

BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS ESSAY SERIES

Fifth Essay: Friendship within, and not without, the Family:

The Natural Friendship of Husband and Wife

By Professor Michael Pakaluk

Here begins a series of four essays on the nature of friendship within the family, and how that same friendship should extend outward from the family, permeating all of society and constituting that attitude, or virtue, known as ‘solidarity’. Since we regard the family as the necessary seedbed of solidarity, we might say that this friendliness outside the family is, however, not without the family.

Theory: Marriage is a Natural Friendship

The family is said to be the ‘basic cell’ or ‘building block’ of society. What this means is that human beings neither come into existence as individuals on their own (but rather from a man and a woman—who are then responsible for the upbringing of that child, because they caused its existence—and ipso facto they constitute a rudimentary ‘family’) nor typically do they carry out the various activities of ordinary life as individuals.

That the family plays this role is not something human beings have conspired together to plan or to will; it happens, rather, because of the internal logic of love between a man and a woman, and the fact that that love tends to be fruitful. Thus, the family is 'by nature' and prior, even, to political society: there had to have been families before the founding of states and governments; and government is properly speaking over families rather than individuals. The family, that is to say, is the natural 'basic cell' of society; it is by the intention of nature that this is so.

To take a trip by airplane and gaze at the communities below is to see vividly a confirmation of this truth. What one sees from the air are, for the most part, clusters of houses. One does not see caves, or hermit holes, or phone-booth type dwellings where 'individuals' live, but rather houses and homesteads. Take the house to be the physical representation of the family: material civilization divides up into households, then, just as human sociability divides up most basically into families, and each house stands for a man and woman who fell in love and founded a distinct unit of human society.

Thus: society depends upon families, as being constituted out of these basic units; and families depend upon the love between a husband and a wife. We wish to examine this love, then, to see what it must be like, if it is to play the role it needs to have in the fabric of society.

Note that this approach is the opposite of that usually taken in modern society. People typically begin by considering what they think contributes to their 'individual welfare' and 'interests,' and then they wonder whether and to what extent marriage or family life can be of service to them. But whatever notion of 'individual welfare' they start with in this way must be false. What contributes to the welfare of something depends upon what that sort of thing is like. If a human being is the sort of thing which, objectively and by nature, is meant to play a certain kind of role in society composed of others, then there is nothing which is 'his welfare' distinguishable from his playing that sort of role. If a cell in the body could think, it could draw no conclusions about its 'welfare' except by studying the role it was meant to play as composing a certain sort of tissue, within an organ, which plays a specific role in contributing to the health of the body. Similarly, if human beings are naturally sociable, then the welfare of each individual essentially includes his contributing to the good of those societies of which he is naturally a part.

We assume that the basis of a thing must be as strong as the elements of that thing. The basis of a family is the love between husband and wife. But the family is constituted by ties of blood. Hence, the love between husband and wife must be at least as strong as ties of blood. But ties of blood are unconditional and indissoluble. They are unconditional, because love for someone of 'the same blood' continues, or should continue, even if the other acts poorly. (The love should continue, even if some sorts of actions must stop, or circumstances must change: it can, for instance, be consistent with love for an alcoholic relative, that we ask him to leave our household.) They are indissoluble because once you are related to someone by blood, you remain so always:

this is not something that can ever change. We conclude, then, that the love between husband and wife must be unconditional and indissoluble.

This is a conclusion that we reach simply by considering the nature of the case: what sort of character that love must have, if it is to play the role allotted to it by nature. A family, constituted by ties of blood, must be founded upon a relationship at least as strong as ties of blood, if society is to have integrity. Think of physical atoms: the 'strong forces' which hold together the nucleus of an atom are, and must be, stronger than the electrical forces of the atom, or else atoms would split apart and dissolve, and material substances would have no permanence or solidity. Or consider again the view of human society we get from an airplane and think of what a mess our towns and villages would be if houses, those physical representatives of the family, were prone to break apart, because the walls of the house were no more strongly bound to each other than they were to things outside the house.

The basis of a thing must not only be as strong as the elements of that thing, it must also have a character which harmonizes with that of those elements. Now it is a feature of ties of blood that they, so to speak, 'radiate outwards': we have the most affection for those that are closest to us in blood, and corresponding weaker affection, the more remote a relative. We may note this phenomenon simply to stress weakening, viz. that affection between (say) cousins is weaker on average than that between brothers. Or we may equally note this phenomenon in order to underline the extending outwards of the

affection, viz. the very same principle that leads brothers to have affection for each other, similarly leads us to have affection even for (say) our second cousins once removed. Ties of blood are remarkable, then, for leading us to have affection (unconditional and indissoluble, in its own way) for persons far removed from the immediate arena of our interests, concerns, and action.

But, then, if that's the sort of thing a family is, and the relationship between husband and wife is the basis of it and therefore of a piece with it, then the relationship between husband and wife, in its nature and interior logic, must similarly be expansive and look beyond itself. Perhaps you have seen photographs of family reunions, which portray several generations of a single family, gathered together at once: white-haired great-grand parents surrounded by their children, children's children, and even children of their grandchildren. That sort of photograph, we maintain, captures something that is true of any instance of married love—even those relationships which do not, as it happens, lead to a manifold descendents. The old maxim of the neo-Platonists, *bonum diffusivum sui* ("goodness is diffusive of itself") applies to married love above all human loves.

The love between husband and wife, considered as a naturally occurring relationship—a 'natural institution'—is therefore unconditional, indissoluble, and outward reaching. These characteristics belong to marriage as a natural friendship and are not peculiar to any specifically religious conception of marriage. Moreover, they are 'objective' and 'set in advance' for us. We do not have freedom to disregard them, and

we do not have complete freedom in altering them. To get married is publicly to recognize and accept the objective nature of the relationship. It is to say: “We wish, by this act of the will, to place our relationship within that class of naturally occurring man-woman friendships—unconditional, indissoluble, and fruitful. In so doing we aim to be faithful to its nature, which has not been designed or constructed by us”.

(To say that such a relationship naturally has these characteristics is not to say that has them necessarily or inevitably, but only that we can succeed in acting as if it didn't only for the short term and through violence, and that our doing so will not lead to general benefits in the long run. Consider, as an analogy, right-handedness. That someone is right-handed is the result of a natural process, not chosen or decided upon. Nonetheless, it is not necessary that a right-handed person grow up to be, in fact, solely right-handed: he could be trained to be left-handed as well. (Importantly, we'd never succeed in making him left-handed instead.) But it would be unworkable generally to train right-handed people to be left-handed, because this would require the constant application of force, and, on account of the inefficiency at least, it would not work out for the best.

The virtues of a thing are relative to the function of a thing: a virtue is a trait which enables a thing of a certain kind to do its specific work well. For instance, the function of a knife is to cut; thus, the virtues of a knife are the traits that a knife should have in order to cut well. These include holding a sharp edge; rigidity; and safety. If the function of the natural friendship between husband and wife is to provide a basis for the family which is

unconditional, indissoluble, and outward reaching, then the virtues of a husband or wife—how they should act and live—will be implied by the traits that each should have in order to carry out their role in this relationship well.

Practice: Courtship is Revelatory of Marriage

What makes the natural friendship of marriage work well is exhibited in courtship. What produces also conserves: if courtship brings about the relationship, then it similarly preserves and strengthens it. And it is common for nature to provide at first vigorous motives for an endeavor, which then are withdrawn, and must be replaced with calmer but more stable and persistent motives: initial enthusiasm must be replaced by perseverance, if a man is to succeed; youthful energy must yield to habits of hard luck; in science, the natural curiosity of a child must develop into the methodical habits of a scientist. In general, the rule is that we are 'carried away' and supported at first by motives that have more the character of emotion. They please us because they are genuine; we take them to be tantamount to divine guidance, because they are nearly irresistible. We think we are living at a higher pitch, and more fully, when we are simply yielding to that sort of current of life. But such natural motives work only to provide an exemplar and foretaste, which deliberateness and a precious commitment of the will must later, through hard work and difficulties, strive to win. Thus, it is that courtship holds up to a couple at the start of their relationship an image to which they must continually strive to conform. But what is distinctive about courtship? What does one find there and nowhere else? What is strikingly and effortlessly depicted there?

We cannot ask these questions without reminding ourselves that few couples today in fact enjoy a period of courtship. Now this is troubling for two reasons. The first is that with the decline of courtship, one finds also the decline of any element of deliberateness and will in the origin of a relationship. We did not mean to suggest just now that initial motives are pure emotions. They are not: at the beginning of endeavors, we often find ourselves carried along by emotions, and emotions make it easy for us to do what we recognize is best. But nonetheless our action is not solely emotional, nor lacking in deliberateness.

Yet this is important when later we look to that initial period as to a kind of model of what our action should be like. If that initial period itself contains an element or has a framework of deliberateness, then our later efforts, necessarily more deliberate, may more easily imitate it—whereas to the extent if that initial period is almost solely a display of emotionalism, then it contains little that we may later safely imitate. Courtship gives a deliberate cast to the emotion of falling in love, so that it is something that can, in fact, be imitated by our deliberate efforts, later on, of remaining in love. If in courtship the emotion elicits the deliberate behavior, in marriage the deliberate behavior is meant to elicit the emotion. Couples who fail to court therefore deprive themselves of a suitable image of what their marriage should later be.

The second is that courtship is simply a way of acting that calls attention to the essential act of a marriage. In a marriage, each person gives himself to the other. (To say that marriage is unconditional, is to say that the gift of each is free and not conditional upon the gift of the other, in some quid pro quo fashion. To say that it is indissoluble, is to say that the gift is given entirely, without the possibility of retraction. To say that it is outward reaching, is to say that the gift is inherently procreative, in intention or possibility, if not in fact.) Courtship therefore involves a demonstration by each of some sort of self-possession—through composure, delicacy, modesty, and self-control—since no one who fails to possess himself can truly give himself. Furthermore, it involves repeated gestures which signify that one recognizes the character of the gift of the other: that the gift is free (hence the importance of ‘proposals’ in courtship); that it is valuable (hence the importance of expressed admiration); and that, if it is to be given, it is given without restrictions or qualifications (hence the necessity of protestations of unworthiness and lack of desert). Thus, couples who fail to court fail in fact to prepare themselves correctly and worthily for the ‘exchange of gifts’ which is their marriage—which leads directly and easily to the great ‘sin’ against marriage, namely, taking the other person for granted.

What, then, is distinctive about courtship? Precisely those sorts of action that exhibit a kind of ease or facility in this giving and receiving of the other as a gift. (Of course, in proper courtship the gift is given and received only in anticipation, since the relationship is not consummated. What serves as a sign in the manner of anticipation in courtship works as a sign in the manner of testimony in a marriage.) These include the following:

1. Spending time together, speaking sincerely. A human being is most fully his heart, and it is through sincere conversation that we share what is in our heart with another. In courtship this is spontaneous and irresistible: a couple deeply in love may need in fact to battle to stop spending time together, or risk getting run down from lack of sleep. In marriage, husband and wife must, rather, work at having sincere conversations. To do this, they must be careful to set aside time together each day, when they may talk. They should try not to talk solely of practical matters (schedules, finances, difficulties) which have little to do with what is in the heart (and in this regard they will be helped if each has a vigorous intellectual or interior life, nourished by reading, thoughtfulness, and prayer). They must especially aim to avoid recriminations or accusations throughout the day, which will cause the other to put up protective walls, which hinder thoughts from going out as much as from coming in.

2. Complaisance in the will of the other. If sincere conversation has to do with the heart, then complaisance has to do with the will. It is remarkable how the likes and dislikes of each partner in a courtship are derived from those of the other. The formula in courtship is: "That you like it is reason enough for me to like it." Again, in courtship this is a spontaneous and inevitable reaction: we almost instinctually, as a way of being closer to the other, take on outlooks, habits, and preferences of a person we deeply love. But in a marriage, once again, effort is required—which, however, very quickly becomes effortless. There are various reasons why the attitude of complaisance becomes difficult in a marriage. Because of the difficulties of domestic life, especially when raising children, husband and wife may each, naturally enough, look upon the other as a source of

consolation. But it is a short step from this to expecting that one's own preferences be gratified over those of one's spouse—the antithesis of complaisance. Or, again, it is common for the husband, because he is charged with the ultimate authority in deciding how to apply moral principles in the household, to overshoot his authority, and look to get his way also, illicitly so, in matters that where no moral principle applies, and the exercise of any distinctively husbandly authority is not at stake. For the wife, a more common problem, perhaps, is that she wrongly places greater stress on self-sacrifice on behalf of her children, than on going along with her husband's fancies; or she is so weary after serving her children, that the self-sacrifice required in dealing with her husband seems almost impossible to her.

3. Delicacy and refinement, in allowing scope for the other's freedom. As we said, in courtship both man and woman are deeply respectful of the freedom of the other. Courtship is perhaps the most equal human relationship, even though the man pursues, and the woman pursues, because each sees the other as entirely free to gift or to decline to give himself as a gift. But over time, not because of marriage so much as on account of an inherent tendency to disorder in male-female relationships (recall the 'curse' of Genesis: "You desire will be for your husband; but he will lord it over you"), this delicacy and refinement come under attack. The husband must work against tendencies to dominate his wife, adopting a position of uniform superiority (quite different from his legitimate authority to lead); whereas the wife must avoid a kind of self-subjection to her husband, which she views as her 'fate' or 'sentence'.

To say this much is to describe in outline the nature and chief marks of the natural friendship between husband and wife. Yet there are two other matters of great importance that, by the nature of the case, will arise after courtship and are consequent to courtship: First, how should husband and wife deal with the faults they discover in each other (which frequently will have been hidden, or well-compensated for, during courtship), or with the injuries they inflict on each other? Second, in what precise way does this friendship between them, and its complementarity, serve as a model for their children, so that it is correct to say that a good relationship between husband and wife is also the best gift that parents can give to their children?

North American Educational Initiatives Foundation, Inc.

www.naeif.org

Copyright © 1999-2025 All Rights Reserved