and attraction to the same sex is a matter of indifference - if it is all the same, so to speak - then indeed sameness has triumphed over difference and we have 'homosexualised' our culture into a post-modern Gnosticism with its own potent spirituality. Where sexual differentiation is ignored then male same-sex relationships may in the long run smother the distinctive gifts that lesbians, transsexuals and intersex people, or heterosexual couples not wishing to have children may bring to the Church. For it does seem that

some Christian gay advocates are tempted to purchase recognition at the price of an otherwise traditional conformism that comports uneasily with an earlier generation of gay activists who repudiated the bourgeois overtones of conventional church marriage. This conformism may also be, ironically, incapable of withstanding the renewed challenge to marriage presented by plural and incest marriage advocates, to name only two of the issues on the nearest horizon. If so, then the implicit conservatism inherent in the denial of difference will have betrayed us.

The view taken here is that there are a variety of legal remedies relating to the justice issue, including civil marriage with liturgical blessing, but that the felt need for symbolic equality should not be pursued at the cost of giving in to a possibly Gnostic repudiation of the procreative ontological reality of sexual difference. The price is too high. Gnosticism is seriously mistaken in its view of the created order and therefore, if procreation is lost to view as a defining good of marriage then, sooner or later, the Church will have to revisit the difference that children make under some other name than marriage. For, however it may willfully redefine marriage, the Church can do nothing to make non-procreative relationships procreative. Whatever technological innovations are brought to bear on the problem, by their very nature they will bear witness to a natural order they can only mimic and can never replace except, should pregnancy among humans become obsolete, by making parents 'among the barren so pitied in the Old Testament'. The natural order may be surmounted by technology but only upon the conditions that the natural order makes available (Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 37). Equality in the matter of procreation is not in the gift of the Church.

Therefore, while an account of the goods of same-sex relationships can be developed along Augustinian lines, without suggesting that he would himself have approved of this development, it is as impermissible to cast

same-sex relations back into the prelapsarian state as it is to thrust procreative marriage forward into the future state of the Kingdom. The essential point of this brief sketch is that the procreative potential instantiated in sexual differentiation is a fundamental although necessarily time bound and limited ontological reality, whether we call it marriage or not, that has to be reckoned with as a matter of fact and as a matter of the utmost relevance when it comes to the understanding and care of children. The marriage canon should not be changed lest the Church in a moment of inadequate theological attention cast us back into a pre-Augustinian Gnosticism, our apparent appetite for bodily pleasure only a thinly veiled cover for the reproductive/technological revolt against the material conditions of our creation, an ill advised attempt to anticipate that freedom from child bearing, while desiring the gift of children, which can only be a life-giving reality in that coming kingdom where there will be no more death and where children will safely live within the embrace of Jesus. Attempting to ignore the crucial relevance of procreation in the Church's account of human sexuality is to ignore the only grounds on which there could ever be homosexual or any other relationships at all, the only grounds on which homosexual couples could offer their unique gift of love to adopted children, the only grounds on which there ever could be a kingdom in which it would make sense to say that celibacy and same-sex, and possibly other, unions are anticipations of the angelic like order that awaits humanity. And this would be a return to the Gnosticism that the Early Church doctrine of creation was intended to defeat. In that struggle the Bishop of Hippo was the most systematic and the greatest, if not the first, theologian to defend the flesh, indeed, the first and one of the very few theologians ever to have defended the flesh in order to defend the Jews, that historical people for whom procreation was and still is celebrated as the very gift and ground of

existence and survival this side of the Messiah's return when, finally, marriage shall be no more because it will not be necessary.