A discussion about marriage and sexuality could be understood as a fundamental aspect of a contemporary discussion, especially in relation to the fields of morality and justice. Today in theory and in practice, many positions exist as a result of differing views on marriage and sexuality in our contemporary world. In my opinion, many people think they know what marriage is, what sexuality is; they may indeed have an idea, an opinion, a point of view, but they do not really know exactly why marriage and sexuality are linked in the particular way taught by certain theologians.\(^1\)

Here I would like to explain briefly the point of view of the Blessed Antonio Rosmini, an Italian Catholic philosopher and theologian who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century, who provides interesting food for thought for our contemporary world.

1. Marriage and Love

What is marriage? For some people it is a simple ceremony, well-orchestrated by parents and friends. For others it is a simple contract, formalized before a public authority. For other people it is above all an unforgettable event. For still others, it is a different way of life, a union, a sharing, a popular phenomenon, a fact that, sooner or later, may come to exist.

The list of opinions could be continued including some reflections about divorce.\(^2\) Of course, it might be said, it depends on one’s environment; in a theological school, other issues would probably influence us. In the face of the question: “What is marriage?”, a few people responded immediately: “It is a sacrament”, and others have come to the same conclusion after some further discussion. The traditional equation: marriage = sacrament, is no longer conceived as being naturally obvious. It is for me very interesting to hear some people saying: “get married for love, if there is love, then there is everything”, and then immediately hear the same people use expressions such as: “if love ends, the marriage also ends”.\(^3\)

This only brings a sudden shift in the question: “What is love?” As we can imagine, there are always different assertions, different points of view in which some definition of the too greatly abused word love can be found. The vast majority of the definitions refer to the sphere of sensuality, corporeality and feeling, without any reference to the true meaning of love, which goes beyond sensuality, corporeality and feeling, if it is understood in a philosophical and theological context that is able to explain all the facets the word love possesses. Sensuality, corporeality and feeling are, in fact, elements of human nature that must be understood and not condemned, but which do not constitute the whole person. Their meaning, in the natural and supernatural order, remains something that can only be interpreted in the light of a wider, higher and deeper vision involving inevitably the openness of the human person to his/her spiritual dimension and his/her natural inclination to search for God who is not a concept, but a Person.
Only an encounter with God can actually provide an initial understanding of what true love is, and marriage can be considered as the sacramental expression of this encounter. It is in human nature to search for love, an unconditional love that is realized in the union of two people, who mutually bind their lives through a pact made with each other and with God, which announces its validity to humanity. The groom and the bride, the agents of marriage, are called to be witnesses of their relationship by virtue of a sacrament of love which makes them one flesh.

We must try to answer this question: “In the face of all the alternative perspectives the contemporary world seems to propose, is it still possible to demonstrate that Christian marriage continues to have value today?”

For Rosmini, Christian marriage does not have a value but is a value, in exactly the same way as with his concept of a person. A person has no freedom, but is freedom. For this upholds the sense of the words of Jesus when he said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father, but by me.” (Jn, 14:6) The ontology and the theology of Christ are the heart of the thought and life of every human being, who knows himself/herself to be a unique work of art, loved and created by God.

2. Marriage

The great Italian philosopher Antonio Rosmini reflected on the question of marriage from different points of view in important works which may be considered today as an extraordinary example of his broad education and sensibility. A large number of papers, studies and surveys, written over time, demonstrate the attention that scholars have had for his philosophical thought in this particular field.

1 I do not want to say that all theologians take the same line, but that a theological vision of the problem, beyond the different religious confessions, provides a more complete, although different, picture with respect to an expressed opinion that does not start from a precise reference, but that necessarily involves many disciplines linked with theology: philosophy, history, law, medicine, biology and many other sciences.

2 Today the question of divorce seems to be more important than marriage, but the question is open. On the Rosminian side, Cirillo Bergamaschi’s response to this problem is very interesting. See C. Bergamaschi: “L’indissolubilità naturale e sacramentale del matrimonio e la legislazione civile secondo Rosmini”, in: Aquinas (1976/3), 327-359.

3 A friend of mine commented to me one day: “Remember: love is eternal while it lasts”.

4 The principal works by Antonio Rosmini about marriage have been published in volume number 30 of the critical edition of his works, as the 6th volume of the Moral Philosophy Section: A. Rosmini: Del Matrimonio, ed. R. Bessero Berti, Roma: Città Nuova, 1977 (Opere edite ed inedite di Antonio Rosmini; 30). This book contains the following essays: Sulle leggi civili che riguardano il Matrimonio de’ cristiani (9-175); Progetto di legge sul Matrimonio del Deputato Bertolini (179-193); Lettera di un teologo ad un vescovo sul ministero del Sacramento del Matrimonio (197-202); La legge civile in relazione al Matrimonio: Dialoghi tre (205-336); Del bene del Matrimonio Cristiano: Ragionamento (339-353). Rosmini also wrote about marriage in other important works. We must remember Filosofia del diritto, ed. R. Orecchia, 6 vols., Padova: Cedam, 1967-1969. This extensive work has been translated in English by two Rosminian fathers: Denis Cleary and Terence Watson: The Philosophy of Right, 6 vols., Durham: Rosmini House, 1993-1996.

Here I want to focus, albeit briefly, on some central aspects of his thoughts on marriage, for I am convinced that his vision can contribute to a reconsideration of Christian marriage in the context of our contemporary “liquid society”. This society, still dazed by the aftermath of nihilism, senses the urgency for solid references that take maximally into account the dignity of the human person in the complexity of his/her own existence.

For Rosmini, God reveals himself to humans, but imperfectly. The fact, however, that he does so makes it possible for human beings to enter into this special relationship with God which is the basis of a relationship that Rosmini defines as a *theocratic society*. The human person can also establish other types of society but the purposes of these are always subordinate to that ultimate aim that is realized through full communion with God. Particularly important is the kind of society that Rosmini defines as *conjugal society* because it is “the source of the growth of the human species which, by consummating conjugal union, comes to subsist in many individuals. So the human race comes into being, and human nature enters, or can enter, into theocratic society with all the individuals in whom this society is destined to reveal and actuate itself. Thus, marriage contains something elevated that moved the Redeemer of the human race to raise it to the dignity of a sacrament.”

Getting married is the forming of a *conjugal society*. This means that being together in a certain place is not enough to form a society; otherwise a simple pile of stones would be a society rather than a simple example of a material whole. Nor can the formation of a society be realized without the fundament of sensuality and rationality, otherwise even animals would be able to set up a society. Umberto Muratore writes that “[t]he feeling of the animal is essentially individual: to seek pleasure and avoid pain is simply based on instinct, which by nature is blind and looks only for its own interest. The union of the brutes more than a society is a cohabitation.”

So we can ask: when do we have a society? A society is created when members consciously and freely attach a common goal to their union. This common purpose is to be understood as an asset to be achieved. For this, members need to agree to direct their actions to the attainment and enjoyment of that good. So we can say that in order to have a society, *intelligence* is necessary. The union of bodies is not sufficient to create a society, it is necessary that the social order be sought in *intelligent souls*.

If we apply this conception to marriage, we obtain a clear and precise definition of what should be understood as Rosmini’s conception of marriage. He writes: “According to upright reason, husband and wife are two human beings who unite with all the fullness realizable between persons of different sex. This is the true concept of marriage.” Continuing, we read this sentence: “Marriage, as I have defined it, is ‘the full, appropriate union between man and woman’.”

What does *full, appropriate union* mean? To understand this concept we must fully understand that a union cannot be attained without the *Truth*. For Rosmini, in fact, the Truth, which is unique to all humankind, unites in itself intelligence and will, giving humans the peace and joy that comes from the consciousness of one’s own righteousness. In this way, we can understand why Rosmini wrote that “it is clear that two intelligent beings can love each other. In this love, each loves all that is in the other, every part and every endowment of the other; every good and pleasure of the other is loved, together with the peace, joy and dignity proper to the other. All these things are loved in the beloved according to their intrinsic merit, that is, limitlessly.”

If humans have the courage to look at the reality of all things, to draw from it the meaning, to proceed according to reason, they realize that all real beings belong to the real supreme principle of all the others. In this way the human will is forced to find God. Thanks to this love, God himself enters as a third member into the conjugal society, because “God becomes the common good both of himself and of the spouses.”
This union is an authentic full communion in truth, virtue and God. It is in fact this threefold union that constitutes and guarantees the stable foundation of the conjugal union.

This full union between man and woman in which, in both theory and practice, the element of sexual difference is important, demonstrates Rosmini’s modern vision which views the happiness of the spouses as a fundamental explanation of a spontaneous and true love. On the theoretical level, the sexual difference expresses the complementarity of the two sexes that come together; on a practical level, this conjunction is the basis of marital happiness which can be blessed by the generation of children.

A careful reflection is necessary in light of the complexity of the human being. The attitude of those who claim to eliminate as problematic the whole complex issue of feelings, the inner upheaval, the tumult of the human heart, the passions, is unjustified, just as it would be mistaken to forget the aspect of human rationality that has its own source of light and point of reference in God. When we consider all these things in relation to the concept of marriage, the inevitably emerging dimension of love in its highest form is: love as full and complete self-giving. In marriage, in fact, the spouses give themselves to each other, and do so completely.

We could say that they love each other in God, for He is the inexhaustible source of that donative love of which St John has been an exceptional witness.

3. Sexuality

The issue of sexuality is complex and central in ongoing debates. In this context it is important to consider sexuality in marriage.


7 U. Muratore: “Natura del matrimonio e divorzio in Rosmini”, 5.


9 Ibid. 92 (n. 1256).

10 Ibid. 16 (n. 1008).

11 Ibid. 17 (n. 1009).

12 It is a relation between two human beings who can mutually complete each other.

13 Thanks to this vision, it is not possible to think that we speak of a “first class” wedding when there are children and of “second class” weddings when, for different reasons, there are no children.

14 Following are the titles of some studies about sexuality in Rosmini’s thought in order of the date of publication: C. Viglino: Rosmini e la morale sessuale; IDEM: La sessualità sotto l’aspetto filosofico, Roma: Leonarda da Vinci, 1923; IDEM: Dell’esenza e dei limiti del diritto coniugale in ordine all’unione sessuale, Roma: Leonarda da Vinci,
When we fall in love, we look different. Every single part of us is improved by virtue of a natural tendency to be influenced by a feeling that affects us deeply. Love is the nourishment of innate human harmony that unfolds through unequivocal attitudes toward someone, a person. Umberto Muratore writes that the physical beauty “and, even more, the beauty of the soul that the body often leaves transpire arouse in us the sensitive and spontaneous affections, if provoked, they turn into love”. Rosmini is convinced that this kind of love “is certainly harmful to the perfection of virtue because, in the present human condition, it binds the soul, taking away from it the freedom to give itself to good wherever good may be”. This love leads to the sensuous affection, which is “the affection engendered by mutual proximity and innocent physical contacts of persons of the opposite or same sex when in conversation with each other, or by their imagining the pleasure from such situations. The affection is reduced therefore to a desire or tendency to renew such pleasures. Not every pleasure caused by bodily contact is referred per se to the generative organs. In fact we can see that movements relative to generation are entirely sui generis.” In this condition it is difficult to completely separate the two things. Only a few people who have a high moral virtue can succeed in this while generally what happens is that “the path from sensual to sexual affection is therefore highly slippery, and sometimes inevitable”.

The two complementary sexes come together with the intention of procreation, which is the example of a very deep love. The main purpose of marriage is certainly the happiness of the couple who become one in love, for love; sexual union that follows is the natural generative way that may lead to the birth of children who are a good wealth of marriage but who are not necessarily, as we know, the purpose of marriage.

The sexual union is the vertex of the union of two intelligent complementary beings who complete each other and who, through marriage, constitute a complete union. Rosmini believes that there are different types of union that prepare for this type of complete union but first of all we must consider the spiritual unions which relate to truth, virtue and God himself because such are essential in order to avoid any interpretation that would consider the mere act of sex as being the culmination of a complete union. The sexual act is only the culmination of a process of union between a man and a woman as a result of an awareness of values that transcend the mere sensuality of the physical act.

Different components are involved in the sexual act. For Rosmini, when a man has sexual union with a woman, this involves all his heart, his feelings, his intellect and his will. We could say that in the sexual act all the powers of the intellectual being are involved. The sexual act is permissible only when it is directed at the whole human person. If it only involved man’s animality, the sexual act would be merely a response to a stimulus. Even the resulting sexual pleasure should not be condemned, provided it is framed in a specific context of legitimacy and understanding.

We must be attentive because while it is true that a sexual act should not be condemned in itself, it is at the same time true for Rosmini that “every sexual movement therefore that does not have generative union between spouses as its immediate end is an opprobrious disorder, contrary to the intention of nature and to the Creator’s will. It is abhorrent to human instinct itself (when this has not been debased and become degenerate) and is reproved by human and divine law.”

Somebody could say that pleasures that are possible should be allowed because if such pleasures are possible, it means that they are established by a wise Creator who certainly did not create anything in nature that is aimless. Rosmini answers this provocative objection in this way:

1. For the upright human being there are no sexual pleasures outside marriage. There may be pleasures for the animal, but not for the complete human being who is not only animal but principally rational and moral, and to whom every disordered pleasure is supremely hateful, abominable and...
painful. The hatred and pain overcome the pleasure so that they remove the nature of pleasure and make it a torment: as I said, every disordered pleasure is rejected by the moral-human instinct which loves the contrary virtue above everything else. Those who seek such pleasures are distorted and drawn outside their own nature.

2. Sexual pleasures between persons of the same sex (which an upright person will never want) are a sort of necessary consequence of the sexual tendency, whose legitimate mode of satisfaction is however in honest marriage. This consequence results from the limitation inherent in animal nature. But, as we said, all the defects of this consequence considered physically are opposed in a human being by the existence of intelligence and of noble instincts, instincts which intelligence is born to produce and does produce, provided the human being is not damaged. In animals, however, who lack reason as a brake and moderating influence, the Creator provides that the sexual instinct does not suffer any misuse, except rarely, through some infirmity or damage to their physical inclinations. 

As we can see, Rosmini does not condemn the man who is the victim of a sexual orientation that by general definition is aberrant because the philosopher is concerned about the person, who remains a person, even when having committed the worst sins. He does not say, for example, that homosexuality is a malady, but a messy impulse that can be caused by several different factors. Only by accepting the doctrine of original sin – now less attended to than in the past – in relation to the Rosminian vision regarding the difference between sin and guilt, can we understand the limitations of human nature and certain impulses that may lead to an instinct that has difficulty recognizing a specific natural and moral order. Rosmini does not judge as a cruel magistrature who looks down on humans, but he considers it to be harmful to human beings to walk far from the path of perfection that every person is called to follow.

Now we can try to understand the nature of the sexual union from the perspective offered by Rosmini. He gives an extremely charming analysis which focuses on two main points: (1) Sexual union is an act of the soul; (2) the union of the sexes is a mutual communication of life.

Let us begin with the first point. Rosmini writes:

[…] According to the Creator’s most wise dispositions, the chief of all the different conditions of human nature is the difference between the sexes. The character of this difference is such that, far from impeding the full union of two


Rosmini is very clear on this when he says that “sexual affection unites the two sexes with the intention of generation. This affection is so proper to them that it is physically impossible between persons of the same sex” (ibid. 31 [n. 1053]).

Rosmini does not condemn sexuality but he believes that sexuality outside of the sacrament of marriage could be defined as disordered and far from the pure intention of the upright human person.


Ibid. 29 (n. 1048-1049).

Ibid. 30 (n. 1051).

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Ibid. 31-32 (n. 1055).

Rosmini distinguishes between sin and guilt, considering sin as a disorderly action or state which is harmful because totally contrary to truth and God’s will. A person is only guilty of sin when he deliberately chooses to act immorally. If Adam is guilty of original sin, we are not. We have the original sin without guilt, but we become guilty when we deliberately give in to the weakness of nature consequent to original sin. It is difficult to understand in which way the disorder caused by original sin works in us. We can only say that none are immune to imperfection caused by the original sin. We could say that each of us has his/her own sins but God will judge, while what is important for us is repentance. These approaches are to be found in: A. Rosmini: Conscience, transl. D. Cleary/T. Watson, Durham: Rosmini House, 1989.

This is a philosophical argument, not a dogmatic supposition. This way of thinking, can, I think, be considered interesting even by a person who “believes to not believe”.

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human individuals through lack of uniformity, it accomplishes the union through diversity of form. The Creator has predisposed a wonderful appropriateness of form and organization of one body to the other. The immediate cause of this cannot be found in a principle of reason but solely in the fact of animality, which according to its eternal concept is necessarily subject to such law and determination.

[...] The nature of sexual union, for which human nature is suitable in its lowest part, is not, I repeat, material, as if it could be achieved by the mere mechanical union of material parts. It is rather an activity of the active animal principle. This certainly operates in matter but with an action of its own that differs greatly from any mechanical operation.

[...] I remind the reader of what I have said elsewhere: the animal principle is simple, and is the soul itself. The act of sexual intercourse, in which generation takes place, is an act of the soul operating in bodies and through bodies. The soul does not act through particular parts to the exclusion of others; the whole animal contributes to the act, especially the whole nervous system stimulated by the soul. The ancients themselves knew this. Now we can consider the second point in order to understand why for Rosmini the union of the sexes is a mutual communication of life. He writes:

[...] In Anthropology as an Aid to Moral Science I gave as my opinion that the sensations (at least those of touch) which we have from an animate body are specifically different from those of an inanimate body. From the former we receive a communication of the soul itself which gives life to the body that produces the sensation in us.

[...] Individual life, it must be noted, has an expensive force communicable to the bodies it is able to invade. It certainly has a power to make them one with itself, as we see in nutrition and other phenomena. We can have no great difficulty therefore in conceiving and admitting that a kind of communication of life takes place between two living bodies when they make contact; one body feels the very soul of the other body. This is particularly true in the case of lovers, where each would fuse totally with the other, if possible. The channeling and communicating of life in this union is aided, or rather produced, by the spontaneous consent of the wills, that is, by the effort of the souls, the principles of animation. Sexual intercourse is certainly the most intimate of bodily unions: the two fundamental feelings seem for a moment to become one, so that the feeling of one is reciprocally the feeling of the other. No words can express this more effectively than those of Scripture which define marriage as: ‘And the two shall be in one flesh’ [St. Matthew 19:5-6]. Here the unity of the flesh must be understood as the unity of life by which the flesh is vivified and in which both individuals share. The union of the sexes is therefore a vital not a material union. In the act, which can last only a moment, life exercises the function by which it joins two living bodies in the way the parts of a single animated body are joined together: for example, the brain and heart of the same human being intercommunicate through organic, vital functions and make a single animal out of both.

4. Marriage and Sexual Union

It is very interesting that Rosmini treats these issues in The Philosophy of Right, but it is clear that for him marriage is a very special form of union that should be defined with explicit characteristics and that even involves a context concerning the nature of the rights and the consequent reflection on the value of the rights. We must be attentive at this point because the philosopher introduces the explanation that the fact of the ordering of marriage to sexual union is for him the specific difference that distinguishes it from other kind of unions. Rosmini, in fact, argues that “[A]lthough the other unions in marriage are presupposed and have even greater nobility, the sexual union is the final completion of marriage. The ordering of marriage to this union is the specific difference between it and all other unions possible to human beings. [...] Ancient traditions said that the first parents of
mankind were ἀνδρογυνοί [androgyne] who were later separated. It was in fact logical that the propagated human species should consider its parents in the very act of generation, because in this act they are precisely ἀνδρογυνοί [androgyne], and generation and paternity begin."

Rosmini explains clearly, as I mentioned before, that procreation is not the purpose of the marriage but the effect of a sexual union that is a possibility inside the marriage. He writes that [a]ccording to the eternal idea, the Creator so ordered animal nature that at the moment when sexual union reached its greatest degree of intimacy and the feeling soul of one partner tended with greater impetus to invade the bodily parts of the other, some particles should separate from the body of each, move towards one another and meet in a place suitable for maintaining their life. In the act of detachment, these particles are not only alive but at the highest degree of vital stimulation and, as it were, animated by double life.

[...] After union they do not cease to live, even though partly divided from the individuals to whom they belong and from whom they were drawn by impetus of the souls that wished to unite. Through this division, the feeling preserved in them is no longer part of the feeling of the two individuals. They constitute therefore the first rudiments of a new animal destined to become a new human individual through communication of the light of God’s face.

[...] There is no more apt way of expressing this mysterious fact of generation than the phrase of divine Scripture in which the son of the parents is called their ‘spark’. This union described by Rosmini leads the reflection to consider a new fundamental principle that we can now understand clearly: the inconfusability of persons. He writes that

[c]onjugal society is a perfect union in accord with nature, a union between two human individuals of different sex. But one thing remains distinct in them: person. The spouses unite to form one nature out of two, but cannot form one person out of two. When God defined marriage saying that the spouses must be one flesh, he said simultaneously that they will be two in the one flesh, ‘THEY WILL BE TWO’.

[...] It is true that a kind of personal communication also exists between lovers, and therefore between spouses, in so far as one enjoys the personship of the other. But this kind of transfusion of persons neither intermingles them nor excludes their proper, indelible being.

[...] If the affection we are discussing changes from a spontaneous to an aroused state, it produces a special loving phenomenon; it goes outside itself to the loved object. Petrarch indicates this: Sometimes in the midst of sad tears / A doubt assails me: how can these limbs / live so far from their spirit? / But Love responds: Don’t you remember? / This is a privilege of lovers / freed from all human qualities.

In conclusion we can say that Rosmini keeps alive the pure meaning of marriage, shows the nature of this union, demonstrates the necessity of understanding that this special union is about the two different sexes: man and woman, underlines the importance of sexuality and explains the value that the marriage is, in accordance with that which ancient peoples have understood very well. He transcribes how the “Romans defined it [marriage]: ‘The union of male and female, the sharing of all life, the communication of DIVINE and human right’, and said that the wife ‘is accepted as companion in human matters and in the DIVINE HOUSE’. With wonderful foresight, the Romans included in marriage that divine society about which we have spoken and which we have posited as the foundation of marriage.”

26 Ibid. 33-34 (n. 1059-1060).
27 Ibid. 34 (n. 1061-1062).
28 Ibid. 35 (n. 1063-1064).
29 Ibid. 35-36 (n. 1065-1067).
30 Ibid. 36 (n. 1068).
Marriage and Sexuality: A Rosminian Proposal for Today

The vision of Antonio Rosmini on marriage and sexuality is an inspiration for contemporary reflection. The author tries to demonstrate the modernity of his point of view. Rosmini, in fact, is a classical example of a Christian thinker who knew how to advocate a renewal in the tradition of the Church, preserving the message of the Fathers of the Church and accepting the challenge of modern times. Relativism and atheism, the two names of the same disease called nihilism, have contributed to the destruction of moral, philosophical, political and theological values. The state of marriage is also affected by this disease. Rosmini is very clear and he appeals to reason to respond to both rationalism to irrationalism, the two theoretical extremes of our times. Marriage is a value and reference to the Truth and to Love guarantees victory against any provocative opinion that would seem to deny the fundamental status of marriage in itself.

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