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HOW DO THE WRITINGS OF POPE BENEDICT XVI ON
“TRANSFORMATION” APPLY TO A COUPLE’S
GROWTH IN HOLINESS IN SACRAMENTAL
MARRIAGE?

Houda Jilwan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Philosophy

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The University of Notre Dame Australia

2018

Declaration of Authorship

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Houda Jilwan

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Date: 23/3/2018

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Introduction

Pope Benedict XVI is widely considered to be one of the greatest theologians and Catholic thinkers of our time. His works are marked by a deep love for the truth found in Christ and his Church. One of the prominent themes in Benedict's writings is the personal encounter with Christ that leads to transformation. For him, the encounter with Christ is an encounter with a living person who transforms our innermost selves revealing to us our true identity as children of God.¹ He transforms us in such a profound way as to bring us to say with Saint Paul: "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).² Thus, for Benedict, the aim of transformation is holiness.

All Christians are called to holiness. The universal call to holiness finds its roots in Scripture. In the Old Testament, God gives the following command to Moses: "Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, you shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2).³ In the New Testament, Jesus says to his disciples: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). St Paul writes: "For this is the will of God: your sanctification" (1 Thess 4:3). The universal call to holiness was particularly emphasised in the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*: "All the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord – each in his or her own way – to that perfect holiness by which the Father himself is perfect."⁴ Speaking directly to married couples, the Conciliar Fathers stated: "Christian married couples and parents, following their own way, should with faithful love support one another in grace all through life."⁵

Looking at marriages today, we find that many Christian couples are struggling to live peacefully together let alone seek holiness through their marriage. In a homily during the Mass for the Opening of the Synod of Bishops in 2012, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about "the painful reality of many marriages which, unhappily, end badly."⁶ He stated that there is "a clear link

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Introduction to Year of Faith*, Audience, Vatican Website, October 17, 2012, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en.html>.

Quotes from Pope Benedict XVI are taken from the Vatican website unless stated otherwise, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en.html>.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent*, Message, October 15, 2012.

³ The Revised Standard Version translation is used in this thesis.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, "*Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*" (hereafter LG) in *The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), 11.

⁵ LG, 41.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Holy Mass for the Opening of the Synod of Bishops*, Homily, October 7, 2012.

between the crisis in faith and the crisis in marriage.”⁷ Thus, in the hope of rediscovering the power of the sacrament of marriage through which Christian couples receive abundant graces that help them live their call to holiness, it is necessary to search for a path which helps couples reignite and enliven their faith. Such a path can be found in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI on transformation as the fruit of an encounter with Jesus Christ. Benedict makes a clear connection between faith and a true encounter with God. In a homily during his visit to Poland in 2006, he said: “Believing means entering into a personal relationship with our Creator and Redeemer in the power of the Holy Spirit, and making this relationship the basis of our whole life.”⁸ Thus, when married couples enter into a personal relationship with Christ, they are able to relive their faith and be open to the transforming power of Christ.

The aim of this thesis is to reflect on how transformation in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI apply particularly to a couple’s growth in holiness in sacramental marriage. How does this transformation come about? What do couples need to do so they can experience the progressive transformation that Christ can bring into their lives? What are the effects of transformation on their marriage?

In order to answer these questions, Chapter 1 will consider the universal call to holiness and its relationship with grace, the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist, prayer, suffering, work and virtue. It will highlight how the call to holiness is lived by some groups in the Church and by some lay members who became saints through their ordinary everyday life.

Chapter 2 will examine sacramental marriage as a path to holiness. It will address the three goods of marriage, how marriage was described in *Gaudium et Spes*, the sacramentality of marriage and its participation in the spousal relationship of Christ and the Church. It will also consider the relationship between marriage, grace and the Holy Spirit and the importance of cooperating with grace. It will highlight the role that prayer, the Cross and the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist play in marriage. It will also stress the significance of chastity in marriage.

Chapter 3 will survey Pope Benedict XVI’s writings to study his use of the word “transformation” and other words that serve as synonyms for “transformation”. It will place an emphasis on the link between “transformation”, faith and conversion. The act of following Christ as a means for transformation will be considered. Special attention will be drawn to the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Mass in Krakow*, Homily, May 28, 2006.

importance of the spiritual provisions which Christians need in order to follow Christ such as prayer, reading Scripture, frequenting the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist.

In Chapter 4, Pope Benedict XVI's writings on transformation will be applied to Christian spouses as a precious treasure and a path that leads them to their true final end, that is, their sanctification. The chapter will consider the different ways through which transformation can be applied to their growth in holiness. It will also study the effects of transformation on the different aspects of their relationship.

This work is a humble attempt to rediscover the beauty and joy of marriage as a path to holiness through the rich writings of Pope Benedict XVI and his faith in the person of Christ who alone can transform every couple and lead them to holiness. While I am aware of the great challenges that couples face today and the complexity of marriage, I believe that faith gives us access to a true love, the love of Jesus Christ who stoops down and touches us in our difficulties, our daily problems, our times of crisis and darkness and who transforms our pain into a means for our sanctification. Christ helps us see reality from a different angle. When we take on his own view of reality and choose him as our reference point, we open ourselves to the power of his transforming grace.

In surveying the writings of Pope Benedict XVI, his work before and during his pontificate was considered. However, the subject of this thesis will be limited to writings of his Petrine ministry. Some reference to his previous writings will be made with the aim of highlighting the continuity of his theological thought. Finally, in order to gain a proper understanding of the theme of transformation in the writings of Benedict, it is essential to include in this introduction an overview of his life and thought.

An overview of the life and thought of Pope Benedict XVI

Joseph Ratzinger was born on 16 April 1927 in the Bavarian town of Marktl am Inn, Germany. It was the eve of Easter, Holy Saturday. He was immediately baptised in the font which was blessed during the Easter liturgy for that day. He later wrote: "To be the first person baptised with the new water was seen as a significant act of Providence. I have always been filled with thanksgiving for having had my life immersed in this way in the Easter Mystery."⁹

⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones. Memoirs: 1927-1977*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 8.

His parents, Joseph and Maria, were devout Catholics whose home was filled with symbols of their faith. He had an older sister, Maria, born in 1921, and an older brother, Georg, born in 1924. Growing up in Bavaria which was a strictly Catholic state, he enjoyed the liturgy, rituals and processions in which he took part during religious festivals. These had a profound effect on him.

In 1927, Germany was still in turmoil following World War I. There were many tensions and struggles at play throughout Europe. Joseph Ratzinger's father, a policeman, was forced to move with his family several times due to his outspoken criticisms of local Nazis. By the time Ratzinger was in his early teens, Nazi troops had entered many countries in Europe. German troops entered also his village and the seminary where he had been studying was used as a military hospital. Joseph Ratzinger's calling to the priesthood could not be pursued since at the age of sixteen in 1943 he was conscripted into the German army to fulfil his military service. In 1945, he was captured by the American forces and was eventually released six months later.¹⁰

In 1946, Joseph Ratzinger entered the seminary at Freising and a year later, he began his studies in philosophy and theology at the University of Munich. Among his professors were Michael Schmaus and Gottlieb Söhngen.¹¹ On the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, 29 June 1951, he was ordained as Roman Catholic priest, along with his older brother, Georg. He was assigned to Saint Martin's Parish, in the district of Munich, as the assistant priest, and later served as a chaplain at the Precious Blood Parish in Munich. Between 1952 and 1954, he served as an instructor at the major seminary in Freising while assisting at churches in Freising. In July 1953, he graduated from the University of Munich as a doctor of theology with a dissertation on the concept of 'the People and House of God in Augustine.' A few years later, in 1957, he completed his 'habilitation' (post-doctoral dissertation) where he wrote on the theology of history in St Bonaventure. This second doctoral thesis is a requirement in order to hold a chair at a university in Germany.¹²

Joseph Ratzinger worked as a professor of dogmatic and fundamental theology in various universities in Germany. Between 1962 and 1965, he was the personal advisor of Cardinal Joseph Frings of Cologne and an official theologian at the Second Vatican Council.

¹⁰ Joann F. Price, *Pope Benedict XVI. A Biography* (California: Greenwood Biographies, 2013), 33.

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, Lieven Boeve, Gerard Mannion (eds), *The Ratzinger Reader: Mapping a Theological Journey* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 1.

¹² Price, *Pope Benedict XVI. A Biography*, 55.

In 1972, he founded, along with Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac and others, the International Catholic Journal *Communio*. On 14 March 1977, he was appointed Archbishop of Munich and Freising by Pope Paul VI. On 27 June of the same year, he was elevated to the cardinalate. For his episcopal motto, he chose ‘*cooperatores veritatis*’ meaning ‘fellow worker for the truth’.¹³ This was taken from the Third Letter of St John.

In 1981, Joseph Ratzinger was appointed by Pope John Paul II Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and thereby President of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the International Theological Commission. He also served as Head of the Pontifical Commission for the preparation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which was promulgated in 1992. He was appointed Dean of the College of Cardinals in 2002 and on 19 April 2005 he was elected Pope during the fourth ballot in the Sistine Chapel. He chose the name Benedict XVI indicating that his pontificate would be a continuation of that of Benedict XV. The name is also linked to the patron saint of Europe and founder of the Benedictine order, Benedict of Norcia.¹⁴

The thought of Pope Benedict XVI as Pope and as Joseph Ratzinger is marked by his unrelenting passion for truth. As it was previously noted, his motto as a bishop was ‘co-worker for the truth’. His theology begins from the principle that God has stepped into history and revealed the truth of Himself through the person of Jesus Christ. One cannot decide what truth is but rather needs to submit to it in faith. In an interview with Peter Seewald, Joseph Ratzinger said:

Relinquishing truth doesn’t solve anything but, on the contrary, leads to the tyranny of caprice. In that case, the only thing that can remain is really what we decide on and can replace at will. Man is degraded if he can’t know truth, if everything, in the final analysis, is just the product of an individual or collective decision.¹⁵

In the same interview, he highlighted the importance of accepting the truth revealed by Jesus Christ through faith: “What’s essential about Christ himself is not that he proclaimed certain ideas – which, of course, he also did. Rather, I become a Christian by believing in this event. God stepped into the world and acted; so it is an action, a reality, not only an intellectual entity.”¹⁶

¹³ Laurence Paul Hemming, *Benedict XVI Fellow Worker for the Truth, An Introduction to his Life and Thought* (London: Burns & Oates, 2005), 56.

¹⁴ Ratzinger, Boeve, Mannion, *The Ratzinger Reader*, 6.

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth. Christianity and the Catholic Church at the End of the Millennium. An interview with Peter Seewald*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 67.

¹⁶ Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 20.

This passion for the truth led Joseph Ratzinger to defend vigorously matters of faith and morals when he was acting as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He seldom hesitated to apply discipline to theologians whom he found to be opposing the Church's teachings. For him, it is very important "not to put seeking approval or accommodating the feelings of the group above the truth."¹⁷ He also considers the Church to be the lens through which God may be seen. In his interview with Peter Seewald, he stated:

I began with the theme of the Church and it is present in everything. Only in dealing with the Church it was important to me, and it has become increasingly important, that the Church not be an end in herself but exist so that God may be seen. In that respect I would say that I study the theme of the Church with the intention of opening a vista onto God. And in this sense God is the real central theme of my endeavours.¹⁸

An important feature of the theology of Joseph Ratzinger, which continued to be prominent throughout his writings as Pope, is the central role that conversion plays in authentic Christian experience. He envisages the pattern of God's dealings with us as "being, above all, converting and transformative – indeed ultimately paschal; grace purifies and turns around nature, as does Christ humanity, as does the kingdom history."¹⁹ As Pope, he wrote: "Saying 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty', in his power, in his way of being Father, is always an act of faith, of conversion, of the transformation of our thought, of the whole of our affection, of the whole of our way of life."²⁰ For him, the experience of faith calls for an encounter "not with an idea or with a project of life, but with a living Person who transforms our innermost selves, revealing to us our true identity as children of God."²¹

Joseph Ratzinger was initially considered by some a reformist.²² However, following the Second Vatican Council, he was of the opinion that the Council has been used as a license for far too extensive changes. Some argue that once he came to be convinced of this position, Ratzinger abandoned his attitude of moderate reformist and took up the defence of Catholicism threatened by modernity.²³ His theology is rooted in tradition, particularly in the biblical and patristic tradition of the Church. In Ratzinger's theological vision, the point of departure for theology is the Word of God which needs to be interpreted within the Church with the help of the great masters of the faith, the Church Fathers. He wrote that, precisely through his

¹⁷ Ibid, 68.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ James Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger's Theological Ideas. Wide Cautions & Legitimate Hopes* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 2009), 33.

²⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *I believe in God the Father Almighty*, Audience, January 30, 2013.

²¹ Ibid, 7.

²² Ratzinger, Boeve, Mannion, *The Ratzinger Reader*, 12.

²³ Ibid, 12. It is important to note that this judgment is not shared by everyone.

formation, he “was marked above all by scripture and the Fathers, by a form of thought that was essentially historical.”²⁴

The thought of Pope Benedict XVI has been influenced by many writers. As Cardinal Ratzinger, he told Peter Seewald during an interview: “To a certain extent I am a Platonist. I think that a kind of memory, of recollection of God, is, as it were, etched in man, though it needs to be awakened. Man doesn’t simply know what he is supposed to know, nor is he simply there, but is a man, a being on the way.”²⁵ Thomas Rausch affirms Ratzinger’s Platonic heritage by stating that “First, like Plato, Ratzinger locates the true and the good beyond the world of experience, in the spiritual. Second, his notion of wisdom, though illumined by his faith, is very much formed by Plato.”²⁶

The most formative influence on Pope Benedict XVI’s thought is St Augustine. His first dissertation was on the Church as ‘the People and House of God’. In this dissertation, “he contrasted the ancient Roman ‘city of gods’ and its cult with the true City of God now revealed in the Church where true worship took place.”²⁷ According to Aidan Nichols, “Ratzinger identifies two main elements as starting points of Augustinian ecclesiology. Augustine’s reflection on the concept of faith will be vital for his understanding of the Church as people of God. By contrast, his concept of love is more important for his portrait of the Church as the house of God.”²⁸ Ratzinger’s immersion in the writings of St Augustine would have a lifelong effect on his theology. He stated: “Augustine has kept me company for more than twenty years. I have developed my theology in a dialogue with Augustine, though naturally I have tried to conduct this dialogue as a man of today.”²⁹ James Corkery identifies in the theology of Ratzinger three Augustinian footprints: “a preferring of the humility of faith over the pride of philosophy, a defence of the ‘city of God’ against the powers of the ‘earthly city’, and a recognition of the duality that is deep within human beings who, even when desiring the good, cannot embrace it.”³⁰ This first footprint forms an essential feature of Ratzinger’s theology. For

²⁴ Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 93.

²⁵ Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 41.

²⁶ Thomas P. Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI. An Introduction to his theological vision* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 2009), 42.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 47.

²⁸ Aidan Nichols, *The Thought of Benedict XVI. An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (New York: Burns & Oates, 2005), 21.

²⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Glaube, Geschichte und Philosophie. Zum Echo auf *Einführung in das Christentum*” quoted by Nichols, *The Thought of Benedict XVI*, 17.

³⁰ Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Ideas*, 25.

him, “the organ for seeing God is the heart. The intellect alone is not enough.”³¹ When writing about the importance of the senses and the emotions in spirituality, he comments on Saint-Exupéry’s *Little Prince*: “you only see properly with your heart (And the Little Prince can be taken as a symbol for that childlikeness which we must regain if we are to find our way back out of the clever foolishness of the adult world and into man’s true nature, which is beyond mere reason).”³² Augustine also influenced Ratzinger’s understanding of conversion as something definitive, decisive but also in need of development throughout one’s life. This illuminates his writings on transformation as a lifelong process stemming from an ongoing encounter with the Lord.

Pope Benedict XVI was also influenced by the writings of St Bonaventure whom he chose to study for his habilitation thesis. He was attracted to his “personal and historical perception of Revelation as an action whereby God shows himself in a definite historic moment.”³³ Bonaventure’s understanding of revelation played a part in shaping Ratzinger’s thought during the Second Vatican Council. In his autobiography, he wrote:

[Some] insights gained through my reading of Bonaventure, were later on very important for me at the time of the conciliar discussion on revelation, Scripture, and tradition. Because, if Bonaventure is right, then revelation precedes Scripture and becomes deposited in Scripture but is not simply identical with it. This in turn means that revelation is always something greater than what is merely written down.³⁴

One other influence of Bonaventure on Ratzinger’s thought was “Bonaventure’s absolute rejection of any philosophy not integrated into Christian wisdom.”³⁵ For him, Christ is the true wisdom and faith is above philosophy and the natural sciences.

Gottlieb Söhngen, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Romano Guardini, Joseph Pieper and Dietrich von Hildebrand have also exerted an influence on Pope Benedict XVI. Gottlieb Söhngen was a professor of fundamental theology at the University of Munich and the doctoral thesis director of Ratzinger. He taught him “to critically question neoscholastic ideas. He stressed the difference, but also the correlation between theology as wisdom and as science.”³⁶ He also affirmed the connection between scholarly theology and direct piety. “By

³¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (London/Berlin/New York/Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2007), 92.

³² Joseph Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 55.

³³ Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith. The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

³⁴ Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 109.

³⁵ Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI*, 55.

³⁶ Emery De Gaal, *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI. The Christocentric Shift* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 33.

following the premonitions, or better yet, intuitions of faith and the heart – in the vein of Blaise Pascal and Cardinal Newman – the believing heart not only enters deeper into divine love but unlocks a heretofore unknown level of knowing that remains accountable to human reason.”³⁷

Henri de Lubac’s work *Catholicism* was a ‘key reading event’ in the life of Pope Benedict XVI, as expressed in his autobiography: “It gave me not only a new and deeper connection with the thought of the Fathers but also a new way of looking at theology and faith as such. Faith had here become an interior contemplation and, precisely by thinking with the Fathers, a present reality.”³⁸ According to Hemming,

what Benedict perceived in de Lubac and his thought was the desire to address the questions of the day with an outlook shaped by the Church’s own tradition of understanding (rather than methods of understanding derived from secular life), exemplified by the Church Fathers, the very figures who had given continuing shape to that tradition.³⁹

Benedict also has a great affinity with Hans Urs von Balthasar. They both had a personalist approach to theology. For them “the encounter with the living Christ ought to be the point of departure for any kind of theology.”⁴⁰ Together with other theologians, they founded a new international theological journal *Communio* in which both published significant contributions. Ratzinger also shared with von Balthasar “an interest in beauty as a transcendental property of being, and in love as a theological virtue, and indeed the form of all virtue.”⁴¹ Both de Lubac and von Balthasar have influenced Ratzinger’s ecclesiology and understanding of revelation. In his autobiography, he wrote: “I cannot even begin to say how much I owe to my encounter with them.”⁴²

Another writer who had made a contribution to the thought of Pope Benedict XVI was Romano Guardini who wrote both his doctoral and habilitation theses on Bonaventure. He made an impact on the young Ratzinger. According to Tracey Rowland, “Guardini’s *The Essence of Christianity* (1938) can be read as a precursor to Ratzinger’s *Introduction to Christianity* (1968).”⁴³ In 2000, Ratzinger also published his own *The Spirit of the Liturgy* paralleling Guardini’s classic *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (1918) which he described as having a

³⁷ Ibid, 35.

³⁸ Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 98.

³⁹ Hemming, *Benedict XVI*, 39.

⁴⁰ De Gaal, *The Theology of Benedict XVI*, 38.

⁴¹ Tracey Rowland, *Benedict XVI. A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 21.

⁴² Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 143.

⁴³ Rowland, *Benedict XVI*, 18.

decisive contribution in the inauguration of the Liturgical Movement in Germany.⁴⁴ Ratzinger was also impacted by the new approach to the spiritual interpretation of Scripture as portrayed in Guardini's book *The Lord*.⁴⁵ For both Guardini and Ratzinger, Christianity is not an abstract idea but a person: Jesus Christ himself.⁴⁶

According to Rowland, Joseph Pieper, a professor of philosophical anthropology at the University of Münster, also had an influence on Ratzinger, particularly in his treatment of the theological virtues. Ratzinger sought to extend Pieper's philosophical reflections and his *Spiritual Exercises* were dedicated to Pieper on his 85th birthday.⁴⁷

Finally, Dietrich von Hildebrand was another influential author in the life of Pope Benedict XVI especially in terms of the theme of transformation. He was inspirational in his "depiction of the Christian attitude of readiness to change and convert to the radical newness of Christ."⁴⁸ In a preface written by Ratzinger to the biography of von Hildebrand, *A Soul of a Lion*, he remarked that von Hildebrand's "joy and freshness of his understanding of Catholic doctrine was contagious."⁴⁹ Both von Hildebrand and Pope Benedict XVI stress the importance of being transformed through Christ.

In summary, the episcopal motto chosen by Ratzinger when he was appointed bishop by Pope Paul VI describes best the essence of his theology. For Benedict, truth is not an abstract idea that we define, but rather a person named Jesus Christ who reveals God to us. It is only through an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ that we are transformed in our innermost selves and our human relationships are renewed. True theology reflects on the experience of that encounter with God lived in faith. It does not destroy piety but rather leads the believer into a deeper love of God.

⁴⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 7.

⁴⁵ Rowland, *Benedict XVI*, 18.

⁴⁶ De Gaal, *The Theology of Benedict XVI*, 41.

⁴⁷ Rowland, *Benedict XVI*, 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

⁴⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, "Preface" in Alice von Hildebrand, *A Soul of a Lion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 12.

Chapter 1: The universal call to holiness

The universal call to holiness is a call to transformation in Christ. All Christians are called to share in God's holiness by being a true image of Christ. In this chapter, the meaning of holiness will be addressed. A quick overview of the idea of the universal call to holiness in Scripture and Tradition will be presented. A special emphasis will be placed on the relationship between the universal call to holiness and grace, the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist, prayer, suffering, work and virtue. Following Pope Benedict XVI's methodology of first laying out the theological principles and then giving practical examples of these principles lived out in the life of particular groups or individuals, this chapter will include a description of how the universal call to holiness is lived by two particular groups in the Church, namely *Opus Dei* and Catholic Action. It will also consider the example of some lay members of the Church who became saints by responding to the universal call to holiness in their ordinary everyday life.

1.1 Meaning of holiness

What is the actual meaning of holiness? How can one define it? What does it look like in everyday life? In the Letter to the Ephesians, we read:

Put off the old man that belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new man, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:22-24).

Holiness then means to be created anew, after the likeness of God. It is to become Christ in today's world. This involves a process of transformation from one state to another where one needs to "put off the old man" and "put on the new man". Dietrich Von Hildebrand, in his book entitled *Transformation in Christ*, wrote:

God communicates a new supernatural life to us in holy Baptism; He allows us to participate in his holy life. This new life is not destined merely to repose as a secret in the hidden depths of our souls; rather it should work out in a transformation of our entire personality ... All true Christian life, therefore, must begin with a deep yearning to become a 'new man' in Christ, and an inner readiness to 'put off the old man' – a readiness to become something fundamentally different. ¹

¹ Dietrich Von Hildebrand, *Transformation in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 1.

Thus, holiness involves change and a readiness to allow oneself to be totally transformed into the likeness of God who is Love.

In St Paul's Letter to the Colossians, we find a detailed description of the qualities of holiness which the Christian is called to 'put on':

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And over all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body (Col 3:12-17).

Holiness then means, above all, growing in the virtue of love. It is love that makes us "put on Christ" and partake in the very essence of his life. Jesus, himself, said: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13: 35).

1.2 A quick overview of the universal call to holiness in Scripture and Tradition

One of the key features of Christianity is the belief in God's gift of redemption through which one is invited to partake in the divine life of the Trinity and therefore share in the holiness of God. The call to holiness is found explicitly throughout Scripture. In Leviticus, God gave a command to his people: "You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2). The Lord Jesus preached holiness to all saying: "You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). In the First Letter of St Peter, we read: "But as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct" (1 Pet 1:15). When addressing the Ephesians, St Paul wrote: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph 1:3-4). He also commanded husbands to love their wives as "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her" (Eph 5: 25-26). St Paul also confirmed the call to holiness in his letter to the Ephesians: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thess 4:3).

The call to holiness in Scripture is addressed to everyone. This is confirmed by early patristic literature which assumes that "all biblical themes (except radical poverty and

dedicated virginity) are meant for all classes of people.”² However, due to the rise of religious orders, many came to believe that holiness is reserved for the privileged few who choose to renounce the world and live a life of poverty and virginity dedicating their lives to the pursuit of the kingdom. This view of holiness was described as a prejudice by Pope Pius XI during the commemoration of the third centenary of the death of St Francis de Sales, in 1922 when he said:

St Francis de Sales appears to have been given to the Church by a special plan of God in order to refute by the examples of his life and the authority of his teaching a prejudice already in vogue at his time and still widespread in our days, namely, that true holiness, consistent with the teaching of the Catholic Church, exceeds the reach of human efforts and at the very least is so difficult to attain that it does not in any fashion concern the common run of the faithful, but belongs only to a small number of persons endowed with a rare energy and an exceptional elevation of soul; that, besides, this holiness involves so much anxiety and trouble that it is absolutely incompatible with the situation of men and women living in the world.³

This erroneous view of holiness tends to split the Christian community into two groups: “a privileged group of chosen souls who enjoy a head start in the matter of holiness, and the rest, who muddle along and try to keep the commandments and avoid sin as much as they can.”⁴ This split means “a veritable separation between morality, based on the constraint of law, and mysticism, seen as an extraordinary phenomenon.”⁵ It results on the sociological plane in a separation within the Church between ordinary Christians, who are expected to conform merely to ordinary moral standards, and religious, who are dedicated to a higher way of life.⁶ Such view could not be further from the truth. The call to holiness is universal. It is addressed equally to all Christians through their baptism. This doctrine was taught explicitly by the Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* in which it was affirmed that “everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness.”⁷

² Thomas Dubay, Holiness, “Universal Call To”, *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 7 (Detroit: Gale, 2003): 5.

³ Pope Pius XI quoted by Gustave Thils, “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church,” *Communio* 17 (1990): 495.

⁴ Gerald O’Collins, *The Spirituality of the Second Vatican Council* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 1.

⁵ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr Mary Thomas Noble (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 257.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ LG, 39.

1.2.1 Vatican II and the universal call to holiness

The universal call to holiness formed one of the central messages of the Second Vatican Council. A chapter entitled ‘the People of God’ in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, taught that “all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord – each in his or her own way – to that perfect holiness by which the Father himself is perfect.”⁸ This is also affirmed in another chapter in *Lumen Gentium* entitled ‘the universal call to holiness’ where we read: “It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in whatever state or walk in life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.”⁹

Although Christians may have different ways of life and duties, they are still called to the same holiness and they have obtained an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God.¹⁰ Thus, the holiness of religious people is not different from that of those living in the world. All members of the Church share in the one and same holiness since they are moved by the same Spirit of God.¹¹

The laity, understood to mean all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church, are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven with the ardour of the Spirit of Christ.¹² They are given the special vocation of becoming the salt of the earth in those places and circumstances that they alone can reach.¹³ They are also called to live a unity of life where no division exists between their life in the world and their life of faith.¹⁴ In his commentary on chapter 5 of *Lumen Gentium*, Friedrich Wulf stressed the importance of that unity of life by stating that “Christian sanctification is not a road running parallel to the road of one’s ordinary life and work, but is a thing achieved in and through one’s state of life with its daily tasks, in and through the concrete circumstances and events of one’s existence.”¹⁵ Thus, holiness becomes personal when each member of the People of God is called in a unique and unrepeatable manner.¹⁶

⁸ LG, 11.

⁹ LG, 40.

¹⁰ LG, 32.

¹¹ William L. Doty, *Holiness for all* (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1969), 15.

¹² Second Vatican Council, “Apostolicam Actuositatem: Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity” (hereafter AA) in *The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), 2.

¹³ LG, 33.

¹⁴ Peter Coughlan, *The Hour of the Laity* (Newtown: E.J. Dwyer Pty. Ltd, 1989), 6.2.1.

¹⁵ Friedrich Wulf, “The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 268.

¹⁶ Karol Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, trans. P.S. Falla (London: Collins, 1980), 190.

The description of holiness in *Lumen Gentium* included more emphasis upon grace and full participation in the body of Christ and less on following rules and keeping laws. The followers of Christ are called by God not because of anything they had done but by God's grace which makes them his sons and daughters by Baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature. This is how they are sanctified.¹⁷ Their call to holiness is "effective because it is accompanied by a gift of the Holy Spirit".¹⁸ However, as a response in faith to the divine gift of grace, their holiness "takes the form of moral perfection, the mainspring of which is charity."¹⁹ Thus, the source of all holiness stems from the mystery of Christ, who alone, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is entitled to be called the Holy One.²⁰ The Divine Trinity brings holiness to the entire Church: "Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and Holy Spirit is celebrated as 'alone Holy,' has loved the Church as his spouse, handing himself over for her to make her holy."²¹

One may wonder how can the Church be holy when her members are sinners? To understand what may seem a contradiction, one needs to consider the mystery of the union of Christ with the Church, which is his Body and his Spouse. To say that the Church is holy does not mean primarily that all her members lead holy lives. It means that the Church is Christ's body, it lives by his life and in a certain sense can even be identified with him in his glorious existence in heaven.²² The Church is sanctified by Christ's gift of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, "it is necessary to distinguish the *sancta* (i.e., the Church's holy and sanctifying realities: the truth of the Gospel and the authentic sacraments) and the *sancti* (i.e., the people who receive the sanctifying realities)."²³ Thus, the Church is unfailingly holy because she offers the source of divine life to its members. However, this source nourishes the faithful in a progressive manner where they are continually undergoing a process of conversion and transformation.²⁴

Being a member of the Church necessarily means being called to share in the holiness of Christ; one cannot be a member of the Church and not be called to holiness.²⁵ On the other

¹⁷ LG, 40.

¹⁸ Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, 192.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Patrick McGoldrick, "The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness," in *Vatican II: The Constitution on the Church. A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*, ed. Kevin McNamara (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), 266.

²¹ LG, 39.

²² McGoldrick, "The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness", 267.

²³ Benoit-Dominique De La Soujeole, O.P., "The Universal Call to Holiness," in *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition*, eds. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41.

²⁴ Ibid, 41.

²⁵ Adrian Hastings, *A Concise Guide to Documents of the Second Vatican Council* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1968), 54.

hand, holiness is not an isolated gift received in a private encounter between a person and Christ, but it is found within the Church. It is the whole Church, and not the individual, who stands before him as the Bride of Christ.²⁶ Thus, it is through Baptism that Christians receive their call to holiness where they are made sons and daughters of God and members of the Body of Christ. They must therefore hold on to that gift and strive to perfect it in their lives.²⁷ Arriving at holiness, therefore, is a lifelong process in which grace is dispensed by and drawn from the source of life, Christ himself, through his Body, the Church. It is only through the fullness of participation in the Church that the life of holiness is nourished.

Furthermore, the Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* places a great emphasis on the role of every member of the Church in sharing in Christ's mystical Body as priest, prophet and king. It is through fulfillment of this role that a Christian is

able to grow in grace: through the offering of spiritual sacrifice ... in the liturgical sacrifice of the Mass; through the diffusion of the light of inspiration, whereby he is able to give expression to the truths of revelation; and through exercising the strength received through the Church, which enables him to bear Christian witness, especially through the charity which sets fire to the earth.²⁸

Christ, the eternal priest, continues his witness and his service through the laity by giving them life through his Spirit and impelling them to accomplish every good and perfect work.²⁹ By joining them intimately to his life and mission,

he also gives them a share in his priestly office of offering spiritual worship for the glory of the Father and the salvation of humanity. Hence the laity, dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvellously called and prepared so that ever richer fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, if accomplished in the Spirit, become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ: their prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, even the hardships of life if patiently borne.³⁰

Thus, laypeople offer their whole life to the Father. They offer it "not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him."³¹ Through their participation in the priesthood of Christ, they are able to sanctify the world by glorifying God and working for the salvation of mankind.³² The self-offering made by the lay faithful includes the small hidden acts of

²⁶ Wulf, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 264.

²⁷ LG, 40.

²⁸ Doty, *Holiness for All*, 13.

²⁹ LG, 34.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ferdinand Klostermann, "The Laity," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 244.

³² Ibid, 244.

everyday life. It involves “the personal confession of sin as well as the bending over backwards to help one’s neighbour, spouse, child, parent, and even the unknown stranger who happens across one’s path.”³³

The laity also shares in the prophetic office of Christ. Just as Christ proclaimed the kingdom of the Father both by his life and his word, they, too, are made witnesses to the Gospel in daily family and social life.³⁴ In the ordinary circumstances of their lives, they practice evangelisation by proclaiming God by word and by the witness of their lives.³⁵ One particular state of life that holds a special value in the prophetic office is “married and family life” where spouses witness to “their faith and love of Christ to each other and to their children.”³⁶ The family plays a significant role in spreading the Gospel in the midst of the world, at home, at work and through the ordinary duties of life. Having been made sharers in the prophetic office of Christ, the laity are called to build up the kingdom of God and, therefore, “have the duty to work hard to acquire a deeper knowledge of revealed truth and earnestly pray to God for the gift of wisdom.”³⁷

The lay faithful are also called to share in the reign of Christ as king. He, who was obedient to the point of death, has entered the glory of his kingdom where all of creation will be freed of the slavery of sin. Since the faithful share in the kingdom of God, they need to help one another to achieve greater holiness of life, “so that the world may be filled with the spirit of Christ and may the more effectively attain its destiny in justice, in love and in peace.”³⁸ Thus, the laity plays a principal role in fulfilling such a universal task. Through them, Christ “will increasingly illuminate the whole of human society with his saving light.”³⁹

The participation of the laity in the three offices of Christ of priest, prophet, and king, pertains to the very essence of their Christian vocation to holiness which cannot be separated from their call to the apostolate. There is a strong bond of unity between holiness and the apostolate. True holiness is never attained alone, in a private spiritual world; it is rather shared with others. In the words of Pope Francis: “the path to sainthood is not taken alone, each one

³³ Peter Casarella, “Disciples in the Midst of the World: Collaboration of the Lay Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of their Pastors,” in *Called to Holiness and Communion*, eds. Rev. Steven Boguslawski, O.P. and Robert Fastiggi (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2009), 236.

³⁴ LG, 35.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ LG, 36.

³⁹ Ibid.

for oneself, but is travelled together, in that one body that is the Church, loved and made holy by the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁰ Thus, a dynamic apostolate is essential for the lay faithful who is called to burn with the Spirit of Christ and be a kind of leaven in the world.⁴¹ As it was affirmed in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate.⁴²

1.2.2 Holiness and grace

A question could be asked about how is it possible for Christians who live hectic lives in the world today to respond to the call to holiness? St Paul gives an answer in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor 3:18) Thus, the change that holiness requires does not usually take place instantly; it is rather a lifelong journey that takes place gradually through the action of the Holy Spirit. Man cannot change himself through his own efforts, it is only through God’s grace that holiness can be lived by all Christians regardless of their state of life.

The future Pope John Paul II commenting on the universal call to holiness wrote: “The call is effective because it is accompanied by a gift of the Holy Spirit, that is by grace, which constitutes the real foundation of man’s sanctification notwithstanding his weak and sinful nature.”⁴³ Thus, it is the Holy Spirit who sanctifies the faithful and enriches them with virtues distributing special graces among them by which “He makes them fit to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute towards the renewal and building up of the Church.”⁴⁴

Even though holiness stems from the action of the Holy Spirit, it still requires the cooperation of the faithful and a readiness to allow oneself to be transformed and shaped into the image and likeness of God. The life given by the Spirit is not a magical or mysterious process, but an event composed of acceptance and response.⁴⁵ One needs to be ready to

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, General Audience, Vatican Website, November 19, 2014, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/Francesco/audiences/2014.index.html>.

⁴¹ Doty, *Holiness for All*, 64.

⁴² AA, 2.

⁴³ Wojtyła, *Sources of renewal*, 192.

⁴⁴ Bernard Häring, *Road to Renewal* (London: Geoffrey Chapman Ltd, 1967), 71.

⁴⁵ Patricia Fox, “A Renewed Theology of Vocation as a Response to the Pastoral Challenges Facing the Australian Church,” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 89 (2012): 29.

“decrease” so that Christ may “increase” in him. In the words of Hildebrand, the radical readiness to change forms

the distinctive trait of those who have grasped the full import of the Call, and without reserve have decided upon an imitation of Christ . . . And this, again, presupposes a state of ‘fluidity’, as it were: that we should be like soft wax, ready to receive the imprint of the features of Christ.⁴⁶

Cooperation with grace and the divine will was described in *Lumen Gentium* as a condition for growing in holiness. Christians “will grow in holiness if they receive all things with faith from the hand of the heavenly Father and cooperate with the divine will, making manifest in their ordinary work the love with which God has loved the world.”⁴⁷ One cannot become holy without making efforts to use the means of sanctification given to him by Christ through his Church. These means are mentioned briefly in Chapter four of *Lumen Gentium*:

If charity is to grow and like good seed produce fruit in the soul, all of the faithful must willingly hear the word of God and carry out his will by what they do, with the help of his grace; they must frequently partake of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and take part in the liturgy; they must constantly apply themselves to prayer, self-denial, active sisterly and brotherly service and the practice of all the virtues.⁴⁸

Thus, in order to understand the call to holiness and the way it is lived out in everyday life, one needs to consider closely those means of sanctification which help Christians become a true image of Christ.

1.2.3 Holiness and the sacrament of reconciliation

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that sanctifying grace is infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul “to heal it of sin and to sanctify it.”⁴⁹ Received in Baptism, it forms in us the source of the work of sanctification.⁵⁰ Thus, one can conclude that the very first thing that is needed on the road to holiness is to ensure that sanctifying grace is not lost through a life of sin and that one remains connected to the vine, Christ, who is the source of all holiness. In his book, *Pathways to Holiness*, Louis of Granada stressed the importance of conversion on the journey to holiness. He wrote:

⁴⁶ Hildebrand, *Transformation in Christ*, 5.

⁴⁷ LG, 41.

⁴⁸ LG, 42.

⁴⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC) (Strathfield: St Pauls, 2000), 1999.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

a thing cannot become what it is not, unless it first ceases to be what it is . . . A person cannot become wise unless he first ceases to be ignorant; he cannot be healthy until is he cured of his sickness or infection. In like manner, the Christian cannot become just and holy if he does not turn away from his sinful life.⁵¹

Thus, one needs to remove all obstacles to grace and this is where the sacrament of reconciliation plays a great role in restoring the life of grace to those who have lost it through sin.

Through the sacrament of reconciliation, one obtains God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church. It is only God who has the power to forgive sins, however, Christ gives this power to men to exercise it in his name.⁵² The purpose of this sacrament is to restore us to God's grace and join us with him in an intimate friendship.⁵³ The sinner regains, not only his friendship with God, but also his place in the communion of saints where "he is made stronger by the exchange of spiritual goods among all the living members of the Body of Christ."⁵⁴

The sacrament of reconciliation is not only necessary for restoring sanctifying grace, but is also recommended by different popes as means of growing in holiness. Pope Pius XII noted in his encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* that even though venial sins may be expiated in different ways, frequent confession of those sins is highly recommended "to ensure more rapid progress day by day in the path of virtue."⁵⁵ He then went on to list some of the benefits which frequent confession provides. These include: increase of genuine self-knowledge, growth in humility, correction of bad habits, resistance against spiritual neglect and tepidity, purification of the conscience, strengthening of the will, attainment of self-control and increase in grace in virtue of the sacrament itself.⁵⁶

Pope John Paul II also stressed the necessity of frequent confession as a means of growing in holiness. In an address to the participants in the course on the internal forum organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary in March 2004, he said: "It would be an illusion to want to strive for holiness in accordance with the vocation that God has given to each one of us without frequently and fervently receiving this sacrament of conversion and

⁵¹ Louis of Granada, *Pathways to Holiness*, trans. Jordan Aumann (New York: Alba House, 1998), 43.

⁵² CCC, 1441.

⁵³ CCC, 1468.

⁵⁴ CCC, 1469.

⁵⁵ Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, June 29, 1943,

<https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en.html>, 88.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

sanctification.”⁵⁷ Frequent confession, for John Paul II, is an encounter with Christ who regenerates, renews and sanctifies the Christian and accompanies him on his way towards holiness. One can never be holy enough to not need the purification of this sacrament. Frequent confession purifies our service to God and the motivation that sustains it.⁵⁸ Thus, “gradually, from confession to confession, the believer experiences an ever deeper communion with the merciful Lord to the point of fully identifying with him, which comes with that perfect ‘life in Christ’ of which true holiness consists.”⁵⁹

1.2.4 Holiness and the Eucharist

Among the means of arriving at holiness, the Eucharist plays a unique role. In the blessed Eucharist “is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch.”⁶⁰ It is in the Eucharist that we encounter God in all his holiness. Father M. Raymond, in his book *This is Love*, described Christians as being grafted into Christ Jesus by Baptism. Commenting on the significance of the Eucharist, he wrote:

If we would live fruitful lives, we must have the holiness of Christ coursing through our veins as really as branches have the sap of the vine coursing through theirs. We must live ‘in Christ Jesus’ – and be ‘alive to God’ with the very life of Jesus Christ. Where can we do this more surely than in Mass where we meet him who ‘alone is holy’ and meet him as that Lover who would give us his love in the form of life?⁶¹

The Eucharist works in our lives in a very real way where Christ “meets each of us as we are, and makes our concrete existence the place where we experience daily the radical newness of the Christian life.”⁶² Participating in Mass and receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion lead Christians to holiness through “an intimate union with Christ Jesus.”⁶³ The Lord himself said: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (Jn 6:57). Moreover, the Eucharist “preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at Baptism,”⁶⁴ it separates us from sin by “cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from

⁵⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Address to the participants in the course on the internal forum organised by the Tribunal of the Apostolic Penitentiary*, Speech, Vatican Website, March 27, 2004, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>, 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

⁶⁰ CCC, 1324.

⁶¹ M. Raymond, *This is Love* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1964), 24.

⁶² Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Apostolic Exhortation, February 22, 2007, 79.

⁶³ CCC, 1391.

⁶⁴ CCC, 1392.

future sins,” it enables us “to break our disordered attachments to creatures”⁶⁵ and “strengthens our charity, which tends to be weakened in daily life.”⁶⁶

Thus, any journey to holiness must pass through the gift of the Eucharist. This is what John Paul II affirmed in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* where he wrote that every commitment to holiness

must draw the strength it needs from the Eucharistic mystery and in turn be directed to that mystery as its culmination. In the Eucharist we have Jesus, we have his redemptive sacrifice, we have his resurrection, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have adoration, obedience and love of the Father. Were we to disregard the Eucharist, how could we overcome our own deficiency?⁶⁷

Through the Eucharist, Christ accomplishes what was begun at Baptism: our incorporation into him and into his Church. The Eucharist, then, becomes a foretaste of heaven where we experience the blessed presence of God, in the marriage supper of the Lamb.⁶⁸ In the words of St Francis de Sales, “prayer made in union with this Divine Sacrifice has untold power through which, indeed, the soul overflows with heavenly grace.”⁶⁹ Thus, one can truly understand why Vatican II’s Fathers referred to this sacrament as “the source and summit of the Christian life.”⁷⁰

Providing such great nourishment to the soul, the Eucharist becomes our essential daily bread through which we obtain great help in becoming holy. In his encyclical *Mysterium Fidei*, Pope Paul VI wrote that the Church desires to have the faithful in large numbers attend daily Mass. This desire is

based on a wish to have them all united to God through the Sacrament and to have them draw from it the strength to master their passions, to wash away the lesser sins that are committed every day and to prevent the serious sins to which human frailty is subject.⁷¹

Pope Paul VI also recommended that the faithful frequently visit the Blessed Sacrament to give thanks to Christ, to adore him and show him their love.⁷²

⁶⁵ CCC, 1394.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, April 17, 2003, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>, 60.

⁶⁸ Thomas Richard, *The Ordinary Path to Holiness* (New York: Alba House, 2003), 173.

⁶⁹ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (Blacksburg: Wilder Publications, 2011), 53

⁷⁰ LG, 11.

⁷¹ Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, September 3, 1965,

https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en.html_66.

⁷² Ibid.

1.2.5 Holiness and prayer

Prayer is an essential means to holiness. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes it as “a vital necessity.”⁷³ Without prayer in which we allow the Spirit to lead us, we fall back into being slaves to sin.⁷⁴ The Catechism also teaches that

prayer and Christian life are inseparable, for they concern the same love and the same renunciation, proceeding from love; the same filial and loving conformity with the Father’s plan of love; the same transforming union in the Holy Spirit who conforms us more and more to Christ Jesus; the same love for all men, the love with which Jesus has loved us.⁷⁵

Through prayer, we cooperate with God’s grace and his plan of love for us,⁷⁶ we obtain the Holy Spirit who contains all gifts for our sanctification,⁷⁷ and we gain the transformation of our heart as the first response to our petition.⁷⁸

Prayer is a personal encounter with Christ in which we raise our hearts to him and receive the many graces and blessings that flow from his love. Through our prayer, we enter into the prayer of Jesus to his Father and thanks to him, we become “as close to the Father as John the Beloved Disciple was to Jesus, as he rested his head upon his sacred breast and upon his sacred heart.”⁷⁹ This union with God in our prayer and the contemplation of his face cause our soul to be filled with him, help us grow in his likeness and moulds our actions on his.⁸⁰

The vital role that prayer plays in attaining holiness was stressed by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* in January 2001, where he wrote that “holiness calls for a Christian life distinguished above all in the art of prayer.”⁸¹ In the same letter, he affirmed that prayer is not only for the chosen few who choose to live a consecrated life, but rather for all ordinary Christians. He noted that

it would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which

⁷³ CCC, 2744.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ CCC, 2745.

⁷⁶ CCC, 2738.

⁷⁷ CCC, 2741.

⁷⁸ CCC, 2739.

⁷⁹ Richard, *The Ordinary Path to Holiness*, 84.

⁸⁰ De Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 39.

⁸¹ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Apostolic Letter, Vatican Website, January 6, 2001, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>, 32.

today's world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but 'Christians at risk'.⁸²

A natural accompaniment to prayer is the meditation on the word of God which "can enable us to find everywhere and always the God 'in whom we live and exist' (Acts 17:28)."⁸³ Vatican II Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* exhorted all the Christian faithful to get to know Christ by frequent reading of the divine scriptures.⁸⁴ It stated that in Sacred Scripture,

the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them. And such is the force and power of the word of God that it is the Church's support and strength, imparting robustness to the faith of its daughters and sons and providing food for their souls. It is a pure and unfailing fount of spiritual life.⁸⁵

In the words of Pope John Paul II, "the primacy of holiness and prayer is inconceivable without a renewed listening to the word of God."⁸⁶ Praying Scripture, then, becomes a life-giving encounter with Christ where one is shaped and transformed into his person.

1.2.6 Holiness and suffering

The universal call to holiness needs to be placed in the light of the Paschal Mystery⁸⁷ in order to appreciate its full meaning. By dying with Christ, we also rise with him into eternal life. Thus, there is no holiness without the mystery of the Cross; without suffering and dying to oneself through love. Suffering allows us to participate in the redemptive work of Christ where we are united with his passion.⁸⁸ This is affirmed by St Paul in his Letter to the Colossians: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24). Moreover, Jesus himself described the Cross as a necessary means of discipleship: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). Thus, to follow Christ means to accept one's suffering and unite it with the sufferings of Christ so it may acquire a new meaning, that of

⁸² Ibid, 34.

⁸³ AA,4.

⁸⁴ Second Vatican Council, "*Dei verbum*: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," (hereafter DV) in *The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), 25.

⁸⁵ DV, 21.

⁸⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Apostolic Letter, Vatican Website, January 6, 2001, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>, 39.

⁸⁷ Häring, *Road to Renewal*, 79.

⁸⁸ CCC, 1521.

being transformed into the very means of our sanctification. To suffer means to be open to the salvific power of God offered to us through Christ.⁸⁹

In his encyclical *Paenitentiam Agere* Pope John XXIII called the faithful not only to accept the sufferings that come their way and unite them to Christ, but also to seek voluntary mortifications in imitation of Christ. He wrote:

Besides bearing in a Christian spirit the inescapable annoyances and sufferings of this life, the faithful ought also take the initiative in doing voluntary acts of penance and offering them to God. In this they will be following in the footsteps of our divine Redeemer who, as the Prince of the Apostles said, ‘died once for sins, the Just for the unjust; that he might bring us to God. Put to death indeed in the flesh, he was brought to life in the spirit.’ ‘Since, therefore, Christ has suffered in the flesh,’ it is only fitting that we be ‘armed with the same intent.’⁹⁰

Consequently, every act of mortification, when joined to the Cross of Christ, can become a means for sanctification.

1.2.7 Holiness and work

Human work constitutes another means of sanctification for the believer. According to the Second Vatican Council, work should enrich Christians personally, enabling them to help others and to promote the betterment of all of human society and of creation. In imitating Christ who worked as a carpenter, Christians rise to a higher sanctity through their daily work by making the love with which God has loved the world manifest in their ordinary activity.⁹¹

Through their daily work, the lay faithful

do not separate their union with Christ from their ordinary life, but actually grow closer to him by doing their work according to God’s will. This is the path along which lay people must advance, fervently, joyfully, overcoming difficulties with prudent, patient effort.⁹²

Therefore, every work that is well done for the glory of God becomes an effective means of sanctification where one gradually grows in holiness.

⁸⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, Apostolic Letter, Vatican Website, February 11, 1984, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html, 23.

⁹⁰ Pope John XXIII, *Paenitentiam Agere*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, July 1, 1962, w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en.html, 31.

⁹¹ LG, 41.

⁹² AA, 4.

Work can also be redemptive since it includes ‘sweat and toil’. Through their work, the faithful are able to carry their Cross and unite their difficulties with Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that

by enduring the hardship of work in union with Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth and the one crucified on Calvary, man collaborates in a certain fashion with the Son of God in his redemptive work. He shows himself to be a disciple of Christ by carrying the cross, daily, in the work he is called to accomplish. Work can be a means of sanctification and a way of animating earthly realities with the Spirit of Christ.⁹³

1.2.8 Holiness and virtues

Since the goal of a virtuous life is to become like God,⁹⁴ the practice of virtue, therefore, is essential to holiness. The universal call to holiness is a call to heroic virtue. A holy man or woman is one “who lives the theological virtues and the moral virtues to an eminent degree not attainable by human resources alone.”⁹⁵ St Benedict taught that “the virtues are the means whereby the Christian believer is transformed and made into an active image of God.”⁹⁶ Thus, one cannot arrive at holiness without growing in virtue. Moral theologian Servais Pinckaers described the virtues as “the arteries that carry strength and disperse joy throughout the entire organism of the moral life.”⁹⁷

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches about two groups of virtues: human virtues and theological virtues. Human virtues are “habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith.”⁹⁸ One acquires human virtues by education and by repeated efforts in the practice of the good. These efforts are purified by divine grace.⁹⁹ There are four cardinal virtues under which we can list all the particular moral virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. Prudence allows one to apply moral principles to particular cases without error and to know the good to achieve and the evil to avoid. Justice consists in giving God and neighbour their due. Fortitude enables one to persevere in face of difficulties, resist temptations and overcome

⁹³ CCC, 2427.

⁹⁴ CCC, 1803.

⁹⁵ Thomas Dubay, “Holiness, Universal Call To,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 7 (Detroit: Gale, 2003): 6.

⁹⁶ Romanus Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 194.

⁹⁷ Servais Pinckaers, *Morality. The Catholic View* (South Bend: St Augustine’s Press, 2001), 80.

⁹⁸ CCC, 1804.

⁹⁹ CCC, 1810.

obstacles in the moral life. Finally, temperance ensures the will's mastery over instincts and limits desires to what is honourable.¹⁰⁰

The theological virtues are faith, hope and charity. They form the foundation of Christian moral life, they give life to all moral virtues and are infused by God into the souls of the faithful.¹⁰¹ They exist only through God's grace. Although prayer makes us more disposed to receive the theological virtues, we cannot acquire them through anything we do.¹⁰² Moreover, since the theological virtues are the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in the soul, cooperating with grace and being open to the action of the Holy Spirit play a significant role in one's growth in holiness through which one's moral life becomes a reflection of the life of Christ.

Even though all virtues are important for a life of holiness, two of them act as foundation for the rest. Among the human virtues, humility is the most essential. It is "the precondition and basic presupposition for the genuineness, the beauty, and the truth of all virtue."¹⁰³ When humility is absent, pride "contaminates all intrinsically good dispositions, and robs every virtue of its value before God."¹⁰⁴ Only through humility can one recognise his spiritual poverty and his need for God's intervention in his life. Humility opens one's heart to receive God's gifts and blessings. This is affirmed in Scripture: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pt 5:5).

The other virtue which acts as foundation and source for all other virtues, human and divine, is the theological virtue of charity. In fact, charity is "the primary element in the perfection of the Christian life."¹⁰⁵ It contains the inmost substance of all holiness. The acts of all the other virtues "derive their value and merit from their being motivated by charity."¹⁰⁶ The Fathers of Vatican II described charity as

the first and most necessary gift by which we love God above all things and our neighbour because of him . . . It is the bond of perfection and fullness of the law, it directs and gives meaning to all the means of sanctification and leads them to their goal.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁰ CCC, 1806-1809.

¹⁰¹ CCC, 1813.

¹⁰² Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology*, 200.

¹⁰³ Hildebrand, *Transformation in Christ*, 149.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 149.

¹⁰⁵ William E. May, *Principles of Catholic Moral Life* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1981), 421.

¹⁰⁶ May, *Principles of Catholic Moral Life*, 421.

¹⁰⁷ LG, 42.

One of the greatest biblical passages on love is written by Saint Paul who asserted that no matter how great our moral actions are, if done without love, they gain no value.¹⁰⁸

1.3 The universal call to holiness in practice

Having discussed the meaning of holiness and how the universal call to holiness is realised through the power of grace, the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist, prayer, suffering, work and virtue, I will now examine how the universal call to holiness is lived in practice. Following Pope Benedict XVI's methodology in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, I will look at specific examples of how different members of the Church live the universal call to holiness. I will consider two particular groups in the Church, *Opus Dei* and Catholic Action. I will also look at the example of some lay members who became saints by striving to be holy in their ordinary everyday life.

1.3.1 Opus Dei and the universal call to holiness

Well before Vatican II taught the universal call to holiness, the realm of lay spirituality had begun to be explored by St Francis de Sales in the seventeenth century and Blessed John Henry Newman in the nineteenth century. However, it was St Josemaria Escriva in the twentieth century who recognised that lay spirituality remained underdeveloped and so, in response to this, he founded the Prelature of *Opus Dei*.¹⁰⁹ Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, also as Cardinal Ratzinger, affirmed the significant role he had played in promoting the universal call to holiness.

In an address to the participants of the Congress on the teachings of Blessed Josemaria in 1993, Pope John Paul II stated that Blessed Josemaria “reminded the contemporary world of the universal call to holiness and of the Christian value which professional work can have in the ordinary life of each person.”¹¹⁰ Moreover, writing about the view of holiness which was dominant in Escriva's time, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote:

¹⁰⁸ See 1 Cor 13: 1-3.

¹⁰⁹ *Opus Dei* means ‘the work of God’ in Latin.

¹¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Address to the participants in a conference on the teachings of Blessed Josemaria Escriva, founder of Opus Dei*, Speech, Vatican Website, October 14, 1993, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>.

Holiness then becomes a thing reserved for some ‘greats’ whose images we see on the altars, and who are completely different from us ordinary sinners. But this is a mistaken notion of holiness, a wrong perception which has been corrected – and this seems to me the central point – precisely by Josemaria Escriva.¹¹¹

Rather than providing lay people with a ‘watered down’ version of religious spirituality, St Josemaria Escriva offered them a spirituality that was uniquely their own, one in which they could respond to the call to holiness not away from the condition of their state of life, but precisely in it and through it. Their ordinary lives became the sphere, occasion and means of attaining holiness. In one of his homilies, Escriva stated:

Jesus did not address himself to a privileged set of people; he came to reveal the universal love of God to us. God loves all men, and he wants all to love him – everyone, whatever his personal situation, his social position, his work. Ordinary life is something of great value. All the ways of the earth can be an opportunity to meet Christ, who calls us to identify ourselves with him and carry out his divine mission – right where he finds us.¹¹²

Thus, *Opus Dei* became a means by which the Catholic faithful could seek sanctity in the world where they live and work. This did not mean giving more time to selected activities and leaving others aside, but rather using ordinary work as means of sanctification. Work, when done well, is elevated to a supernatural dimension. By raising to God the smallest of his actions, the Christian turns the effort and obstacles which he encounters into a sacrifice pleasing to God. Hence, his work becomes a form of prayer. Moreover, work, accomplished seriously becomes sanctifying for others. It “serves to draw other souls to God. Hence the importance the founder of *Opus Dei* attaches to professional excellence, whatever one’s occupation – intellectual or manual, managerial or performing.”¹¹³ Thus, human work is transformed into an occasion of Christian witness in the world turning one’s vocation to apostolate.¹¹⁴

Furthermore, in the spirituality of *Opus Dei*, the lay faithful are called to deepen their life of prayer, frequent the sacraments and turn their work into prayer so they may become “contemplative souls in the middle of the world.”¹¹⁵ They live what they call “the plan of life”. They spend time in conversation with God, attend daily Mass, pray the Rosary, the Angelus and the Morning Offering. They read the Gospel and some spiritual book daily. They try to live in God’s presence throughout the day using aspirations, acts of thanksgiving, spiritual communions, acts of atonement and through considering their divine filiation. They end their

¹¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Letting God Work,” *L’osservatore Romano* (October 6, 2002): 2.

¹¹² Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is passing by* (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2011), 255.

¹¹³ Jean-Jacques Thierry, *A Close Up* (New York: Cortland Press, 1975), 148.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 148.

¹¹⁵ Josemaria Escriva, *The Way. Furrow. The Forge* (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2011), 408.

day with an examination of conscience at night. They frequent the sacrament of reconciliation weekly. They receive weekly formation, attend monthly days of recollection, a yearly retreat and an annual formation course. Scott Hahn, a contemporary theologian who is a member of *Opus Dei*, wrote: “The plan of life is what finally imposed a spiritual order on my ordinary days. And that order was the necessary precondition of peace. My work at last was ordered to worship – and not only in my fondest intentions but, fairly often, in my conscious thought as well.”¹¹⁶

Members of *Opus Dei* do not just seek their own holiness but through their apostolate they place a great emphasis on sharing the universal call to holiness with others. In the words of St Josemaria:

The interior life implies a growth in union with Christ, in the bread and in the word. And apostolate is the precise and necessary outward manifestation of interior life. When one tastes the love of God, one feels burdened with the weight of souls. There is no way to separate interior life from apostolate, just as there is no way to separate Christ, the God-man, from his role as redeemer.¹¹⁷

Thus, the apostolate that is lived in *Opus Dei* is a form of individual apostolate which is, in the better words of Vatican II, irreplaceable. Individual apostolate is “the starting point and condition of all types of lay apostolate, including the organised apostolate; nothing can replace it.”¹¹⁸

1.3.2 Catholic Action and the universal call to holiness

The expression ‘Catholic Action’ can be understood in two senses, a wide sense and a narrow sense. In the wide sense, Catholic Action means any activity on the part of a lay association that has an apostolic scope. In the narrow sense, Catholic Action means apostolic activity carried on by institutions and organisations for the assistance of the hierarchy in the Church.¹¹⁹ Pope Pius XI gave a classical definition for Catholic Action as “the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the Church’s hierarchy.”¹²⁰ This definition was given, according to Pope Pius XI, “after due thought, deliberately, indeed, one may say not without divine

¹¹⁶ Scott Hahn, *Ordinary Work Extraordinary Grace* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 55.

¹¹⁷ Escriva, *Christ is passing by*, 275.

¹¹⁸ AA, 16.

¹¹⁹ Jeremiah Newman, *What is Catholic Action? An Introduction to the Lay Apostolate*, (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1958), 37.

¹²⁰ Luigi Civardi, *A Manual of Catholic Action* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1936), 5.

inspiration.”¹²¹ From this definition one can conclude that the aim of Catholic Action must be identical with that of the hierarchy. The aim of the hierarchy is described in Pope St Pius X’s first encyclical *E supremi* in which he wrote that the supreme end towards which all our efforts must converge is to establish the human race under the rule of our Lord, Jesus Christ.¹²² Thus, the supreme aim of Catholic Action is the advent of Christ’s kingdom among individuals, in the family, and in all of society.¹²³

Christ’s kingdom is a kingdom of holiness where Christ rules in every heart. Hence, Catholic Action is an invitation to the lay faithful to seek their own holiness and that of others. In fact, there is a strong link between one’s holiness and the holiness of others since one who is growing in holiness cannot but love his neighbour and care for his eternal salvation. In order to grow in holiness, Catholic Action aims at the formation of consciences as an indispensable means for the reign of God’s kingdom.¹²⁴ Pope Pius X wrote:

Catholic Action, inasmuch as it proposes to restore all things in Christ, constitutes a real apostolate for the honour and glory of Christ Himself. To carry it out right one must have divine grace, and the apostle receives it only if he is united to Christ. Only when he has formed Jesus Christ in himself shall he more easily be able to restore Him to the family and society.¹²⁵

Thus, members of Catholic Action must reproduce in themselves Jesus Christ, their perfect model, and therefore must view holiness as their immediate aim. This is confirmed later by Pope Pius XI who wrote: “Catholic Action has for its first and foremost end the pursuit of personal Christian perfection.”¹²⁶

In Catholic Action, the forming of consciences involves various types of formation: religious, moral, social and apostolic.¹²⁷ Through their religious formation, members of Catholic Action fulfil their duties towards God. However, their piety is not limited to an exterior expression but flows from an interior life of holiness where “religion becomes the good leaven that lightens and sweetens the whole of life; the motive force that arouses and directs every action, private or public, towards our supernatural end,”¹²⁸ and where they make their

¹²¹ Ibid, 5.

¹²² Pius X, *E Supremi*, Encyclical, Vatican Website, October 4, 1903, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en.html>, 14.

¹²³ Civardi, *A Manual of Catholic Action*, 14.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 35.

¹²⁵ Pius X, *Il Fermo Proposito*, Encyclical, Vatican Website, June 11, 1905, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en.html>, 11.

¹²⁶ Pope Pius XI, Letter to Cardinal Bertram, November 12, 1928, as quoted by Newman, *What is Catholic Action? An Introduction to the Lay Apostolate*, 105.

¹²⁷ Civardi, *A Manual of Catholic Action*, 36.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 37.

way towards the heights of sanctity by having Jesus Christ put before them as model of perfection.¹²⁹

Moral formation consists in the exercise of moral virtues which aim at living one's duties towards oneself and one's neighbour. In Catholic Action, moral formation is adapted to the conditions of life and psychological requirements of each person since duties differ between different states of life and perfection is attained through different paths according to individual situations. However, the aim remains one: the promotion of a Christian worldview in both private or public life.¹³⁰ Another important feature of moral formation in Catholic Action is the belief that moral perfection is attained one step at a time and therefore, the educator "must place upon shoulders no more than the weight that they can carry; nor increase the load till the shoulders be more robust. Anything else might produce disheartenment in the pupil, and make him cut short at the outset a path that might have led him very high."¹³¹

Social formation in Catholic Action stems from man's duties not only as an individual, but also as a member of society. It teaches how one "should translate the evangelical precepts and counsels in social life; that is, in the life of the working man, the professional man, the citizen, the elector, the legislator."¹³² Thus, political and social rights, if exercised according to the principles of Christian morality, bring the fruits of holiness not only to individuals but also to society. A unity is formed between private life and public life where one is not only religious at home and in church, but also in public offices, in political and social sphere.¹³³

Members of Catholic Action also receive apostolic formation since their aim is to win souls for Christ and the Church. Pope Pius XI wrote in a speech to the directors of Catholic Action of Rome in 1931: "In order to make the laity share in an apostolate such as the hierarchic one, divinely instituted and proceeding straight from the hands and heart of Jesus Christ, we must first form the apostles, the co-apostles, the participators in His divine mission."¹³⁴ Thus, members are taught how to share the gifts they have received with others, aiding them in seeking holiness and living under the reign of Christ.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 37.

¹³⁰ Newman, *What is Catholic Action. An Introduction to the Lay Apostolate*, 94.

¹³¹ Civardi, *A Manual of Catholic Action*, 39.

¹³² Ibid, 40.

¹³³ Ibid, 41.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 43.

Being apostolic, Catholic Action aims at drawing people to Christ. As Pope Pius XI wrote, Catholic Action

must have as preliminary the individual sanctification of each one of its members: so that the supernatural life abounds and superabounds within them. But after this first and formative element, comes the second – the distribution of this life, the action of the apostolate.¹³⁵

Catholic Action, therefore, must be directed to all people, Catholics and non-Catholics going after the lost sheep, the indifferent, the weak and the pagan-minded.¹³⁶

1.3.3 Saints who lived the universal call to holiness

Holiness is for everyone. This is a truth taught by the Fathers of Vatican II, “not just to embellish ecclesiology with a kind of spiritual veneer, but to make the call to holiness an intrinsic and essential aspect of their teaching on the Church.”¹³⁷ Pope John Paul II strongly promoted the universal call to holiness. He canonised 482 saints and beatified 1,338 individuals, among them many lay people who arrived at holiness in the most ordinary circumstances of life.¹³⁸ The following is an account of the life of some ordinary saints who responded to the universal call to holiness. These saints, like all others, “serve *theologically*, as a *locus theologicus*,” they “offer avenues of access to the Christian mysteries in ways that facilitate theology’s task of mediating the meaning and value of Christian faith to contemporary culture.”¹³⁹ Therefore, in considering the lives of the following saints, I hope to stress the importance of unity between theology and spirituality. Contemporary theologians, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan and Hans Urs von Balthasar, like Benedict XVI, “warn us that to neglect the witness of the saints is to impoverish the theological tradition and Christian culture.”¹⁴⁰

Gianna Beretta Molla was an Italian paediatrician, born on October 4, 1922 to a devout Catholic family. Her mother had a great influence on her faith. The death of her parents in 1942

¹³⁵ Pope Pius XI, Speech to the Directors of the Catholic Action of Rome, April 19, 1931, as quoted by Civardi, *A Manual of Catholic Action*, 44.

¹³⁶ Australian National Secretariat of Catholic Action, *Studies in Catholic Action. A Practical Approach*, (Melbourne: The Hawthorn Press, 1948), 46.

¹³⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 30.

¹³⁸ Brian O’Neel, *39 New Saints You Should Know* (Cincinnati: Servant Books, 2010), xv.

¹³⁹ Anne Hunt, “Immortal Diamonds: The Lives of the Saints as *Locus Theologicus*,” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 80 (2003): 390.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 391.

led her to attain greater spiritual maturity. She completed her studies and received a doctorate in medicine. Immediately after graduation, she began a medical practice in Magenta near Milan, helping sick people who thronged to her office. Her work was a great success until her death. In addition to her profession, she was involved in Catholic Action. She had the ability to inspire young people for the Catholic faith. She often gave lectures and organised retreat days, social evenings, excursions and hikes for the Catholic youth groups.¹⁴¹

Gianna married the engineer Pietro Molla in February 1955. Together, they had three children. When she was pregnant with her fourth child in 1962, a dangerous cyst was discovered on her uterus. Before undergoing surgery, Gianna gave strict orders to the doctors to save her child knowing that she was in danger of losing her life. Gianna died offering her life as a sacrifice so that her baby might live.¹⁴² She did not accomplish things that we might be used to understand as extraordinary, but rather, through a life of prayer, virtue, participation in the sacraments and practising her profession, she was able to reach holiness. She is now a great example for wives and mothers around the world. Pope John Paul II, on the day of her canonisation on May 16 2004, said: “The extreme sacrifice she sealed with her life testifies that only those who have the courage to give of themselves totally to God and to others are able to fulfil themselves.”¹⁴³

Another saint who could be given as an example of how the universal call to holiness can be realised in the middle of the world is Blessed Alberto Marvelli. He was born on March 21, 1918. He lived in an impoverished area in Italy. His parents taught him a profound love of the faith and the practice of charity. Alberto sought holiness through daily prayer, attending Mass, frequenting the sacrament of reconciliation and adoring Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He devoted himself to the help of the poor. However, he also struggled daily with his faults like any ordinary Christian. He wrote once:

How many times at the foot of the altar have I promised to become purer and more sincere, but just as many times, I have failed. Lord, help me to vanquish my quick-trigger impatience, to contain my often unhealthy curiosity and my inordinately unbridled imagination, my readiness to speak badly of others, and pull down the walls of my pride and haughtiness.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Ferdinand Holbock, *Married Saints and Blesseds Through the Centuries* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 457.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 455.

¹⁴³ Pope John Paul II, *Canonisation of Six New Saints*, Homily, Vatican Website, May 16, 2004, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>, 7.

¹⁴⁴ O’Neel, *39 New Saints You Should Know*, 13.

On another occasion, he wrote that advancing in the spiritual life requires constant effort and determination where one progresses step by step.¹⁴⁵ Such statements give us assurance that holiness is real and can be attained in the ordinary events and struggles of our life. His life is a call for all the lay faithful to find their own path of sanctity in their families, communities and professions. Alberto died on October 5, 1946 and was beatified on September 5, 2004.

Another example of holiness lived in the midst of the world is one of Saints Louis and Zélie Martin, the parents of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. They are the first-ever married couple with children to be canonised in the same ceremony. Their canonisation took place on October 18, 2015. On that day, Pope Francis stated in his homily that “the holy spouses Louis Martin and Marie-Azélie Guérin practiced Christian service in the family, creating day by day an environment of faith and love which nurtured the vocations of their daughters, among whom was Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus.”¹⁴⁶

Both Louis and Zélie had a desire to enter religious life prior to their marriage. However, they discovered that God was calling them to the married state. They sought holiness through their marriage and the circumstances of everyday life. They attended daily Mass, lived a life of virtue, prayer, and service to their five daughters who lived to adulthood. In the words of Zélie: “we lived only for them, they were all our happiness.”¹⁴⁷

Louis and Zélie also had a great share in suffering. Four children died before the age of five. However, they lived their suffering with great faith and hope. Zélie wrote:

When I closed the eyes of my dear little children and buried them, I felt sorrow through and through . . . people said to me, ‘It would have been better never to have had them.’ I couldn’t stand such language. My children were not lost forever; life is short and full of miseries, and we shall find our little ones again up above.¹⁴⁸

Zélie was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1876; she died on August 28, 1877. Louis was left to care for his girls alone. In 1887, he suffered a stroke which affected his mobility and even his mental capacity. He accepted his sufferings offering them up for the salvation of souls. Louis died in the summer of 1894.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Pope Francis, *Canonisation of Four Blesseds*, Homily, Vatican Website, October 18, 2015, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en.html>.

¹⁴⁷ O’Neel, *39 New Saints You Should Know*, 32.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

1.4 Conclusion

All men and women are called to be saints. No one is exempt from this call to holiness. Saints are not born with special gifts and privileges; they are ordinary people who struggle with their weaknesses throughout their lives. They strive to acquire virtue through an intimate sharing in the life of Christ and his Church. Saints come from all walks of life and all various circumstances. Every Christian is chosen to be a saint simply because he has been baptised in Christ and thus has become a sharer in his life.

Since it is by grace that we grow in holiness, a close relationship with Christ is vital. As Pope Benedict XVI said:

Holiness, the fullness of Christian life, does not consist in carrying out extraordinary enterprises but in being united with Christ, in living his mysteries, in making our own his example, his thoughts, his behaviour. The measure of holiness stems from the stature that Christ achieves in us, in as much as with the power of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life on his.¹⁴⁹

Holiness, however, is not given in an instant. It is rather a journey that requires a lifetime just like a seed requires time to grow into a tree. Having received the life of Christ in Baptism, we have been given all that is needed to become holy as he himself is holy.

Finally, the universal call to holiness, as taught by the Second Vatican Council, is a great gift to the Church. It helps the faithful, from all walks of life, to rediscover their Christian identity and mission. Although sanctity is experienced differently by different people, it remains rooted in one source: the person of Jesus Christ. Pope Benedict XVI expressed this reality beautifully when he wrote:

Visiting a botanical nursery garden, one is amazed by the variety of plants and flowers, and often one is drawn to think of the imagination of the Creator who has given the earth a wonderful garden. A similar feeling of wonder strikes us when we consider the spectacle of sainthood: the world appears to us as a “garden”, where the Spirit of God has given life with admirable imagination to a multitude of men and women saints, of every age and social condition, of every language, people, and culture. Everyone is different from the other, each unique in his own personality and spiritual charism. All of them, however, were impressed with the “seal” of Jesus (cf. Rv7:3) or the imprint of his love witnessed through the Cross.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, Audience, Vatican Website, April 13, 2011.

¹⁵⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Holiness is Always in Season* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 13.

Thus, in the garden of the world, there are many paths to holiness all originating from the one source: the person of Jesus Christ. One of these paths is found in sacramental marriage. This will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Sacramental marriage

The universal call to holiness is addressed in a special way to Christian spouses who are called to be Christ-like in and through their marriage. As they signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and his Church, they help each other attain to holiness in their married life and in the rearing and education of their children.¹ Marriage then involves a process of transformation initiated and completed by Christ. Since the aim of this thesis is to apply the writings of Pope Benedict XVI on ‘transformation’ to couples in sacramental marriage, it is essential to consider the characteristics of sacramental marriage and how couples can seek holiness through the power of the sacrament. Thus, this chapter will include an outline of the goods of marriage and an overview of marriage based on *Gaudium et Spes*. It will explore the sacramentality of marriage and its participation in the spousal relationship of Christ and the Church. It will also address the role of grace in sacramental marriage, the importance of the couple’s cooperation with grace and their openness to the Holy Spirit. Lastly, this chapter will highlight the significant role of the Eucharist, the sacrament of reconciliation, prayer, the Cross and chastity in helping couples grow in holiness through marriage.

2.1 The three goods of marriage

In his defence of marriage against the Manichee heretics who held that sex was evil, St Augustine taught that “marriage enjoyed three intrinsic ‘goods’: *proles*, that is, the procreation of children; *fides*, that is, the mutual fidelity of the spouses; and *sacramentum*, the permanence of the union.”² The Catholic tradition made these three goods its own.³ In *fides*, it is expected that neither partner will engage in sexual activity outside of marriage. In *proles*, children will be accepted, nurtured and religiously educated, and in *sacramentum*, the marriage will never

¹ LG, 11.

² Peter J. Elliott, *What God Has Joined The Sacramentality of Marriage* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), 79.

³ Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (hereafter CC) Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, December 31, 1930, w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en.html, 36.

be dissolved and neither partner will be allowed to remarry, even for the sake of having children.⁴

Augustine placed a great emphasis on the binding indissolubility of marriage and compared those who separate or remarry to the apostate who turns its back to its espousal to Christ.⁵ Thus, in Christian marriage, the couple binds themselves not only to each other, but also to God. In the words of Matthias Scheeben, in the marriage contract

there is incurred and signified something more than a simple contractual obligation, namely, a holy, religious union and binding force . . . a sworn promise does not simply set up an obligation in the person promising toward the person to whom the promise is made, but also makes him responsible to God, and in God to the recipient of the promise, so that a violation of the promise takes on a sacrilegious character.⁶

Moreover, marriage, as *sacramentum* according to Augustine's understanding or as the indissoluble union of husband and wife, is grounded in the being of the spouses and the identity they freely gave to each other as husband and wife through the act of marital consent. Thus, "a spouse can no more become an ex-spouse than a father can become an ex-father or a mother an ex-mother."⁷

The goods of *fides* and *proles* stem naturally from the good of *sacramentum*. By pledging themselves to one another in the act of marital consent, Christian spouses commit themselves to the good of fidelity or *fides*. They realise that they are "summoned to be as faithful to one another as God is faithful to his people, as Christ is to his bride, the Church."⁸ Similarly, by giving themselves to one another in an indissoluble union, spouses give to one another their procreative sexuality. Being married is "precisely what constitutes them as persons who have a right to bear and educate children of their own."⁹

It is important to note that conjugal love must not be identified as one of the ends of marriage. Dietrich von Hildebrand, who played a significant role in emphasizing the importance of love in marriage, described conjugal love as "the primary meaning" of marriage rather than its end. For Hildebrand,

⁴ Michael G. Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament A Theology of Christian Marriage* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 58.

⁵ Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 80.

⁶ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert (London: B. Herder Book Co, 1946), 598.

⁷ William E. May, *Sex, Marriage and Chastity Reflections of a Catholic Layman* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1981), 38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

marriage is the closest and most intimate of all earthly unions in which, more than in any other, one person gives himself to another without reserve, where the other in his complete personality is the object of love, and where mutual love is in a specific way the theme (that is to say, the core) of the relationship.¹⁰

Consequently, conjugal love is not an end in itself but rather what gives meaning to the ends of marriage. This was affirmed by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical on the Regulation of Birth, *Humanae Vitae*, when he described conjugal love as the means by which husband and wife “tend towards the communion of their beings in view of mutual personal perfection, to collaborate with God in the generation and education of new lives.”¹¹

2.2 An overview of marriage based on *Gaudium et Spes*

The Church’s vision of marriage is captured in a brief yet comprehensive statement in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, where it is described as “the intimate partnership of life and the love which constitutes the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws; it is rooted in the contract of its partners, that is, in their irrevocable personal consent.”¹² In this concise description, one can note four characteristics of Christian marriage. First, it is an institution of divine origin. Second, it has its own nature and laws established by the Creator. Third, it is essentially a personal form of communion. Last, it is ‘entered into’ only through the free and irrevocable consent of the persons themselves.¹³ Since it is the Creator who is the author of marriage and the one who has established its laws, Christian spouses need to understand God’s plan for marriage and follow it faithfully in order to gain fulfilment and happiness. Through their fidelity to God’s plan, Christian couples seek not only their private good but also the common good of society.¹⁴

The description of marriage as “an intimate community of conjugal life and love” reflects the Church’s vision of marriage as a very special form of partnership that involves a

¹⁰ Dietrich von Hildebrand quoted by Rolando B. Arjonillo in *Conjugal Love and the Ends of Marriage A Study of Dietrich Von Hildebrand and Herbert Doms in the Light of the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes* (Berne: European Academic Publishers, 1998), 58.

¹¹ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, Encyclical Letter on Birth Control (hereafter HV) (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2008), 8.

¹² Second Vatican Council, “*Gaudium et Spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” (hereafter GS) in *The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican II*, ed. Austin Flannery (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), 48.

¹³ Mark A. Pilon, *Magnum Mysterium The Sacrament of Matrimony* (New York: Alba House, 2010), 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

profound and intimate bond of communion between a man and a woman. This deeply personal bond is distinct from all other forms of communion or friendship. It is specified as “conjugal”, a form of love that involves a complete sharing of one’s person.¹⁵ Thus, spouses are called to give themselves to each other in a “total” manner. John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Christian Family in the Modern World, *Familiaris Consortio*, used the words of Tertullian to describe the total gift, the beauty and the depth of conjugal love:

How can I ever express the happiness of the marriage that is joined together by the Church, strengthened by an offering, sealed by a blessing, announced by angels and ratified by the Father? . . . How wonderful the bond between two believers, with a single hope, a single desire, a single observance, a single service! They are both brethren and both fellow servants; there is no separation between them in spirit or flesh. In fact they are truly two in one flesh, and where the flesh is one, one is the spirit.¹⁶

Hence, the fullness of conjugal love between Christian spouses is unique and cannot be found in any other form of human love.

The description of marriage in *Gaudium et Spes* also stresses the importance of the irrevocable personal consent of the couple entering marriage. Without this free act of consent, marriage cannot be valid. The couple needs to consent freely to offering themselves unreservedly to each other not for the purposes that they determine, but for the specific ends of marriage which were determined by God himself. Moreover, it is important to note that the free consent of the couple is also irrevocable. Once their vows are sealed by God in the bond of marriage, they are no longer free to change their mind. The reason for this is outlined in *Gaudium et Spes*:

For the good of the partners, of the children, and of society this sacred bond no longer depends on human decision alone. For God himself is the author of marriage and has endowed it with various values and purposes.¹⁷

In other words, God is involved in the exchange of vows between spouses. They make a free act of consent and He seals their bond according to His eternal plan for marriage. Hence, in every marriage there are three wills involved, two human and one divine.¹⁸

The indissolubility of Christian marriage is based on God’s plan in which the union between man and woman is a sign of the indissoluble union between Christ and his bride, the

¹⁵ Ibid, 2.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Apostolic Exhortation on the Christian Family in the Modern World (hereafter FC) (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1981), 13.

¹⁷ GS, 48.

¹⁸ Pilon, *Magnum Mysterium*, 15.

Church. In *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II notes that the revelation that Jesus Christ makes about the original truth of marriage

reaches its definitive fullness in the gift of love which the word of God makes to humanity in assuming a human nature, and in the sacrifice which Jesus Christ makes of himself on the cross for his bride, the Church. In this sacrifice there is entirely revealed that plan which God has imprinted on the humanity of man and woman since their creation, the marriage of baptised persons thus becomes a real symbol of that new and eternal covenant sanctioned in the blood of Christ.¹⁹

Hence, for John Paul II, the relationship between spouses, understood according to the image of the relationship between Christ and the Church, reveals the essential truth about marriage, namely, that Christian marriage must “mirror the love that Christ, the bridegroom, gives to the Church, his bride, and which the Church seeks to give back to Christ in return.”²⁰

Another aspect of the description of Christian marriage in *Gaudium et Spes* is the fact that it is “rooted in the covenant of the partners”. Since the new relationship between God and his people was established by Christ as the new covenant, Christian marriage, which mirrors the relationship between Christ and his Church, is also a permanent covenant relationship.²¹ The word “covenant” was chosen by the Council Fathers “as a Christian, biblical term, to provide God’s binding basis for the intimate partnership of life and love which constitutes the married state.”²² It points to the sacred character of marriage, its religious nature rather than its legal nature. It emphasizes the permanency of marriage. It also highlights the uniqueness of the subjects of marriage as persons rather than things.²³

2.3 Marriage as a sacrament

Marriage was part of the Church’s life from the beginning. However, the sacramentality of marriage was understood and clarified only gradually on the level of dogmatic reflection.²⁴ The Fathers of the Church understood the sacramentality of marriage as a sign and reference to Christ’s union with the Church from which flows the indissolubility of marriage. Augustine

¹⁹ FC, 13.

²⁰ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them. A Theology of the Body* (hereafter TOB) (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 476.

²¹ Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 176.

²² Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 178.

²³ Pilon, *Magnum Mysterium*, 14.

²⁴ Marc Cardinal Ouellet, *Mystery and Sacrament of Love A Theology of Marriage and the Family for the New Evangelisation* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 45.

contributed significantly to this understanding through his teaching on the three ‘goods’ of marriage. Later theologians would be able to analyse and systemize what Augustine had attained: the ‘third good’ *sacramentum* is

raised by the ‘great mystery’ to become a ‘sacrament’ for Christians, a sacred symbol which signifies that mystery of Christ’s deathless love for his spouse the Church, a sacred symbol which, therefore, causes what it signifies, an indissoluble bond between Christian husband and wife.²⁵

The understanding of marriage as ‘sacrament’ in its definitive meaning, that is, as one of the seven sacraments, was developed by St Thomas Aquinas. He wrote:

Matrimony, then, in that it consists in the union of a husband and wife purposing to generate and educate offspring for the worship of God, is a sacrament of the Church ... And as in the other sacraments by the thing done outwardly a sign is made of a spiritual thing, so, too, in this sacrament by the union of husband and wife a sign of the union of Christ and the Church is made; in the Apostle’s words: “This is a great sacrament, but I speak in Christ and in the church” (Eph. 5:32). And because the sacraments effect that of which they are made signs, one must believe that in this sacrament a grace is conferred on those marrying, and that by this grace they are included in the union of Christ and the Church, which is most especially necessary to them, that in this way in fleshly and earthly things they may purpose not to be disunited from Christ and the Church.²⁶

The view of marriage as a ‘sacrament’ between baptised persons was affirmed by the Council of Trent which defended marriage against the ideas of the Protestant Reformers. The Council addressed the true and proper sacramentality of marriage and the institution of the sacrament by Christ: “But the grace which was to perfect that natural love, and confirm that indissoluble union, and sanctify the persons married, Christ Himself, the instituter and perfecter of the venerable sacraments, merited for us by His passion.”²⁷

The teaching on the sacrament of marriage was further developed in later documents of the Church. Pope Leo XIII wrote in his encyclical *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae* that Christ raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament; that he gave husband and wife power to attain holiness in the married state through the heavenly grace his merits gained for them; and that by making marriage a sign of the mystical union between himself and his Church, he made the

²⁵ Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 84.

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, trans. J.O’Neil (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), chapter 78.

²⁷ Council of Trent, Twenty-Fourth Session, in *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. Rev. H. J. Schroeder (Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), 180.

natural indivisible union of one man and one woman far more perfect through the bond of heavenly love.²⁸

Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical *Casti Connubii*, stressed the permanence of marriage as a sacrament and its undying efficacious power by quoting Cardinal Robert Bellarmine:

The sacrament of matrimony can be regarded in two ways: first, in the making, and then in its permanent state. For it is a sacrament like to that of the Eucharist, which not only when it is being conferred, but also whilst it remains, is a sacrament; for as long as the married parties are alive, so long is their union a sacrament of Christ and the Church.²⁹

The documents of Vatican II placed a special emphasis on the grace that Christian spouses receive through the sacrament of marriage. *Lumen Gentium* affirmed that by partaking in the mystery of the union between Christ and His Church, Christian spouses help each other attain to holiness in their married life and in the raising of their children. They do so by means of a special gift they have among the people of God.³⁰ *Gaudium et Spes* highlighted the intimate partnership of married life and love and the close relationship between Christ and Christian spouses:

Just as of old God encountered his people in a covenant of love and fidelity, so our Saviour, the spouse of the Church, now encounters Christian spouses through the sacrament of marriage. He abides with them in order that by their mutual self-giving spouses will love each other with enduring fidelity, as he loved the Church and delivered himself for it.³¹

The same text in *Gaudium et Spes* asserted that human love participates in divine love by virtue of the sacrament, which enables the spouses to accomplish their mission:

Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is directed and enriched by the redemptive power of Christ and the salvific action of the Church, with the result that the spouses are effectively led to God and are helped and strengthened in their lofty role as fathers and mothers.³²

Finally, *Gaudium et Spes* stressed the role of the Holy Spirit in sacramental marriage in animating the growth and self-gift of the spouses:

Fulfilling their conjugal and family role by virtue of this sacrament, spouses are penetrated with the spirit of Christ and their whole life is suffused by faith, hope and

²⁸ Pope Leo XIII, *Arcanum Divinae*, Encyclical Letter on Christian Marriage, February 10, 1880 in *The Great Encyclical Letters of Leo XIII* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1903), 63.

²⁹ CC, 110.

³⁰ LG, 11.

³¹ GS, 48.

³² Ibid.

charity; thus they increasingly further their own perfection and their mutual sanctification, and together they render glory to God.³³

The marriage of two baptised Christians, being a sacrament, is an outward sign which confers inward grace. It is not simply a religious symbolic reality, but by being inserted into the Paschal Mystery, “it becomes a grace-filled sign of Christ’s union with the Church, and, therefore, it becomes a *grace-causing* sign.”³⁴ This grace of marriage is rooted in baptism as John Paul II affirms in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*:

By means of baptism, man and woman are definitively placed within the new and eternal covenant, in the spousal covenant of Christ with the Church. And it is because of this indestructible insertion that the intimate community of conjugal life and love, founded by the Creator, is elevated and assumed into the spousal charity of Christ, sustained and enriched by his redeeming power.³⁵

Moreover, through the grace of baptism, union between husband and wife becomes union with the body of Christ. Thus, in sacramental marriage, it is Christ who hands over the body of each spouse to the other and therefore, the spouses’ mutual self-gift becomes a gift of Christ.³⁶

The sacrament of marriage produces three major effects.³⁷ The first is the indissoluble bond which exists until the death of one of the partners. This indissolubility is a divine gift. It does not involve a fusion of personalities, “each personality remains distinct, and far from losing itself in the mutual gift, flourishes, improves, grows, affirms and is affirmed, for the length of married life.”³⁸ The indissoluble bond becomes a visible evidence to the world of God’s eternal unbreakable love and his unity with the Church. Resulting from the free human act of the spouses and the consummation of their marriage, this bond is irrevocable and “gives rise to a covenant guaranteed by God’s fidelity.”³⁹

The second effect of the sacrament is an increase in sanctifying grace. This increase of God’s divine life in the soul will be given in proportion to the interior disposition of each partner to receive this grace from God.⁴⁰ Thus, this effect may vary in degree in the two partners. The increase of sanctifying grace occurs in persons who are marrying in the state of

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Pilon, *Magnum Mysterium*, 67.

³⁵ FC, 13.

³⁶ Alain Mattheeuws, *Les “dons” du mariage. Recherch de théologie morale et sacramentelle* (Bruxelles: Culture et Vérité, 1996), 433-34, translated by Ouellet in *Mystery and Sacrament of Love*, 161.

³⁷ Pilon, *Magnum Mysterium*, 74.

³⁸ Pope Paul VI, *The Family, School of Holiness*, Address to the Équipes de Notre-Dame, 1970, translated by Elliott in *What God Has Joined*, 167.

³⁹ CCC, 1640.

⁴⁰ Pilon, *Magnum Mysterium*, 74.

grace. In the case where one or both partners are not in the state of grace at the time of their marriage vows, the grace of the sacrament will be take effect once the sinner reconciles with God in the sacrament of penance.⁴¹

The third effect produced by the sacrament is the gift of sacramental graces to assist the spouses reach their sanctification. Christ encounters Christian spouses in the sacrament of marriage,

dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ," and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love.⁴²

2.4 The participation of Christian marriage in the spousal relationship of Christ and the Church

God's original plan for marriage, which is found in the first three chapters of Genesis, is seen by John Paul II in his theology of the body as a "primordial sacrament", "a sign that efficaciously transmits in the visible world the invisible mystery hidden in God from eternity."⁴³ Only the body, in its masculinity and femininity, makes visible that mystery and transfers into the reality of the world what is spiritual and divine. Through his body, "man becomes a visible sign of the economy of Truth and Love, which has its source in God himself and was revealed already in the mystery of creation."⁴⁴ Thus marriage, as instituted in Genesis, becomes in a way "the central and consummate point of the sacrament of creation."⁴⁵ It has its divine source in holiness and is instituted for holiness which "permits man to express himself deeply with his own body, precisely through the 'sincere gift' of self."⁴⁶

The spousal meaning of the body flows from the spousal love of God for man. As the union of man and woman, marriage is the fundamental symbol of God's love for his people. God wants to be one with man. This union is most wonderfully and fully expressed in the

⁴¹ Ibid, 75.

⁴² CCC, 1642.

⁴³ TOB, 203.

⁴⁴ TOB, 203.

⁴⁵ Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained. A Commentary on John Paul II's "Gospel of the Body"* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2003), 356.

⁴⁶ TOB, 204.

person of Jesus Christ through the event of the incarnation. Hence, the incarnation, in the words of John Paul II, is “the definitive source of the sacramentality of marriage.”⁴⁷ It is

the definitive and ultimate ‘nuptial’ union. It is the union of divinity and humanity in the Person of the Word. It is the indissoluble sign of the Father’s covenant love for humanity, of the super-abounding grace bestowed upon the incarnate – that is, the human – person.⁴⁸

In Christ, God comes in the flesh as the Bridegroom to be united to His Bride the Church. This most intimate union is consummated on Calvary where “Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that He might sanctify her” (Eph 5:25-26). John Paul II refers to this new union as the sacrament of redemption. In the sacrament of creation, the mystery that was hidden in God from all eternity became a visible reality through the union of the first man and woman in the perspective of marriage. This same mystery, in the sacrament of redemption, becomes a visible reality through the indissoluble union of Christ with the Church, which St Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians, presents as the nuptial union of spouses. Thus, the sacramentality of marriage finds its ultimate foundation in the Paschal Mystery.

The mystery of God’s spousal love for humanity is fully revealed in a key scriptural text for sacramental marriage which can be found in St Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians 5:21-33. In this passage, the apostle highlights two important aspects: the headship of Christ over his Church and his espousing that Church in self-sacrificing love.⁴⁹ Husbands and wives are called to imitate the relationship between Christ and His Church in these two aspects. In Ephesians 5:22, we read: “Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord”. This verse does not imply any kind of submission by which the wife would become a servant or slave of the husband. The author

expresses a different concept instead, namely, that it is in her relationship with Christ – who is for both spouses the one and only Lord – that the wife can and should find the motivation for the relationship with her husband, which flows from the very essence of marriage and the family.⁵⁰

In the previous verse, Paul had called the spouses to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). Thus, their relationship is based on mutual submission out of reverence for Christ who becomes “the source and the at the same time the model of that submission.”⁵¹ Moreover, husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave his life

⁴⁷ West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, 314.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 50.

⁵⁰ TOB, 473.

⁵¹ TOB, 474.

for her (Eph 5:25). This kind of sacrificial love excludes the one-sided submission of wives and ensures a relationship of mutual love between spouses. The exercise of authority by the husband is then

not a matter of domination but a gift to marriage and family. For the husband to exercise his leadership and authority properly, he must be willing to be self-sacrificial and to subordinate his own private interests to the well-being and good of the marriage and family. Only in this way will he love his wife as Christ loves the Church.⁵²

The second aspect that is highlighted in the text of Ephesians is the spousal union between Christ and his Church in sacrificial love. The love of Christ for his Church is the model of love of the spouses. The purpose of this love can be found in verses 25-27:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish

Thus, the essential purpose of the love of Christ for the Church is her sanctification where she is presented without spot or wrinkle, that is, in a glorious state of holiness and absence of sin.⁵³ The process of sanctification is rooted in 'Baptism'. The person who is baptised "becomes at the same time – by virtue of the redemptive love of Christ – a participant in his spousal love for the Church."⁵⁴ Spouses are called to recapitulate in their marriages Christ's spousal union with themselves and hence, as they are cherished and nourished by the Bridegroom, they are to cherish and nourish one another.⁵⁵

The analogy of spousal love as a sign of Christ's love for his Church is also understood in light of the concept of 'reciprocal donation of self' as presented by John Paul II in his theology of the body. To be subject to one another means to live the total and sincere gift of self according to the nuptial meaning of the body, of masculinity and femininity.⁵⁶ In imaging the nuptial mystery of Christ's love for the Church, "the husband is above all the one who loves and the wife, by contrast, is the one who is loved."⁵⁷ This complementarity is written in the very anatomy of man and woman and since the body is the sacrament of the person, it is written in their very personality as male and female. The giving and receiving does not imply activity

⁵² William E. May, *Marriage: A Common Endeavour*, found on <http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/may/marriage.htm>.

⁵³ TOB, 484.

⁵⁴ TOB, 482.

⁵⁵ Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 57.

⁵⁶ West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, 317.

⁵⁷ TOB, 485.

and passivity nor does it limit giving to the masculine and receiving to the feminine. The giving and accepting interpenetrate in such a way that the giving itself becomes accepting, and the acceptance is transformed into giving.⁵⁸ In the words of William E. May, the man “gives in a receiving way,” whereas the woman “receives in a giving way.”⁵⁹

2.5 Grace in sacramental marriage

As Christian marriage is a sacrament, it is a way of sanctification. Christian spouses are called to reach holiness through their marriage. Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical *Casti Connubii*, wrote that the outward expression of love between spouses

demands not only mutual help but must go further; must have as its primary purpose that man and wife help each other day by day in forming and perfecting themselves in the interior life, so that through their partnership in life they may advance ever more and more in virtue, and above all that they may grow in true love toward God and their neighbour, on which indeed dependeth the whole Law and the Prophets.”⁶⁰

The sanctification of Christian spouses occurs through the whole of married life where the “everyday things that make up the conjugal life are sanctified and become, through the sacrament of marriage, the instruments and manifestations of the divine life in the soul.”⁶¹ This process of sanctification is only possible through the abundant flow of grace which spouses receive in the sacrament. Christ raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament and made it a sign and source of grace by which natural love is perfected, the indissoluble union of spouses is confirmed and both husband and wife are sanctified.⁶² In sacramental marriage, spouses “open up for themselves a treasure of sacramental grace from which they draw supernatural power for the fulfilling of their rights and duties faithfully, holily, perseveringly even unto death.”⁶³

The grace received through the sacrament of marriage is unique in the lives of Christian spouses. This is affirmed in both *Lumen Gentium* and *Casti Connubii*: Christian spouses have their own special gift among the people of God,⁶⁴ God has judged their love worthy of special

⁵⁸ West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, 320.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ CC, 23.

⁶¹ Canon Jacques Leclercq, *Marriage A Great Sacrament*, trans. The Earl of Wicklow (Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds Ltd, 1951), 31.

⁶² CC, 38.

⁶³ CC, 40.

⁶⁴ LG, 11.

gifts, healing, perfecting and exalting gifts of grace and of charity.⁶⁵ The sacrament of their marriage adds particular gifts, dispositions, seeds of grace, by elevating and perfecting the natural powers.⁶⁶

The special grace that is given to Christian spouses flows from the person of Christ who is at the centre of their relationship. Christ comes into their lives, abides with them so that just as He loved the Church and gave his life for her, the spouses may love each other through mutual self-gift.⁶⁷ Matthias Scheeben, writing on marriage in his work on the mysteries of Christianity, describes this flow of grace as having its source in Christ:

When a Christian man and woman contract marriage they enter into a closer union with the God-man as the bridegroom of the Church who abounds in grace. He Himself receives them and consecrates them as active organs in His mystical body. Thus, by reason of their new rank, new grace and new life must flow into them from the source of the head. This is chiefly an increase of sanctifying grace, but it also involves a right to all the actual graces they need in their new state for the fulfillment of their sublime duties.⁶⁸

Hence, it is the power of Christ's love that elevates the love of Christian spouses and transforms it in such a way that it becomes a visible and created reality capable of communicating God's love and grace.⁶⁹ This affirms the significance of Pope Benedict XVI's writings on transformation which can illuminate a great path to holiness for spouses in sacramental marriage.

2.5.1 The Holy Spirit and marriage

The role of the Holy Spirit in sacramental marriage is expressed in John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*:

The Holy Spirit who is poured out in the sacramental celebration offers Christian couples the gift of a new communion of love that is the living and real image of that unique unity which makes of the Church the indivisible Mystical Body of the Lord Jesus. The gift of the Spirit is a commandment of life for Christian spouses and at the same time a stimulating impulse so that every day they may progress toward an ever richer union with each other on all levels – of the body, of the character, of the heart,

⁶⁵ CC, 49.

⁶⁶ CC, 40.

⁶⁷ GS, 48.

⁶⁸ Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, 605.

⁶⁹ May, *Sex, Marriage and Chastity*, 53.

of the intelligence and will, of the soul – revealing in this way to the Church and to the world the new communion of love, given by the grace of Christ.⁷⁰

Therefore, it is through the Holy Spirit that Christian spouses are configured to the love of Christ, Bridegroom of the Church. It is He who leads them to true spousal communion and holiness. It is essential, therefore, that spouses maintain a concrete and persevering openness to the action of the Holy Spirit.

All the sacraments include a specific operation of the Holy Spirit. In marriage, there are two distinct but closely related ways in which the Holy Spirit is effective.⁷¹ The first consists in posing a divine seal on the conjugal bond which allows the spouses to be participants in the indissoluble union between Christ and the Church. Just as in the incarnation the Holy Spirit effected the hypostatic union in the person of Jesus Christ, the Spirit effects the bond between Christian spouses.⁷² The second way in which the Holy Spirit operates in marriage is through the outpouring of his grace. The effect of grace embraces the spouses' whole life and renders them able to reach their sanctification. In the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, Christian spouses

are penetrated with the spirit of Christ, which suffuses their whole lives with faith, hope and charity. Thus, they increasingly advance the perfection of their own personalities, as well as their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God.⁷³

The work of the Holy Spirit in sacramental marriage is beautifully captured in a text written by Cardinal Marc Ouellet in his book *Divine Likeness* in which he described the Holy Spirit as the great craftsman of the sanctification of conjugal love:

He transmits to the spouses something of his own way of being communion of Persons. Having taken possession of their love by the seal of the conjugal bond, he becomes the interior Master of their love, he teaches them to savour the joy of communion in a deeper and purer way; he invites them to love one another with his own love, which effaces itself, gently and sincerely, to leave to the other the primacy of gift or of welcome. In difficult times he patiently achieves the conversion of their hearts through the suffering of humiliation and reconciliation after sin; in all circumstances, he teaches prayer as the starting point of life, for the growth and the holiness of those persons called to sacramental love.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ FC, 19.

⁷¹ Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 146.

⁷² Ibid, 147.

⁷³ GS, 48.

⁷⁴ Marc Cardinal Ouellet, *Divine Likeness Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 129.

2.5.2 The Eucharist and marriage

The Eucharist is an indispensable gift containing the great mystery of which marriage is the sacrament. John Paul II called it “the very source of Christian marriage.”⁷⁵ In the Eucharist, “Christian spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage covenant flows, is interiorly structured and continuously renewed. As a representation of Christ’s sacrifice of love for the Church, the Eucharist is a fountain of charity.”⁷⁶ The active participation in the Eucharist reaffirms the spouses’ calling to live within and from the power of this covenant love. Whenever Christian spouses participate in the celebration of the Eucharist, they respond to their calling as Christians as well as to their vocation of marriage.⁷⁷

Expressing the depth of the relation between the conjugal covenant and the eucharistic mystery, John Paul II writes that the Eucharist

manifests the communion between the Father and the Son in the Spirit inserting the faithful within this communion, who thereby find themselves in communion with one another . . . [the new covenant] ‘shapes’ their love from within: they love one another not only as Christ loved, but already mysteriously, with the very love of Christ, for his Spirit is their gift inasmuch as they allow themselves to be shaped by him.⁷⁸

In one of his addresses to newlyweds, Pope Pius XII stressed this intimate connection between the Eucharist and marriage. He stated that in the family which needs an intimate union of love and peace, the Eucharist “unites and almost fuses hearts together.”⁷⁹ He then went on to say that

to bear the burdens, the trials, the common sorrows which no family, however well-ordered, can escape, strength is needed each day. The Eucharist is a source of strength, of courage, of patience, and the gentle joy which it diffuses in well-disposed souls makes them feel a serenity which is the most precious treasure of family life.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ FC, 57.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Bernard Häring, *Married Love A Modern Christian View of Marriage and Family Life* (Chicago: Angus Communications, 1970), 35.

⁷⁸ Pope John Paul II, *If You Knew the Gift of God*, Speech to Members of the International *Foyers des Équipes Notre-Dame* Movement, Vatican Website, September 23, 1982, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html, translated by Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 169.

⁷⁹ Pope Pius XII, *Dear Newlyweds Pope Pius XII Speaks to Young Couples* (Kingswood: The World’s Work Ltd, 1961), 198.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Thus, spouses who cut themselves off from the Eucharist, the centre of their union, have no longer access to its transforming power, and hence “retreat progressively towards the purely human horizon of their union, to the great detriment of the family and the Church.”⁸¹

2.5.3 The sacrament of reconciliation and marriage

Just as sin breaks the personal relationship of Christians with God, the sin of Christian spouses violates their covenant relationship with God who blessed them and united them in his love. Ouellet describes the sin of Christian spouses as a contradiction to their vocation to sacramental love. For him, the essence of that sin is the refusal of the covenant with God which is manifested in an obliviousness to the theological dimension of their union, a loss of the sense of Christ’s presence in their relationship and an indifference towards the Holy Spirit as an intimate partner in their love.⁸² Moreover, according to Ouellet, since sin leads the spouses to run away from the divine presence and “desert their mission as mediators of the gift of Love and of Life”, it consequently “affects the priestly depths of their being.”⁸³

Thus, the sacrament of reconciliation is indispensable for Christian spouses. It leads them back to their covenant relationship with God. John Paul II wrote in *Familiaris Consortio* that through this sacrament,

the married couple and the other members of the family are led to an encounter with God, who is ‘rich in mercy’, who bestows on them his love which is more powerful than sin, and who reconstructs and brings to perfection the marriage covenant and the family communion.⁸⁴

The sacrament of reconciliation becomes then a renewal and deepening of the spouses’ promises spoken at the marriage altar.⁸⁵ Since sacramental confession reconstructs true communion in the Lord, it becomes a source of holiness for the couple. In sacramental confession, the couple receives the gift of the Spirit and what was accomplished in the Paschal Mystery is accomplished in them as a paschal event of reconciliation.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 142.

⁸² *Ibid*, 141.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 143.

⁸⁴ FC, 58.

⁸⁵ Häring, *Married Love*, 34.

⁸⁶ Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 173.

Christian spouses are encouraged to have recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation since sin is a real threat to their communion with God and to their marriage. Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, asked married couples not to become discouraged when sin keeps its hold over them, but rather to have recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation where the mercy of God is found in abundance.⁸⁷ Similarly, John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*, writing about the broader communion of the family, affirms that

every family is called by the God of peace to have the joyous and renewing experience of “reconciliation”, that is, communion re-established, unity restored. In particular, participation in the sacrament of reconciliation and in the banquet of the one body of Christ offers to the Christian family the grace and the responsibility of overcoming every division and of moving toward the fullness of communion willed by God, responding in this way to the ardent desire of the Lord: “that they may be one”.⁸⁸

When spouses experience the mercy of God and receive forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation, they in turn can offer forgiveness to each other in their daily life. The sacrament of marriage becomes then “not only the sign of the love of Christ for his Church but of the victory He grants to spouses when they have to cope with forces which would deform and destroy their love.”⁸⁹

2.5.4 Prayer and the power of the Cross in marriage

Christian spouses have a priestly vocation based on their baptismal priesthood exercised in the sacrament of marriage whereby their lives are transformed into spiritual sacrifices.⁹⁰ According to John Paul II, this transformation in the lives of Christian spouses “is achieved not only by celebrating the Eucharist and the other sacraments and through offering themselves to the glory of God, but also through a life of prayer, through prayerful dialogue with the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.”⁹¹ Prayer, therefore, is essential for married couples who long to be holy.

Prayer also strengthens the union of Christian spouses in a very special way. This is affirmed by Pope Pius XII in one of his addresses to newlyweds:

⁸⁷ HV, 25.

⁸⁸ FC, 21.

⁸⁹ Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 186.

⁹⁰ FC, 59.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

who could be more truly and fully united in prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, than those upon whom holy Matrimony has impressed the living and permanent image of the sublime union of Christ himself with the Church, his beloved spouse, born on Calvary from the opening of his side?⁹²

United in prayer and fortified by the sacraments of Eucharist and reconciliation, Christian spouses are then able to deal with the suffering that marriage may carry. Married life is filled with challenges that may cause suffering. Husbands and wives can be wounded by misunderstanding, indifference, arguments, thoughtlessness and anger. Romantic love can grow cold in one or both spouses. Parenthood, with all its joys, may carry with it the possibility of sorrow. Financial worries or sickness may also cause suffering. The list is endless. In order to persevere in their union and live the bond of fidelity despite all their sufferings, Christian spouses need to embrace the mystery of the Cross. Imaging the love of Christ which was consummated on the Cross, the love between Christian spouses cannot exist without the Cross. It is elevated by Christ to “become the self-giving of his Cross.”⁹³

Thus, spouses need to enter the Paschal Mystery and die to themselves daily for the good of the other and the good of their marriage. They do so through Christ’s grace which “sets them free and restores them, precisely by raising them above their own limitations. And just as the incarnation of the Son of God reveals its true meaning in the Cross, so genuine love is self-giving and cannot exist if it seeks to detach itself from the Cross.”⁹⁴

2.5.5 The importance of cooperation with grace

Christ’s action in the sacrament of marriage does not take place automatically. It requires faith, hope, love and desire for him, and hence the interior disposition attitude of husband and wife play an important role in their cooperation with grace.⁹⁵ The sacrament of marriage is above all an encounter of persons. It

is not really liveable except in a constant conversion of the spouses to the very person of Christ. This conversion to Christ is then an intrinsic part of the nature of the

⁹² Pope Pius XII, *Dear Newlyweds*, 254.

⁹³ Elliott, *What God Has Joined*, 183.

⁹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the Participants in the Ecclesial Diocesan Convention of Rome*, Speech, June 6, 2005.

⁹⁵ Dennis Burke quoted by Philip Cody, *How God Works in Christian Marriage. A Study Based on Gaudium et Spes* (Rome: Pontificam Universitatem S. Thomae De Urbe, 1981), 46.

sacrament and it directly governs the meaning and scope of such a sacrament in the life of a couple.⁹⁶

The conversion of Christian spouses to Christ requires an assent of faith, a “yes” which mirrors Christ’s own “yes” to the Father as well as the “yes” of Mary to the incarnate Word.⁹⁷ This “yes” allows the Spirit to act upon the couple and transform their marriage. This is affirmed by John Paul II in a statement he made when comparing the Spirit’s action upon the eucharistic species to that upon the couple: “The Spirit can make conjugal love become the Lord’s own love; if the spouses let themselves be transformed, they can love with ‘the new heart’ promised by the new covenant.”⁹⁸ This makes the writings of Pope Benedict XVI on transformation very relevant to Christian spouses.

The cooperation of Christian spouses with grace is also noted in *Casti Connubii* where Pope Pius XI stressed the importance of cultivating the seeds of grace received in the sacrament of marriage:

Since it is a law of divine Providence in the supernatural order that men do not reap the full fruit of the Sacraments which they receive after acquiring the use of reason unless they cooperate with grace, the grace of matrimony will remain for the most part an unused talent hidden in the field unless the parties exercise these supernatural powers and cultivate and develop the seeds of grace they have received.⁹⁹

2.6 Chastity in marriage

Chastity is a virtue not only for celibates but also for married people. It is defined as “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.”¹⁰⁰ Chastity is incorrectly viewed as a negative human virtue. It is often understood as “a ‘blind’ inhibition of sensuality and of physical impulses such that the values of the body and of sex are pushed down into the subconscious, where they await an opportunity to explode.”¹⁰¹ Karol Wojtyła, in his book *Love and Responsibility* wrote about the true positive meaning of chastity. For him, it is impossible to understand the full meaning of

⁹⁶ Gustave Martelet quoted by Philip Cody, *How God Works in Christian Marriage*, 41.

⁹⁷ Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 170.

⁹⁸ Pope John Paul II, *If You Knew the Gift of God*, Speech to Members of the International *Foyers des Équipes Notre-Dame* Movement, Vatican Website, September 23, 1982, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html, quoted by Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 169.

⁹⁹ CC, 41.

¹⁰⁰ CCC, 2337.

¹⁰¹ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 170.

chastity apart from an understanding of love as “a function of the attitude of person to person.”¹⁰² The love between a man and a woman must have as foundation the affirmation of the value of the person where each of them desires the good of the other wholeheartedly.¹⁰³ This longing for the good of the other cannot exist if

the love between a man and a woman is dominated by an ambition to possess, or more specifically by concupiscence born of sensual reactions, even if these are accompanied by intense emotion. Such emotions give love a ‘relish’, but do not always contain its objective essence, which is inseparable from reciprocal affirmation of the value of the person.¹⁰⁴

The positive value of the virtue of chastity is characteristic of virtue in general. Angelo Scola described virtue as

an increase in freedom, a spiritual energy which forms the faculties and the inclinations and allows for excellent action. Far from being a mere repression of the passions, it realises their ‘truthful integration’ in the light of the truth about the good of the person called to the gift of himself in love.¹⁰⁵

To grow in virtue is to grow in the likeness of Christ. It is to participate in his own virtues and to participate in his perfect love of the Father. The virtues are like the ‘wedding gift’ Christ makes to his Church in the Spirit, to make her grow in love. Thus chastity, seen in this light, is not equated with continence, but is the virtue of true love strengthened by the Spirit.¹⁰⁶ Chastity leads Christian spouses to identify with Christ and hence purify their love from utilitarian attitudes.¹⁰⁷

Chastity then does not merely involve subduing the sensual appetites. It is rather a much deeper attitude of seeking the ‘good’ and embracing the true meaning of love. In chastity, “the desire to ‘enjoy’ is subordinated to a readiness to show loving kindness in every situation.”¹⁰⁸ Wojtyła comments on the fullness of chastity in the following statement:

The ability merely to subdue the appetites originating in sensuality as they arise falls short of virtue, it is not chastity in the full sense of the word, even if the individual concerned nearly always succeeds in controlling himself. Fully formed virtue is an efficiently functioning control which permanently keeps the appetites in equilibrium by means of its habitual attitude to the true good determined by reason.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² Ibid, 167.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 145.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 145.

¹⁰⁵ Angelo Cardinal Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, trans. Michelle K. Borrás (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 370.

¹⁰⁶ Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, 371.

¹⁰⁷ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 169.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 170.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 169.

The virtue of chastity is not easy to attain. It “includes an apprenticeship in self-mastery which is a training in human freedom”¹¹⁰ where the person chooses to act “as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint.”¹¹¹ This self-mastery is “a long and exacting work. One can never consider it acquired once and for all. It presupposes renewed effort at all stages of life.”¹¹² This is affirmed by Wojtyła who notes that chastity requires maturity internally and externally. He writes: “chastity is a difficult, long term matter; one must wait patiently for it to bear fruit.”¹¹³ Wojtyła also asserts that chastity “requires a special interior, spiritual effort, for affirmation of the value of the person can only be the product of the spirit.”¹¹⁴

The significance of an interior life in acquiring the virtue of chastity is also highlighted in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Pope Paul VI acknowledges the difficulties present in married life and encourages them to depend on God’s love which has been poured into their hearts through the Holy Spirit. He calls them to ask for divine assistance through persistent prayer, to draw from ‘the unfailing well of grace and charity’, the Eucharist and to have recourse to the sacrament of penance when sins keep hold of them.¹¹⁵ Commenting on *Humanae Vitae*, John Paul II notes that the ‘love poured out’ in the hearts of the spouses by the Holy Spirit is the essential and fundamental “power”.¹¹⁶ Prayer, the Eucharist and penance

are the means – infallible and indispensable – to form the Christian spirituality of conjugal and familial life. With their help, that essential and spiritually creative “power” of love reaches human hearts and, at the same time, human bodies in their subjective masculinity and femininity.¹¹⁷

2.7 Conclusion

Sacramental marriage is a participation of the spouses in the ‘new covenant’ of Christ; the spousal relationship between Christ, the Bridegroom and the Church, the Bride. It has three goods: *proles*, *fides* and *sacramentum*. The sacrament of marriage confers special grace on the

¹¹⁰ CCC, 2339.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid, 2342.

¹¹³ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 172.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 171.

¹¹⁵ HV, 25.

¹¹⁶ TOB, 641.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

spouses which helps them grow in holiness and achieve the ends of marriage, above all their sanctification. The grace they receive requires their cooperation through prayer and frequent recourse to the sacraments of the Eucharist and reconciliation. These means lead them to grow in virtue especially the virtue of chastity which helps them live in the truth of their spousal love. They also help them grow in love for each other and provide them with constant help to live the universal call to holiness according to their state of life. In maintaining a living personal relationship to Christ, spouses ensure that they live the sacrament of marriage in its fullness according to God's plan. One way of living a personal and intimate relationship with Christ is illuminated by the writings of Pope Benedict XVI on transformation which will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Transformation in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI

Pope Benedict XVI refers often in his writings to the process of “transformation” which a Christian undergoes once he encounters Christ. This theme forms the essence of salvation since to be saved from sin means to be transformed into a true image of Christ. This chapter will argue that the topic of transformation is at the heart of Benedict’s theological concerns. It will place an emphasis on the link between transformation and faith, conversion, the act of following Christ, the mystery of the Cross and relationships. By exploring the theme of “transformation” in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI, this chapter aims to apply it to couples in sacramental marriage who strive to live the universal call to holiness in their ordinary everyday life.

3.1 The theme of “transformation” in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI

Having been influenced by St Augustine and other writers such as Romano Guardini, Pope Benedict XVI does not see Christianity as an ideology or a set of beliefs, but rather as an encounter with the person of Christ who comes to reveal God’s face, to change us from within in order to redeem us from the forces of evil and give us a share in his divine life. This change involves a transformation process, a “letting go” of one’s old nature and “putting on” a new nature, as St Paul writes in his Letter to the Ephesians: “Put off the old man who is corrupted according to the desire of error, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind: and put on the new man, who according to God is created in justice and holiness of truth” (Eph 4:22-24).

This understanding of Christianity forms the theme of Dietrich Von Hildebrand’s book *Transformation in Christ* in which he wrote: “All true Christian life, therefore, must begin with a deep yearning to become a ‘new man’ in Christ, and an inner readiness to ‘put off the old man, a readiness to become something fundamentally different’.”¹ However, becoming “something fundamentally different” can only happen if one has a genuine encounter with the Lord who alone is able to transform hearts and change people from within. Pope Benedict XVI, in an address on the World Day for Prayer for Vocations in 2012, used St Augustine’s

¹ Dietrich Von Hildebrand, *Transformation in Christ*, 3.

experience to illustrate the effects of such transformation on a person who has encountered the Lord:

In a famous page of the Confessions, Saint Augustine expresses with great force his discovery of God, supreme beauty and supreme love, a God who was always close to him, and to whom he at last opened his mind and heart to be transformed: "Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all. You called, you shouted, and broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, not I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace."²

The great transformation which St Augustine had experienced could only happen through a personal encounter with a God who loves, who bends down and lifts man up to new horizons. For Pope Benedict XVI, it is this kind of transformation that marks the essence of being a Christian. He wrote: "To become a Christian, a human being must change, not merely in one place or another, but unconditionally, down to the very bottom of his being."³ The aim of such change is to decrease so that Christ may increase. This was clearly expressed in his Message for Lent 2013 when he said: "It is not enough for God that we simply accept his gratuitous love. Not only does he love us, but he wants to draw us to himself, to transform us in such a profound way as to bring us to say with Saint Paul: 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.'"⁴

The theme of being transformed by an encounter with the person of Christ recurs frequently in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI. In his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, he wrote: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."⁵ This encounter with Christ is an encounter with "a living person who transforms our innermost selves revealing to us our true identity as children of God."⁶ The link between transformation and the encounter with Christ was stressed by Pope Benedict XVI on other occasions. For him, a radical transformation begins to take place in one's being once he or she becomes sincerely open to an encounter with Christ.⁷ The power of such transformation is not the product of a thought but

² Pope Benedict XVI, *World Day for Prayers for Vocations*, Message, April 29, 2012.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Credo for Today. What Christians Believe* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 150.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent*, Message, Vatican Website, October 15, 2012.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Encyclical Letter, December 25, 2005, 1.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Year of Faith Introduction*, Audience, October 17, 2012.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Apostolic Exhortation, September 30, 2010, 50.

rather it stems from the irresistible presence of the person of Christ as St Paul had experienced through his conversion.⁸

The encounter with Christ can be experienced by anyone. It may not be as dramatic as in the case of St Paul, but can be just as powerful. Pope Benedict XVI commented in one of his audiences on the conversion of St Paul:

We are only Christians if we encounter Christ. Of course, he does not show himself to us in this overwhelming, luminous way, as he did to Paul to make him the Apostle to all peoples. But we too can encounter Christ in reading Sacred Scripture, in prayer, in the liturgical life of the Church. We can touch Christ's Heart and feel him touching ours. Only in this personal relationship with Christ, only in this encounter with the Risen One do we truly become Christians.⁹

As previously indicated, the transformation that stems from an encounter with the person of Christ involves a renewal, a change, a "turning away from" one's old way of life and "turning towards" a new way of life. St Paul wrote in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (5:17). Thus, in describing the process of transformation, Pope Benedict XVI uses terminology such as "*metanoia*", "repentance", "conversion" and "faith working through love."

The meaning of *metanoia* was clearly expressed in *Credo for today*: "*Metanoia* is not just some sort of Christian attitude but rather is actually the fundamental Christian act, understood of course, in terms of one very definite aspect; the aspect of change, the act of turning, of becoming new and different."¹⁰ Similarly, when speaking of conversion, in his visit to Rome's prison for minors, Pope Benedict XVI described it as a choice to abandon sin and return to God: "Conversion, which always, even before being an important effort to change our behaviour, is an opportunity to decide to get up and set out again, to abandon sin and to choose to return to God."¹¹ On Ash Wednesday, 2010, he also described conversion as the act of taking a new direction: "To repent [or convert] is to change direction in the journey of life: not, however, by means of a small adjustment, but with a true and proper about turn."¹²

Pope Benedict XVI also makes a connection between faith and transformation. In a homily, during his visit to Poland in 2006, he said: "Believing means entering into a personal relationship with our Creator and Redeemer in the power of the Holy Spirit, and making this

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *St Paul's Conversion*, Audience, September 3, 2008.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ratzinger, *Credo for Today*, 150.

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Visit to Rome's Prison for Minors*, Homily, March 18, 2007.

¹² Pope Benedict XVI, *Ash Wednesday*, Audience, February 17, 2010.

relationship the basis of our whole life.”¹³ In his Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*, he commented on how faith brings a new reality to the life of Christians. Through faith and cooperation, man’s thoughts and affections, mentality and conduct are “slowly purified and transformed, on a journey that is never completely finished in this life.”¹⁴

Another good illustration of the link between faith and transformation can be found in a homily he gave on the feast of the Assumption in 2006:

Believing is not adding one opinion to others. And the conviction, the belief, that God exists is not information like any other. Regarding most information, it makes no difference to us whether it is true or false; it does not change our lives. But if God does not exist, life is empty, the future is empty. And if God exists, everything changes, life is light, our future is light and we have guidance for how to live. Therefore, believing constitutes the fundamental orientation of our life. To believe, to say: “Yes, I believe that you are God, I believe that you are present among us in the Incarnate Son”, gives my life a direction, impels me to be attached to God, to unite with God and so to find my dwelling place, and the way to live.¹⁵

The interplay between transformation, *metanoia*, conversion, repentance and faith can be noted not only through an explanation of their meaning, but also through the use of these terms together on different occasions. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “Christ calls constantly for *metanoia*, conversion.”¹⁶ On another occasion, in a homily to members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, he said: “In faith, in this ‘transformation’ that repentance brings, in this conversion, in this new way of living, we arrive at life, at real life.”¹⁷ Faith was also described by Pope Benedict XVI as a change of mentality, a conversion.¹⁸ In one of his audiences in the Year of Faith, he said: “Saying ‘I believe in God, the Father Almighty’, in his power, in his way of being Father, is always an act of faith, of conversion, of the transformation of our thought, or the whole of our affection, of the whole of our way of life.”¹⁹

Thus, in studying ‘transformation’ in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI, one needs to make reference to the different terms he uses interchangeably with it. They all have one theme in common, that of encountering the person of Christ and allowing oneself to be shaped and moulded by him. It is only through that personal encounter with Christ that one can experience

¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Mass in Kraków*, Homily, May 28, 2006.

¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, Apostolic Letter, October 11, 2011.

¹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Homily, August 15, 2006.

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, Apostolic Exhortation, November 19, 2011.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Eucharistic Concelebration with Members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission*, Homily, April 15, 2010.

¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *God Reveals His Benevolent Purpose*, Audience, December 5, 2012.

¹⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *I believe in God the Father Almighty*, Audience, January 30, 2013.

metanoia, repent, convert, believe and be truly transformed from within, right to the core of one's being.

3.2 Transformation, faith and conversion

The themes of transformation, faith and conversion are interrelated in the thought of Pope Benedict XVI. In his Wednesday audiences during the Year of Faith, one notes how they are all woven into a beautiful tapestry that reveals God's love for his people. Describing what faith is, he said: "Faith is an assent with which our mind and our heart say their "yes" to God confessing that Jesus is Lord. And this 'yes' transforms life, unfolds the path toward the fullness of meaning, thereby making it new, rich in joy and trustworthy hope."²⁰

According to Pope Benedict XVI, faith, then, is born from a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ. One needs to know a person before he or she can love him: "The content or truth of faith asks for a conversion of life that gives life to a new way of believing in God. Knowing God, meeting him, deepening our knowledge of the features of his face is vital for our life so that he may enter into the profound dynamics of man."²¹

The significant role that a true encounter with Christ plays in acquiring faith is clearly expressed by Pope Benedict XVI in his audiences during the Year of Faith. For him, faith is not merely an intellectual act but rather an act of entrustment to God who gives a certitude that is just as solid as that which comes from science and precise calculations. Faith is an "act with which I entrust myself freely to a God who is Father and who loves me; it is adherence to a "You" who gives me hope and trust."²² Thus, faith is based on a genuine encounter with Christ who comes to change us, "converting our daily life, transforming within us mentalities, value judgments, decisions and practical actions."²³ Faith is never an illusion or an escape into a sentimental world; rather it is a force that affects our whole life and sets us free through a total embrace of the Good News of the Gospel.²⁴

²⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *What is Faith?* Audience, October 24, 2012.

²¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Year of Faith Introduction*, Audience, October 17, 2012.

²² Pope Benedict XVI, *What is Faith?* Audience, October 24, 2012.

²³ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Ways that lead to Knowledge of God*, Audience, November 14, 2012.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Faith leads to conversion as through faith “everything appears in a new light, so it is a true ‘conversion’; faith is a change of mentality.”²⁵ It is looking at the world through a new set of eyes, the eyes of God who gives his people the assurance of his salvation. This connection between faith and conversion which is very much influenced by the theology of St Augustine, is asserted again in one of his audiences in the Year of Faith:

Faith is welcoming, in life, God’s view of reality, it is letting God guide us with his words and sacraments in understanding what we should do, what journey we should make, how we should live. Yet at the same time, it is precisely, understanding according to God and seeing with his eyes that makes life sure, that enables us to ‘stand’ rather than fall.²⁶

To live transformation, one needs true conversion; one needs to leave the old self behind and be open to the transforming power of God’s grace. In other words, one needs to leave his own will in order to follow God’s will. For Pope Benedict XVI, conversion must not only be in attitude and behaviour, but it must involve one’s whole way of thinking, it “must go to the real core. This must happen because our way of looking at the world, of understanding reality, all our thought must change from its foundations ... We must learn to share in the thinking and the will of Jesus Christ. It is then that we will be new people in whom a new world emerges.”²⁷ Moreover, the act of being converted is an abandonment of one’s own personal success and self-sufficiency in order to follow Christ with simplicity, total surrender and trust. Only then, Jesus becomes for each one, as Mother Teresa of Calcutta liked to say, “my All in all.”²⁸

Such conversion, which involves a willingness to die to oneself and be formed anew by Christ, cannot occur once and for all; it must be a continual conversion that happens daily through a constant struggle to fight against evil and turn towards God. As Pope Benedict XVI said in his homily on Palm Sunday in 2009:

the great ‘yes’ of the decisive moment in our life – the yes to the truth that the Lord puts before us – must then be won afresh every day in the situations of daily life when we have to abandon our ‘I’ over and over again, placing ourselves at the Lord’s disposal when deep down we would prefer to cling to our ‘I’.²⁹

When speaking on the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul in 2009, Benedict noted that conversion involves two steps. The first requires a certain knowledge and recognition of one’s faults as seen in the light of Christ. This recognition produces a sense of sorrow, contrition and

²⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *God Reveals His Benevolent Purpose*, Audience, December 5, 2012.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*, Homily, June 28, 2009.

²⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Ash Wednesday*, Audience, February 21, 2007.

²⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Celebration of Palm Sunday of the Passion of Our Lord*, Homily, April 5, 2009.

a desire to begin anew. In the second step, one needs to realise that the journey of ‘beginning again’ and ‘changing from within’ does not depend on one’s own effort or action, but rather on surrendering completely to Christ and letting oneself be conquered and formed by him. Conversion involves a process of death and resurrection. This explains why St Paul does not say: “I am converted”, but he says “I died” (Gal 2:19), I am a new creature.³⁰

Thus, repentance and contrition are essential components of conversion. Hildebrand stresses this point in his book *Transformation in Christ*: “The initial step of the soul’s meeting with God bears the mark of contrition ... Without a radical breach with our past sins we can evince no readiness to be transformed by God.”³¹ He adds:

He who is filled with true penitence will not only say to God: “Turn away Thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities,” but continue thus: “Create a clean heart in me, O God: and renew a right spirit within my bowels . . . Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and strengthen me with a perfect spirit.”³²

The relationship between contrition, conversion and transformation is also noted in Sacred Scripture. God, who dwells in the person who has a contrite and humble spirit, comes to revive his heart and thus transforms him from within: “I dwell in the high and holy place and also with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Is 57: 15). God does not manifest his transforming power in proud men, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5). Instead, God acts in those who recognise their sins and experience true contrition in their hearts: “But this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word” (Is 66:2). When a person has a contrite spirit, God grants him a conversion of heart, a return towards his true self as a child of God: “Yet to those who repent he grants a return, and he encourages those whose endurance is failing, and he has appointed to them the lot of truth” (Sir 17:24).

Pope Benedict XVI illustrates that same relationship between repentance (contrition), faith and conversion in an audience given on Ash Wednesday, in 2010. Commenting on the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15), he said that “to repent” and “to believe” are not two different things, but rather they share the same and one reality. Repentance and conversion are not mere decisions to change one’s moral actions, but rather they have as their

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Feast of Conversion of St Paul*, Homily, January 25, 2009.

³¹ Hildebrand, *Transformation in Christ.*, 31.

³² *Ibid.*, 39.

foundation a decision of faith, a total surrender to a real and living person. One who experiences conversion and repentance is also one who believes and is willing to live life in communion with the person of Christ allowing oneself to be transformed by the Gospel.³³

Hence, to convert is to say “yes” to the person of Christ, to believe in him, to gaze at his splendid face and to adopt his way of thinking. Pope Benedict XVI affirms that “every day presses us to give ourselves to Jesus, to trust in him, to abide in him, to share his lifestyle, to learn true love from him, to follow him in the daily fulfilment of the Father’s will, the one great law of life.”³⁴ This involves true repentance, leaving behind all that pulls one away from the love of God.

The second dimension of conversion that Benedict speaks about, namely letting oneself be conquered by Christ, involves an understanding that it is only God who can transform a person, only he can shape and mould that person into a true image of himself. Even faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit which enables us to respond to God’s initiative. In Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, we read: “To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God.”³⁵

Thus, transformation depends first and foremost on the action of grace in one’s life. It is God who converts, renews, changes and transforms. As Pope Benedict XVI said in a Wednesday audience on holiness:

A holy life is not primarily the result of our efforts, of our actions, because it is God, the three times Holy (cf. Is 6:3) who sanctifies us, it is the Holy Spirit’s action that enlivens us from within, it is the very life of the Risen Christ that is communicated to us and that transforms us.³⁶

Another image which Pope Benedict XVI uses to describe this process of transformation initiated by God is the image of God drawing man’s will upwards, towards his own will. In an audience about Easter Triduum, in 2011, he said that the whole process of our redemption is characterised by a certain movement from our will to God’s will. Jesus invites us to be part of that movement, to let go of our “no” and embrace the “yes” of the Son who abandons himself totally to the will of the Father. Jesus “in this transformation of ‘no’ into

³³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Ash Wednesday*, Homily, February 17, 2010.

³⁴ *Ibid.*,

³⁵ DV, 5.

³⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Holiness*, Audience, April 13, 2011.

‘yes’, in this insertion of the creatural will into the will of the Father, he transforms humanity and redeems us.”³⁷

Thus, transformation can only happen if one is open to the action of the Holy Spirit and to an encounter with the person of Christ who alone can transform our “no” into a “yes” to God’s will. How can one encounter Christ and be transformed by him? The answer can be found in one of Pope Benedict XVI’s statements: “We can have faith in the risen one only if we have encountered him. We can encounter him only by following him.”³⁸ Thus, following Christ forms the initial step in encountering him. One needs to follow him first in order to know him and to experience his transforming love. The act of following Christ then is vital for the transformation of every Christian.

3.3 Following Christ in order to be transformed by him

Following in the steps of Christ is essential if one is to be transformed by his love. In fact, the first message of the risen Lord, communicated by means of the angels and the women was: “come, follow me; I am going before you!” (Mk 16:7). In a homily, on the occasion of Palm Sunday in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI described in a magnificent way what “following Christ” meant for the first disciples as well as what it means for us today. For the first disciples, the “following” was both external and internal:

The exterior aspect was walking behind Jesus on his journeys through Palestine; the interior aspect was the new existential orientation whose reference points were no longer in events, in work as a source of income or in the personal will, but consisted in total abandonment to the will of Another. Being at his disposal, henceforth, became the *raison d’être* of life.³⁹

Today, the act of “following Christ” in its true essence, is an interior change. It requires leaving behind our own plans of success, gain and fulfillment and instead following someone greater, Jesus Christ who goes before us and shows us the way. He is truth and love. Following him means entering into the service of truth and love, losing oneself in order to find him. Thus, one no longer lives for oneself, for one’s own goals in life, but rather gives oneself completely to Another.⁴⁰

³⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Easter Triduum*, Audience, April 20, 2011.

³⁸ Ratzinger, *Credo For Today*, 109.

³⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Palm Sunday*, Homily, April 1, 2007.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

On another occasion, during a parish visit in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI stated that in following Christ, we are provided by the Lord with “abundant spiritual provisions in order to cross the desert of this world and make it into a fertile garden. These provisions are docile listening to his Word, the Sacraments and every other spiritual resource of the liturgy and of personal prayer.⁴¹ Thus, to be transformed in Christ, one must live a life of prayer, be open to the Word of God in Scripture and participate frequently in the sacraments from which grace flows abundantly.

The relationship between prayer and transformation is beautifully described in an address by Pope Benedict XVI, during his pastoral visit to Naples in 2007:

The power that changes the world and transforms it into the kingdom of God, in silence and without fanfare, is faith – and prayer is the expression of faith. When faith is filled with love for God, recognised as a good and just Father, prayer becomes persevering, insistent, it becomes a groan of the spirit, a cry of the soul that penetrates God’s Heart. Thus, prayer becomes the greatest transforming power in the world.⁴²

This close relationship between prayer and transformation was also highlighted by Benedict XVI during his address at the occasion of the beatification of Cardinal Newman. He recalled Cardinal Newman’s view of prayer as an elevation of the soul to God in every situation, every place and every season. When we pray, we gain a new set of ideas and fresh principles, we are no longer what we were before, but instead, through our faithfulness to prayer, we are transformed gradually into the likeness of God.⁴³

Moreover, Pope Benedict XVI affirms that prayer has power to transform us into salt and light for the whole world. Through prayer, we become receptive to God’s grace and to the action of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. Prayer allows us to be more disposed to hear the still voice of God, to cooperate with his grace and to become salt and light for the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴

The bond between prayer and transformation was also stressed by Pope Benedict XVI on two other occasions. In an audience entitled *Man in Prayer*, he stated that: “the primary aim of prayer is conversion, the flame of God that transforms our heart and enables us to see God and so to live in accordance with God and live for others.”⁴⁵ In another audience on prayer,

⁴¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Visit to the Parish of Santa Felicita e Figli martiri*, Homily, March 25, 2007.

⁴² Pope Benedict XVI, *Pastoral Visit to Naples*, Travels, October 21, 2007.

⁴³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Beatification of Cardinal Newman*, Travels, September 19, 2010.

⁴⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *World Youth Day Mass*, Travels, July 20, 2008.

⁴⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Man in Prayer*, Audience, June 15, 2011.

he noted that “praying means raising oneself to God’s heights, through a necessary, gradual transformation of our being.”⁴⁶

Another way of following Christ is reading Scripture. It leads to a profound transformation of one’s heart. During the opening of the twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Benedict XVI urged believers to ‘enter into intimacy’ with God’s word which alone can profoundly change man’s heart.⁴⁷ This transformation which is caused by an intimate listening to God’s word was also affirmed in another address where he described reading Scripture as a personal encounter with the Lord of life, an encounter that involves making concrete decisions.⁴⁸ Only when one makes concrete decisions and firm resolutions that one can gradually be transformed into divine likeness.

According to Pope Benedict XVI, reading and understanding Scripture must not depend only on the conceptual analysis of a biblical passage, but also on the progress of conversion that is happening in the heart of the believer. One can only arrive at an exact understanding of Scripture if both mind and heart are being purified in the process.⁴⁹ Thus, a correct reading of Scripture requires inner transformation. It is only when we are being conformed to Christ, that we become capable of understanding his Word in its fullness. The link between Scripture and transformation can also be found in Pope Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* in which he wrote that during contemplation of Scripture, we take up God’s own way of seeing reality and we “ask ourselves what conversion of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of us?”⁵⁰

Furthermore, Pope Benedict XVI highlights the transforming effect of Scripture on one’s life by describing the intimate relationship between Mary and the Word of God:

We see that Mary was, so to speak, “at home” with God’s word, she lived on God’s word, she was penetrated by God’s word. To the extent that she spoke with God’s words, she thought with God’s words, her thoughts were God’s thoughts, her words, God’s words. She was penetrated by divine light and this is why she was so resplendent, so good, so radiant with love and goodness.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Prayer*, Audience, October 3, 2012.

⁴⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Opening of the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, Homily, October 5, 2008.

⁴⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Psalm 119 (118)*, Audience, November 9, 2011.

⁴⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *John Scotus Erigena*, Audience, June 10, 2009.

⁵⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, 87.

⁵¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Feast of the Assumption*, Homily, August 15, 2005.

Mary's radiant love and goodness stem from the transforming power of God's word. She was open and receptive to God's word, allowing her thoughts, her words and her whole life to be transformed by God. Thus, one experiences transformation to the extent that he lets himself be penetrated wholly by God's word each day.

Another source of transformation for Pope Benedict XVI is the Eucharist. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, he described how the gift of the Eucharist effects transformation in us and causes us to begin living eternal life even now. The Eucharist has power to transform our existence. In Pope Benedict XVI's words, "it is not the Eucharistic food that is changed into us, but rather we who are mysteriously transformed by it."⁵² Not only has the Eucharist power to transform individuals, but also the entire history and cosmos. In a homily on the Solemnity of the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ, Pope Benedict XVI said:

God wishes to continue to renew humanity, history and the cosmos through this chain of transformations, of which the Eucharist is the sacrament. Through the consecrated bread and wine, in which his Body and his Blood are really present, Christ transforms us, conforming us to him: he involves us in his work of redemption, enabling us, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to live in accordance with his own logic of self-giving, as grains of wheat united to him and in him.⁵³

The sacrament of reconciliation is another way of following Christ closely and being transformed by him. Pope Benedict XVI, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*, described the sacrament of reconciliation as a "school of the heart" where the follower of Christ grows in his Christian life by paying close attention to the spiritual and moral dimensions of his actions. The sacrament of reconciliation allows one to face life's difficulties with the spirit of the Gospel and to experience conversion in a unique way.⁵⁴ Conversion is always the result of a humble admission of one's need for God's mercy.⁵⁵ It is only when one is able to accept the need for God's redemption that he or she can experience a process of transformation.

3.4 Transformation and the mystery of the Cross

Christian transformation is rooted in the mystery of the Cross. An example of how Benedict XVI explains transformation and the Cross can be found in his homily during the

⁵² Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Post-Synodal Exhortation, February 22, 2007, 70.

⁵³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Solemnity of the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ*, Homily, June 23, 2011.

⁵⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, Apostolic Exhortation, November 19, 2011, 32.

⁵⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2010*, Message, October 10, 2009.

Chrism Mass in 2008. He described Christ's love as having a transforming power. It transforms the Cross, the act of killing, into an act of giving. It also transforms every believer from being mere human into a sharer in God's divine life. Through the transforming power of Christ's love, our whole life becomes "a passage" and a transformation.⁵⁶

To be transformed in Christ is to participate in his death and resurrection. It involves following the path of a grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies in order to bear much fruit. When speaking about St Paul's conversion, Pope Benedict XVI said: "Far from being merely a stage in Paul's personal growth, this was a death to himself and a resurrection in Christ: one form of life died in him, and a new form was born, with the Risen Christ."⁵⁷ In every act of transformation, one needs to die to oneself in one way or another. One needs to leave behind a certain way of being in order to be conformed to the image of Christ.

This reality is portrayed in the Gospel: "Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it" (Lk 17: 33). Thus, in the process of transformation, one needs to anticipate suffering. Pope Benedict XVI stressed this point in his homily on the Solemnity of Pentecost in 2010. He affirmed that when we lose ourselves for the true God, we begin to experience peace and joy that can never be found in the world. In fact, we begin to find the fullness of our existence. In this context, Benedict XVI also invited us to let ourselves be touched by the fire of the Holy Spirit; a fire that, even though causes suffering, is also necessary for our transformation. He added: "It is not without reason that in the language of Jesus, 'fire' is above all a representation of the mystery of the Cross, without which Christianity does not exist."⁵⁸

The acceptance of suffering as a necessary part of transformation is also noted in a speech given by him to the clergy of the Italian Diocese of Aosta. He said that "suffering itself is the way to transformation, and without suffering nothing is transformed."⁵⁹ Thus, one needs to accept suffering, in order to enter the mystery of the Cross rather than trying to eliminate it. Not only is suffering necessary for transformation, but it is also closely connected with love. Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his encyclical, *Spe Salvi*:

Even the "yes" to love is a source of suffering, because love always requires expropriations of my "I", in which I allow myself to be pruned and wounded. Love

⁵⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Chrism Mass*, Homily, March 20, 2008.

⁵⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Pastoral Visit to the Roman Parish of the Holy Face of Jesus at Magliana*, Homily, March 29, 2009.

⁵⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Eucharistic Celebration of the Solemnity of Pentecost*, Homily, May 23, 2010.

⁵⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Meeting with clergy of the Italian Diocese of Aosta*, Speech, July 25, 2005.

simply cannot exist without this painful renunciation of myself, for otherwise it becomes pure selfishness and thereby ceases to be love.⁶⁰

Thus, transformation in Christ who is Love, calls one to enter into the mystery of the Cross, in his death and resurrection. It involves continual dying to oneself in order to be renewed and conformed to the image of Christ. Even though, the shaping and moulding of that image may be painful, it is precisely this pain that acts as a grace in achieving God's work in us.

3.5 The effect of transformation on relationships

Encountering Christ and being converted to his love have a significant effect on one's relationships with others. This stems from the unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbour. One cannot love God without loving his neighbour. In fact, as Pope Benedict XVI stated in his message for Lent in 2013:

The Christian life consists in continuously scaling the mountain to meet God and then coming back down, bearing the love and strength drawn from him, so as to serve our brothers and sisters with God's own love.⁶¹

This close relationship between love of God and love of neighbour was emphasised by him on many other occasions. In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, he noted that love of neighbour is possible through an intimate union with God where one's will is united to God's will. This communion of will not only affects our behaviour, but also our feelings. We begin to look at the other person through the eyes of Christ and we begin to love even the person whom we do not like.⁶²

When we enter into the very life of God through an intimate relationship with him, only then can his love become active in us. In his message for Lent in 2013, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: "When we make room for the love of God, then we become like him sharing in his own charity. If we open ourselves to his love, we allow him to live in us and to bring us to love with him, in him and like him; only then does our faith become truly 'active through love' (Gal 5:6)."⁶³

⁶⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, Encyclical, November 30, 2007, 38.

⁶¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2013*, Message, October 15, 2012.

⁶² Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Encyclical, December 25, 2005, 18.

⁶³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2013*, Message, October 15, 2012.

This, of course, involves a true communion with the person of Jesus, a communion that leads in turn to a true communion with others. In his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI stressed the importance of being in communion with Jesus Christ. He noted that only through such communion are we capable of living for others and be there for them.⁶⁴ Once one's relationship with God is destroyed through sin, all other relationships are then altered.⁶⁵

Thus, salvation from sin is not only aimed at restoring our relationship with God but also our relationship with others. Pope Benedict XVI affirmed the importance of this reality in *Africae Munus* where he noted that reconciliation does not only aim at drawing sinful persons to God through forgiveness of their sins, but it also aims at restoring relationships between people and removing all obstacles that prevent them from experiencing God's love.⁶⁶

A great example of how God's love can transform relationships is found in the life of St Paul, as referred to by Pope Benedict XVI:

Every personal encounter with Jesus is an overwhelming experience of love. Previously, as Paul himself admits, he had "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (Gal 1:13). But the hatred and anger expressed in those words was completely swept away by the power of Christ's love. For the rest of his life, Paul had a burning desire to carry the news of that love to the ends of the earth.⁶⁷

Thus, Paul's relationship with the Church was transformed from being a relationship of hatred and persecution to a relationship of love and restoration. This transformation was the result of an experience of God's love that alone can renew the human heart.

Pope Benedict XVI affirmed this strong bond between love of God and love of others on other occasions. In an audience, in 2012, he said that "the relationship with the Lord is the relationship that gives light to all our other relationships."⁶⁸ He also commented, in another audience during the same year, that "the encounter with Christ renews our human relationships, directing them, from day to day, to greater solidarity and brotherhood in the logic of love,"⁶⁹ Finally, in an audience in the Year of Faith, he stated: "Man on his own cannot redeem himself;

⁶⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, Encyclical, November 30, 2007, 28.

⁶⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *General audience*, February 6, 2013.

⁶⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, Apostolic Exhortation, November 19, 2011, 20.

⁶⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Meeting with Young People Malta*, Travel, April 18, 2010.

⁶⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, October 3, 2012.

⁶⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, October 17, 2012.

only the Creator himself can right relationships. Only if he from whom we distanced ourselves comes to us and lovingly holds out his hand can proper relationships be restored.”⁷⁰

3.6 Theological context of Pope Benedict XVI’s thought on ‘transformation’

3.6.1 The continuity of his thought

The thought of Benedict XVI’s on transformation is in continuity with the theological direction he had chosen as Joseph Ratzinger prior to his papacy. He had always asserted that being a Christian involved transformation, conversion and change based on an encounter with the person of Christ. In his book *Principles of Catholic Theology*, he wrote that

metanoia is not just any Christian attitude but the fundamental Christian act per se, understood admittedly from a very definitive perspective: that of transformation, conversion, renewal and change. To be Christian, one must change not just in some particular area but without reservation even to the innermost depths of one’s being.⁷¹

For Ratzinger therefore, becoming a Christian involves being purified, converted, turned around.⁷² In fact, a man becomes a Christian only by repenting.⁷³ This process of conversion and transformation is accomplished through faith. Ratzinger spoke of sin as being, in the final analysis, a loss of faith in God. In his book, *Seek That Which is Above*, he wrote: “the evil from which we ask to be delivered is, in the mind of Jesus, primarily and most importantly the loss of faith. For Jesus, the inability to believe in God and to live by faith is the evil of all evils.”⁷⁴ Thus, for Ratzinger, “the antidote to sin must be belief: faith in God.”⁷⁵ It is only faith that purifies and converts. However, it is important to note that this purifying faith does not stem from a human effort but is a gift from above and “Christ is central to it.”⁷⁶ Ratzinger argues that “the human person is oriented not to some interior depth but to the God who comes from

⁷⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *I believe in God: Maker of Heaven and Earth, the Creator of Man*, Audience, February 6, 2013.

⁷¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, trans. Sister Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 60.

⁷² Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Ideas*, 49.

⁷³ Hans Urs Von & Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Two Say Why*, trans. John Griffiths (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971), 70.

⁷⁴ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Seek That Which is Above. Meditations through the Year*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 127.

⁷⁵ Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Ideas*, 48.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

without ... only the Lord can effect our conversion, breaking our resistance to the powers that enslave us and enabling us to believe.”⁷⁷

At the heart of conversion and transformation lies the paschal mystery of Cross and resurrection. Following in the footsteps of St Augustine, Ratzinger is conscious of “humanity’s fallenness; and he envisages the pattern of God’s dealings with us as being, above all, converting and transformative – indeed ultimately paschal: grace purifies and turns around nature, as does Christ humanity, as does the Kingdom history.”⁷⁸ This paschal pattern of authentic Christian existence forms an essential feature of Ratzinger’s theology.⁷⁹ His emphasis on the Cross of Christ and on grace as fundamentally healing and transformative – is significantly distinctive; and “it is not the typical emphasis of many Roman Catholic theologians. Some argue that it is closer, rather, to Reformed theology.”⁸⁰ In fact, he frequently quotes Luther, and, like Luther, he emphasises “a theology of the cross that stresses the priority of grace over human achievement, philosophical reason, or ecclesial power.”⁸¹ For Ratzinger then, it is not through our own efforts that we are transformed but rather through the gift of faith bestowed through encounter with Jesus Christ.⁸²

This transformation through faith born out of an encounter with Christ has always been emphasised in Ratzinger’s theology. In a conversation with Peter Seewald, he stated that “faith is not just a system of knowledge, things we are told; at the heart of it is a meeting with Jesus. And ... this meeting with Jesus, among all those other meetings we have need of, is the truly decisive one.”⁸³ He also affirmed that encountering Christ requires following him for Jesus cannot be found at a fixed point. He lives on the way, going on before us. We learn where he lives and then we get to see him only in following him and accompanying him on the way.⁸⁴ Thus, for Ratzinger, following Christ is essential for a personal encounter with him. It requires a kind of discipleship that can only happen in the modality of the Cross, in the true losing of

⁷⁷ Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI*, 45.

⁷⁸ Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Ideas*, 33.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ James Corkery, “Reflection on the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI),” *Acta Theologica* 32 (2012): 24.

⁸¹ Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI*, 49.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God and the World. A conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 251.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 254.

oneself.⁸⁵ It leads to a faith that says “yes” to God in Jesus Christ; a faith that reaches the centre of the person and penetrates into what is most personal and intimate.⁸⁶

The intimate relationship between faith, transformation and encounter with Christ is captured beautifully by Ratzinger in his book *Introduction to Christianity*:

Faith is the finding of a “You” that bears me up and amid all the unfulfilled – and in the last resort unfulfillable – hope of human encounters gives me the promise of an indestructible love which not only longs for eternity but guarantees it. Christian faith lives on the discovery that not only is there such a thing as objective meaning, but this meaning knows me and loves me, I can entrust myself to it like the child that knows all its questions answered in the “You” of its mother. Thus in the last analysis believing, trusting and loving are one, and all the theses round which belief revolves are only concrete expressions of the all-embracing about-turn, of the assertion “I believe in You” – of the discovery of God in the countenance of the man Jesus of Nazareth.⁸⁷

This quote highlights one of the important features that lies at the heart and centre of Ratzinger’s theology and illuminates his later writings on transformation as Pope Benedict XVI: the priority of *logos* over *ethos*, of receiving over making, of being over doing.⁸⁸ This implies that “we do not make who we are through what we do but receive who we are from prior creative Love.”⁸⁹ Here we are at the core of what it means to believe; it is

understanding our existence as answer to the word, the *logos*, that bears up and holds all things. It means affirming that the meaning which we do not make but can only receive is already granted to us, so that we have only to take it and entrust ourselves to it. Correspondingly, Christian belief is the option for the view that receiving precedes the making – though this does not mean that making is reduced in value or proclaimed to be superfluous. It is only because we have received that we can also “make”.⁹⁰

Thus, transformation happens when we stop standing on our own relying on ourselves and instead be open to receive who we are as a gift from the One who gives meaning to our existence. We are transformed when we live Mary’s *Fiat* (“let it be done unto me”) allowing

⁸⁵ Ratzinger, *Seek That Which is Above*, 39.

⁸⁶ Pablo Blanco, “The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger: Nuclear Ideas,” *Theology Today* 68, no.2 (2011): 160.

⁸⁷ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 48.

⁸⁸ Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Ideas*, 31.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 33.

⁹⁰ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 43.

the relation to God and to all others in God to penetrate to the core of our being and thus to order from within all that we are and hence do and have.⁹¹ For Ratzinger, the “degree of perfection in human life is directly proportionate to the degree of this penetration, this transformation and integration of all that we are, and hence do and have, in terms of relation to, love of, God and all others in God.”⁹²

The priority of receiving over making as a distinctive feature of Ratzinger’s (and later Benedict XVI’s) theological vision is at the root of his concept of transformation. A Christian is not in charge of his own spiritual growth. He does not *achieve* transformation by living different acts of piety nor by behaving according to a good moral system. Instead, he *receives* transformation as a gift by opening himself to the person of Christ with total trust allowing him to touch and heal every aspect of his being. Thus, transformation requires letting go of one’s self-sufficiency and independency. It is the result of a conversion “from an I-involvement to a relationship of trust and to being included in a relationality that precedes the human being; a relationality that touches the human being so much that it changes the horizon of meaning of his or her existence.”⁹³

Another aspect of Ratzinger’s theology which illuminates his writings on transformation is the Christian’s participation in the paschal mystery. It is only by entering upon Christ’s “path of dying and rising, that we will reach the goal revealed in him.”⁹⁴ Only the one who loses his self finds it; only the one who gives life receives it (Mk 8:35). For Ratzinger, the losing of self in love is “resurrection because it is a dying. It is a cross contained in an Easter.”⁹⁵ Therefore, to be transformed in Christ, one needs to be prepared to die to oneself and to be burned by the fire of his divine love. As Ratzinger stated in a conversation with Peter Seewald:

Jesus does not come to make us comfortable; rather he sets fire to the earth; he brings the great living fire of divine love, which is what the Holy Spirit is, a fire that burns ... yet this is not a destructive fire but one that makes things bright and pure and free and grand. Being a Christian, then, is daring to entrust oneself to this burning fire.⁹⁶

⁹¹ David L. Schindler, “Is America Bourgeois?” *Communio* 14 (1987): 270.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Reader. Mapping a Theological Journey*, eds. Lieven Boeve & Gerard Mannion (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 53.

⁹⁴ Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Ideas*, 43.

⁹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, “Jesus Christ Today,” *Communio* 17 (1990): 78.

⁹⁶ Ratzinger, *God and the World*, 222.

Thus, transformation must pass through the Cross. To eliminate suffering is to eliminate love since there can be no love without suffering. Love always demands an element of self-sacrifice and always brings with it renunciation and pain.⁹⁷

3.6.2 The contribution of Pope Benedict XVI's writings on transformation to sacramental marriage.

Benedict's thought on transformation particularly his insistence on it being the fruit of a personal encounter with the Person of Christ forms a distinctive contribution to couples in sacramental marriage. To be transformed Christian spouses need to rely, not so much on practices of piety which are certainly important and indispensable for Christian life, but rather on entrusting themselves to Christ who gives them what they are incapable of acquiring on their own: meaning and truth. It involves letting go of self-reliance and self-preoccupation to receive from Christ with outstretched hands the gift of being changed and converted. Thus, transformation in couples depends in a certain sense on whether or not they allow themselves to be turned around letting their old existence to be taken away in order to receive a new one. Transformation always requires an act of faith in Christ on the part of the couple where they no longer live according to their own vision but instead they let Christ direct all aspects of their lives.

Marriages today stand in urgent need of Benedict XVI's contribution regarding transformation. Many Christian couples are struggling in their marriages despite their participation in the sacraments and their recourse to prayer. What they need is a deep encounter with Christ where they let go of their autonomy down to the roots and let themselves be changed by him in such a way that they become identified with him. Since sin attacks the relationality (being made for relationship) of spouses pushing them towards a relationless existence that is ultimately a refusal to love,⁹⁸ they need Christ to restore them to their true relational selves. They need him who, as the being-of-relation *par excellence*, the 'exemplary' human, can lead them back to love.⁹⁹ Christ who is a completely open being that clings to nothing of its own and stands nowhere on its own (The Son is fully open: 'from the Father, 'for' others)¹⁰⁰ restores couples to their true Christian existence which is existence *for*. Thus,

⁹⁷ Ibid, 322.

⁹⁸ Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger's Theological Ideas*, 42.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 43.

by encountering Christ, Christian spouses are moved away from egoism and preoccupation with self into an existence *for* Christ and *for* others. Having received from him what they are, their receptivity is completed in their responsiveness; in giving (back) to God and to each other.¹⁰¹

Faith in Christ, therefore, is closely linked to love. To believe in Christ whose Being is completely derived from the “Thou” of the Father and lived for the “You” of men, means simply to make love the content of faith.¹⁰² Faith which is not love is not a really Christian faith.¹⁰³ This has great implications for married couples. Spouses who open themselves to the transforming power of Christ through the gift of faith, grow in love for each other for “those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them.”¹⁰⁴ Married couples then are no longer preoccupied with themselves, with their own needs and preferences. Their life becomes centred on living for Christ and for others. They realise that on their own, their love shows many deficiencies. However, they let themselves be drawn by Christ beyond those deficiencies through his abundant love. Therefore, Christian spouses who encounter Christ in faith realise that they are, as Ratzinger says (using an image from Augustine) beggars before God, stretching out their hands to receive what only God can give.¹⁰⁵ They are not transformed by any efforts of their own but rather through what they accept as a gift.¹⁰⁶

Behind the concept of transformation in Benedict XVI’s writings stands a theology of the Cross. Being a Christian signifies “the abandonment of self-centredness and accession to Jesus Christ’s existence.”¹⁰⁷ The Christian man leaves behind the “privateness and peace of his ‘I’, departs from himself in order by this frustration of his ‘I’ to follow the crucified Christ and exist for others ... He is called to the continual exodus of stepping outside himself.”¹⁰⁸ This is significant for married couples. Those who are not willing to step outside themselves and let Christ convert them and transform them miss out on reaping the fruit of the Cross: access to true life.¹⁰⁹ They remain locked in on themselves clinging to their own way of seeing the world.

¹⁰¹ David L. Schindler, “Is America Bourgeois?”, 270.

¹⁰² Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 154.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 42.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, ‘Beten in unserer Zeit’ in : *Dogma und Verkündigung* (Munich:Wewel, 1973), quoted by James Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Vision*, 39.

¹⁰⁶ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 202.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 190.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 191.

They struggle to live in peace since they continue to live their lives revolving around themselves rather than Christ who is the only source of peace. On the other hand, those who, like Christ, embrace the fate of the grain of wheat and let themselves be sacrificed dying to themselves, experience a deep transformation effected by the Cross of Christ. This transformation touches all aspects of their lives and is based on entrusting themselves totally to the person of Christ.

Finally, Benedict XVI's contribution on transformation offers Christian spouses something very unique. It helps them renew and strengthen their marriage, not by *doing* or *achieving* certain tasks, but rather by simply *being* open to let themselves be changed and converted through their encounter with Christ. This contribution is especially needed today in a world that promotes self-sufficiency, independency, precise calculations and being in control of one's life. All these work against one's growth in holiness since being holy involves emptying oneself and letting oneself decrease so Christ may increase.

3.7 Conclusion

The process of "transformation" in the thought of Benedict XVI involves a real encounter with the living Person of Christ. It stems from a conversion of heart, a true repentance and a faith that is willing to surrender totally to the action of the Holy Spirit letting oneself be formed anew by the hands of God. To be transformed by God, one needs to become a 'follower' of Christ, entrusting oneself to him with total abandonment and trust in his love, letting go of one's self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Transformation cannot be achieved through one's efforts or merits, but rather through allowing oneself to be converted and changed by an encounter with Christ. Following Christ requires staying close to him through a life of prayer, meditation on the Word of God and participation in the sacraments of the Eucharist and of reconciliation. These provide a setting for a personal encounter with him where one's thoughts and decisions are continually shaped by his transforming love.

Transformation requires the gift of faith in God who is love. It is rooted in the Paschal Mystery through which one is called to die to oneself in order to rise again with Christ. It has a major effect on our relationships with others. Living in communion with God, seeing the world through his eyes and allowing ourselves to be formed by him, we can then love others through the power of his love.

Finally, the theme of transformation is also found in Benedict's earlier writings prior to his papacy. As Ratzinger, he had always emphasised the significance of conversion and transformation through a personal encounter with Christ. He placed a special emphasis on the importance of faith, the theology of the Cross and the primacy of receiving over making. The following quote captures his view of the intimate relationship between faith, transformation and the encounter with the Person of Christ:

Faith is the finding of a "You" that bears me up and amid all the unfulfilled – and in the last resort unfulfillable – hope of human encounters gives me the promise of an indestructible love which not only longs for eternity but guarantees it. Christian faith lives on the discovery that not only is there such a thing as objective meaning, but this meaning knows me and loves me, I can entrust myself to it like the child that knows all its questions answered in the "You" of its mother. Thus in the last analysis believing, trusting and loving are one, and all the theses round which belief revolves are only concrete expressions of the all-embracing about-turn, of the assertion 'I believe in You' – of the discovery of God in the countenance of the man Jesus of Nazareth.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 48.

Chapter 4: “Transformation” as applied to a couple’s growth in holiness in sacramental marriage

Christian spouses are called to strive for holiness in their ordinary everyday life through the sacrament of marriage. The holiness they are called to is not a ‘second grade’ type of holiness which is reserved for their state of life but is rather the same holiness to which all the baptised are called. It is the same holiness of all the great saints the Church has seen throughout the centuries. This universal call to holiness which was emphasized in Vatican II is still unknown to many Christian couples who seem to think that holiness is reserved for the privileged few religious and priests. They often lack a deep understanding of the effects of the sacrament of marriage and the graces it confers to help them grow in holiness. In today’s world, there is a great need for Christian spouses to come to know or rediscover their call to holiness in marriage as well as a need to respond to that call through an active cooperation with the grace available for them through this sacrament. An effective means to cooperate with grace is to apply the writings of Pope Benedict XVI on “transformation” to their lives, allowing God to shape their relationship and transform it so it may become their daily path to holiness. This chapter will consider the different ways through which “transformation” can be applied to a couple’s growth in holiness in sacramental marriage as well as the effects of “transformation” on the different aspects of their relationship.

4.1 The unused talent hidden in the field

As it was discussed in Chapter II, Christian spouses receive through the sacrament of marriage an abundant flow of grace. They have their own special gift among the people of God,¹ they are given an increase in sanctifying grace and a treasure of sacramental grace to assist them in fulfilling their vocation to holiness.² The sacrament of marriage adds to their love “particular gifts, dispositions, seeds of grace, by elevating and perfecting the natural powers.”³ Christian spouses are “penetrated with the Spirit of Christ, which suffuses their whole lives with faith, hope and charity.”⁴ Moreover, they are called to imitate the relationship

¹ LG, 11.

² CC, 40.

³ Ibid.

⁴ GS, 48.

between Christ and His Church in which Christ espouses the Church, giving himself totally to her in self-sacrificing love. They are called to die to themselves daily out of love for one another. The process of dying to oneself, of being broken and given to the other person, is only possible through the abundance of grace which they receive from the sacrament.

This picture of sacramental marriage and the effects of grace it produces in the lives of the couple is difficult to reconcile with that of Christian marriages in today's world where many couples are separating. This leads to an important question: With such abundance of grace available for Christian couples, how is it that holiness in marriage remains almost an impossible goal to reach? The answer to this question can be found in Pope Pius XI's *Casti Connubii*:

Since it is a law of divine Providence in the supernatural order that men do not reap the full fruit of the Sacraments which they receive after acquiring the use of reason unless they cooperate with grace, the grace of matrimony will remain for the most part an unused talent hidden in the field unless the parties exercise these supernatural powers and cultivate and develop the seeds of grace they have received.⁵

Thus, grace in marriage is not a magic wand that produces instant effects. It requires the cooperation of the couple and their right interior dispositions and attitudes. Without a commitment to cultivate the seeds of grace that they receive through the sacrament, these seeds remain hidden and will not bear fruits. Hence, the couple's growth in holiness depends essentially on their level of commitment to cooperate with God's grace.

This explains how many couples today fail to grow in holiness as a result of a deep neglect of their interior life and a lack of openness to the work of grace in their lives. Most couples remain caught up in a world of materialism and consumerism where they find themselves spending all their energy on pursuing a life of comfort and material wealth. They frequently tend to rely on themselves for obtaining happiness and in the process, they risk losing their faith or living that faith in a shallow way.

Moreover, many Christian couples have fallen into the trap of what the future Pope Benedict XVI called in his homily during Mass before the Conclave in 2005, a 'dictatorship of relativism' where "letting oneself be tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times".⁶ This dictatorship of relativism "does not recognise anything as definitive" and its "ultimate goal consists solely of

⁵ CC, 41.

⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Homily during Mass before the Conclave in 2005*, Vatican Website, April 18, 2005, www.vatican.va/gp11/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html.

one's own ego and desires."⁷ Thus, many couples today struggle to adhere to the truth of their faith and find themselves picking and choosing what they think is right and determining for themselves the morality of their actions. This way of thinking and acting makes it difficult to cooperate with grace which is only received and lived according to the Truth found in the person of Jesus Christ.

Having affirmed that the holiness of Christian spouses depends on God's action and their own cooperation with grace, a new set of questions emerge: What does this cooperation with grace consist of? What does it require? How is it applied to a couple's life? How can the theology of Benedict XVI inform it and help in its realisation?

4.2 The writings of Pope Benedict XVI on "transformation": a precious treasure for Christian spouses

In those writings in which Pope Benedict XVI touches upon "transformation", he unveils a great treasure for the Church which married couples can use as a strong foundation to help them cooperate with grace in a powerful way. For Benedict, holiness is not based on attaining moral perfection nor on gaining a certain ideology or a set of beliefs, but rather on a deep encounter with the person of Christ. Holiness is about a personal relationship with Christ who reveals to us God's face. It is about knowing Christ, falling in love with him, believing in him, desiring to partake in his life and to see the world through his eyes, allowing oneself to be transformed totally by him down to the core. In other words, for Benedict, couples cooperate with grace in a profound way if they first encounter the person of Christ on a deep, personal level and allow themselves to be transformed by his irresistible presence. Encountering Christ and entrusting oneself to his transforming presence form the distinctive contribution of Benedict to couples in sacramental marriage.

The personal encounter with Christ leads couples to not rely on their own resources in order to grow in love for one another but instead to draw all their strength from the original source of love, Christ himself. When they let themselves be transformed by the person of Christ, they become like him sharing in his own charity; they allow him to live in them and to bring them to love with him, in him and like him.⁸ Benedict affirms that the relationship with

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message For Lent*, Message, October 15, 2012.

Christ is the relationship that gives light to all other relationships.⁹ This is particularly true when it comes to the relationship between husband and wife who are called to reflect the love of Christ for his Church. Thus, clinging to Love himself is a sure way of sharing that love with one another.

To understand what Pope Benedict XVI means when he writes about transformation through a personal encounter with Christ and hence to understand what makes his contribution distinctive to couples in sacramental marriage, a few points need to be considered. First, a personal encounter with Christ involves an act of faith which is not a mere intellectual act but which rather constitutes the fundamental orientation of one's life.¹⁰ For Christian spouses then, believing in Christ means letting him become the centre around which their whole lives move. It means allowing him to be the Lord of their relationship placing everything at his feet and opening wide the doors of their hearts to be transformed by him down to the core of their being. They learn to adopt his view of reality and allow him to purify them and guide them in all their decisions and actions. They no longer follow their own plans or rely on their self-sufficiency, but rather they follow Christ in a total act of surrender and trust placing themselves at his disposal, entrusting their lives, their concerns, their struggles along with their hopes and dreams to his mercy. Faith allows couples to let go of their own will and to "learn to share in the thinking and the will of Jesus Christ."¹¹ They learn to love like Christ by allowing him to draw them beyond their deficiencies and weaknesses and give them what they themselves cannot achieve on their own. Faith in Christ then calls couples to entrust themselves completely to the person of Christ.

Second, transformation through an encounter with Christ is effected by his Cross, by his Paschal Mystery. It is only through dying like a grain of wheat that one can rise and bear fruit. This process of death and resurrection is at the heart of transformation in Christ. To be transformed by Christ is to die to oneself; to leave behind a certain way of being. It is to lose oneself in order to give oneself completely to Another.¹² This can be a cause of suffering since renunciation of oneself is often painful and demands great sacrifices. Again, this aspect of transformation is significant when applied to Christian spouses. As they are all called to love each other in the same way that Christ loved his Church by sacrificing himself for her, they cannot possibly answer that call unless they learn first to die to themselves for the sake of Christ

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, October 3, 2012.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Homily, August 15, 2006.

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Solemnity of Sts Peter and Paul*, Homily, June 28, 2009.

¹² Pope Benedict XVI, *Palm Sunday*, Homily, April 1, 2007.

who alone can transform them and conform them to his image. In fact, married life is filled with challenges and struggles that demand a constant outpouring of oneself in the spirit of sacrifice. If couples are not willing to die to themselves and let themselves be formed anew through the transforming power of Christ, they would miss the opportunity to grow in holiness and allow their marriage to be sanctified by grace.

One aspect of dying to oneself that is very relevant to couples in sacramental marriage is their willingness and readiness to be changed by Christ. Couples who are willing to be transformed by Christ must be ready to look at themselves in the light of Christ, face their sins with truth and humility and entrust themselves to the transforming power of Christ through genuine contrition. Without contrition and a readiness to let oneself be changed and converted by Christ, transformation is not possible. As Dietrich Von Hildebrand asserted in his book entitled *Transformation in Christ*, “the initial step of the soul’s meeting with God bears the mark of contrition.”¹³ This aspect of transformation holds a great significance for Christian spouses since it is a great struggle for married couples to live the virtue of humility and be ready to accept their own sins and failings. They can easily fall into the trap of pride where they tend to magnify the faults of the other spouse and minimise their own. Thus, to be transformed, they are called to look inward instead of outward and to go through a daily conversion where, having admitted their faults, they “decide to get up and set out again, to abandon sin and to choose to return to God.”¹⁴ As Benedict XVI states, it is through suffering and humility converting over and over again that God chooses the way of the transformation of hearts.¹⁵

Lastly, transformation through a personal encounter with Christ cannot be achieved but rather received. It is not what the couples do that will bring them transformation but instead, it is what they let Christ do in them. Transformation is never the product of a couple’s own efforts in pious practices or spiritual plans. It is the unique gift they receive from Christ once they entrust themselves to him and let themselves be changed and converted by him. This act of entrustment to the person of Christ, abandonment to his love and total openness to receive his gift make the writings of Pope Benedict XVI on transformation very unique in their contribution to couples in sacramental marriage. Christian spouses are called to leave behind all self-control, self-sufficiency and self-reliance to embark on a new journey of complete

¹³ Dietrich Von Hildebrand, *Transformation in Christ*, 31.

¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Visit to Rome’s Prison for Minors*, Homily, March 18, 2007.

¹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Peter the Fisherman*, Audience, May 17, 2006.

dependence on God letting him be the one driving their lives. It is only through letting themselves be sculpted by Christ that He will turn their marriage into a masterpiece of love.

4.3 Christian spouses encounter Christ by following him

As it was discussed above, encountering Christ is essential for transformation. For Benedict, it is only in a personal relationship with Christ and an encounter with the Risen One that we truly become Christians.¹⁶ Thus, Christian spouses who want to be transformed by Christ need to encounter him on a personal level. How does this encounter happen? What does it entail? Benedict gives a clear guidance on the path which one must take to encounter Christ. He writes that “we can encounter him only by following him.”¹⁷ Thus, Christian spouses are called to follow Christ. What does this mean for them? To answer this question, one needs to study what the act of “following Christ” means for Benedict. A closer look at his homily on Palm Sunday in 2007 provides us with some understanding of what “following Christ” implies and how it can be applied to Christian spouses.

In that homily, Pope Benedict XVI described the procession of the palms as a symbolic representation of what we call the “following of Christ”.¹⁸ He then explained what “following Christ” actually means. For Christ’s disciples, the “following” was both external and internal. The exterior aspect involved “leaving their professions and walking behind Jesus on his journeys through Palestine. The interior aspect was “the new existential orientation whose reference points were no longer in events, in work as a source of income or in the personal will, but consisted in total abandonment to the will of Another.”¹⁹ This interior aspect, the “abandonment to the will of Another” is also the essence of what it means for us today to follow Christ. The Pope continued his homily saying that for us “following” Christ is

an interior change of life. It requires me no longer to be withdrawn into myself, considering my own fulfilment the main reason for my life. It requires me to give myself freely to Another - for truth, for love, for God who, in Jesus Christ, goes before me and shows me the way. It is a question of the fundamental decision no longer to consider usefulness and gain, my career and success as the ultimate goals of my life,

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Paul's Conversion*, Audience, September 3, 2008.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Credo for Today: What Christians Believe*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 109.

¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Palm Sunday*, Homily, April 1, 2007.

¹⁹ Ibid.

but instead to recognize truth and love as authentic criteria. It is a question of choosing between living only for myself or giving myself - for what is greater.²⁰

On a later occasion, Pope Benedict XVI explained that “following Christ” means

immersing our own will in the will of Jesus, truly giving him priority, giving him pride of place in every area of our lives: in the family, at work, in our personal interests, in ourselves. It means handing over our very busy lives to Him, living in profound intimacy with Him, entering through Him into communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit, and consequently with our brothers and sister.²¹

Thus, for Benedict, following Christ is first and foremost an act of abandoning one’s own view of reality, one’s own vision of life, one’s own plans of success, gain and fulfillment in order to embrace the vision, plans and will of Christ himself. It is an act of surrender to the will of Another. It is saying “yes” to Jesus and be willing to go with him wherever he takes us. It is “accepting him as the One who shows us the way ... It means accepting his word day after day as a valid criterion for our life. It means seeing in him the authority to which we submit. We submit to him because his authority is the authority of the truth.”²²

For Christian spouses who are tempted daily to pursue the happiness proposed to them by the surrounding culture, a happiness based on self-sufficiency and on being the masters of their own life, following Christ through an act of total abandonment to his will becomes even more urgent today. Despite all the difficulties and obstacles they encounter, Christian spouses are called to leave their own plans of self-realisation and entrust themselves to Christ’s greater plan for them. This act of trust in the goodness of God’s plan is very significant for their transformation and hence for their growth in holiness. God says to them: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Prov 3:5-6). He also promises them a future full of hope: “For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer 29:11). When Christian spouses, following Benedict XVI’s advice, choose Christ to be the centre of their lives and the One they follow above everything else because he is the truth, they gain “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *World Day of Prayer for Vocations*, Message, April 21, 2013.

²² Ibid.

Another aspect of following Christ involves having recourse to the abundant spiritual provisions which Christ makes available for those who follow him as a sign of his presence and love and as an aid to help them cross the desert of this world and turn it into a fertile garden. They include docile listening to the Word, participating in the Sacraments and every other spiritual resource of the liturgy and of personal prayer.²³ Christian spouses who want to encounter Christ and let themselves be transformed by him are then called to follow him through a life of prayer, listening to God's word in Scripture and participating in the sacraments of Eucharist and reconciliation.

These spiritual provisions require a certain degree of "activity" on the part of the couple. However, this does not contradict the primacy of *receiving* over *making* which forms an essential feature of Benedict's theology and which makes Benedict's contribution on transformation distinctive and thus valuable. By approaching prayer, Scripture and the sacraments with an attitude of total abandonment to Christ and a willingness to let themselves be changed and converted over and over again through a personal encounter with him, Christian spouses are then able to experience real transformation. They do so not by relying on their own efforts in their spiritual life, but rather by allowing themselves to be available and open through those spiritual provisions to receive what God chooses to give them. This is how they grow in holiness according to his plan. Moreover, the process of *receiving* does not imply passivity on the part of the couple. It does not eliminate their involvement. However, this involvement has to do not so much with changes that they make but rather with changes that they permit to be made to them,²⁴ thus their transformation remains the effect of a gift received.

4.4 The significance of the spiritual provisions.

Despite their participation in the sacraments and their recourse to prayer, many Christian spouses are struggling in their marriages. What the writings of Pope Benedict XVI on transformation offer them is an invitation to a personal encounter with Christ in which they abandon their own plans and entrust themselves completely to him letting themselves be turned around, converted and changed by him. This encounter with the person of Christ and total abandonment to him allow the couple to tap into the power of grace available for them in prayer

²³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Pastoral Visit to the Parish of Santa Felicita e Figli Martiri*, Homily, March 25, 2007.

²⁴ Corkery, *Joseph Ratzinger's Theological Ideas*, 61.

and the sacraments. In this way, rather than struggling in their marriage, they begin to grow in holiness precisely through their marriage.

4.4.1 The power of prayer in the life of Christian spouses

Benedict states that prayer is the greatest transforming power in the world,²⁵ and the means through which we are changed gradually into the likeness of God.²⁶ Prayer is not a duty or a task that depends on our own action, but rather it is the encounter with a living Person to whom we listen and with whom we converse.²⁷ Prayer nourishes our spiritual life and transforms our existence. In prayer, “God draws us toward him offering us enlightenment and consolation and enabling us to scale the mountain of holiness so that we may be ever closer to him.”²⁸ Prayer, therefore, depends on the action of God in our lives. Thus, for Christian spouses, seeking a personal encounter with the Person of Christ through prayer is key to their transformation. Their basic attitude to prayer must consist of abandoning themselves to God’s love²⁹ and being open to conversion which is the flame of God that transforms their hearts and enables them to see God, live in accordance with him and live for others.³⁰ This attitude to prayer leads them to entrust themselves increasingly to the hands of God with trust, love and certainty that in the end it is only by doing his will that they can be truly happy.³¹

Christian spouses then reap great benefits from prayer when they let themselves be formed and shaped into the image of Christ. In prayer, they receive inspirations to apply in their married life affections which unite their heart to the heart of Christ and resolutions to live according to his will. When Christian spouses approach prayer as a personal encounter with Christ, they gain a clearer understanding of who they are, of their own faults and weaknesses as well as a willingness to let themselves be changed and conformed to Christ. They also gain an abundance of grace that helps them grow in virtue in their relationship together, their relationship with their children and with others around them. Moreover, in today’s world where spouses live stressful lives and are constantly running from one activity to another, prayer that

²⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Pastoral Visit to Naples*, Travels, October 21, 2007.

²⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman*, Travels, September 19, 2010.

²⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, May 30, 2012.

²⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Contemplation and the Power of Prayer*, Audience, June 13, 2012.

²⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *In Jesus Christ, the Faithful “Yes” of God and the “Amen” of the Church*, Audience, May 30, 2012.

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Man in Prayer*, Audience, June 15, 2011.

³¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Meditation*, Audience, August 17, 2011.

is based on an encounter with Christ becomes for them an oasis where they come to find rest and draw grace from Christ, the source of living water.

Without this attitude of abandonment to the Person of Christ and openness to conversion, the prayer of Christian spouses risks being unfruitful. They continue to live according to their own plans, choosing to be the masters of their own lives and hence they miss their call to grow in holiness through the transforming power of Christ. Thus, Benedict's writings on transformation through prayer contribute greatly in helping couples grow in holiness in sacramental marriage.

4.4.2 Meditation on the word of God: a natural accompaniment to prayer for married couples

The writings of Pope Benedict XVI on transformation also play a part in helping couples gain a new perspective on how to meditate on the word of God in such a way that leads them to grow in holiness. Again, for Benedict, meditation on the word of God is a "personal encounter with the Lord of life, an encounter that involves making concrete decisions,"³² produces profound change in man's heart³³ and asks for a conversion of mind, heart and life.³⁴ Thus, married couples benefit greatly when they approach Scripture with a readiness to encounter Christ and let themselves be shaped by his word.³⁵ By doing so, they begin to "see reality with new eyes, with the eyes of faith and the Lord, who speaks to the mind and the heart and gives new light to the journey at every moment and in every situation."³⁶ Thus they not only listen to God's word but they let their hearts be penetrated by that word, challenged and purified in the process. In their response to the word of God, they do not rely on their own understanding but rather they allow themselves to be enlightened and led by the person of Christ whom they have encountered.

Scripture then becomes the means through which married couples learn to think with God's thoughts and to speak his words. It illuminates their mind, provides food for their souls³⁷

³² Pope Benedict XVI, *Psalm 11*, Audience, November 9, 2011.

³³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Opening of the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, Homily, October 5, 2008.

³⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, 87.

³⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 48.

³⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, April 25, 2012.

³⁷ DV, 21.

and leads them to holiness through making concrete decisions born out of an encounter with Christ. The Fathers of Vatican Council II affirm the importance of Scripture as a source of spiritual life:

For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently, these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: “For the word of God is living and active” (Heb 4:12) and “is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).³⁸

When married couples meditate on the word of God with a total openness to the person of Christ, they learn to draw strength from the source of spiritual life. They learn to recognise God’s voice especially at times when they have difficult decisions to make or when they are faced with great challenges. Their encounter with Christ in Scripture helps them discern God’s will, provides them reassurance and confidence in God’s love and tenderness in times of struggle and suffering and it illuminates their mind in dealing with different situations in their daily life. Allowing themselves to be led, shaped and formed by Christ through his word, they grow in their knowledge of him, in their love and in their desire to follow him as the Lord of their life. Without approaching Scripture with the attitude which the writings of Benedict XVI emphasise very strongly, that is, as an intimate encounter with Christ who leads the way, couples risk missing the opportunity to know Christ, be transformed by him and hence grow in holiness.

4.4.3 The sacrament of reconciliation: an indispensable source of holiness in marriage

Pope Benedict XVI described the sacrament of reconciliation as a “school of heart” where the follower of Christ grows in holiness by paying close attention to the spiritual and Christians to face life’s difficulties with the spirit of the Gospel and to experience conversion in a unique way.³⁹ It teaches them to see themselves as God sees them, to be honest with themselves and to grow in humility. By letting themselves be forgiven, they learn to forgive others. In recognising their own weaknesses, they grow more tolerant and understanding of the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, Apostolic Exhortation, November 19, 2011.

failings of others.⁴⁰ Thus, for Christian spouses, the sacrament of reconciliation is essential for their transformation. It leads them to conversion, to turn away from sin and to grow in holiness in the spirit of humility and forgiveness. When couples who desire to follow Christ neglect going regularly to confession, they risk gradually slowing their spiritual pace to “the point of increasingly weakening and ultimately perhaps even exhausting it.”⁴¹

The importance of frequent confession as one of the means of transformation in Christ was also affirmed by Pope John Paul II who was also a great inspiration and influence on Benedict XVI.⁴² He stated that “it would be an illusion to want to strive for holiness in accordance with the vocation that God has given to each one of us without frequently and fervently receiving this sacrament of conversion and sanctification.”⁴³ Thus, Christian spouses who are seeking to be holy in their vocation to marriage need to have frequent recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation. As sin violates their covenant relationship with God, causes them to lose the sense of Christ’s presence in their relationship and to have an indifference towards the Holy Spirit as an intimate partner in their love,⁴⁴ they need the sacrament of reconciliation to restore their relationship with God and with each other. Through frequent confession, Christian spouses are “led to an encounter with God, who is ‘rich in mercy’, who bestows on them his love which is more powerful than sin, and who reconstructs and brings to perfection the marriage covenant and the family communion.”⁴⁵ Thus, they gradually experience an “ever deeper communion with the merciful Lord to the point of fully identifying with him, which comes with that perfect ‘life in Christ’ of which true holiness consists.”⁴⁶

When talking about the sacrament of reconciliation, Benedict again stresses the importance of a personal encounter with Christ through this sacrament. He writes:

When one insists on the accusation of sins – which must nevertheless exist and it is necessary to help the faithful understand its importance – one risks relegating to the background what is central that is, the personal encounter with God, the Father of

⁴⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Letter to Seminarians*, Letter, October 18, 2010.

⁴¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *To the Participants in the Course on the Internal Forum Organised by the Tribunal of the Apostolic Penitentiary*, Speech, March 7, 2008.

⁴² Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Last Testament*, trans. Jacob Phillips (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 177.

⁴³ Pope John Paul II, *Address to the Participants in the course on the internal forum organised by the tribunal of the Apostolic Penitentiary*, Speech, Vatican Website, March 27, 2004, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html.

⁴⁴ Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 141.

⁴⁵ FC, 58.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

goodness and mercy. It is not sin which is at the heart of the sacramental celebration but rather God's mercy, which is infinitely greater than any guilt of ours.⁴⁷

For Benedict then, one needs to approach the sacrament of reconciliation with an attitude that seeks to encounter Christ, allow oneself to be forgiven by him and let oneself be converted and transformed in the process. For him, there must always exist a close connection between the sacrament of reconciliation and a life oriented decisively to conversion and hence transformation.⁴⁸ This requires an act of entrusting oneself to God in total abandonment and love for "God forgives all to those who love much."⁴⁹

When Christian spouses approach the sacrament of reconciliation with such an attitude, they let themselves be transformed by the love of God and his mercy. They are no longer afraid of facing their sins but rather they begin to look closely at their faults and weaknesses knowing well that those sins will be wiped away by the love of God whom they encounter in the sacrament. Frequent confession stops being a mere formality but rather an essential ingredient to nourish and sustain their commitment to follow Christ.⁵⁰

Christian spouses who acknowledge their spiritual poverty and humbly admit their need for God's mercy realise that they cannot save themselves and that their holiness depends completely on God's grace. They trust in him and let themselves receive his forgiveness and learn from him how to offer mercy and forgiveness to each other. This is very significant in family life where couples live under the same roof, are physically close and when their faults and weaknesses are more likely to come to light. Christian spouses who experience God's unconditional love and mercy in the sacrament of reconciliation, a love that does not depend on their own efforts or merits, will be more capable of showing love and forgiveness to each other.

4.4.4 The Eucharist: the source of Christian marriage

The Eucharist plays a unique role in helping couples follow Christ closely as it unites them to him in a very profound way. It effects transformation in them and causes them to begin living eternal life even now. Benedict XVI states that just like the bread and wine are

⁴⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *To the Participants in the Course on the Internal Forum Organised by the Tribunal of the Apostolic Penitentiary*, Speech, March 7, 2008.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, the Body and Blood of Christ are given to the couple so that they themselves will be transformed in their turn and become the Body of Christ, his own Flesh and Blood.⁵¹ They become conformed to him, involved in his work of redemption and, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, able to live in accordance with his own logic of self-giving.⁵²

To experience transformation through the Eucharist, Pope Benedict offers Christian spouses an invitation to see Holy Communion as an encounter with Jesus, an encounter with God himself, who leads them to the sources of life.⁵³ Benedict states that “God’s presence in the Eucharist is not static. It is a dynamic presence that grasps us, to make us his own, to make us assimilate him. Christ draws us to himself, he makes us come out of ourselves to make us all one with him.”⁵⁴ Through the Eucharist, he wants to transform us as he transformed the Host.⁵⁵ Thus, by allowing themselves to be drawn into that process of transformation, Christian spouses are then able to enter into the “hour” of Christ in which God “has triumphed, because he is Love.”⁵⁶ By letting themselves be transformed by Love, they grow in holiness and in their love for one another. As they get nourished by the Eucharist, they become food for one another responding to each other’s hunger for love.⁵⁷

Pope Benedict XVI emphasis on an encounter with Christ who is love in the Eucharist helps couples understand that their transformation depends not so much on their own efforts in participating in the sacrament of the Eucharist but rather on their openness to let themselves be touched by love. In an address after receiving honorary doctorate in Castel Gandolfo, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said: “when people are seized by love a new dimension of being opens in them, a new grandeur and breadth of reality.”⁵⁸ Thus for Benedict, it is love that is behind all aspects of transformation. He states that “in the sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus shows us in particular the truth about the love which is the very essence of God.”⁵⁹ It is this encounter with love that effects transformation in Christian spouses and leads them to grow in holiness.

⁵¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Apostolic Journey to Cologne on the Occasion of the Twentieth World Youth Day*, Homily, August 21, 2005.

⁵² Pope Benedict XVI, *Solemnity of the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ*, Homily, June 23, 2011.

⁵³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Celebration of Vespers in the Cathedral of Munich*, Homily, September 10, 2006.

⁵⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Pastoral Visit to Bari for the Conclusion of the 24th National Eucharistic Congress*, Homily, May 29, 2005.

⁵⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Solemnity of the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ*, Homily, June 15, 2006.

⁵⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Mass at Marienfeld Area*, Homily, August 21, 2005.

⁵⁷ Jacques Philippe, *Fire and Light* (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2016), 116.

⁵⁸ Pope Emeritus Benedict, *Pope Benedict’s Words After Receiving Honorary Doctorate in Castel Gandolfo*, <https://zenit.org/articles/pope-benedict-s-words-after-receiving-honorary-doctorate-in-castel-gandolfo/>

⁵⁹ SC, 2.

When couples let themselves be transformed by the love of Christ in the Eucharist, they receive a flow of grace that helps them to grow in strength, courage, patience, compassion and kindness, forbearing one another and forgiving each other. These gifts may take time to become visible, however, the profound changes they produce in their hearts are guaranteed through Jesus' words: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my cup has eternal life" (Jn 6: 54-56), and eternal life is no less than loving with God's love. Thus, in marriage, where many challenges are found and a constant outpouring of oneself in daily sacrificial love is required, spouses have a great need to have recourse to the immense grace available for them through the Eucharist so that they may be transformed by Love himself.

4.5 Commitment to prayer and the sacraments: a key to following Christ wholeheartedly

Pope Benedict XVI places a great emphasis on the importance of encountering the Person of Christ in our life. For him, "the fundamental relationship with God is brought into being in conversation with God, in daily personal prayer, and with participation in the sacraments."⁶⁰ Thus, this relationship cannot grow if we are not committed to those spiritual provisions offered to us by the Lord along the way. For Benedict, to believe in God is to entrust oneself to him not only in times of difficulty or in devoting to him a few moments of the day or week but rather by founding one's life on him, letting his Word guide it every day.⁶¹ Christ then must become the centre of one's life, the one who guides every thought, decision or action. Benedict states that "the more room we make for prayer, the more we will see our life transformed and enlivened by the tangible power of God's love."⁶²

This commitment to follow Christ is seen in the life of the early disciples of Jesus. When Jesus called them to follow him, answering his call meant leaving their own will and plans, their own view of reality and abandoning themselves to his will and his plan for them. They could no longer "follow after their own heart and their own eyes" (Num 15:39), they would now "follow the lamb wherever he goes" (Rev 14:4) and they would learn to see the world with his eyes. For the disciples, following Christ meant remaining close to him every day. It meant waking up each morning and waiting for his instructions: where would they go this day? What would they do? Whom would they meet? Where would they be sent? What

⁶⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Saint Alphonsus Mary Liguori*, Audience, August 1, 2012.

⁶¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *"I Believe in God"*, Audience, January 23, 2013.

⁶² Pope Benedict XVI, *Contemplation and the Power of Prayer*, Audience, June 13, 2012.

miracles would they witness and be part of? The disciples' reference point was no longer centred on themselves but rather on Christ. He was the one directing their lives, giving them a new purpose and a new plan. Following him was a decisive turning point in their lives, they no longer looked back. They made a commitment to follow him totally and to remain close to him every day. It was that commitment which allowed Christ to shape them and transform their hearts and their lives. Thus, the act of 'following' Christ cannot bear fruit of transformation if it is not based on a commitment to remain close to him daily.

Just like the first disciples, Christian spouses who are open to let themselves be transformed by Christ and hence grow in holiness must have a commitment to follow him daily through a deep life of prayer and participation in the sacraments. They too need to wake up each morning and wait for his instructions: What is he asking of them today? How should they serve their spouse and children? Who is in most need of their love? Whom should they reach out to? Who needs their forgiveness the most? Who should they ask for forgiveness? In what area in their life is God asking them to let themselves be converted and changed by him? They can only find the answers to these questions as they learn to recognise his voice in prayer and through their openness to receive his grace in the sacraments. Only those who recognise Christ's voice can follow him and consequently grow in holiness. As Christ said: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand" (Jn 10:27-28).

The commitment which Christian spouses make in following Christ must be marked by constancy and be based on an act of will rather than on feelings. It is not enough to commit oneself to prayer only when one 'feels' like praying or when one is receiving consolations. Perseverance in prayer, especially in times of spiritual dryness, ensures then that Christian spouses remain close to Christ and open to his transforming power, for the act of faith which they make in prayer will keep them in profound communion with him. This communion will sooner or later bear the fruits of interior transformation. The same principle applies to participation in the sacraments. It is only through a constant commitment to receive the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist that Christian spouses will get to encounter Christ and allow themselves to be transformed by him. Pope Benedict XVI asserted the significance of commitment and constancy in prayer in one of his Wednesday audiences where he stated that prayer is

a work of God but demands commitment and continuity on our part. Above all continuity and constancy are important. Jesus' exemplary experience itself shows that

his prayer, enlivened by the fatherhood of God and by communion with the Spirit, was deepened and prolonged in faithful practice, up to the Garden of Olives and to the Cross ... In deep friendship with Jesus and living in him and with him the filial relationship with the Father, through our constant and faithful prayer we can open windows on God's Heaven ... Dear brothers and sisters, let us train ourselves in an intense relationship with God, with prayer that is not occasional but constant, full of faith, capable of illuminating our lives, as Jesus taught us.⁶³

4.6 The effects of following Christ to be transformed by him on the holiness and lives of Christian spouses

When Christian spouses commit to follow Christ daily, they allow themselves to be transformed by the power of grace. This transformation touches all aspects of their lives. It leads them to grow in virtue, in mutual and unreserved affection for each other, in unity and fidelity, in sexual intimacy and most importantly in their identification with Christ through embracing the Cross, sanctifying their work and living a true apostolate.

4.6.1 Growing in virtue

Having a deep prayer life and a constant access to the sacraments have great implications on the couple's growth in virtue. By following Christ, entrusting themselves to him and allowing themselves to be shaped and formed by him, Christian spouses begin to take on his qualities and hence grow in virtue and holiness, for a holy man or woman is one who lives the theological virtues and the moral virtues to an eminent degree not attainable by human resources alone.⁶⁴ There are two virtues that are vital in a couple's life: humility and love. These virtues grow immensely through the couple's commitment to and nurturing of their interior life. Spouses who spend time in prayer and who have frequent recourse to the sacraments acknowledge their spiritual poverty and their dependence on God. They recognise that they are creatures, that without him they can do nothing and that, as Benedict XVI states, it is only by losing one's life in him that one can gain it.⁶⁵ Consequently, spouses grow in self-knowledge since they are more exposed to the light of Christ. They see their sins, their faults and weaknesses and hence, they become humble in their relationship with each other. They do

⁶³ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, November 30, 2011.

⁶⁴ Dubay, Holiness, "Universal Call To", *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 7 (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 6.

⁶⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, February 13, 2013.

not let pride poison their marriage and prevent them from admitting their faults and asking forgiveness from one another.

Moreover, spouses who have a deep interior life grow in the virtue of love. The more they ‘follow love’ (2 Jn 1:6) and let themselves be guided by him, the more they grow in love for God and for each other, and hence grow in holiness. Love “gives meaning to all the means of sanctification and leads them to their goal.”⁶⁶ Without love, they gain nothing as St Paul affirms in his First Letter to the Corinthians: “If I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13: 2-3). What does it mean for couples to love one another? The following passage from St Paul helps describe the true features of love:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor 13:4-7).

In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on love in the family, *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis, successor of Benedict and his admirer, dedicated a good part of Chapter four to comment on the passage above from St Paul. He affirmed that spouses who grow in the virtue of love through an intimate encounter with Christ, grow in patience with each other. They do not act on impulse and avoid giving offense to one another. They recognise that the other has a right to live as he or she is even when they act or think differently. They realise that love is not a feeling but it rather involves acts of kindness and a readiness to be always of assistance. They value one another’s achievements, show understanding and concern for each other, and embrace one another’s weaknesses. Spouses who are transformed by love abhor making each other suffer. They take care to communicate well, to learn how to speak and how to listen well. Their words and gestures are pleasing not abrasive and rigid. They do not seek their own interest but rather they serve each other realising that the greatest feature of love is to lay down their life for one another. Couples who are transformed by Christ are not irritable, they respond to annoyances by asking God for healing and freedom from sin for the other, they never let the day end without making peace. They forgive each other through understanding one another’s weaknesses and excusing them. They realise that they are a mixture of light and shadow and that love can coexist with imperfection. They do not have to be perfect to love each other. Finally, spouses transformed by love do not control and dominate each other but rather they

⁶⁶ LG, 63.

set each other free through trust. Not only they trust each other but they also trust God's plan for each one of them and hence, they begin to see each other with a supernatural perspective. They see the big picture through the eyes of faith and they show a constant readiness to confront any challenge without ever giving up, being determined to defeat evil and submitting to love in all things.⁶⁷

The love between spouses, as described by Pope Francis, may seem impossible to attain. This is true if couples rely on their own resources and power. However, as Benedict's writings on transformation confirm, when they open themselves to the transforming power of God's love through a constant commitment to their interior life following Christ closely each day, they receive an abundant flow of grace that transforms their relationship in a profound way. Drinking directly from the source of love, Christian spouses no longer depend on each other for experiencing love, and hence they are freed from the heavy task of quenching a thirst that they can never satisfy. Once they realise that Christ is the One who will fill their hungry hearts, their expectations of each other decrease and they become more focused on giving love than expecting it. The love of Christian spouses is then the effect of their transformation in Christ. As Pope Benedict XVI stated in his message for Lent 2013, "when we make room for the love of God, then we become like him sharing in his own charity. If we open ourselves to his love, we allow him to live in us and to bring us to love with him, in him and like him."⁶⁸ He also wrote on the same occasion that "the Christian life consists in continuously scaling the mountain to meet God and then coming back down, bearing the love and strength drawn from him, so as to serve our brothers and sisters with God's own love."⁶⁹ Thus, through a daily commitment to follow Christ, spouses learn to love each other with God's own love and hence their love undergoes a great transformation.

Moreover, when spouses are genuinely open to an encounter with the Person of Christ, they are naturally drawn to love like he does. Examining themselves constantly each day, they begin to find different ways in which their love would be more conformed to Christ. They learn from Christ how to communicate better, not only through gentle words, but also through gentle and tender body language. They start to take extra care not to offend or hurt the other. They are quick in asking forgiveness when they fail and quick in offering forgiveness to the other

⁶⁷ AL, 91-119.

⁶⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2013*, Message, October 15.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

accepting their weaknesses and faults. In fact, their whole daily life is transformed by Christ as they cooperate with grace. This is affirmed in *Gaudium et Spes*:

Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfil their conjugal and family obligation, they are penetrated with the spirit of Christ, which suffuses their whole lives with faith, hope and charity. Thus they increasingly advance the perfection of their own personalities, as well as their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God.⁷⁰

Moreover, Christian spouses who are open to transformation and who let their hearts be penetrated by the light of Christ begin to see with God's vision recognising the enemy's tactics and the schemes he uses to destroy relationships. As the First Letter of St Peter says: "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pt 5:8). Thus, rather than falling into his trap and allowing themselves to be caught up in resentment, they begin to see the big picture and they are moved to break the cycle of evil which feeds on impulsive reactions and pride and choose to act in love instead.

4.6.2 Growing in friendship and affection for each other

Following Christ daily allows spouses to cooperate with the grace available to them in the sacrament of marriage. According to *Gaudium et Spes*, conjugal love

involves the good of the whole person, and therefore can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling these expressions as special ingredients and signs of the friendship distinctive of marriage. This love God has judged worthy of special gifts, healing, perfecting and exalting gifts of grace and of charity. Such love, merging the human with the divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves, a gift providing itself by gentle affection and by deed, such love pervades the whole of their lives: indeed by its busy generosity it grows better and grows greater.⁷¹

Thus, spouses who entrust themselves to Christ and allow themselves to be transformed by him are given special gifts of grace that help them grow in friendship and in affection for each other. This love of friendship embraces the good of their whole person. As Pope Benedict XVI said in his address to engaged couples during a pastoral visit to Ancona, genuine love requires a process of maturation; it must move from the initial attraction to wanting the best for the

⁷⁰ GS, 48.

⁷¹ Ibid, 49.

other.⁷² Such love ensures the growth of friendship and affection in the life of the couple. Benedict also affirmed that married couples are given a share in Christ's spousal love, making them a sign of his faithful and all-embracing love for the Church. If they receive this gift and renew their "yes" each day by faith, with the strength that comes from the grace of the sacrament, then their family will grow in God's love according to the model of the Holy Family of Nazareth.⁷³

Moreover, spouses growing in friendship and affection for one another also grow in trust which is essential for their relationship, enabling it to be free. Spouses need this freedom to enrich and expand their relationship and to foster sincerity and transparency between them.⁷⁴ When they

know that they are trusted and appreciated, they can be open and hide nothing. Those who know that their spouse is always suspicious, judgemental and lacking unconditional love, will tend to keep secrets, conceal their failings and weaknesses, and pretend to be someone other than who they are.⁷⁵

Thus, spouses who are committed to follow Christ daily are open to receive the special grace available to them in the sacrament of marriage. They experience transformation in their relationship as they grow in friendship, affection and trust without which their marriage cannot stand.

4.6.3 Growing in unity and fidelity

Spouses are called through the sacrament of marriage to render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions.⁷⁶ This intimate union coupled with the good of the children "impose total fidelity on the spouses and argue for an unbreakable oneness between them."⁷⁷ To live unity and fidelity, they need the assistance of Christ who comes to abide with them so that "just as He loved the Church and handed Himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through

⁷² Pope Benedict XVI, *Meeting with Engaged Couples Pastoral Visit to Ancona*, Travels, September 11, 2011.

⁷³ Pope Benedict XVI, *7th World Meeting of Families Milan*, Homily, June 3, 2012.

⁷⁴ AL, 115.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ GS, 48.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

mutual self-bestowal.”⁷⁸ Thus, the more closely spouses follow Christ and the more they allow themselves to be transformed by him, the more they will grow in unity and in fidelity.

Spouses who are transformed by their encounter with Christ grow in their love and faithfulness towards each other, for to love like Christ is to love forever. Thus, the fidelity of the spouses stems from Christ’s own fidelity in love; a fidelity that is definite, permanent and unconditional. As Pope Benedict XVI noted, when couples make room for Christ, he makes their love faithful, happy and indissoluble.⁷⁹ Thus, it is Christ who transforms the couple’s love and helps them live fidelity. Benedict also asserted that the couple’s fidelity stemming from Christ leads them to look after each other, to the point of living for each other.⁸⁰ Such fidelity allows the couple to remain close together in good times and in bad, it fosters trust between them and a sense of belonging which is a characteristic of married love. Couples who love each other with the love of Christ bear every trial with a positive attitude, are constantly ready to confront any challenge together and have a strong commitment to their marriage.

Couples who are transformed by Christ also grow in unity. As Pope Benedict XVI noted, it is only through communion with God that we are capable of being in communion with others, living for them and being there for them.⁸¹ It is only the encounter with Christ that renews human relationships, directing them to greater solidarity.⁸² Thus, spouses who encounter Christ daily experience transformation through their growth in unity. They work together, think together, serve each other and thus experience a deep and intimate union. Having decided to follow Christ wholeheartedly, they both share the same goal: their reciprocal sanctification and the sanctification of their family. Thus, they become more united in their decisions and their actions. This is particularly true when it comes to parenting. Spouses whose goal is holiness are united in the education of their children and the transmission of faith to them. They practice an ongoing partnership, mutually supporting each other and committing themselves to serving each other and their children. Parents who live in unity

make time to sit and talk about each child’s growth in character – present needs and problems, steps that need to be taken and lessons taught, signs of progress, who shall handle what, and so on . . . They do not let the children come between them, in anything.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Meeting with Engaged Couples Pastoral Visit to Ancona*, Travel, September 11, 2011.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, Encyclical, November 30, 2007, 28.

⁸² Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, October 17, 2012.

If a child poses a request to one parent, each parent will hold off until he or she has first checked with the other.⁸³

Moreover, parents who are transformed by Christ and united in him lead their children to holiness through their own example. When children observe that their parents' actions are driven by a love of Christ, when they watch them make time for quiet prayer, frequent the sacraments, read Scripture and invest in their faith formation, they learn from them to encounter Christ as a person and as their greatest friend. Seeing their parents' commitment to Christ translate in love around them, they are drawn to follow Christ themselves and to entrust themselves to him.

4.6.4 Growing in sexual intimacy

Christian spouses who let themselves be transformed by Christ grow in his likeness and hence grow in the virtue of chastity which ensures that they use their sexuality in a tender, affectionate, personal and reciprocal way. Pope Benedict XVI noted that there is an urgent need to recover an appreciation of the virtue of chastity. He stated that

the integrating and liberating function of this virtue should be emphasised by a formation of the heart, which presents the Christian understanding of sexuality as a source of genuine freedom, happiness and the fulfillment of our fundamental and innate human vocation to love.⁸⁴

Benedict also stressed that children have a “fundamental right to grow up with a healthy understanding of sexuality and its proper place in human relationships.”⁸⁵ Thus, when spouses entrust themselves to Christ and allow their hearts to be formed by him, they experience a transformation in their sexual intimacy. They are liberated by the virtue of chastity gained through an intimate relationship with him. Their new understanding of sexuality is then passed on to their children who in turn experience transformation of their own sexuality.

That Christ transforms sexual intimacy of spouses through the virtue of chastity was also supported by Karol Wojtyła. He noted that chastity in the love between spouses has as foundation the affirmation of the value of the person where each of them desires the good of

⁸³ James B. Stenson, *Lifeline The Religious Upbringing of Your Children* (New York: Scepter Publishers, 1996), 40.

⁸⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the Bishops of America*, Speech, March 9, 2012.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

the other wholeheartedly.⁸⁶ Thus, it requires a “special interior, spiritual effort, for affirmation of the value of the person can only be the product of the spirit.”⁸⁷ Thus, couples who have a deep interior life and are constantly open to the work of the Spirit through their encounter with Christ grow in chastity in their marriage. This is again affirmed by Pope John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body* where he stated that

prayer, the Eucharist and penance are the means – infallible and indispensable – to form the Christian spirituality of conjugal and familial life. With their help, that essential and spiritually creative “power” of love reaches human hearts and, at the same time, human bodies in their subjective masculinity and femininity.⁸⁸

Thus, chastity is a vital virtue that helps couples grow in sexual intimacy which is meant to be an authentic communion of persons. Such communion can only happen when it is “performed in union with God as an expression of his own Trinitarian life – the life of the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁹ It is only through the powers coming from the Holy Spirit who purifies, enlivens, strengthens, and perfects the powers of the human spirit that sexual union is brought about on the proper level of persons.⁹⁰ Thus, as the couple grows closer to Christ each day and allow themselves to be transformed by him in all aspects of their lives, they grow in chastity and they gain the purity of heart which Christ calls them to. Therefore, their union is freed from utilitarian attitudes and their sexual intimacy is elevated and perfected.

4.6.5 Sanctifying work

As Christian spouses entrust themselves to Christ and follow him daily, their union with him is not limited to time spent alone with him in prayer, but rather it penetrates all aspects of their lives particularly the daily work they do according to God’s will. Pope Benedict XVI stated in one of his homilies that “every day presses us to give ourselves to Jesus, to trust in him, to abide in him, to share his lifestyle, to learn true love from him, to follow him in the daily fulfilment of the Father’s will, the one great law of life.”⁹¹ Thus, every work that the spouses do in response to God’s will becomes a place of encounter with Christ where they allow themselves to be transformed and sanctified by him. In imitating Christ who worked as

⁸⁶ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 145.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 171.

⁸⁸ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 641.

⁸⁹ Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, 457.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*.

⁹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Ash Wednesday*, Homily, February 17, 2010.

a carpenter, they learn to do all things with love transforming all their ordinary activities into a means to rise to a higher sanctity.⁹² Hence, the more spouses remain in Christ's presence in their daily work, the more they let him transform that work elevating it to a supernatural dimension.

Moreover, since work includes 'sweat and toil', spouses who raise to God the smallest of their actions, turn the effort and obstacles which they encounter into a sacrifice pleasing to God.⁹³ In fact, by enduring the hardship of their work in union with Christ, spouses collaborate with the Son of God in his redemptive work. They show themselves to be true disciples of Christ by carrying their Cross daily in the work they are called to accomplish. Their work becomes a means of sanctification and a way of animating all their earthly realities with the Spirit of Christ.⁹⁴ Thus, all activities of modern couples, if accomplished with love and offered up in union with Christ, lead to the couple's growth in holiness: going to work, managing a household, cooking, cleaning, driving kids around from one place to another, attending different meetings and even participating in activities for leisure.

4.6.6 Embracing the mystery of the Cross

Spouses who follow Christ closely and let themselves be transformed by him are open to the mystery of the Cross. They recognise that their transformation involves a process of death and resurrection, a participation in the Paschal Mystery. This forms one of the main features of Ratzinger's theology which Corkery calls "the paschal pattern of authentic Christian existence."⁹⁵ It calls Christian spouses to die to themselves in one way or another; to leave behind a certain way of being in order to be conformed to the image of Christ. Therefore, they learn to anticipate suffering, accept it as the way to transformation and realise that without it nothing is transformed.⁹⁶ Thus, they are willing to go through the painful process of letting Christ purify them from sin, get rid of all attachments that pull them away from him and lead

⁹² DV, 112.

⁹³ The practice of offering up the little annoyances of the day was encouraged by Pope Benedict XVI in his Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, 40.

⁹⁴ CCC, 2427.

⁹⁵ Corkery, *Joseph's Ratzinger's Theological Ideas*, 33.

⁹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Meeting with clergy of the Italian Diocese of Aosta*, Speech, July 25, 2005.

them to grow into his likeness. In other words, they die with him so that they may also rise with him.

Moreover, Christian spouses who live a personal encounter with Christ recognise that true love in marriage is closely connected with suffering. As Pope Benedict XVI noted:

Even the “yes” to love is a source of suffering, because love requires expropriations of my “I”, in which I allow myself to be pruned and wounded. Love simply cannot exist without this painful renunciation of myself, for otherwise it becomes pure selfishness and thereby ceases to be love.⁹⁷

Therefore, they do not expect to love without suffering. They recognise that they cannot be true followers of Christ if they spend their days trying to remove the Cross from their marriage and hence remove the very means of their sanctification. For Jesus said: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23).

Thus, spouses who entrust themselves to Christ and follow him closely tend to have a more positive attitude towards suffering. Not only they tend to accept it, but they also embrace it as a means for their identification with Christ and their growth in holiness. They recognise that suffering has a redemptive value and so, they turn every difficulty, challenge or pain into a means for their sanctification and the sanctification of their family. Therefore, the hardships of married life become the place where they meet Christ and be conformed to his image rather than a cause of tension and discord in the family. This positive attitude stems from the very fact that their whole being is transformed by their personal and daily encounter with Christ who gives their lives a whole new direction and meaning.

4.6.7 Bearing fruit through a true apostolate

In one of his Wednesday audiences, Pope Benedict XVI stated that in the early Church,

whoever had and lived the faith in Christ Risen was called to become a point of reference for all others, setting them in this way in contact with the Person and the Message of Jesus, who reveals the face of the Living God. And this holds true also for us: a Christian who lets himself be guided and gradually shaped by the faith of the Church, in spite of his weaknesses, his limitations, and his difficulties, becomes like a window open to the light of the living God, receiving this light and transmitting it to the world.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, Encyclical, November 30, 2007, 38.

⁹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Faith of the Church*, Audience, October 31, 2012.

Thus, when Christian spouses have a deep daily encounter with the person of Christ, they become a point of reference for others transmitting the light of Christ to the world. Their union with Christ is what makes their apostolate fruitful. This was affirmed in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*:

The success of the lay apostolate depends upon the laity's living union with Christ, in keeping with the Lord's words, "He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). This life of intimate union with Christ in the Church is nourished by spiritual aids which are common to all the faithful, especially active participation in the sacred liturgy.⁹⁹

Apostolicam Actuositatem also confirms that Christian spouses are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself¹⁰⁰ who calls them to the evangelisation and sanctification of men and to spreading the spirit of the Gospel.¹⁰¹ Thus, couples who are transformed by Christ, invest time and energy in evangelising their family first and the people whom God placed in their lives. They do so by ensuring that their children are well formed in the faith leading them by the witness of their own life. They also seek to lead others to Christ through authentic friendship, good example and prayer. They may also take part in different parish activities or groups who work in the area of evangelisation.

Moreover, for couples who follow Christ, the apostolate is not an extra task that they may or may not exercise. Instead, it becomes their whole purpose in life, for their transforming encounter with Christ impels them to share with others what they themselves have experienced. In addition, having followed Christ and having chosen to serve him in all things as their Lord and God, their hearts are penetrated with his love and moved by his mission which they make their own.

4.7 When only one spouse is open to the transforming encounter with Christ

Spouses are called to "help one another to attain holiness in their married life."¹⁰² This is affirmed by a striking statement made by William E. May when he was commenting on the encyclical of Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*: "a married person's path to holiness God wants him to

⁹⁹ AA, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 3.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 2.

¹⁰² CCC, 1641.

have has a name: his or her spouse.”¹⁰³ Holiness in marriage can be attained not only when both husband and wife are open to be transformed by an encounter with Christ, but also when only one of them allows such a transformation. This is possible since God, who alone can transform a soul, utilises and rewards the prayers sent up, the sacrifices and sufferings accepted and sometimes voluntarily sought and offered up by one spouse for the conversion of the other.¹⁰⁴

An example of this can be found in the life of a couple, Felix and Elisabeth Leseur. Elisabeth had a great love for Christ. She lived a life of daily encounter with him. She allowed him to transform all aspects of her life and so, she grew in renunciation, detachment, acceptance of suffering and utmost charity toward God and neighbour. She sought holiness while living in the world fulfilling the obligations of her state as a married woman. Her husband did not share her faith. In fact, he actively sought to destroy it through books, criticism, polemics, and raillery. As a result, Elisabeth suffered greatly and silently. However, she prayed incessantly for his return to the Faith and to the practice of religion. She accepted and offered up all her privations, sacrifices, trials, sufferings, and at the end, even her death.¹⁰⁵ After her death, having found and read her writings, he converted and became a priest. The power of her intercession is captured in the following words he wrote:

I have, since her death, learned to appreciate the eloquence and persuasive power of her silence. God heard the constant prayer that it concealed and, when the sacrifice was fully accomplished, answered it abundantly. In His infinite goodness, He allowed the silence to be broken after Elisabeth’s death, so that she spoke to and instructed me in my innermost thoughts, as she would never have done in life, and very often I might have exclaimed, “Being dead, she speaketh.” But above all, her intercession, when it became more direct and more powerful, called forth our divine Lord’s grace and mercy, so that He let my poor soul hear His voice. God has completed the conversion which was begun in me by the shining influence of my holy companion, Elisabeth, and which was determined by reading her writings.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ William E. May, *Church, Marriage and the Family* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine’s Press, 2007), 78.

¹⁰⁴ Felix Leseur in *The Secret Diary of Elisabeth Leseur* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 2002), xiii.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Leseur, *The Secret Diary of Elisabeth Leseur*, xvi.

4.8 The relevance of Pope Benedict XVI's contribution on transformation to some other types of couples who are married sacramentally.

Although the focus of this thesis is on Christian spouses who are practising their faith, the writings of Pope Benedict XVI on transformation can also inform other couples in sacramental marriage who find themselves in different situations spiritually. Those who are lukewarm, perhaps living their faith out of a sense of obligation, can benefit from the writings of Benedict by considering his invitation to a personal encounter with Christ who is seeking a close and intimate relationship with them and who wants to transform them from within by sharing their concerns, their struggles, their hopes and their dreams. He alone fills their existence with deep meaning and peace. By encountering him, they rediscover their faith which brings joy and hope to their personal, family and social life.¹⁰⁷

Spouses who are away from the Church and no longer believe in Christ may find the writings of Benedict on transformation appealing as he links faith to the attractive force of truth which the human heart is constantly searching for. In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

Each of us has an innate and irrepressible desire for ultimate and definitive truth. The Lord Jesus, "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6), speaks to our thirsting, pilgrim hearts, our hearts yearning for the source of life, our hearts longing for truth. Jesus Christ is the Truth in person, drawing the world to himself.¹⁰⁸

For Benedict, Christ reveals the truth of our existence. To encounter him is to encounter the One who gives meaning to our life.

Spouses who fluctuate between practicing their faith and neglecting it may also find Benedict's writings beneficial. Rather than considering their faith to be the sum of certain ideas and beliefs in which they are neither satisfied nor convinced, they learn to rediscover the truth of faith through a genuine encounter with the Person of Christ who reveals himself to them not through ideas and convictions but through a relationship.

¹⁰⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Opening of the Synod of Bishops*, Homily, October 7, 2012.

¹⁰⁸ SC, 2.

4.9 Mary: a great guide and intercessor for married couples who seek transformation in Christ

Mary gives Christian spouses a great example of how encountering Christ by following him closely each day can lead to their transformation and hence their holiness. Through Mary's "yes" God entered the world and transformed it. Her willingness to accept God's call and cooperate with him brought salvation to all men. Mary trusted in God and surrendered herself to him completely. She was perfectly open to the action of the Holy Spirit. Her whole life was penetrated and transformed by God's word. As Benedict XVI says, she always "knew how to respond with complete availability, the fruit of a profound bond with God that had matured in assiduous and intense prayer."¹⁰⁹

Mary is not only a shining example of transformation in Christ, but also a powerful intercessor for spouses. As Pope John Paul II noted in his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*:

Mary places herself between her Son and mankind in the reality of their wants, needs and sufferings. She puts herself "in the middle," that is to say she acts as a mediatrix not as an outsider, but in her position as mother. She knows that as such she can point out to her Son the needs of mankind, and in fact, she "has the right" to do so. Her mediation is thus in the nature of intercession: Mary "intercedes" for mankind.¹¹⁰

Thus, just as Mary interceded for the bride and groom at the wedding of Cana, she continues to intercede for every married couple bringing their needs to the Lord. However, her intercession is always accompanied by a total submission to God's will. She says to every couple: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5) and hence, as Pope Benedict XVI noted, she

leaves everything to the Lord's judgement. At Nazareth she gave over her will, immersing it in the will of God: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word' (Lk 1:38). And this continues to be her fundamental attitude.¹¹¹

By teaching couples to be totally obedient to God's will, Mary prepares them to receive abundant grace from him and so, just as water was transformed into wine at Cana, they themselves become transformed into a true image of Christ. This great transformation gives rise to many other transformations in their lives, particularly and more importantly, the transformation of their marriage.

¹⁰⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Apostolic Journey to Mexico and the Republic of Cuba, Audience*, March 14, 2012.

¹¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater: On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the life of the Pilgrim Church*, Encyclical, Vatican Website, March 25, 1987, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html, 21.

¹¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Apostolic Journey to Muchen, Altotting and Regensburg*, Homily, September 11, 2006.

Finally, Mary stands before each married couple as a sign of comfort and hope. She turns to them, saying in the words of Pope Benedict:

Have the courage to dare with God! Try it! Do not be afraid of him! Have the courage to risk with faith! Have the courage to risk with goodness! Have the courage to risk with a pure heart! Commit yourselves to God, then you will see that it is precisely by doing so that your life will become broad and light, not boring but filled with infinite surprises, for God's infinite goodness is never depleted!¹¹²

4.10 Conclusion

In today's world where 'relativism' is so prevalent and faith is no longer regarded as important, Christian spouses are more than ever in great need of rediscovering God's plan for them in marriage and their call to holiness. They need to regain an awareness of the grace available for them through the sacrament of marriage and recognise that it is only through their cooperation that this grace will bear fruit and lead them to holiness. The writings of Pope Benedict XVI on "transformation", when applied in the lives of Christian spouses, help them cooperate with grace in a profound way and hence change into Christ's likeness from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18).

Transformation in Christ requires taking a new direction in life. It involves letting go of one's own view reality and looking at the world with the eyes of Christ. Thus, couples who seek to be transformed by Christ need to follow him daily with complete abandonment and an inner readiness to be changed by him. This readiness to be changed cannot be selective but needs to be total and unconditional. Christian spouses need to allow Christ to rule in their hearts and transform every aspect of their lives. They need to let him guide them with his words and sacraments in understanding what they should do, what journey they should make, how they should live.¹¹³ It is precisely understanding according to God and seeing with his eyes that makes their life sure and enables them to "stand" rather than fall.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Pope Benedict XVI, *Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Homily, December 8, 2005.

¹¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, *God Reveals His Benevolent Purpose*, Audience, December 5, 2012.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Today, Christian spouses are in great need of a path that leads them to respond to the universal call to holiness as addressed to them by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*. Through the sacrament of marriage, spouses receive an abundance of grace to assist them in fulfilling their vocation to holiness. However, unless they cultivate the seeds of grace that they receive, these seeds remain hidden and will not bear fruit. The writings of Pope Benedict XVI on transformation provide an insight into such a path which can serve as a means of cooperating with grace. This path involves the couple's encounter with the person of Christ who comes to transform them in such a profound way that they are gradually changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18).

For Benedict, transformation can only happen through an act of total entrustment to the Person of Christ who shows us the face of the Father, reveals to us his boundless love and gives meaning to our existence. To be transformed, one needs to abandon oneself to Christ with the attitude of a child who is certain of his mother's love. This abandonment must reach what is most personal and intimate in one's being. It requires inner conversion, leaving one's own view of reality, self-sufficiency and independency to enter into a relationship of trust with God who grants the certitude of eternal love and meaning. Such relationship with God is born from a personal encounter with Christ which can only happen by following him daily and accompanying him on the way. To follow him, one must let go of one's old self and entrust all aspects of life to him in such a way that He becomes one's centre and compass.

Benedict tells us that, in following Christ, we are given spiritual provisions to ensure an intimate encounter with him. These provisions include prayer and recourse to the sacraments which have always been in the Church the spiritual veins through which grace flows. Thus, the distinction of Benedict XVI's contribution in his writings on transformation consists of not so much a new path which was unknown before, but rather of a special emphasis on the attitude through which one needs to approach prayer and the sacraments. It is precisely this attitude of a personal encounter with Christ described above that ensures transformation and hence growth in holiness. Thus, through the writings of Pope Benedict XVI on transformation, Christian spouses are called to a new attitude of conversion, abandonment and entrustment to the Person of Christ. They are called to let go of self-reliance and dependence on their own efforts in their spiritual life and entrust themselves totally to the Person of Christ, allowing themselves to be

guided, illuminated, converted and transformed by him. They no longer need to remain in the confinement of their “I” but rather move into a confident entrustment to a “You” who gives them the guarantee of his eternal love.

Adoption of this attitude of abandonment, which is so central in Benedict XVI’s writings, provides spouses with a path that helps them reap the fruits of grace available for them in their sacramental marriage and hence leads them to grow in holiness. When Christian spouses allow themselves to be transformed by Christ, they begin to see the effects of this transformation on their marriage. They will grow in virtue especially the virtue of humility and love which help them be patient with each other, treat one another with kindness, understanding and compassion, and forgive each other’s faults and weaknesses. They will also grow in friendship and affection for each other based on trust. They will grow in unity and fidelity that is definite, permanent and unconditional. They will also grow in sexual intimacy since their love is moved by the virtue of chastity. Spouses who let themselves be transformed by Christ will learn to do all things with love hence elevating their ordinary activities to a supernatural dimension. They learn to embrace the Cross realising that their transformation involves dying to themselves daily in order to rise with Christ. They also learn to share Christ with others so they too may be transformed by him.

The transformation of Christian spouses leads to the transformation of their marriage. As they follow Christ daily, they “enter into the self-surrender that is the real heart of love,”¹¹⁵ and they become couples who love as God has loved.¹¹⁶ Their act of “following Christ” is bound up with the Paschal Mystery since it implies entering into communion with God.¹¹⁷ As they die with Christ, they also rise with him and their marriage is transformed by love. It is changed gradually into a true image of Christ’s marriage to his bride the Church. They learn to overcome division in their relationship and become united in all things. Together, they are able to face all the challenges they encounter in their daily life providing each other with great support and true friendship.

Finally, the insights provided by Benedict XVI can be used as a framework for pastoral work with Christian married couples. They shed light on new ways of helping couples grow in holiness through an intimate and daily encounter with Christ in which they learn to entrust

¹¹⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1985), 15.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, “Jesus Christ Today,” *Communio* 17 (1990): 77.

themselves totally to him. When applied in marriage preparation programs, marriage counselling or any other form of marriage ministry, these insights can lead to the transformation of many marriages today.

In conclusion, couples in sacramental marriage can find a precious treasure in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI on transformation. Facing great challenges in today's world, they are more than ever in great need of renewing their faith through an intimate encounter with the Person of Christ who alone can transform their marriage into a sign that speaks of God's love and a path that leads them to holiness. Christian spouses are in urgent need today to give their "yes" to Christ in the same way that Christ gave his own "yes" to the Father. It is precisely this "yes" that will grant them the assurance that they are cherished and protected by the love of God who gives them strength in a culture that presents them with many challenges. Following Mary's example of listening with docility to Christ's words and trusting in him, they are then able to witness how "the water of everyday life is changed into the wine of love that makes life good, beautiful and fruitful."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Meeting with Engaged Couples in Ancona*, Travel, September 11, 2011.

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