

Radical Union

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET

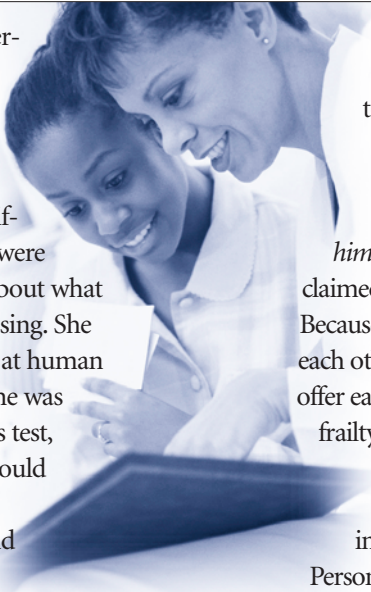
Recently, I had a telephone conversation with my daughter, Kate, who is away at college. We hadn't talked in awhile, so we had a lot of catching up to do. During the conversation, Kate asked me how different family members and friends were faring—all with a deep sensibility about what would ultimately make their hearts sing. She and I have always been able to look at human life together in this way. Finally as she was signing off to go study for a calculus test, Kate said to me wistfully, "I wish I could major in THIS."

I smiled as I got off the phone and pondered her words. THIS! This intimacy. *This union.* This closeness to each other that becomes deeper and richer as the years go by, even in the midst of geographical distance. But Kate does not want THIS just with me. She wants THIS with friends and other members of our family. She wants to bring THIS to the people with whom she works. In THIS, she finds happiness, security, fulfillment and peace.

"What else do we all want, each one of us, except to love and be loved, in our families, in our work, in all our relationships?" Servant of God Dorothy Day once wrote. "The keenness and intensity of love brings with it suffering, of course, but joy too, because it is a foretaste of heaven."

SUPREME HAPPINESS

"Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness," teaches the Catechism of the Catholic Church. While many believers are attracted to heaven as a concept, they don't always experience the truth that heaven can begin on earth in the depth, beauty and intimacy of human relationships through Jesus Christ



in the life of his Church. Yes, "by his death and Resurrection, Jesus Christ has 'opened' heaven to us" (CCC 1024).

Because Christ remains fully present, most especially in the reception of the Blessed Sacrament, we have been given *the way through him* to "love one another intensely," as St. Peter proclaimed to his friends in the early Church (1 Peter 1:22). Because Christ remains among us now, we can receive each other in him with all of our differences. We can offer each other his mercy and love in the midst of our frailty and fears. We can comfort, console and support one another through every sorrow and joy. And caught up—through him—into the intimate communion between the three divine Persons of the Trinity, *we can pursue this divine intimacy with every person we encounter.*

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Real Unity Between People

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“BEGIN OUR HEAVEN HERE ON EARTH”

Today, the secular culture is deeply conflicted about union, often proposing a temporary act of the body as the only response to the universal human longing for a permanent bond that never ends. The great cultural lie—that the surface of the body is the only satisfying way of being completely united with another—has caused tremendous heartache for many men and women of every age, race, creed and sexual orientation. Even many believers have had difficulty experiencing the vibrant union for which they still long, perhaps within a marriage or vocation that seems increasingly disconnected from a well-spring of passionate life and love. Who can offer us their counsel and witness of a union that fully satisfies?

The truth about exclusive, infinite union has been best articulated—and experienced—in what for some, is a rather surprising place. Paradoxically, it has been the *virgins of the Church* who have been the greatest witnesses to the divine union possible between persons. By offering the “radical gift of self for love of the Lord Jesus Christ and, in him, of every member of the human family,” celibate men and women can live a new way of intimate relationship caught up into the life of God (*JPII, Vita Consecrata* 3). This very human way of union was perfected by the Lord himself, through his total personal offering—including his Body—to every person. This is the radical path that the world often finds hard to fathom—yet it has provided an astounding experience of infinite union to chosen men and women, ever since the appearance of Christ on earth.

Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, a contemplative 19th century nun, once wrote, “It seems to me that we can begin our heaven even here on earth, since we possess him, and through everything, we can remain in his love.” Recognizing this amazing gift, Elizabeth experienced a deeper union with her own sister, who lived outside the cloister walls: “I can feel you in the chapel from noon to one o’clock, it is the fusion of our two souls in him, oh! If you knew how close we are! Continue to live in communion with [God] through everything; that is the center where we meet.”

Likewise, St. Paul, while in prison wrote of the startling depth of relationship that had developed between a Greek slave and himself, and how that union was now a gift to be offered and shared for the benefit of the whole community. “I urge you on behalf of my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment, who was once useless to you but is now useful to both you and me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you... So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me” (*Philemon 1:10-12*).

A STARTLING NEW WAY

The union that the people of God are called to in Jesus Christ is a startling new way of loving—a way that people in the culture can recognize and experience. In the Church today, this truth is manifested most radically in a vibrant celibate life lived in union with the living Presence of Christ. From this witness, men and women in religious or consecrated life can offer themselves freely to every

person, loving intimately and profoundly “with the freedom of God” (*JPII, VC, 88*).

In my own life, I have encountered several religious men and women who have shown me that *only Jesus Christ can bring infinite union into finite, human relationships*. Only Jesus Christ can bring us the beginning of heaven on earth. THIS is the truth about union that I am asking him to keep bringing into my own intimate relationships. THIS is the gift of a new humanity that I want to keep “majoring in” with my beautiful daughter and the family, friends and strangers who surround us. ❖

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The Intimate Path to Union at Mass

BY DANIEL LAHOOD

To love is to give. For a time, for a long time, whether defined by the intensity of its passage or its chronology, the Lord wants us to give.

Nikos Kazantakis, author of *Zorba the Greek*, visited a monastery and asked the monks there if he could remain for 30 days. He didn't inform the monks of his intention. Nikos would make a bargain with God. He would sit waiting, praying, imploring that God reveal himself to him. Nikos waited and prayed, he implored. Nothing. Nikos left the monastery and set out, writing the screenplay for the Martin Scorsese movie, "The Last Temptation of Christ."

Simone Weill was a Jew. Simone used to sit in a Catholic Church in Berlin and sit and sit. For years Simone sat in a pew and sat and sat. After some years, she started to say the Our Father. She did that for years. Simone was asked what was the most important stance in one's relationship with God. Her answer: "patience." If she had become convinced of the truth as taught by the Catholic Church, she was asked, why didn't she become a Catholic? "Because I'm a Jew," she answered. Would it be impertinent to suggest that Simone could be the model for Reinhold Niebuhr's

"Anonymous Christian"? I wonder how she would've gotten on with Nikos. Oil and water, I suspect.

IT'S A MYSTERY

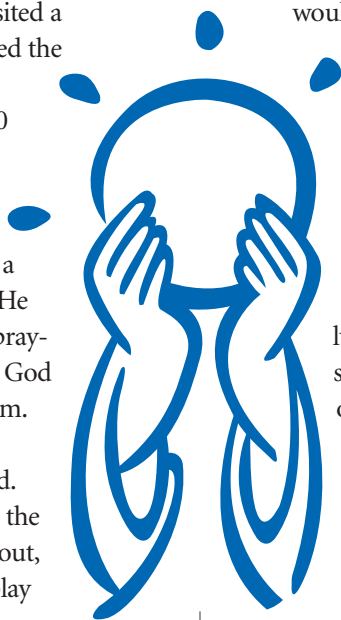
Obviously Mr. Kazantakis wouldn't be patient enough to make it through your average Greek liturgy nor would Simone be able to participate fully in the Mass. We share no such excuse.

As the Mass precisely mirrors the three stages of spiritual growth outlined by the great spiritual writers, so also does the liturgy reflect the action of the Trinity in the world.

Three plus three in this case equals Three. Don't worry, it's a Mystery.

The Redeemer is Mercy itself. The first stage in the spiritual life is self-emptying (Nikos probably got an F in self-emptying; Simone probably got an A). The first section of the Mass is a cry for forgiveness, a call to conversion. This is the Purification Stage. "Christ Have Mercy."

The Spirit is the bringer of Truth, and in the Epistles, Psalms and Gospel we come to know his activity in our lives and history. St. John of the Cross calls this second stage, the Illuminative. We awaken to the reality of God's presence in our soul. The Word of the Lord. "Thanks be to God."



Getting There...

If we feel separated from Christ or others during Mass, perhaps we need to have an even deeper experience of purification. The Sacrament of Reconciliation brings us fully and unequivocally back into full communion with God and one another. In no other way is this possible! Through this sacrament, we are offered a completely clean slate to begin our pursuit of communion anew. What an amazing gift to every human person! ❖

THE UNITIVE STAGE

During the Eucharist, we join our sacrifice to the Father and he, in return, feeds us with his own life. Here is the Alpha Omega point, the source and summit of the spiritual life. This is where mere men become divinized. "By this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity." This is the Unitive Stage.

The third Three that accompanies these others, and without which no progress is made, are the virtues of humility, wisdom and understanding. When, please God, these virtues are infused by grace, we may find ourselves embraced in the depths of our soul by the One we've sought to the blast of thunder and chimes.

To love is to receive. ❖

A Communion of Persons

BY PAULA SPARACINO ZELAYA

I always felt in my heart that Josue was the one for me. I can still remember very early on in our high school relationship, sitting outside of my house on our front stoop, talking about getting married, and calculating that it would be possible only in about seven years. Well, we had finally made it five years, through thick and thin, ups and downs, and even a considerable breakup.

A year ago, we made the conscious choice to trust God completely with our relationship. At that point, we literally let go and handed it over to God. We resolved that in the end we would accept whatever happened as God's will. I believed that this was the time to find out if God truly blessed our union as one intended for marriage.

The transition was a difficult one, because above all else, it involved letting go of our "control" over our relationship and asking God to do with it what he willed. Trust is never easy. And this was the ultimate trust, the ultimate surrender. During this time, we both said the Rosary

daily, we continued going to Mass together, and we started going to Confession once a month together. The result was that we were able to be more open with each other about our faith, our faults, and our relationship.

SURRENDER TO CHRIST

Our continued effort, our heartfelt prayers, our surrender to Christ and our absolute trust in his will for our lives is what brought us to the utterly most beautiful time of our entire relationship. We have grown more together in the last year, than in the first five. I am amazed at the person I see in Josue now, because it is a completely different person than I saw before. Our unity with

Christ has allowed us to see and understand amazing things about one another, and about Christ as an essential element in our relationship.

In one year, we (under Christ's direction) learned to give and receive forgiveness, we learned to communicate, not to hold resentment or anger against each other, but instead we learned the beauty and freedom of surrendering to



Vocation to Marriage Video

Looking for an attractive presentation of the Church's timeless teachings on marriage? Order "The Vocation to Marriage: Vocation to Love and Service of Life" from the Knights of Columbus. This 30-minute DVD is available for only a postage charge. Visit www.kofc.org or call 1-203-752-4270. ❖

one another, but more importantly surrendering together to God. We learned these things so completely, that it became clear to Josue that our union was blessed and a blessing from God. He proposed and I said yes.

HE UNITES OUR HEARTS

I think the key to all of the joy, love, and friendship that Josue and I are finding in one another now, is the fact that we solidified our hearts first, and we are waiting for the union of our bodies after our wedding day. This is something that we have especially understood, accepted, and developed in the past year of our engagement.

We have thanked God for the gift of each other, we prayed and trusted more. We handed over our worries about finding a house to live in after we're married, and we were blessed again with the gift of a home. In God's arms, in his loving embrace, we have experienced beautiful things. We are a witness to God's promise that he will unify our hearts. ❖

Union with Women

BY JOHN M. CAPOBIANCO

Most men recognize that women are pretty darn mysterious creatures. And the funny thing is that the closer you get to a woman, the more you try to enter into a fitting satisfying union with her, the more mysterious she becomes. This is true whether the woman in question is your spouse, daughter, mother, sister or friend. It doesn't matter. Just when you think you have figured out exactly how you can satisfy her desires and make her happy, something new arises that makes you realize—wow—she's just different! And that's a good healthy thing for men to learn. She is a pure gift from above and that's what makes her so mysterious.

I have come to believe that the key to enjoying the quest of this mysterious and often illusive union with women is to trust what many today consider a rather unlikely source. Jesus of Nazareth is the key for men to fulfill their own desire to please and join in real heart to heart union with the women in their lives. He is the one who wants to share with us the kind of divine union that he experiences with his Father. He is the one who saves us and those we love from being crushed by the real disconnects and sorrows that separate our hearts. He is the one who makes it possible—when we honestly join our lives in union with him—for us to unite, for us to truly love beyond ourselves, the women he places in our lives.

AN APPEALING LADIES MAN

For many men, however, this may seem like a lot of uncomfortable, stupid "Jesus" talk. This is especially true

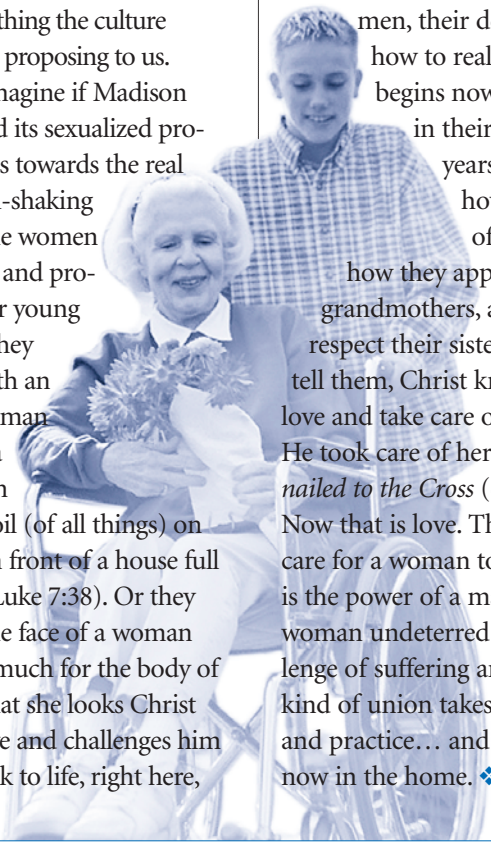
for many men and even boys who easily dismiss much of what Christ and his Church offers about human relationships. Perhaps—like many in modern culture—Christ's celibate love is so off-putting that they can't take him very seriously when it comes to putting their best moves on their women. Perhaps many fear deep down that the Jesus offered to us by the Catholic Church is not really much of an appealing ladies' man. Perhaps they believe what he really offers leads to reduced relationships with everyone and ultimately leads to a depressing life.

The reality is that Jesus Christ presented in the Gospels, constantly present to us in Sacramental life, protected for us by the Magisterium of the Church, is much more passionate—not just toward women—but for all human relationships, than anyone or anything the culture comes close to proposing to us.

Can you imagine if Madison Avenue turned its sexualized production talents towards the real body and soul-shaking response of the women in Christ's life and proposed it to our young men today? They could start with an image of a woman slipping into a crowded room and pouring oil (of all things) on Christ's feet in front of a house full of guests (cf. Luke 7:38). Or they could show the face of a woman who cares so much for the body of her brother that she looks Christ right in the eye and challenges him to bring it back to life, right here,

right now (cf. John 11:41). Or they could show the eyes of a woman whose heart and soul is penetrated forever in the simple act of being asked for a drink of water at a well (cf. John 4:6). For men united in intimacy with Christ today, approaching the mind, heart and body of a woman *with his love* hardly makes one half-a-man. In fact, just the opposite is true. Union with Christ makes one a complete and mature man, passionate in his love for all women. In Christ, a man can crack the mystery and join in union with women in such a way that he embodies for each one the gift of self in love.

I have tried to impress upon my sons the importance of this union with Christ and how he makes it possible for us to love beyond ourselves. Their desire to be authentic men, their desire to learn how to really love women, begins now in our home in their adolescent years. It begins with how they take care of their mother, how they appreciate their grandmothers, and how they respect their sister. Remember, I tell them, Christ knew how to love and take care of his mother. He took care of her *while he was nailed to the Cross* (cf. John 19:25). Now that is love. That is how you care for a woman to the end. That is the power of a man united to a woman undeterred by the challenge of suffering and death. This kind of union takes lots of grace and practice... and it begins right now in the home. ❖



Receiving His Communion in the Parish

Recently, I attended the Mass of Christian Burial for a beloved parishioner. Many of the woman's long-time parish friends took the day off from work to come say good-bye to their friend who had spent the past year in a difficult fight against cancer.

During the Mass, I noticed a young couple sitting in front of me who seemed particularly grief-stricken. In tears, they sat close together and did not seem to know the responses or songs that the rest of us sang in unison. When they did not kneel during the Consecration or say the words to the Our Father, it became clear to me that they did not share our faith.

As I watched and prayed for them, I found myself looking at the Mass through their eyes. Did they experience our counter-culture hope and peace in the face of this tragic death? Did they recognize the unique union shared by the parishioners in the church? As they stayed in their pew during Communion, did they recognize our act as the only way to stay in deep, infinite relationship with this beloved friend or relative?

A REAL FUSION

The Mass in our parish is the place of encounter between the living and the dead, the place where Jesus Christ brings his promise of immortality into the truth of our

mortality. This is not just an abstract, hoped-for connection, but a real physical "fusion" with his divine life and love, through his Body and Blood in the Eucharist. Christ in the Eucharist brings our



parishes union; Christ in the Eucharist keeps us eternally connected with every member of our parish family.

"Those who feed on Christ in the Eucharist need not wait until the here-after to receive eternal life: they already possess it on earth, as the first-fruits of a future fullness

which will embrace man in his totality. For in the Eucharist we also receive the pledge of our bodily resurrection at the end of the world," reminds Pope John Paul II. "For this reason Saint Ignatius of Antioch rightly defined the Eucharistic Bread as 'a medicine of immortality, an antidote to death'" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 18).

AN OFFER TO REMAIN

While he walked the earth, Jesus invited every person he encountered into this immortal communion with his Father. Some came along; many others rejected him to the point of condemnation, torture and the greatest separation faced by

every human person—death. What was the Almighty's response to this rejection of his divine communion? Merciful love, and an offer to remain with us on earth, most especially in the Eucharist.

"Receiving the Eucharist means entering into a profound communion with Jesus. 'Abide in me, and I in you' (Jn 15:4). This relationship of profound and mutual 'abiding' enables us to have a certain foretaste of heaven on earth," teaches the Pope (*Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 19).

The mission of the Church on earth is to continue to offer this radical communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a God who is union. The Church is the only place where this desire of every human heart can be found, and yet, this divine communion is freely offered to anyone who wants to come and see at the local parish.

During the funeral, I noticed I wasn't the only one in my pew who offered a warmer hand than usual to the young couple during the sign of peace. I pray that they were able to fully receive this gesture of our shared humanity—a gesture linked through Christ to their deceased loved one who lives! ❖

—MBN

A Great Sign

The unity of Christ's disciples, therefore, is a great sign given in order to kindle faith in the world, while their division constitutes a scandal." — *John Paul II, Mother of the Redeemer*, 29

Real Unity Between People

BY THOMAS TOBIN

Shortly before Thanksgiving, a colleague of mine at Springbrook High School in Silver Spring, Maryland, came to tell me that my former student, Thomas, had been killed in combat in northern Iraq. It was a complete shock to me and I was devastated.

Of all the students I have taught in my ten years at Springbrook, there were none that were closer to me than Thomas. He had been one of the founding members of our Catholic Students' Club here at the school. For two years I knew him through the club and then when he was a senior, he became my student. In those three years, we spent a lot of time together, and he kept in touch with me from his basic training and his time on his base in the state of Washington.

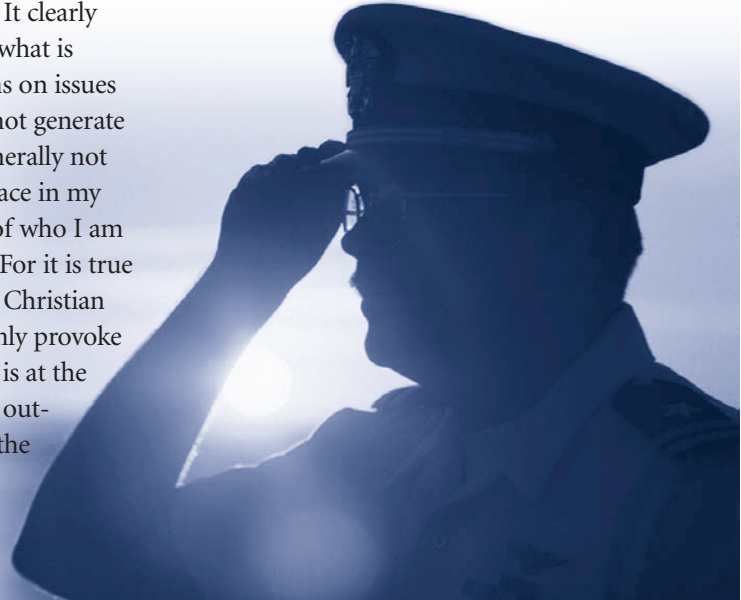
THE BEAUTIFUL, ATTRACTIVE PRESENCE

The friendship I had with Thomas was special to me in a number of ways, but especially in one way. We came together through our faith. My friendship with him and the other students (but especially him) was a sign for my colleagues and the others in the school. In our time people are easily reduced to labels (oh, he's the Catholic, he's the liberal, he's the conservative) in a way that empties a person's position toward life. A person's fundamental choices toward life's questions can in that way be rendered familiar and banal. When people see a real unity between people, though, it is different. It can not be so easily

reduced or dismissed. It clearly begs the question of "what is behind that?" Positions on issues abound, but they do not generate unity and they are generally not interesting. Thomas' face in my class was a reminder of who I am and what I belong to. For it is true that the experience of Christian friendship does not only provoke the question of "what is at the source of this" for the outside observer, but for the friends as well. For us the question of what, or to put it better, who is at the source

of our friendship places us in the position of contemplating the beautiful, attractive presence of Christ among us: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am." This is the formula of Christian friendship and it is the description of the Church.

It is for that reason that although I am still saddened by the thought that my young friend died at the age of 20 by a sniper's bullet in Mosul, I do not despair. A death of a young person forces hard questions. It can easily seem that the One who gives takes away in a capricious manner. But the evidence of Christian friendship teaches us of a deeper truth. The relationship always had at its source the presence of Another. That One is the One who has experienced death in order to guarantee that everything that is so surprisingly beautiful in life will be brought to fruition, to its destiny. Now the friendship with Thomas that was given to me as a surpris-



ing gift is dramatically closer to its fulfillment. I pray for the soul of Thomas and I pray to him, that that world, where things are experienced in their beautiful entirety, may be experienced more in this world and that therefore everything that Christian friendship promises may be more evident, more tangible here and now. (Please pray for my friend Thomas, too). ❖

What could be meant by a peace which is not like the kind the world gives? It is a peace... stronger than suffering. Not a peace without warfare, but peace despite warfare, within warfare, beyond warfare. It is the peace of a soul that through love has come to dwell entirely in heaven and to share in heaven's own peace, regardless of anything earthly that can happen to it."

— Charles de Foucauld



FROM THE MYSTICAL MONSIGNOR

The Unity of Divine Love

Unity is certainly a desired and fulfilling experience in human relations. But at what price? Not at the price of one imposing his or her judgments and decisions on the other. Neither at the price of a compromise that requires both to lower their expectations of what can and should be. Can real unity exist without these?

The unity the heart seeks is a unity within a real difference, indeed a unity that is strengthened as the difference is more and more recognized, affirmed, and celebrated. We are capable of this unity but we cannot achieve it ourselves. Such a unity is the secret of the God who made us precisely to share this life with us through the mystery of Christ. This is the Unity of Divine Love, the life of the Trinitarian God. This is the heart of the life of the Church.

The manifestation of Trinitarian life in the world is the Church. There is no other way of enjoying this unity in human relationships except living these relationships as part of the life of the Church. This is the reason for the sacramentality of marriage. That is why the life of a family born out of the sacrament of marriage is called to be a “domestic Church.” This unity is tested all the time by the power of disunity arising from sin, but again and again it is made possible by the victory of Christ.

This unity is what the devil fears the most. The devil can put up with anything; it can deceive us in many ways, but it cannot pass the test of being a source of unity. There is no unity in hell. This is in fact the nature of hell. The Church is present on earth, in Purgatory, and in Heaven, but not in hell.

The vocation of marriage and the family is to make this unity present in the world. Marriage and family have this purpose: to build the Church through the Unity of Divine Love. ❖

— Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete
U.S. Ecclesiastical Advisor for Communion and Liberation,
an international movement in the Church

Ponder in Your Heart

Discussion Questions

How can we “begin our heaven even here on earth”? (p. 1 and 2)

- How can the “virgins of the Church” point to the radical union offered by God?
- Where do you see evidence of the Lord’s intimate union in your own life?

Do you experience union with God during Mass on Sunday? (p. 3)

- Why is “self-emptying” such an important first step to union?
- How does the Eucharist “divinize” those who receive in a state of grace?

Why is it so difficult for many young Catholics to accept the Church’s teachings on courtship and marriage? (p. 4)

- How can Christ unite hearts and souls before marriage?
- How can the union of bodies before marriage make it harder for couples to grow in their interior relationship with God and one another?

How can the difference between men and women be a stumbling block to union? (p. 5)

- Why do men have trouble seeing Christ as “an appealing ladies’ man”?
- How can young men be encouraged to care for the women in their lives?

What is your experience of union within the parish community? (p.6)

- How does the Eucharist unite the living and the dead within our parish?
- In what ways can we offer our union to people who do not share our faith?

Why is real union such a challenge in the face of terror and violence? (p.7)

- How does Christ’s “attractive Presence” bring peace even in the midst of warfare?