

The Grace of “I Do”

By Richard Gaillardetz



I am a theologian, so I will not hesitate to put an explicitly theological spin on what marriage has taught me. In short, I am increasingly convinced that my relationship with my wife, and with our children, is the spiritual “place” where I will work out my salvation. Authentic married life, I think, has a salvific character that is not merely psychological or emotional. As a Christian, I believe marriage is a place where I am invited into the dying and rising of Christ. Let me try to explain.

I can recall a period early in our marriage when the salvific nature of marriage impressed itself upon me. At the time our twins were only two months old, I was just completing my doctoral studies. Foolishly, I agreed to teach in a summer program at a university some four hundred miles away. We packed up all of the baby paraphernalia, clothes, books, and my computer, piled into our little Toyota, and headed off to live in a dingy building that appeared to have once been an army barrack. Concrete floors, few windows, and broken-down furniture greeted us as we walked into our apartment.

I was teaching all day, and preparing for my dissertation defense in the evening. Diana was stuck in the apartment with twin infants and no friends or extended family to support her. I would leave at 7:30 in the morning as Diana sat on the couch with two screaming babies in her arms. I would return at 4:30 p.m., to find Diana in the same predicament, if not in the same spot. I had best not describe the glare she would give me. The evenings were spent in petty bickering as Diana pleaded for some well-deserved “time off,” while I complained about needing to prepare for my dissertation defense.

The nights were an endless succession of interruptions as each baby needed to be fed at three-hour intervals. Neither of us slept more than four hours a night. Both of us resented the other if only because we dared not resent the children. Marital “intimacy” was the last thing on our minds as each of us fought off exhaustion. Somewhere during those four weeks the thought began to creep into each of our minds that this whole marriage project might have been a horrible mistake. This is not what we bargained for, or what we stayed up until the wee hours fantasizing about in the heady days of our engagement. There, little more than two years into our marriage, we found ourselves staring into the abyss.

We survived that summer, though to this day I am not sure how. There was no great epiphany or profound experience that constituted the clear turning point. Call it the grace of the sacrament if you like, all I know is that we began working harder to voice our resentments and frustrations. The image that comes to my mind for what began to happen is drawn from a childhood memory of being at the stern of a large river boat, mesmerized by the soothing movement of the paddlewheel churning up the murky river water and propelling the boat upstream. As the vessel approached the dock, the pilot shifted the engine into reverse. The paddlewheel’s steady rhythm diminished, slowly coming to a stop,

and then, after a discernible pause, the wheel only gradually and with the utmost effort began to turn in the opposite direction.

That summer we saw a gradual but real reversal in the cycle of our own relations. The pattern of caustic complaints and sarcastic responses slowly gave way to a new pattern of care toward one another. The difficulties did not disappear, but each of us seemed to recognize, beyond our own pain and frustration, the effort the other spouse was putting forth, and that mutual recognition triggered a reversal.

The biblical word for conversion, *metanoia*, means not just a shift in one's views or opinions but a fundamental change in direction. My marriage, I am convinced, was calling me to such an interior change. I was being called to a life of care and concern for another that seemed beyond my own powers and resources. Salvation is always the work of God and yet Catholicism insists that there is a kind of cooperation in our free response to God's grace. Put simply, while salvation is always God's work in us, it often feels like our work as we struggle to dispose ourselves to God's saving action. In any event, I have become convinced that my "salvation" the spiritual transformation that God wishes to effect in me, transpires within the crucible of my relationship with my wife and children. This interlocking set of commitments that constitutes our family is both burden and blessing, cross and resurrection; it is an invitation to a truly ascetical vocation.