

## Divine Intra-Trinitarian Love, a Model for the Christian Marital Love

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### Abstract

In recent years, there has been a worldwide increase in young people's interest in sexuality to the detriment of love, which is now frequently read as physical desire. Cultural and socio-economic changes have led to teenagers' becoming sexually active at increasingly younger ages, and studies have shown that more and more teenagers in Romania, similar to all European countries, begin their sex lives before marriage, which leads to the growth of not only the number of one's sexual partners and of sexually transmitted diseases, but also of so-called "unwanted" pregnancies. What this paper aims to do is to promote love as the core value of Christianity and family unity. Love is the main goal of human life and the means to acknowledge the divine spark in others. Love is also essential to the foundation of the Christian family. Created in God's image, man and woman constantly strive to resemble their primordial model, particularly with respect to love. Moreover, God, in His unity of tri-personal communion, is a role model for the Christian family who perfectly mirrors it, while Christ mediates the communion between the Holy Trinity and the members of the family. Love is the supreme gift that spouses can share, a gift that can contribute to their spiritual growth and that can keep the two together for life.

**Keywords:** Holy Trinity, divine, love, Christian family, unity, model

LOVE IS THE CORE VALUE of Christianity. It is out of His perfect love that God created the world, saved it, and constantly cares for it and sanctifies it. It is in this divine intra-trinitarian love that lies the source of the human being's love for the other. The one who loves truly holds the beloved as an ideal in life and loves them unconditionally, with their good and less good parts, in the hope of being able to change the "darkness" into peaks of love and good living. Love is the one that opens the heart's eye which better sees the secret heart of the other, while the other also discovers the secret heart of the person whom they love and who loves them in return, as they

grow closer. The mutual knowledge of the two people is presupposed by this relationship of true love: "As I know him, through love, perhaps better than he knows himself, so he, through the love by which he gets closer to me, can know me better than I know myself."<sup>1</sup>

It is through divine love that the entire creation was brought into existence; that is why the source and finality of all things is God, and He is love: "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." (1 John 4:7-8)<sup>2</sup> In one of his homilies, St. John Chrysostom describes Christ's absolute love of people:

I am a father for you (says Christ) and a brother, a bridegroom and a home, a nurse and a dressing, a root and a cornerstone. Whatever you want, I am for you. My desire is that you have no need whatsoever. I shall serve you; for I came not to be served, but to serve. I am a friend and a member and a head, a brother and a sister and a mother. I am everything for you. Just stay in communion with me. I have been poor for you and a wanderer for you, on the cross and in the tomb for you.<sup>3</sup>

Christ can thus become any family member and offer his support, according to the person's emotional and/or spiritual needs.

The foundation of the family is marital love, which is also the aim of the family. Through love the husband and wife are joined in body and soul, and thus the primordial unity of man takes place. The link between divine intra-trinitarian love and the love within the Christian family is the direct result of the Sacrament of Marriage, which is nothing but "an event in which the truth of [the Church's] life is manifested and realized, and a reality in which our fragmented nature is transfigured into an image of trinitarian community."<sup>4</sup>

Father Dumitru Stăniloae shows that God, in His unity of tri-personal communion, is a role model for the Christian family:

In Orthodoxy God is a tri-personal being, i.e. a tight intimacy between three selves, a life shared between three subjects. Neither is the unity torn, nor do the persons merge. There are

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<sup>1</sup> Dumitru Belu, *On Love* [in Romanian], apud Fr. Ioan C. Teșu, *From the Hell of Passions to the Heaven of Virtues* [in Romanian] (București: Editura Christiana, 2000), 155, footnote 474 (my translation).

<sup>2</sup> This and all subsequent Bible quotations will be taken from the King James Bible, available online: <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/King-James-Version-KJV-Bible/> [22.11.2018].

<sup>3</sup> Fr. John Chryssavgis, *Love, Marriage and Sexuality*, 2005, online: <http://www.orthodoxa.org/GB/orthodoxy/society/love.htm> [22.11.2018].

<sup>4</sup> Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 157.

neither isolated and selfish individuals, nor a mass in which the persons are stifled. But there is family unity; in family there is one heart, one thought, one will. [...] In God there is an ideal family life, full of love: it is not without a purpose that one person serves as Father and another as Son.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, this model is mirrored at the level of the human family, with the spouses and their marital love, followed then by the fruit thereof (i.e. the offspring), who are joined together in “tight intimacy”.

A communion is thus created between the Persons of the Holy Trinity and the members of the family, and it mediated by Christ:

One of the first consequences of comparing marriage to the Holy Trinity, “as structure of supreme love”, is that it presents itself as a “small kingdom”, a *microbasilea*. The *Trinitarian ecclesia* is mirrored in the *domestic ecclesia*. What makes the face of Trinity become the face of marriage is a certain influence of the divine Persons in the spouses’ lives and, above all, the presence and intervention of the Son-person. The passing from divine communion to human communion is done through Christ, consubstantial with the Father and the Holy Spirit in respect to His divinity, and consubstantial with us in respect to His unity.<sup>6</sup>

Man and woman are created in God’s image and likeness (Genesis 1:27 – “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.”); they are endowed with the capacity for mutual love and communion. This love between spouses emerges from the all-embracing love of the Holy Trinity and it is thanks to it that the two can move forward in true life: “A full life is one with love. God is the source of life because in the Trinity lies the source of love. Whoever has love in Him, as a normal relationship with another, also has life.”<sup>7</sup>

It is due to this divine image they have that human beings continuously strive to resemble their model, i.e. God. As such, both man and woman are capable of sharing love, first within the family, and then outside of it, towards other people. Love is what unites the two spouses and helps them rejoice in each other. In a similar way, there is a tight connection between kindness and love within the Holy Trinity:

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<sup>5</sup> Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodoxy and Romanian identity* [in Romanian] (Bucharest: Albatros, 1998), 58 (my translation).

<sup>6</sup> Fr. Ilie Moldovan, *Love, the Sacrament of Marriage. The Theology of Love* [in Romanian], vol. 1 (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 1996), 18-19 (my translation).

<sup>7</sup> Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Immortal Image of God*, apud Fr. Vasile Gavrilă, *Marriage – Life in God’s Kingdom* [in Romanian] (Bucharest: Ed. Fundația „Tradiția Românească”, 2004), 23 (my translation).

This is the mutual kindness or love of one Person towards another. This kindness is related to their actual existence. The Father cannot exist and cannot rejoice in it unless it is an existence lovingly given to the Son. And the Son cannot exist unless accompanied by the joy of receiving His existence from the Father, who gives it out of unlimited love, in accordance with His own existence. And the Holy Spirit lives the fullness of its existence by rejoicing in the joy of the Father in the Son and vice versa.<sup>8</sup>

Marital love is a natural feeling for the spouses, a decision and a commitment to a common life path, as well as a gift from God received during the great Sacrament of Marriage. This family love must be cultivated and supported through continuous effort. It presupposes delicacy, responsibility and respect; through it each one meets the other halfway. In the family unity, man and woman offer themselves to each other in the perspective of God's image in the other. The love between the two is an iconic image of the love of God, as St. John Climacus shows: "Blessed is the person who has obtained such love and yearning for God as a mad lover has for his beloved generating fire by fire, eros by eros, passion by passion, desire by desire."<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Father John Chryssavgis claims that the relationship between the spouses must become an icon of trinitarian love:

Unless marital love opens the couple up beyond themselves, unless the relationship of the two in marriage reflects the communion of the Trinity, unless the love of the couple extends them in one way or another, then marital love is reduced from a sacred icon to a mere idol.<sup>10</sup>

Love is the main goal of human life; it is what makes us constantly strive to become better people and it is also what helps us acknowledge the spark of divinity in others. Human beings are created by God

to love and to look at one another. The experience of love is heaven and life; the absence of love is hell and death. [...] Love shatters the chains of loneliness; it tears down the walls of selfishness. [...] We are never more powerful than when through love we are vulnerable. Love casts out fear; it is stronger than death. To say to someone: "I love you!" is to make a metaphysical statement; it is like saying: "You will never die!" [...] To

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<sup>8</sup> Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Immortal Image of God* [in Romanian], vol. II (Bucharest: Cristal, 1995) 11 (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> St. John Climacus, apud Chryssavgis, *Love, Marriage and Sexuality*.

<sup>10</sup> Chryssavgis.

gaze into another person's eyes with love is to see the soul of the entire world, it is to see the very image of God.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, love is crucial to the foundation of the Christian family. As the unity and life communion between husband and wife, the family was established on the model of intra-trinitarian love. There is a very close connection between the mutual love of spouses and the love God bestows on them and on all people. If the family is on the path to Christian perfection, then family love will be implicitly directed towards God, where it will meet His love for the spouses. In this loving communion, marital love will grow stronger because it will continuously be nourished by its source, which is divine love.

There is no source of true love other than God; thus, where there is such love, God is also present and manifests Himself. Whoever lives in love dwells in God, while the persons who dwell in pure love have the mystical feeling of being embraced by God, although He is present there and His love works in that place as well... Love is the medium which brings people and God together.<sup>12</sup>

Through the Sacrament of Marriage the holy gift is bestowed on the family that receives an ecclesiastical way of life so that the loving relationship and mutual knowledge between the spouses is no longer natural but built on the model of the Holy Trinity:

The relationship and knowledge of the partners becomes an ecclesial event, realized not only through nature but also through the Church. It is an experience of participation in the communion of the saints: the man encounters and knows the woman, and the woman the man, not simply within the natural relationships and sexual love of the family, but in the context of those relationships which constitute the Church as an image of her trinitarian prototype.<sup>13</sup>

The marital relationship becomes a loving perichoretic relationship, similar to the perichoretic life model of the Holy Trinity.

John Breck shows that it is precisely through its gift of procreation that the family stays connected to God's love: "Blessed in the Church, [the family] serves the Church, continuing through procreation God's work of creation, reflecting God's eternal love for the Church, and through it for the whole world, and testifying to marital love, which guides and accompanies

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodoxy and Romanian Identity* [in Romanian], apud Fr. Tiberiu Gh. Dârlea, *Marriage and Mystical Life* [in Romanian] (Bucharest: Lumina, 1995), 61 (my translation).

<sup>13</sup> Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 161.

the spouses on the path of eternal life.”<sup>14</sup> Aiming for salvation and eternal life, family love is a kind of love that actually responds to God’s inner love, which is its source. According to John the Apostle, “God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. [...] We love him, because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:16, 19)

Through their love the spouses do not move away from God, but on the contrary, they get closer to Him and His love, as St. Gregory the Theologian argues: “Joined as a single body and soul, they live through their mutual love, as marriage does not move them away from God but brings them closer to Him because God Himself is the One who draws us to it.”<sup>15</sup> In a similar way, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite writes: “Love, be it godly, angelic, spiritual or physical, is a unifying power which manifests a communion.”<sup>16</sup>

In the Christian family the spouses form a unity with God, as Father Alexander Schmemmann explains: “In a Christian marriage, in fact, three are married; and the united loyalty of the two towards the third, who is God, keeps the two in an active unity with each other as well as with God.”<sup>17</sup>

The feeling of love, supported by the divine blessing of Marriage, is what mystically unites the spouses, as St. Cyril of Alexandria states:

It is of little import if the husband is not joined in body and soul with his lawful partner. For, once and for all they have become one body and somehow one soul, being bound by love and united by God’s law in good understanding.<sup>18</sup>

Love is a life-giving force, the foundation of family, while the family is the seal of love, “the sacrament of love”, as defined by St. John Chrysostom. Within the family love is the spouses’ source of physical and spiritual energy, through which isolation is annihilated and a complete sharing of life and existence is accomplished. Love becomes the way in which human beings enrich their souls; in love there is no fear, for “[h]e that feareth is not made perfect in love.” (1 John 4:18)

Through love husband and wife share their gifts and offer each other the best and noblest parts of their hearts, thus creating a circuit of love and giving through which they both grow spiritually. Discussing the love-giving relation, Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae says:

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<sup>14</sup> John Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life* [in Romanian] (Cluj-Napoca: Patmos, 2003), 79 (my translation).

<sup>15</sup> St. Gregory the Theologian, *Praise of Virginity* [in Romanian], apud Breck, 83, footnote 20 (my translation).

<sup>16</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names* [in Romanian], apud Georges Habra, *Love and Sensuality* [in Romanian] (Bucharest: Anastasia, 1994), 80 (my translation).

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World – Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 90.

<sup>18</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Malachi* [in Romanian], apud Habra, *Love and Sensuality*, 85 (my translation).

The two love each other because they complete each other, because they are not the same as each other. "Love does not take place between similarly sounding souls, but between harmonious ones", says Schiller. Love is a change of being, a mutual completeness. Love enriches each other because it receives and gives continuously, while hatred makes one poor because it neither gives nor receives anything... Marriage means at the same time love and help, joy of the other and his patience. For all this is the divine gift bestowed on the two people who are getting married. Love unites the amazement in the face of the other's mystery and the patience to bear the other's inabilities and the help offered to the other to overcome them. In love they both become strong.<sup>19</sup>

It is only through love that one can enter the other's inner world, the mysteries of the other's inner universe:

starting from the actual person, love moves further into their inner world, sensing all the richness of values that are on hold or tending to be accomplished [...]. In other words, love transposes us to the privileged situation in which one can see the deeper reality, beyond the appearance of the other's empirical person, to know not only the values that are to be realized but also the latent ones – which helps us in the highest degree to get the person's true image.<sup>20</sup>

Love makes the spouses more beautiful, better and nobler.

Love reveals to our soul a previously inexperienced happiness; it communicates great excitement, an incomparable joy. It is as if it gives wings to our soul because, when we love someone, we begin loving everyone and everything is filled with light for us, everything gets a new appearance and begins to shine. In love lies the seed and the enormous power of transformation which makes everything reaching our senses be perceived 'poetically', as we love everything around us, we rejoice in everything and we are open to everything surrounding us. And the beloved dwells at the core of this our mood, as if it were from them that thousands upon thousands of rays spread around joy and light and seal with beauty the beloved's face. When the feeling of love begins to take root in their hearts, even the coldest and roughest of people become kinder and gentler and experience a joy they have never felt before. Although externally the person we love may appear common to others, for us, s/he is unique, incom-

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<sup>19</sup> Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 3 (Bucharest: Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1997), 122 (my translation).

<sup>20</sup> Dumitru I. Belu, *On Love* [in Romanian] (Craiova: Omniscope, 1997), 38 (my translation).

parable and irreplaceable. It is an 'idealisation' of the beloved, and this idealisation is due to the feeling of love which makes us see the beloved as kinder and more beautiful than do others, who are not attached to her/him by the same feelings as ours.<sup>21</sup>

In the light of love the spouses go beyond the person's external appearance, which may sometimes be imperfect, and reach the ideal part where lies the image of God in man.

The law of love makes the other's soul a mirror in which, in fact, they both see themselves. They both discover themselves as beautiful in both body and soul. They see each other, read the depths of each other's heart and recognize themselves in a double hypostasis – as lovers in love.<sup>22</sup>

According to Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite, love is ecstatic, i.e. it overflows one's own ego towards the ones it is addressed, so that those in love no longer belong to themselves but to those whom they love. Therefore, only love can lie at the foundation of family, a feeling which belongs to the sacrament that touches the lives of the spouses.

In this sense, St. John Chrysostom declares:

You do understand how important this sacrament is then, don't you? For, the virgin, living in isolation and having never seen her husband, wants him and loves him since the very first day as if he were her own body. In turn, the man prefers since the very first day the one he has never seen and never spoken with to all his friends and his own parents. On their behalf, the parents dispossessed of their wealth for other reasons are irritated, troubled and often drag those who dispossessed them to court; yet in marriage, they give their daughter together with a rich dowry to a man they often have never seen or known and they are happy to do this and do not think themselves robbed but, seeing their daughter gone, they forget the life spent together, they are neither sad nor offended, but grateful and think it worthy of their aspirations that their daughter should leave them while taking with her a large amount of money.<sup>23</sup>

Blessed and sanctified through the Sacrament of Marriage, love is the supreme gift that spouses share; it is what intermediates the noblest inner-

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<sup>21</sup> V. V. Zenkovsky, *Conversations with the Young about Sexuality* (Bucharest: Ed. Bizantină, 1998), 35-36 (my translation).

<sup>22</sup> Fr. Ioan C. Teșu, *From the Hell of Passions to the Heaven of Virtues* (Bucharest: Ed. Christiana, 2000), 157 (my translation).

<sup>23</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on choosing a wife*, apud Habra, *Love and Sensuality*, 88 (my translation).

most gifts that husband and wife offer each other, which contribute to their spiritual enrichment. Ultimately, it is also what keeps the spouses together until death takes them apart.

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