

Marriage as a vocation?

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Marriage as a Vocation?

Vocation is a very popular topic in Catholic discourse. Its prominence was ensured by Vatican II's remarks on a person's calling in *Gaudium et spes* and the entire chapter of *Lumen gentium* dedicated to the universal call to holiness. Recent magisterial documents speak of marriage as a vocation. For example, a line can be drawn from GS 48 and LG 35 to *Humanae vitae*, 25 to *Familiaris consortio*, 51. The latter is cited in the introduction to *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* (11): "For God, who has called the couple to Marriage, continues to call them to Marriage." In recent years, Pope Francis has encouraged young people to embrace marriage as a vocation in *Amoris laetitia* (AL 72, 211) and *Christus vivit* (CV 259-267).

The current pontificate has been a catalyst for the growing attention to the topic of vocation. The Jesuit Francis thematizes vocation and discernment explicitly in *Gaudete et exsultate* (2018) and *Christus vivit* (2019). Recently, in the context of the Synod on Synodality, the question of discernment and the idea of diverse vocations have also arisen. Nevertheless, recent work in systematic theology does not devote much attention to vocation. Hernán Rojas is right when he says, "Today, in the church, there is more 'vocation ministry' than 'vocation theology'."¹ This observation is even more apt for a theology of marital vocation, as the few detailed theological studies that deal with vocation as a topic of its own do not dwell on marriage. When marriage is approached as a vocation in marriage theology, the emphasis is usually on demonstrating the religious dimension of married life and the participation of married people in the mission of the church. These are indeed essential aspects in considering marriage as a vocation, but the concept of vocation itself is usually not the subject of these studies.

This article attempts to fill this gap. It begins by examining whether the classical concept of vocation should be expanded to include marriage. The next part outlines a biblical foundation and draws on teachings from Vatican II and recent documents, particularly *Gaudete et exsultate* and *Christus vivit*. Against this backdrop, the second half of the article reflects on requirements for a theology of marital vocation, offers an outline for this theology, and explores its implications.

1 H. ROJAS: „Wohin, Herr, willst du mich bringen?": Eine Theologie der Berufung im Gespräch mit Karl Rahner, Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2022 (Innsbrucker theologische Studien; 100), 11 (my translation).

Expanding the Classical Concept?

Over the last five hundred years, the idea has increasingly entrenched itself in the minds of many Catholics that one needs some supernatural motivation, and thus permission, to step out of the natural order into the supernatural realm of priesthood or religious life.² God implants in the hearts of chosen disciples an attraction to priesthood or religious life. They have the task of listening to this inner voice and obeying God's eternal will to find salvation. In the same way that the label *status perfectionis* for religious life has been expanded by Vatican II, the term *vocatio* (and its verbal forms) is applied broadly in the council's documents. All members of the church "are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect" (LG 11). Despite this development, Edward P. Hahnenberg is correct in stating: "Most Catholics associate the word 'vocation' primarily with priesthood or religious life – as do the homilies they hear, the bulletin announcements they read, and the prayers of the faithful they offer at Sunday liturgy. But, if asked, most would readily agree that marriage, for example, is a vocation, or that anyone can feel 'called' to a particular way of life, work, or ministry in the church."³

The classical concept, which links vocation firstly to the question of discerning a way of life and secondly to priesthood and religious life, still dominates the everyday language of the church. Therefore, if we want to consider marriage as a vocation, should we simply expand this concept? Should we expect that God chooses marriage for certain individuals and perhaps even predetermines their "one and only" spouse as well? The existential implications of this theological assumption should not be overlooked. A question of proportionality, and therefore theological responsibility, arises: Is there a sufficiently strong foundation upon which such a theory of vocation can be built that justifies its existential heavy-weight claims? On what theologically sound grounds should we assert that God has fixed plans for our lives, our way of life, and perhaps even our partner, which we urgently need to recognize and fulfill?

There are good reasons to refrain from merely expanding the classical model without critical revision. An expansion of the classical concept of vocation needs to face up to its intertwined skepticism towards sexuality and its nature-grace dichotomy, both of which are, of course, in tension with any theological appreciation of marriage.⁴ There are also other pressing issues, such as its implicit theological anthropology and ecclesiology. Moreover, giving marriage a theological upgrade to the exalted status celibacy has had in the past risks further

2 See E.P. HAHNENBERG: *Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010, 47-90.

3 Ibid. 43-44.

4 One prominent theologian who argues that marriage is not a vocation, not least because of his theological assessment of sexuality, is H.U. VON BALTHASAR: *Christlicher Stand*, Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1977.

devaluing other relationships and family structures.⁵ However, given the limitations of space, instead of deconstructing the classical concept, I focus on a constructive proposal for a theology of marital vocation.

Biblical Foundations

An understanding of vocation that focuses on the discernment of choosing a way of life tends to cite calling narratives such as the vocation of Moses (Ex 3), Samuel (1 Sam 3), Peter (Luke 5,1-11), or Paul (Acts 9,3-19). This approach assumes that these and similar biblical stories address a particular reality or even phenomenon of “calling” that can be applied universally to each individual or to a certain group of individuals. However, this assumption should not be taken for granted.⁶ For instance, interpreting these stories in light of the individual question of choosing a lifestyle or finding one’s own path can be accused of importing a very modern perspective that the biblical texts could not have intended to address.⁷

A more promising approach to a biblical foundation is the Pauline rhetoric of calling. Nowhere else in the Bible is the terminology found with such frequency and, moreover, with a discernible meaning. From a systematic perspective, an even stronger reason to build on the Pauline usage is that it points to the heart of Christian faith. In the Pauline texts, being called is a general characterization of the Christian’s situation given by God and embedded in the relationship with Christ.⁸ This suggests that vocation is not to be understood as a special reality or phenomenon of choosing a special state of life in addition to becoming and being a follower of Christ but instead emphasizes aspects of precisely that following, in some contexts as an exhortation.⁹

This Pauline interpretation can be combined with another typical phrase related to vocation: the call to discipleship. This common motif is misleading, since it and its elements can hardly be found literally as abstract concepts in the gospels.

5 See A.E. PATRICK: *Conscience and Calling: Ethical Reflections on Catholic Women’s Church Vocations*, London-New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013, 117-118.

6 See Michael Höffner’s “hermeneutical objection” to Balthasar in *Berufung im Spannungsfeld von Freiheit und Notwendigkeit*, Würzburg: Echter, 2009 (Studien zur systematischen und spirituellen Theologie; 47), 60-61 (my translation).

7 See E. BREUER: “Vocation and Call as Individual and Communal Imperatives: Some Reflections on Judaism”, in: J.C. HAUGHEY (ed.): *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004, 41-52; J. GOLDINGAY: “Vocation in the Scriptures”, in: D.J. DOWNS/T. HOUSTON-ARMSTRONG/A. YONG (eds.): *Vocation, Formation, and Theological Education: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Fuller Theological Seminary*, Claremont: Claremont Press, 2021, 17-32, 23-25.

8 On the interweaving of the relation to God and relation to Christ, see H. MERKLEIN: *Der erste Brief an die Korinther: Kapitel 5,1-11,1*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus – Würzburg: Echter, 2000 (Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar zum Neuen Testament; 7/2), 126-127; D. WIEDERKEHR: *Die Theologie der Berufung in den Paulusbriefen*, Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg, 1963 (Studia Friburgensia, Neue Folge; 36), 245-247, 259-260. E.g., 1 Cor 1,9.23-31; Gal 1,6; Rom 8,28-30; Phil 3,10-14.

9 E.g., 1 Thess 2,12; 4,7; Gal 5,13.

Even the verb “call” is only used twice in the “calling stories” (Mk 1,20; Mt 4,21).¹⁰ What can rather be found are the disciples, the demand of Jesus to follow him and his teaching about being his disciple. However, it is not inappropriate to speak of a call to discipleship. As a narrative approach suggests, stories about the Twelve and the other disciples were told and recorded in the gospels not only to remember them as historical figures of the early movement around Jesus of Nazareth but also to serve as role models for the challenges of following Christ in later (post-Easter) circumstances.¹¹ Therefore, there is little reason to apply the gospel stories of becoming a follower of Christ (e.g., Peter’s or Levi’s vocation) to the problem of choosing a form of life or to a particular group of Christians. Rather, their theme is remembering and thus demanding the existentially absoluteness of discipleship for all who read or hear the gospel.

Does this discipleship, this being a follower of Christ, demand a certain form of life? In early Christianity, some groups (usually labeled as Encratites) stated that marriage, or at least sexual intercourse, was incompatible with being a Christian. This thesis seems to have already troubled some of the first Christian communities (see 1 Tim 4,3). Perhaps 1 Cor 7 is also a reaction to such a position, which is paraphrased (or even quoted) there in v. 1b. The background and setting of this text are far from clear, but it is quite obvious that Paul is opposing the rigorist view that sexual intercourse is forbidden.¹²

In vv. 17-24, Paul offers insights for a proper assessment of the relationship between the Christian vocation and the choice of a way of life. His point (against the rigorist thesis of v. 1b) is that there is no static correlation; rather, the way of life is not particularly significant in relation to the Christian vocation (similar to social status; see Gal 3,28). There is no need to choose a specific way of life because one is a Christian, nor to change it when becoming one. On the other hand, this could also be interpreted as an elevation of any way of life as a potential framework for fulfilling the Christian vocation.¹³

Thus, if a way of life can be considered a substantial part of one’s own way of living their vocation in Christ, and therefore can be valued as a mode of following him, it seems not unreasonable to characterize this life choice as vocation. The key question, then, is whether marriage can be such a mode or an essential part of it. Paul did not view marriage in this positive light but rather as a temporal concern that should not unduly occupy Christians (see vv. 25-38). It is at least highly questionable whether Paul considered marriage as a charism or vocation

¹⁰ For the use of the term in the New Testament see for example L. COENEN: “καλέω”, in: *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 1, Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1997, 394-399.

¹¹ See H.-J. KLAUCK: “Die erzählerische Rolle der Jünger im Markusevangelium: Eine narrative Analyse”, in: *Gemeinde · Amt · Sakrament: Neutestamentliche Perspektiven*, Würzburg: Echter, 1989 (orig. 1982), 137-160; or the essays in R.N. LONGENECKER (ed.): *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, part I.

¹² See A. LINDEMANN: *Der Erste Korintherbrief*, Tübingen: Mohr, 2000 (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament; 9/1), 158; H. MERKLEIN: *Brief an die Korinther*, 100.

¹³ See C. WOLFF: *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 32011 (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament; 7), 147.

similar to remaining unmarried.¹⁴ However, from a Pauline perspective, remaining unmarried is not valuable in itself but rather is so insofar as it is embedded in a God-serving existence similar to Paul's.¹⁵ Therefore, we could go a step beyond Paul with Paul by demonstrating that the marital state can be a way of living one's vocation through and in Christ, by applying his "hermeneutical 'principle'" from 1 Cor 7, i.e. the relationship with Christ,¹⁶ to the context of marriage.

What Paul overlooked, the Pauline author of the Epistle to the Ephesians addressed in Eph 5,21-33. It is a complex text and not without challenges, for its analogies operate against the backdrop of the patriarchal hierarchy of the ancient household. Elna Mouton sees here "*both* elements of accommodation and resistance"¹⁷ to the contemporary gender models. While a contemporary reader may be moved by the problem of the sexism in such hierarchical models, this was not the author's concern. Rather, the author aims to explore how Christian ideals could be achieved within the context of the ancient household.¹⁸ However, caution is necessary to avoid conflating contemporary theological interpretation with the historical structural sexism that was common in the author's day and is inherent in the analogies used.

But Eph 5,21-33 is not merely about any relationship within the ancient household; the author specifically and elaborately reflects on marriage from a Christological perspective. He seems to ascribe a meaning to marriage that he does not attribute to the other relationships in the Christian household. The biblical scholar Gerhard Sellin describes the unique character of the text as follows: "The special aspect of this text is the oscillation between ethical and allegorical meaning. Therefore, the text has a literal meaning as a household code *and simultaneously* conveys a transferred Christological-ecclesiological meaning."¹⁹ In this way, the text provides a Christological-ethical reflection on marriage. On the one hand, Christ's dedicated love for his *ecclesia* becomes a model for the spouses and on the other hand, in living up to this model, Christ's love becomes vivid in the self-giving, volitional, and affective love of the spouses. The more they enact this love, the more they become an efficacious sign of Christ's love for his *ecclesia ad extra* but also *ad intra* for one another in their marriage.

14 For example, this position is held by T. SÖDING: "Ehe und Ehelosigkeit – eine Alternative im Glauben: Die paulinische Option in 1 Kor 7", in: GEORGE AUGUSTIN/INGO PROFT (eds.): *Zum Gelingen von Ehe und Familie: Ermutigungen aus Amoris laetitia*, Freiburg: Herder, 2018, 420-433, 428.

15 See C. WOLFF: *Brief an die Korinther*, 138; H. MERKLEIN: *Brief an die Korinther*, 112.

16 H. MERKLEIN: *Brief an die Korinther*, 135 (my translation).

17 E. MOUTON: "Reimagining Christian Household Ethos? On the Implied Rhetorical Effect of Ephesians 5:21-33", in: *Neotestamentica* 48/1 (2014), 163-185, 181.

18 See M. HOOKER: "'Submit to One Another': The Transformation of Relationships in Christ (Eph 5:21-6:9)", in: M. WOLTER (ed.): *Ethik als angewandte Ekklesiologie: Der Brief an die Epheser*, Rome: Benedictina Publishing, 2005 (Monographische Reihe von 'Benedictina': Biblisch-Ökumenische Abteilung; 17), 163-188, esp. 175-177, 187-188.

19 G. SELLIN: *Der Brief an die Epheser*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008 (Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament; 8), 456 (my translation, emphasis in original).

Summarizing this outline of a biblical foundation for regarding marriage as vocation, three key points can be made: Firstly, the primary calling of God is Christ himself. Secondly, the way of life is relevant only to the extent that it constitutes a substantial part of achieving one's vocation in and through Christ. There is no static correlation. Third, marriage has the potential to be such a mode of achievement because, within a faithful and loving relationship, spouses can serve as an efficacious sign of Christ's love for each other and for others.

The Vocation of the Human Person and the Universal Call to Holiness

Apart from Holy Scripture, the documents of Vatican II are the most frequently referenced sources in the literature on the topic of vocation.²⁰ This is due to the already mentioned notable appearance of the term in *Gaudium et spes* (GS) and especially in *Lumen gentium* (LG). Although the council did not develop a systematic theology of vocation, two key motifs can be derived from its texts and made fruitful for further reflection on the concept of vocation: the vocation of the human person and the universal call to holiness. In order to connect with recent magisterial teachings and to highlight certain aspects, recent documents, particularly *Gaudete et exultate* (GE) and *Christus vivit* (CV), will also be referred to where appropriate.

Holiness is not something that can be attained through merit, knowledge, or one's own will (GE 35-62). Holiness is primarily a quality of God. Whatever is holy is so because it is a gift of God. Holiness should therefore be regarded as a relational trait of an entity, defined by its dependence on and orientation towards God. The assertions that the church is holy and that her members are called to holiness are to be understood against this backdrop (LG 11, 39-42).

This sanctification by Christ is a stimulus to mission, not a passive and static event. With the call to holiness comes responsibility. Here, the council's understanding of the church is important: its reality is not only a community of the baptized but is "like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (LG 1).²¹ Taking up a point from *Gaudete et exultate*, just as Christ has been the Father's sanctifying word for the world, everyone should consider "the entirety of [their] life as a mission" (GE 23) to become part of the Christological mission for the world (GE 19-24).

All the baptized and confirmed, in all their variety (LG 7), participate in the church's mission in their own individual ways (LG 10-12, GE 10-13) – no further

²⁰ The most detailed examination of the terminology of the council's documents can be found in B. POETSCH: *Identität als Berufung: Eine subjektivitätstheoretische Erschließung der Berufungsthematik im Anschluss an das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, Würzburg: Echter 2020 (Studien zur systematischen und spirituellen Theologie; 55).

²¹ See P. DE MEY: "The Sacramental Nature and Mission of the Church in *Lumen Gentium*", in: *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 14/4 (2014), 348-361.

mandate from any authority is needed. “Therefore in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness.” (LG 39) Two corresponding aspects are included here: first, the individuality of the vocation – Francis describes Jesus as a close friend who is genuinely interested in the individual as a personal friend (CV 288); second, the personal responsibility inherent in participating in the church’s mission, which cannot be assumed by others. Aside from anthropology and the doctrine of grace, ecclesiology is a key factor in any theology of vocation. Implicitly present is the question of “how the individual members of the Church understand *themselves* in relation to God and to the other members of the Church”.²²

Addressing young people as agents of youth ministry in CV 206 and citing the final document of the Synod on Young People, Francis describes the shared responsibility of individuals with their vocation as synodal, as a “journeying together” whereby “we can move towards a participatory and co-responsible Church”. This theme of journeying or of “walking together as baptized persons, in the diversity of charisms, vocations, and ministries”, of a shared responsibility for mission and thus valuing diversity is also present in the documents of the recent Synod on Synodality.²³ Similarly, although not yet linking it with the word “synodality”, in *Amoris laetitia*, Francis emphasized (citing the Synod on the Family’s final document) “that Christian families, by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, are the principal agents of the family apostolate”, and that it is necessary to enable “families to take up their role as active agents of the family apostolate” (AL 200).

Holiness is not an inward concept, lived out best in silent and solitary contemplation. The demanded “perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect” (LG 11) finds its model in Christ and its measure in the love for God and for one another (LG 40). With Francis, one could speak of a hierarchy of virtues with love at the top (GE 60-61). Of course, the path of sanctification that is a path of becoming a loving person by following the example of Christ cannot be self-centered or solitary but aims at being embedded in the community of Christ’s followers (LG 9; GE 6, 140-146). For this reason, it is reasonable that Francis emphasizes that the process of discernment should be focused on relationships with others: “We waste time asking ourselves: ‘Who am I?’ You can keep asking, ‘Who am I?’ for the rest of your lives. But the real question is: ‘For whom am I?’” (CV 286)

The relationally structured ecclesiology and soteriology of *Lumen gentium* find their counterpart in the relational anthropology of *Gaudium et spes*. Christian anthropology is the latter’s key topic. The starting point of the document is the assertion that human existence is questioned in many ways in the modern age (GS 3). Drawing on the sources of faith, the council tries to provide answers

22 B. POETSCH: *Identität als Berufung*, 54 (my translation; emphasis in original).

23 The quotation is from the introduction of the Synthesis Report *A Synodal Church in Mission* of 2023, but see also the *Instrumentum laboris* “How to be a Missionary Synodal Church” for the Second Session (October 2024), 2, 9, 12, 13, 28, 42, III.

and orientation, not least by speaking of a person's vocation (in Latin, *vocatio* and corresponding verbal forms).²⁴

On the one hand, the council sees this universal vocation grounded in creation and in Christology (GS 3, 12, 18, 19); on the other hand, its actualization as a desire for the good and true is interpreted as the work of the Holy Spirit (GS 15, 41). This is important in order to distinguish the conciliar optimism from any Pelagianism. Several times the council mentions the human dependence on God's salvific activity at both the individual and the historical level. This is formally true for every person but materially so in particular for those who know the gospel. Human openness and longing find their way and their aim in Christ (GS 10, 22, 41, 45). "Whoever follows after Christ, the perfect human, becomes himself more of a human." (GS 41)

Every human person, as a body-spiritual being, but especially in reason and conscience (GS 14-17), is open to and inclined towards God. The dignity of the person is grounded in this directed and free openness to the good and the true. For this reason, a truly human turn towards the good and the true must be based on one's own free volition and insight. Here, the individuality of each person must also be taken into account. Francis states: "Good discernment is a path of freedom that brings to full fruit what is unique in each person, something so personal that only God knows it." (CV 295) This is why times of silence and prayer are needed in times of discernment (CV 283-284). Because of the relational nature of the human person, however, their vocation is always directly or indirectly embedded in the community, so that love of God and love of one's neighbor cannot be separated (GS 24). In its declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, the council deepens this understanding of the dignity of the person as an individual, free, and social subject in relation to God.

Requirements for a Theology of Marital Vocation

As we have seen, both Scripture and recent magisterial teachings provide rich points of reference for a systematic theology of vocation. Although not all of these can be explored in the scope of this article, the following outlines some crucial aspects, suggests directions, and highlights important boundaries. As a first step, some requirements for any theology of marital vocation will be presented.

Describing the anthropology of *Gaudium et spes*, Walter Kasper speaks of an "inductive approach 'from bottom up'...without getting into a false anthropocentrism".²⁵ This bottom-up approach and its implications for a theology of grace

24 This happens for the first time in GS 3: The Latin *altissimam vocationem hominis* is translated "noble destiny of man". In regard, generally, to the human person, the terminology can be found in GS 10, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 29, 31, 32, 35, 43, 46, 57, 63, 76, 91, 92. The title of the constitution's first part (GS 11-45) is "The Church and Man's Calling" (*De Ecclesia et Vocatione Hominis*).

25 W. KASPER: "Die theologische Anthropologie von 'Gaudium et spes'", in: *Kirche und Gesellschaft*, vol. 2, Freiburg: Herder, 2019 (Gesammelte Schriften; 16), 591-603, 601 (my translation).

are paradigmatic both in shaping the framework of a theology of vocation and in the theological reflection on marriage. In this approach, the perspective of the individual person – their traits, wishes, experiences, and needs – is valued theologically and becomes crucially relevant for grounding any theological theorizing.

Following the council's transcendental emphasis, vocation should be basically understood as the person's responsiveness to God's call to true happiness and human flourishing, which has become personalized in Jesus Christ. We encounter this personal God in Christ in liturgy, in reading the Scriptures, in preaching, and in other ways (*vocatio exterior*); at the same time, God is opening and inclining the human's heart to this call (*vocatio interior*).²⁶ Basically, vocation is the call to friendship with Christ and through him with the Father (CV 250). Structurally, this represents classical Christian eudaimonism, as exemplified by Thomas Aquinas,²⁷ which resonates in magisterial documents such as *Veritatis splendor* and *Gaudete et exsultate*.²⁸ God “does not want to enter our lives to cripple or diminish them, but to bring them to fulfilment” (GE 175). In this framework, any specific concept of vocation is justified to the extent that it represents an actualization of the fundamental vocation of the human person, which is teleologically related to the call to holiness.

Regarding marriage theology, this transcendental bottom-up approach aligns well with the traditional view of marriage as a natural institution that is restored and elevated to a sacrament by Christ. Therefore, the “natural” reality of marriage is considered structurally inclined to become a sacrament, to be a religious reality. Just as Pseudo-Paul presents the marital relationship as a potential way of realizing Christian love and uses conjugal imagery to describe Christ's love, the idea of the structural openness of marriage to the mystery of Christ unfolds its full significance when it is consistently applied to the concrete daily married life and relationship.²⁹ According to such a transcendental approach, the couple is not just bonded to a metaphysical indissoluble reality but should be acknowledged as active and competent agents of their blessed married life, where they can encounter God (in the light of the Christian revelation), grow in love, and participate in the church's mission for each other and the world.

Regarding the theology of vocation, the transcendental approach demands that we factor in the entire complex reality of human agency. Francis stresses that holiness is about a “sincere and genuine journey of growth” (GE 50). In referring to the Tridentine definition that “grace precedes, accompanies, and follows all our action” (GE 50 n 52; see DH 1525), he emphasizes that “grace acts in history; ordinarily it takes hold of us and transforms us progressively” (GE 50). In CV 252 he says, “The salvation that God offers us is an invitation to be part of a love story interwoven with our personal stories” and characterizes God's love as “a

26 See THOMAS AQUINAS: Quodlibet. II, q. 4, a. 1c.

27 See THOMAS AQUINAS: ST I-II, qq. 1-5.

28 See VS 7, 9; GE I, 32, 64, 175; see also CV 131, 138, 145.

29 See T. KNIIPS-PORT LE ROI: “Christian Symbolism of Marriage and its Usefulness Today”, in: *INTAMS review* 15 (2009), 12-22.

daily, discreet and respectful love, a love that is free and freeing, a love that heals and raises up”, a love that “has to do more with raising up than knocking down, with reconciling than forbidding, with offering new changes than condemning, with the future than the past” (CV 116). However, if such a concept of historical grace and salvation is accepted that includes real, non-linear processes and growth, then a full understanding of human agency as well as human relationships must be integral to the overall picture.

This overall picture cannot be obtained through deductive theological speculation alone. This does not mean that any speculative theology should be avoided or that theology must exclusively adopt empirical approaches. Any (empirical) approach to vocation implies a more or less strong theory of vocation that guides the methodology and questions. It is, of course, a truism in modern philosophy that there is no direct empirical approach to reality and that there is always some underlying theory at play. However, it is not uncommon for theology to apply a theory, legitimized by reference to revelation, to reality without questioning whether it “fits” the reality under consideration.

For example, Peter Egenolf criticizes the studies of Luigi M. Rulla, who conducted research using psychological methods on discernment for priesthood:

Psychology’s own claims to interpret reality are not taken seriously, and not brought into relationship with theology and faith. There is no critical dialogue with theories of personality or development...or with how psychology perceives and interprets social structures – and for that matter Church structures. In such a model, perhaps, faith and theology are in the end insulated from the disturbing questions raised by secular theories. But they are also then impoverished, because they lack the stimulus that such theories might bring.³⁰

This analysis is reminiscent of a problem discussed in theological ethics concerning the personalist framework in marriage and sexual morality. John Paul II has been especially criticized for his deductive approach to sexuality. Other moral theologians advocate for a more hermeneutical approach, which, while holding to a personalist core ideal, engages in dialogue with the recent insights of the human sciences regarding relationships and sexuality.

Despite this criticism, it is undoubtedly the merit of John Paul II to have continued the impetus of Vatican II by developing a theologically affirmative approach to marriage and sexuality.³¹ His apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (1981) may be the magisterial document with the most references to marriage as a vocation. While John Paul II is often criticized for idealizing marriage and sexuality, the opposite result of theological speculation can be observed in the traditional association of sexuality with original sin, which leaves little room for

30 P. EGENOLF: “Vocation and Motivation: The Theories of Luigi Rulla”, in: *The Way* 42/3 (2003), 81-93, 91-92.

31 For a differentiated overview, see, for example, M. LINTNER: *Christliche Beziehungsethik: Historische Entwicklung – Bibische Grundlagen – Gegenwärtige Perspektiven*, Freiburg: Herder, 2023, 195-210.

a full religious appreciation of marriage and, consequently, for recognizing marriage as a vocation, as is still evident, for example, in Balthasar's *Christlicher Stand*.³²

In conclusion, there needs to be continuous, critical feedback between theoretical and practical approaches without loosening the tension in only one direction. If theology does not “fit” the reality of the human life, it cannot make plausible the mystery of the incarnate God as a meaningful reality that connects to one's own concrete existence. Such a thing requires openness to allowing theories of marital vocation to be called into question by other fields, as well as integrating their insights, to avoid theological top-down immunization. Additionally, on the theory's formal level, it is crucial to acknowledge that the perspective of the moral subject – or more theologically, of the called person – plays a substantial role in interpreting their situation. Consequently, a static, rigid framework of vocation that may be applied from a third-person perspective to any situation is to be regarded with suspicion.

Responsible Agents of a Shared History

No static concept can meet the dynamic reality of human agency, which is for the most part characterized by individuality and “historicity” (*Geschichtlichkeit*). This also applies to love relationships, since all human relationships share this nature the more the persons are existentially involved.

Transcendental theologians, in particular, emphasize that freedom extends beyond merely choosing freely between A or B. This is only a derivative aspect of the full reality of freedom, which is rooted in the radical openness of the self-aware subject.³³ Due to this openness, the subject is confronted with itself and thereby with the task of shaping one's own being and conduct. However, this subject does not exist in a vacuum. They are temporal and embodied, situated in various contexts and relations. Therefore, their freedom is as real as they embrace it in forming their life. This process of formation is not merely a sequence of moments in which the person chooses between A or B. Such a view reduces human freedom to its receptive aspects and overlooks the creative and dynamic dimensions of freedom, which include exploring, probing, shaping, growing, and failing.

Against this backdrop, any concept or rhetoric that emphasizes God's will on the one hand and the human person's passive obedience on the other is problematic. While it is theologically reasonable to affirm God's sovereignty and to prevent a theology of vocation from becoming a religiously charged variant of egocentric individualism, this should not lead to a reductive concept of human agency or a general suspicion towards individual freedom and needs.³⁴

32 For example, see H.U. VON BALTHASAR: *Christlicher Stand*, 202.

33 For example, see the classic treatment in K. RAHNER: “Ursprünge der Freiheit”, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 22/2, Freiburg: Herder, 2008 (orig. 1965/1968), 73–90.

34 In particular, M. HÖFFNER: *Berufung* analyzes and critiques the problems of such heteronomous concepts of vocation.

Not taking into account the perspective of the affected individuals correlates with the problem of idealization present in the Catholic doctrine on marriage (see AL 36).³⁵ An unreflective rhetoric of vocation could aggravate this problem. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize that “marriage is a vocation, inasmuch as it is a response to a specific call to experience conjugal love as an imperfect [!] sign of the love between Christ and the Church” (AL 72).³⁶ The problem of idealization particularly emerges within the classical framework of vocation. While the classical view tends to override the perspective of the subject and regards the calling somehow as an eternal command to be recognized and obeyed, the proposed conception views vocation as the person’s response to the personal and incarnate God, shaped within concrete history. From this perspective, vocation is less about finding one’s eternal calling and more about undergoing a “vocational process” (CV 242), a “process in persons who remain always unique and free” (CV 297).

Klaus Demmer’s interpretation of the theory of *optio fundamentalis* offers a good model for mediating between the fundamental freedom of the subject and its historical existence, without separating them.³⁷ At the same time, it connects the vocation to holiness to concrete choices, particularly regarding one’s lifestyle or career. Moreover, it aligns with Paul’s view of the abundance of the calling in Christ, which cannot be applied deductively and directly to one’s way of life. According to Demmer, the fundamental option is not “merely” a formal commitment to the good but includes elements of a conception of a meaningful and good human existence. In case of Christians, the fundamental option is the God-enabled embracing of the person’s calling in Christ which shapes their perspective on life. Therefore, as Demmer states, “the believer acts in everything as a called one”,³⁸ and the fundamental option can be regarded as the “root of a vocation history”.³⁹

The theoretical concept of the fundamental option can be understood as the continual commitment to responding to God’s calling. Since human existence is always lived concretely, the response to a vocation needs and wants to be formed and focused through life choices in order to achieve its fulfillment. This vocation history is ambitious and not without conflicts, risks, and struggles. It is not a solitary journey but embedded in dialogue with others.⁴⁰ If embraced as a vocation,

35 See M. HEIMBACH-STEINS: “Das moralische Gebäude der Kirche – ‚ein Kartenhaus‘? Tendenzen der Idealisierung, Ontologisierung und restriktiven Normierung in den lehramtlichen Weisungen zu Ehe und Familie”, in: K. HILPERT/B. LAUX (eds.): *Leitbild am Ende? Der Streit um Ehe und Familie*, Freiburg: Herder, 2014, 131-145.

36 See J. KNOP: *Beziehungsweise: Theologie der Ehe, Partnerschaft und Familie*, Regensburg: Pustet, 2019, 299.

37 See K. DEMMER: “Optionalismus – Entscheidung und Grundentscheidung”, in: D. MIETH (ed.): *Moraltheologie im Abseits? Antwort auf die Enzyklika „Veritatis splendor“*, Freiburg: Herder, 1994 (Quaestiones Disputatae; 153), 69-87; K. DEMMER: *Fundamentale Theologie des Ethischen*, Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg, 1999 (Studien zur theologischen Ethik; 82), 242-246.

38 K. DEMMER: “Optionalismus – Entscheidung und Grundentscheidung”, 81.

39 K. DEMMER: *Fundamentale Theologie*, 242.

40 See K. DEMMER: *Selbstaufklärung theologischer Ethik: Themen – Thesen – Perspektiven*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 2014, 87-93.

marriage is a specific way to undertake this journey, thereby turning it into a joint pilgrimage, as Demmer vividly characterizes it.⁴¹ It is a “vocation history in a two-unity [Zwei-Einheit]”.⁴²

While an expansion of the classical concept focuses on making the right choice at the right time and perhaps choosing the right partner, the proposed concept views the entire (pre-)marital relationship as an entangled history of two individuals, encompassing all its dynamics, including the full range of tragedy, guilt, breakdowns, healing, success, and happiness. Such a view corresponds far better to the reality of human life and relationships. Moreover, it aligns with an approach of gradualism embraced by *Amoris laetitia*, which appreciates growth and even fragments within the complexity of real relationships, without abandoning the ideal and its normative orientation.⁴³

Consequently, God’s role in a human person’s life can hardly be understood as determining an eternal life plan for a person, placing various hints on their earthly journey, maybe graciously providing assistance from time to time, and then, at the end, standing at the finish line, telling them which way would have been the best or the only right one, and possibly thereby issuing a final judgment on their soul.⁴⁴ It seems more appropriate to regard God as accompanying the individual’s history (see CV 156), rather than overwriting it, and enabling their authorship of their own life. If this is assumed for the individual’s history, it must also be applied to the shared history of persons. In a nutshell: There is no Mr. or Ms. Right, at least not without having walked part of the way together.

From this perspective, common motifs such as God’s eternal plan, or similar deterministic-sounding formulations, which are also frequently used by Francis, are problematic.⁴⁵ As other phrasing shows, this does not have to be the only way to frame vocation. More appropriate are open formulations as, for example, “the paths of holiness which the Lord presents to us”⁴⁶ (GE 150), “a call that can shatter our security, but lead us to a better life” (GE 172), “recognizing how we can better accomplish the mission entrusted to us at our baptism” (GE 174), or marriage as “a vocation which God himself presents through feelings, desires and dreams”⁴⁷ (CV 259).

41 See K. DEMMER: *Angewandte Theologie des Ethischen*, Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg, 2003 (Studien zur theologischen Ethik; 100), 160; *Fundamentale Theologie*, 255.

42 K. DEMMER: *Angewandte Theologie*, 159.

43 See J. KNOP: *Beziehungsweise*, 300–314.

44 Such a deterministic approach has been influential since the 18th century. One of its most prominent proponents was Alphonsus Liguori, see E.P. HAHNENBERG: *Awakening Vocation*, 81–83.

45 For example, see GE 13, 19, 32, 170 (= CV 280); CV 120, 256, 273, 277.

46 The official English translation is “to which the Lord is calling us”, but this is more accurately rendered “which the Lord presents/proposes to us” (“quas Dominus nobis proponit”).

47 Slightly modified from the English translation on the Vatican’s website, which originally reads: “which God himself makes known”. The Italian text reads “Dio stesso propone” and likewise the German version: “die Gott selbst...anbietet” (there is no official Latin version).

Some may suspect here a slippery slope leading to arbitrariness on the human “side” of vocation and a marginalization of God’s role. However, it should not be overlooked that in this perspective the couple is truly regarded as active and responsible authors of their relationship. God’s role cannot be guaranteed by making it external, effectively mystifying God’s call, a formal “heteronomization”. Rather, a theology of vocation should see God as truly enabling human freedom as an answer to Christ’s call to discipleship; similarly, a theology of marital vocation would see God as enabling a truly loving relationship.

It is true that the dynamic concept outlined relieves concrete life decisions from being final decisions on “successful” discipleship. In this way, it does justice to Paul’s relativization of life choices in relation to vocation in Christ. This also applies to marriage as a shared history of vocation. In living marriage as a vocation, the relationship should not be burdened with expectations of what only God may provide.⁴⁸ Moreover, the concept provides a more constructive approach to failures in one’s life and disruptions in relationships. There is no need to attribute them to God’s “mysterious ways” or as deviations from his original will for one’s life. They can be regarded simply as what they are: failures of two free persons in a complex reality, possibly intertwined with guilt.

Beyond viewing the entire (pre-)marital life as a shared vocation history, the proposed concept allows, on the one hand, for loosening the traditional two-part distinction between marriage and celibacy as Christian ways of life, which dominates magisterial texts, and, on the other hand, enables the appreciation of today’s complex realities of life and relationships without merely regarding them as shortcomings or intermediate stages.⁴⁹ Additionally, it paves the way for regarding not only lifestyles related to relationships and sexuality as vocations but also other aspects of life, insofar as they contribute to the individual’s enactment of their vocation to holiness. This includes, for example, one’s career and also other individual commitments, such as advocating for animals.⁵⁰ In summary, vocation is a helpful category for acknowledging the substantial individuality of one’s response to the call to holiness and relationship with God, which cannot be captured by universal norms.⁵¹ As Francis emphasizes, the vocation to holiness requires finding one’s own path to holiness rather than merely copying other models, however inspiring and motivating they may be (see GE II, CV 162).

48 See G.M. PRÜLLER-JAGENTEUFEL: “Ehe als eschatologische Existenz: Spiritualität der Ehe in der Spannung von Immanenz und Transzendenz”, in: *Geist und Leben* 77 (2004), 261-274, esp. 267-268.

49 For this problem, see J. KNOP: *Beziehungsweise*, 268-271.

50 See C. STECK: *All God’s Animals: A Catholic Framework for Animal Ethics*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019, 187-190.

51 See *ibid.* In German-speaking theology, this concern is primarily associated with Rahner’s proposal for an existential ethics.

Vocation as a Fruitful Category

Both a systematic theology of vocation and a theology of marriage can be mutually enriching. They are interconnected through various issues such as anthropology, the doctrine of grace, and ecclesiology. Approaching the theology of vocation through the lens of the theology of marriage highlights aspects, often problematic ones, that are otherwise easily overlooked. Conversely, a well-developed theology of vocation, when engaged with the theology of marriage, can be a valuable resource for emphasizing a central concern in the theology of marriage since the lay movement of the 20th century: understanding marriage as a religious and ecclesial reality and viewing the spouses as agents in this reality.

One particularly attractive aspect for a theology of marriage of the proposed approach, and of the theme of vocation in general, is its natural ability to link the sacraments of baptism and marriage as life-shaping realities.⁵² For example, Peter Hünemann reflects on marriage as a sacrament through the lens of AL 72-74, where sacramentality is described as living marriage as a vocation.⁵³ He states: “In the sacrament of baptism, the universal element of vocation receives its expression; in the sacrament of marriage, the special element of vocation receives its expression.”⁵⁴ Against this backdrop, Hünemann underlines with AL 75 the doctrine that any marriage between baptized persons is a sacrament and that any marriage becomes a sacrament as a result of baptism. However, viewing marriage as a vocation also allows for a distinction between baptism and marriage when emphasizing the dimension of faith, as Julia Knop does with reference to Francis and *Amoris laetitia*.⁵⁵

But perhaps a major advantage of characterizing marriage as a vocation – at least for a moral theologian – is that it avoids the controversial issues surrounding sacramentality while still allowing marriage to be characterized as religious. On the one hand, the category of vocation can illuminate the religious dimension of the marital relationship without invoking the theological concept of sacrament, which many couples may find difficult to grasp. On the other hand, it could serve as a gateway for engaged or married couples to understand their marriage as a sacrament, beyond merely seeking divine blessing and support for their relationship.⁵⁶ Could the theme of vocation, therefore, serve as a resource for articulating a more comprehensive theology of marriage in pastoral contexts? For example, the concept of vocation could be employed to bring into play the aforementioned synodal co-responsibility

52 As can be observed in K. DEMMER: *Angewandte Theologie*, 171.

53 See P. HÜNNEMANN: “The Sacrament of Marriage: A Dogmatic Theologian Reads *Amoris Laetitia*”, in: T. KNIIPS-PORT LE ROI (ed.): *A Point of No Return? Amoris Laetitia on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*, Münster: LIT, 2017 (INTAMS Studies on Marriage and Family; 2), 87-104, esp. 94-95.

54 Ibid. 94.

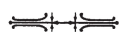
55 See J. KNOP: *Beziehungsweise*, 271-274, 293-300.

56 See the observations of R. SCHEULE: “Schönster Tag, undeutliches Sakrament: Was Brautleute denken”, in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 148/2 (2023), 119-130.

more naturally. However, this goes beyond systematic theological considerations, which, as this article has suggested, should serve as a critical companion to the increasingly frequent talk of vocation in church contexts.⁵⁷

SUMMARY Marriage as a Vocation

In preaching, prayers, and Church documents, talking about vocation or calling is quite common. Since Vatican II, it has increasingly been applied to marriage as well. In contrast, there is relatively little systematic theological reflection on a theology of vocation. When marriage is considered a vocation, it is usually in regard to the religious facets of marriage, or the classical conception of priesthood or religious life is merely expanded without critical revision. This article offers an alternative proposal for a theology of marital vocation. In a first step, a biblical foundation is examined. God's call is Christ himself. To this personal call the Christian responds in his life. Against this backdrop, the decision for a state of life is to be secondarily and non-deductively considered. As can be shown with Eph 5,21-33, marriage has a solid biblical foundation for being regarded as an excellent way of living out one's vocation in Christ. In a second step, Vatican II and some recent documents are consulted to outline the vocation of the human person and the teleologically related universal call to holiness. Subsequently, particularly by referring to the transcendental structure of the conciliar understanding of the call of the human person, some requirements for a theology of marital vocation are discussed. This includes recognizing the importance of the subjective perspective and thereby seeing the spouses as competent agents in a relationship with an inherently religious dimension, as well as the individual in their living out of their personal response to God's call. Therefore, a hermeneutical approach is advocated in contrast to a deductive one. Following this, the spouses are presented as agents of both an individual and shared history of vocation, and some implications and benefits of this perspective are discussed. The starting point here is a brief consideration of human freedom and the theory of fundamental option. Based on this nuanced understanding of human agency, on the one hand, a deterministic perspective is criticized. On the other hand, it is emphasized that the preferred dynamic approach neither marginalizes the role of God nor diminishes the responsibility of the individual. In summary, if the underlying theology of vocation is critically examined, considering marriage as a vocation can be a promising approach for a theology of marriage.



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