

Book Reviews

Peter Jeffery, CSSp, *The Mystery of Christian Marriage*, New York: Paulist Press, 2006; 226 pages, Softcover, \$18.95 U.S.

Fr. Peter Jeffery died unexpectedly at the age of sixty-six before this, his latest book was published. The manuscript was recovered virtually complete in his personal papers. Before, following his ordination, he had spent thirteen years as a missionary in Nigeria. He then specialized in moral theology completing a doctorate and teaching at the Missionary Institute London in Britain for many years.

This book presents a deep theology of Christian marriage based on an impressive amount of research. Although the author is Catholic and the book is Catholic, he draws from many sources including not only Scripture, some Patristic and Medieval theologians, Catholic teaching and modern and contemporary Catholic theologians, but also some Protestant and Orthodox theologians.

Jeffery shows a keen interest in portraying some of the historical developments in the theology of Christian marriage. With regard to this a few areas he focuses on are covenant, conjugal love and sexuality, the marital sacrament and the ecclesiology of the Christian family: the domestic church. With regard to the latter, for example, he traces the origins of the idea of “domestic church” from the Roman concept of family and early Christian house churches. He also has an interesting chapter on the renewal of the theology of Christian marriage at Vatican II. Among other things, this chapter looks at some of the conflicting emphases and influential voices behind the related final chapter of the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*. Jeffery’s treatment continues, pointing out some of the developments in the related teaching of popes Paul VI and John Paul II, especially in the latter’s *Theology of the Body* and *Familiaris Consortio*, a document which followed up on the Synod of Bishops on the Family. As well, Jeffery draws from the insights of quite a few contemporary Christian theologians. He says his purpose is not to write a historical treatise but to share some of the riches of the theology of Christian marriage which are practically unknown today by ordinary Christians. In addition, he presents some good historical

insights on such things as the changing role of women, the emphasis on relationships today, and the problem of the privatization of marriage and the family.

This book is not a treatise on marital and sexual ethics and so does not delve into controversial ethical issues. Rather, it focuses on marital theology which, in the author's view, provides a foundation for sexual morality. Among other things he attempts to answer the question: "What is God's vision of Christian marriage?"(xii)

Jeffery supports an experiential personalist relational approach to Christian marriage following authors such as Dietrich von Hildebrand and Pope John Paul II. Among other things, Jeffery notes that human love is "a peculiar human attribute that goes beyond our animal nature. ...its origin is beyond our evolutionary capabilities... Love is between persons a very special form of personal friendship the gift of oneself the sign of a being made in the image and likeness of God."(1) In his view the real problem today "is how to express love"(27). He rightly concludes that "a spiritual dimension inspires and keeps true love alive because it is a positive force for good. It only exists because God gives his love to us."(28)

In God's design, marriage from the beginning was a natural sacrament, an image of God's family. According to Jeffery, however, this "union is only revealed in all its mystery with the coming of Christ, God's son, who became flesh for us" and drew "together the divine and the earthly of marriage so it became a sacrament ... a new reality". The couple's "life together is more than an image of Christ's relationship to the Church. They are a domestic church. The covenant that a Christian couple makes of a total self-gift of life and love becomes part of the love Christ has for His Church and so they enflesh the presence of Christ in Christian marriage and bring about the salvation of their family in its widest sense."(220-1) In a chapter on "The Marital Sacrament" Jeffery unpacks such ideas well. Among other things, he explains how Christian spouses share in Christ's Paschal Mystery in the sacrifices and costs of real love, their weaknesses and difficulties, as well as in their forgiving and healing each other, in their experiencing joys in being reconciled, and in conjugal love, total-self giving and sexual pleasure.

Although this is generally an excellent book with many insights it also contains a few minor weaknesses. While Jeffery's presentation is usually balanced and nuanced, in a few places he falls into an "either/or" dichotomy rather than a fully "catholic" holistic "both/and" approach--for example, with regard to contract and covenant. In part here he is emphasizing how much richer the term "covenant" is which has a biblical basis and better expresses the total-personal giving of the spouses in marriage than the term contract which relates more to the legal and institutional dimensions of marriage. While he does show an appreciation of the contractual legal institutional dimension of marriage in some places (e.g., p. 6), in some other places he does not (e.g., p. 66). Another example of his falling into an "either/or" dichotomy is when he says "Christ is not present in the individual spouses or individual children, but his presence is within the family as such" (152), that is, in their loving relationships. Rather, from a Christian perspective, ideally Christ is present "both" in the individuals "and" in their relationships. Elsewhere he advocates the need to see marriage holistically. He rightly appreciates the complexity of marriage and proposes a bio-social-anthropo-psycho-spiritual model of marriage.(2-3)

While appreciating the positive developments in Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, Jeffery joins a couple of others in criticizing it for what it does not say. I think this is unfair since no one can be expected to address everything in everything one writes and he neglects to note that John Paul II did address these "missing" aspects in other writings of his such as *Love and Responsibility* and *Familiaris Consortio*. There is also some unnecessary repetition in Jeffery's book (e.g. on 159 and 185). Perhaps the author would have addressed these minor weaknesses himself had he lived to complete fully and to follow the book to its publication. Nevertheless, on the whole this is a very good book on the theology of Christian marriage. It is a worthwhile contribution to the field and deserves to be read by theologians and others.

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