

In The "Supernatural Powers" in the Marriage Sacrament, those who seek will find the mystery of marriage and its unique "supernatural powers" unveiled, and the redeeming power of Christ revealed that is active in this vocational sacrament.

The "Supernatural Powers" in the Marriage Sacrament: Christ's Unique Saving Gift to Husband and Wife

By Jeff Edward Poulin

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**THE
"SUPERNATURAL POWERS"
IN
THE MARRIAGE SACRAMENT**

**CHRIST'S
UNIQUE
SAVING
GIFT TO
HUSBAND
AND WIFE**

JEFF EDWARD POULIN

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**PART I - UNRAVELING THE REDEMPTIVE
GIFT IN HOLY MATRIMONY**

CHAPTER 1

Apathy Towards Marriage

My wife and I have eleven children, and as one can imagine, we tend to stick out regardless of whether we're praying at Mass or dining at a restaurant. Some years ago, it would happen quite often—thanks be to God—that while we were out and about, grace often enabled us to be in the eyes of others a family that witnessed to Christianity, despite not having any intention of drawing attention. Yet, somehow, we still did. Even today, it seems that even though we've had our share of cringeful moments, much has been expunged from the vision of others. For people still asked, "How do you do it?"

Undoubtedly, my family has always been that which has drawn outside attention. But it's also true that the conversations which develop most often always move people towards wanting to know more about our marriage. Time and time again, people seem to innately understand that the spring of blessings and the weight of privations in a family *stem* fundamentally from the marriage, and the nature and condition of that relationship. And so, people want to know, "What's the secret?"

It doesn't take much to reason why people desire such wisdom. People are, after all, social beings; and people most often sincerely desire what is good for themselves, and the ones they love—especially their spouses. But, at the same time, despite such interest, there are two facts that when put together become rather puzzling, and simply can't be overlooked.

First, there is a bounty of books, podcasts, and other counseling resources that cater specifically to spouses and to family life. Without much effort and in a short amount of time, one can rather quickly come across a small mountain of material on relationship building, communication, intimacy, conflict resolution, decision-making, family planning, and child raising—all in effort to preserve and strengthen marriages. All of this seems a suitable solution, of course—until we encounter the second point.

The second point is simply this. Even though various resources exist, despite their abundance, marriage is still staggering and perhaps even more so than ever before. The evidence is undeniable. The number of unmarried cohabitating couples is increasing; there's an increasing number of serial civil marriages; divorce rates vacillate between forty and sixty percent, and essentially bare no distinction between Catholics, Protestants, and non-Christians; and there's a growing denial of the gender complementarity that is required for a true marriage—a marriage between one man and one woman.¹

It's quite surprising then, that despite all this—that is, the condition of marriage in general, *and* the fact that marriage is *the vocation for the majority of people*—that the demand for materials on helping marriages remains at a low, and counselors continually encounter couples who are largely reluctant to engage in any effort to “save” their own marriage. Instead, many readily opt for what they perceive to be the better solution—separation and divorce. Choices which result in more broken families and wounded lives.

¹ “Sacramental Catholic marriages have dropped by 41%” - Thomas J. Olmsted, *Into the Breach: An Apostolic Exhortation to Catholic Men, My Spiritual Sons in the Diocese of Phoenix* (Phoenix: Catholic Information Service, 2015), 1.

The “Supernatural Powers” in the Marriage Sacrament

Why? Why is there such hesitancy and lack of interest in this vocation that has been elevated to a Sacrament (a defined, definitive means of sanctification), and one that most people are called to live? Even those who are genuinely most passionate about God, the Church, and the faith, tend to eagerly indulge in every aspect of Catholic Christianity, except that which they themselves, find themselves in daily—Sacramental marriage.²

A Missing Link in Marriage

Almost one-hundred years ago in the encyclical *Casti Connubii*, a document that focuses on marriage, Pope Pius XI pointed out that Christian spouses have been ignorant of a critical aspect of Holy Matrimony. He contended that when one honestly looks at the fruit of this vocation, it’s evident there is a common deficiency in how spouses understand and *live out* their vocation of marriage; a privation that evidently still remains today. There is a missing piece that is a poverty (if one considers the historical precedence), that must be considered as a serious candidate for why marriages between Catholic Christians often suffer to this day. As the Holy Father noted:

“...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.”³

² Due to a valid natural marriage having a sacramental character, Holy Matrimony, Sacramental marriage, as well as other Sacraments of the Church will be capitalized to highlight their distinction.

³ Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, December 30, 1930, http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html, sec. 41.

Revealed in this apostolic exhortation is the observation that the very qualities which distinguish the Sacrament of marriage from a *natural* marriage, are found to be *wanting*. The “*supernatural powers...and seeds of grace*” that are unique to Sacramental marriage are described as “hidden.” “Hidden” meaning that they are unrecognized or unidentified, and consequently, this gift—these supernatural powers—remains a gift not only unappreciated and undervalued, but unused. A “gift” whose absence leaves marriages powerless to fulfill their purpose, and utterly incapable of being what Pope John Paul II described as, “*the permanent reminder to the Church of what happened on the Cross.*”⁴ How is it that something so important can be missing for so long?

No Theology No Gift

The common view of marriage amongst Catholics, and rightfully so, is that marriage is a way of life. It’s a vocation or daily life that is *designed* and *blessed* by God. It’s built on a mutual love that is channeled and affirmed by a shared oath or set of vows, that forms a bond of love and trust between husband and wife, and is directed towards the work of family. The work or mission of marriage is also known to center primarily upon the couple growing in union with each other, and in communion with God; but also and equally, living its inherent purpose—a life of family, that centers upon creating and nurturing new life towards God and eternity.

The reason for pointing this out is not because of any contention or error, but rather to emphasize that very point—*there is no misconception*. What has always been *commonly* understood about

⁴ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1981), 13.

marriage by Christians *is and has been* affirmed throughout Church teaching long before *Casti Connubii*. From the time St. Augustine wrote *On the Good of Marriage* (401 A.D.), to St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, and more recently still, Pope Leo XIII’s *Arcanum* (1880 A.D.), the nature of marriage as a union of fidelity that is ordered towards offspring, containing even a sacramental character, has long been proclaimed.

One must ask then, if this perspective of marriage is correct, what did Pope Pius XI find eluding our understanding? And what exactly are these supernatural gifts and “supernatural powers” that he found largely unused in marriage?

To answer this, there is something that we already can gather from the words of *Casti Connubii*, even at this point. Something that can be easy to miss, even though it seems obvious once pointed out. If the “gift” is “supernatural” then it is spiritual; and if it’s a form of “grace,” then it certainly is of God, and thus theological.

Not too long ago, in 1997, *Our Sunday Visitor’s Encyclopedia of Catholic Doctrine* called attention to not only the current lack of inquiry into the mystery of Matrimony, but linked the spiritual realities of Sacramental marriage *to the mystery of its sanctifying nature*. Here we find under the “Sacrament of Marriage,” a confession of how a deep theological reflection has long been on the “*efficacy of the sacraments: on how they sanctify,*” but “*peculiarly, this has not been the case with the sacrament of Matrimony...Theological reflection has rather centered on its sign-function...while paying little attention to its sanctifying effect on the spouses themselves.*”⁵ Thus, they conclude: In

⁵ Russell Shaw, ed., *Our Sunday Visitor’s Encyclopedia of Catholic Doctrine* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1997), 414.

light of such a deficiency and the Second Vatican Council's universal call to holiness, a "new emphasis" in theological reflection is called for concerning the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony.⁶

Despite this need, however, as a solution for marriage's current crisis, theology for some, understandably, may seem too idealistic and not very practical; not something that can be readily implemented in everyday life. More so, some are likely to even wrestle just with the notion that a "theology" can fix or even help resolve such marital problems.

Knowledge, however, not being an impediment, but a gift of the Holy Spirit, can sometimes seep from our minds into our hearts, and challenge and change lives. It can lead to conviction and *metanoia* or change, even in such situations as marriage. Such has been the case for me, such has been the case for others, and such has been the case in a similar crisis that has occurred in the other Sacramental vocation, namely, that of Holy Orders.

A Parallel Crisis

No stranger to anyone today is the well-publicized moral scandals that have surfaced regarding chastity in the priesthood. And although sexual abuse by priests has been highlighted in the United States, the problem has given a new platform to related issues concerning Holy Orders that are more pervasive. In particular, are those individuals and groups that have expressed dissent towards the Church's teaching on the nature of the priesthood, celibacy, women priests, and homosexuality. As is evident—even from the pulpit—such heterodox

⁶ Ibid.

ideas seemingly have gained a greater audience with more attentive listeners, and consequently have added much to the confusion over the vocation of Holy Orders.

Several years ago, however, in a defense of priestly celibacy, the late Cardinal Alfons Maria Stickler, in his book *The Case for Clerical Celibacy*, not only identified the current attack on Holy Orders, but submitted as a solution the same wisdom used at the Council of Trent when Holy Orders was in a similar moral crisis.⁷ What the Church realized in the 16th century was that the resulting immoral behavior among religious was partially rooted in a vague and lopsided identity in the priesthood. Realizing that rationalism and materialism had overshadowed spiritual truth, the Magisterium, by defining the Sacraments of Holy Orders and the Eucharist, clarified the nature of this vocation by putting forth a “foundation for a mystical theology of the priesthood [that] reestablished it in the mystical reality of Christ.”⁸

In other words, knowing *who* they are, *what* they are to do, and reaffirming this vocation’s *identity and efficacy in Christ*—as history demonstrates—proved to be quite helpful for Holy Orders and subsequently, the Church. Sainly people such as St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and St. Francis de Sales, following the Council of Trent, led a reform in Spirit that eventually, but progressively and steadily, led to a great resurgence of religious vocations across the centuries. This re-emphasizing of the spiritual realities of the priesthood grounded in Christ, evidently was quite

⁷ Alfons Maria Stickler (1910 - 2007): Archivist and Librarian Emeritus of the Holy Roman Church from 1985 to 1988.

⁸ Alfons Maria Cardinal Stickler, *The Case for Clerical Celibacy: Its Historical Development & Theological Foundations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 85-86.

necessary for the Spirit guided evolution of discipline, devotion, charity, and piety.

Now, if we look at *today's* crisis in Holy Orders through the lens of history, it is easy to see why Cardinal Stickler insisted that such an understanding is needed today. Once again, we are in an age of materialism, rationalism, and loss of spiritual truth. Thus, justifiably, Cardinal Stickler proposed that the priesthood needs to be rediscovered and revealed again during this current "crisis of identity." He explained, "Undoubtedly, the critical situation through which we are living today means that priests more than ever must have the help of a genuine priestly ascetical and mystical theology."⁹

What makes Cardinal Stickler's observations so relevant for our purposes is precisely how analogous the problem in Holy Orders is to what we find in Sacramental marriage—the other vocational Sacrament of the Church. From Cardinal Stickler, we read:

"In a climate of rationalism in which all sense of the supernatural is absent from the mind of man, and in a world dominated by secular materialism in which any sense of the spiritual has disappeared, it is becoming even more difficult for the *priest* to resist a worldly mentality. The supernatural and spiritual identity of his *priesthood* quickly disappears if he does not consciously force himself to deepen it and to be aware of his intimate union of life with Christ."¹⁰

⁹ Stickler, *The Case for Clerical Celibacy*, 85.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

The “Supernatural Powers” in the Marriage Sacrament

By merely replacing “priest” with “spouse,” and “priesthood” with “marriage,” Cardinal Stickler’s words have just become a surprisingly *accurate* description of the climate Matrimony faces today. Marriage, as well as Holy Orders, is not only subject to massive social influences, but there has been a similar secularization of our understanding and practice of *both vocations*, which has produced the current critical state of *both Holy Orders* and *Holy Matrimony*.

There is a key difference that remains, however, between the two. *Where Holy Orders historically has a foundation and considerable development in a mystical theology rooted in Christ, Matrimony does not.*

Summary and Strategy

Sacramental marriage has been on the frontlines for several decades now. Most pronounced and evident are the attacks on life; but just as pervasive today is the distorted view of the very nature of marriage itself, even apart from its Sacramental nature in the Church. Clearly, there’s a lack of genuine understanding being taught about the nature of marriage, and subsequently, its sanctifying nature as a Sacrament of salvation in the Church.

If only part of a truth is revealed, then its integrity is weakened, its truthfulness becomes lost, and unfortunately partial truth gives way to falsehood. The vocational aspect of Matrimony is an essential and even dominating part of the Sacrament, but it is, nevertheless, only part of understanding and living the “married life.” As we will discover, sanctification is a very real part of marriage, and evidently essential to understanding many of our Lord’s teachings on Matrimony; and consequently, the Church’s teachings on Matrimony. Like Holy Orders,

Matrimony must be reestablished and rediscovered in Christ. We must see and understand Matrimony in its entirety— certainly, its vocation, but also its spiritual foundation and its role in redemption.

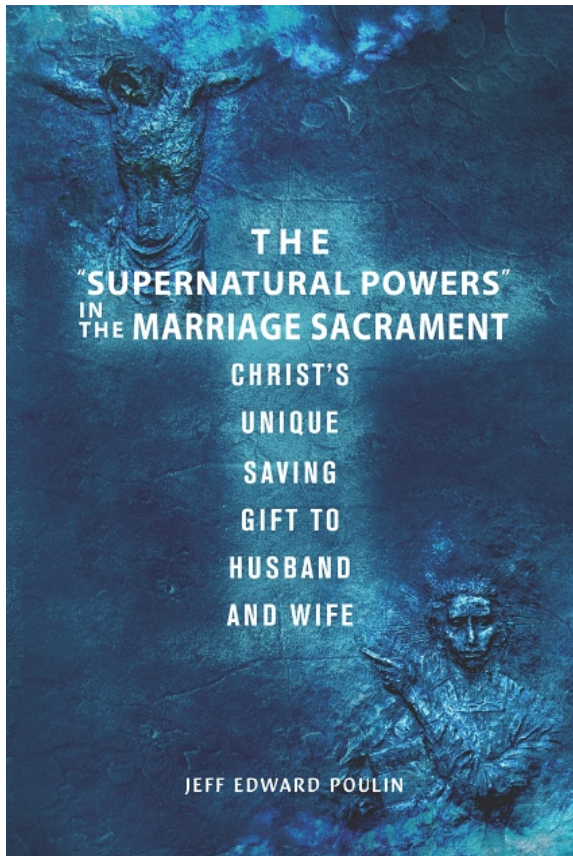
We must recover and mature to a more definitive and theological understanding of marriage. Today is certainly the day that the conditions of marriage need the Divine Wisdom—the reasoning and inspiration—to be put into faith filled practice. It’s time to transfer what is known from the mind to the heart; that we may make the changes necessary to save the Christian family, the beauty of Sacramental marriage, and sanctify souls.

While there is far more to unpack than what I put forth here to discern the “gift” of Sacramental marriage—what I have found over the years is that to truly recognize and share this aspect of marriage, there are three core aspects one needs to know:

First is God’s overall design and purpose for marriage. What makes people married? Does marriage serve and find its end in its “self” or in its work of family? Or does marriage itself, *and its work of family* serve a more encompassing, greater purpose?

The second area is the reality of Jesus’ marriage to us, the Church. Is this just a metaphor to help us understand the closeness and responsibilities of this relationship, or is it an actual marriage having the same essence as a marriage between people?

The third and final point is this: How does knowing the reality of Jesus’ marriage lead and empower husbands and wives in the Sacrament of marriage with the opportunity to intercede for each other with the power of God’s grace, beyond any other relationship in this life?



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