

A sacred and solemn institution: An examination of the nature and purpose of marriage and the family in the Roman Catholic and Hindu traditions in light of Pope John Paul II's *Familiaris consortio*

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**A Sacred and Solemn Institution:
An Examination of the Nature and Purpose of Marriage and the Family in the Roman Catholic and
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by

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ABSTRACT

In 1981, Pope John Paul II promulgated the Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio: The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, in which he wrote of the nature of marriage and family as that of self-giving love. Using this document as a guiding framework, this essay will offer a comparative analysis of marriage and family in the Christian, particularly Roman Catholic, and Hindu traditions. After providing a preliminary background as to the nature and purpose of the nuptial union in both traditions in Part I, I will examine, in a comparative manner, two particular aspects highlighted in *Familiaris Consortio*: in Part II, the family as a “community of persons” and “domestic Church” with the Hindu understanding of the union of two families through marriage and the importance of home *puja*, or daily worship; and, in Part III, the conjugal union as a manifestation of Divine love, with its archetype being the loving sacrifice of Christ for the Church, with the Hindu notion of *bhakti* and the love modeled by *Krishna* and *Rādhā* and *Rama* and *Sita* in the Epic literature of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*. Furthermore, I will show that, in both traditions, marriage and family life is a means of progression toward spiritual perfection, and ultimately, to the path of salvation/liberation.

I. Introduction

The importance of marriage and family life as constitutive of societal foundation is a global reality, one that pervades traditional religious thought and practice. Accordingly, this essay will evaluate and compare the thought of two particular religious traditions, that of the Christian, specifically Roman Catholic, and Hindu, primarily Vaishnavite, in regard to the meaning and role of marriage and family. In the Roman Catholic tradition, Pope John Paul II, both prior to and throughout his pontificate, was a champion of marriage and family issues, and thus, this essay will use his Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio: On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*¹, as a guiding framework in which to offer a basis for comparison throughout. In terms of Hinduism, the specific emphasis on Vaishnavism provides for an adequate representation of the tradition as a whole because of its overarching view of

Hindu thought and practice. Additionally, the Epic literature of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*, considered to be the most valued of Hindu sacred texts, are both primarily Vaishnavite texts, and provide an account of human relationships, particularly love relationships, and thus, will correspond to the text of *Familiaris Consortio* in the final analysis.²

The methodology of this essay is the following: in Part I, a brief overview of the nature and purpose of marriage in both the Roman Catholic and Hindu traditions will be given in order to provide a foundation upon which the subsequent analysis can be offered.³ In Part II, two aspects of John Paul II's discussion of the role and meaning of marriage and family will be extracted, namely, the notion of the family as a "community of persons" and "domestic church," and compared with the Hindu notion of the union of two families through marriage, in other words, the Hindu "joint family," along with the Hindu notion of home *puja*, or worship. Finally, in Part III, John Paul II's articulation of the Roman Catholic understanding of the conjugal union as a manifestation of Divine love, in which the Christian spouses share in and reflect the redemptive love of Christ for his Church, will be compared with two similar, but nevertheless divergent models of the human manifestation of Divine love, recounted in the Epic literature and represented by *Krishna* and *Rādhā* and *Rama* and *Sita*. Surely, many parallels between these two traditions will be seen throughout, as well as a few divergences; however, despite these differences, this comparative exercise will be of great value, for the Roman Catholic and Hindu can invigorate one another as both regard marriage and family life as a means of spiritual progression, and ultimately, as a path to salvation for the Christian, and liberation, for the Hindu.

II. The Importance of Marriage

A. Nature and Purpose of Marriage in the Roman Catholic Church

In the Roman Catholic tradition, marriage is a supernatural vocation in which a man and a

woman realize the fundamental vocation of the human person, that is, to love: “Creating the human race in his own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion.”⁴ Thus, the conjugal union is an actuation of this “most profound truth of man,”⁵ a natural, lived reality that is in accord with God’s created order.

The conjugal communion, the foundation for the broader communion of the family – a matter which will be taken up shortly - has the first essential property of unity: “By virtue of the covenant of married life, the man and woman ‘are no longer two but one flesh’ and they are called to grow continually in their communion through day-to-day fidelity to the marriage promise of total mutual self-giving.”⁶ This covenantal bond, in which the spouses “share their entire life project,”⁷ is a special kind of friendship, one in which the spouses love each other for the very sake of the other, constantly ordering their will toward the good of the other. Additionally, the husband and wife are equal in dignity, and thus give themselves totally, uniquely, and exclusively to one another.⁸

Conjugal communion further requires the essential property of indissolubility, that is, the permanent commitment to one’s spouse for the whole of life. Founded upon and strengthened by Christ,

...the indissolubility of marriage finds its ultimate truth in the plan that God has manifested in his revelation: He wills and he communicates the indissolubility of marriage as a fruit, a sign and a requirement of the absolutely faithful love that God has for man and that the Lord Jesus has for the church.⁹

Furthermore, this indissolubility is rooted in the total self-giving of the spouses to one another, and is absolutely necessary for the good of their children, to which the marital bond is (also) directed: “Thus the couple, while giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves but also the reality of children, who are a living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of conjugal

unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a mother and father.” Furthermore, “when they become parents, spouses receive from God the gift of a new responsibility. Their parental love is called to become for the children the visible sign of the very love of God...”¹⁰

As a matter of summation, marriage in the Roman Catholic tradition is a supernatural vocation in which a man and woman freely, consciously, and lovingly unite themselves as one, realizing the fundamental vocation of the human being, which is to love. Furthermore, this conjugal union is characterized by the essential properties of unity and indissolubility, and thus fidelity and exclusivity, and is ordered to the good of the spouses as well as to the procreation and education of children, who are a permanent sign of the love of the husband and wife. One final consideration must be made in regard to this brief overview of marriage in the Catholic tradition: the sacramental nature of marriage. As one of the seven sacraments, marriage

is the specific source and original means of sanctification for Christian married couples and families. It takes up again and makes specific the sanctifying grace of baptism. By virtue of the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ, of which the spouses are made part in a new way by marriage, conjugal love is purified and made holy... The gift of Jesus Christ is not exhausted in the actual celebration of the sacrament of marriage, but rather accompanies the married couple throughout their lives.¹¹

Thus, as a sacrament, Christian marriage is a means through which the sanctification of the spouses and family occurs, and whereby the glorification of God through Christ is realized.

Furthermore, the sacrament of marriage is a “real symbol of the event of salvation,”¹² a manifestation of Christ’s redemptive love for his Church, which the husband and wife are called to imitate.

B. Nature and Purpose of Marriage in Hinduism¹³

In the Hindu tradition, marriage (*vivaha*) is a Dharmic institution in which a man and a woman, upon becoming husband and wife, enter into the second of the four stages of life, that of the *Grihastha Ashram*, or “householder.”¹⁴ Innate to human nature, married life is a social duty,

one in which the husband and wife are responsible to one another, as well as to their family, to their ancestors, and to all of society. Additionally, married life is a sacred, religious obligation wherein a husband and wife work together towards achieving the four *Purusharthas*, or ends of human life. Because of the sanctity of the institution of marriage and its Dharmic consequences, Hindu marriages are typically arranged by the parents of the man and the woman in order to maximize the compatibility between the partners, thus enabling them to withstand the challenges of time and fulfill their social and religious duties.

The conjugal relationship is characterized by a profound unity in which the spouses share together the whole of life, with its joys, sorrows, pleasures, and challenges, supporting one another always in order to maintain love, peace, and harmony within the *Grihastha Ashram*.

Thus, the bridegroom says to his bride:

Distant though we were, one from the other, we stand now united. May we be of one mind and spirit! Through the grace of God, may the eyes radiate benevolence. Be thou my shield. May thou have a cheerful heart and a smiling face. May thou be a true devotee of God and mother of heroes. May thou have at heart the welfare of all living beings!¹⁵

Committed to one another, husband and wife strive together to achieve the four ends of human life, particularly, in accordance with the householder *dharma*, those of *artha*, the pursuit of wealth and possessions, and *kāma*, which, generally speaking, constitutes sensual desire and pleasure.¹⁶

Additionally, within the Vedic ritual, the husband and wife pledge an eternal friendship to one another, thus marking an element of indissolubility, in which the sensual pleasure of *kama* is transmuted into a loving-devotion that spans the whole of life:

Ye learned people assembled at this sacred ceremony know it for certain that we two hereby accept each other as companions for life and agree to live together most cordially as husband and wife. May the hearts of us both be blended and beat in unison. May we love each other like the very breath of our lives. As the all-pervading God sustains the universe,

so may we sustain each other. As a preceptor loves his disciple, so may we love each other steadfastly and faithfully.¹⁷

This monogamous, life-long companionship is directed toward the further social and religious duty of progeny, which serves as the foundation for societal and cultural growth. Thus, the procreation and education of children, particularly sons, is fundamental to the *Grihastha Ashram*, for future generations are fostered and family traditions perpetuated. Additionally, marriage not only constitutes the union of husband and wife, but also the union of two families, a notion which will be considered shortly.

Again, as a matter of summation, in the Hindu tradition marriage is a Dharmic institution in which the unity and indissolubility of the marital bond is emphasized, and in which husband and wife, within the second stage of life, that of the householder, work together to pursue the four ends or goals of human life, primarily *artha* and *kāma*. One final consideration is the notion of marriage as one of *samskāras*, or sacraments, which are celebrations marking the major transitions in life.¹⁸ Marriage is the most important *samskāra*, for through it a man and a woman assist one another in the way of righteous living, and contribute to the fostering of the family, the society, and the culture as a whole. Ultimately, married life constitutes a spiritual experience, in which the spouses move together along the path of spiritual perfection, striving toward the supreme and ultimate goal of life, that is, liberation.

III. The Role of the Family

A. The Christian Family – A Community of Persons and Domestic Church

“Marriage,” writes John Paul II, “is the foundation of the wider community of the family, since the very institution of marriage and conjugal love is ordained to the procreation and education of children in whom they find their crowning.”¹⁹ The communion that is created

between a husband and wife, when the two become “one flesh” in marriage, is ordered beyond themselves: through their decision to have children, parents reflect God’s desire, as a community of persons, that is, as Trinity, to extend this communion of love into the temporal realm. Through this re-presentation of the procession of Trinitarian love, husband and wife share in the creative power of God, by which the external manifestation of their love is their child. Thus, “the family, which is founded and given life by love, is a community of persons: of husband and wife, of parents and children, of relatives.”²⁰

As the “first and vital cell”²¹ of society, the Christian family’s importance cannot be underestimated. Through its practice of love and virtue, the family has the potential, and the duty, to be involved in political life and practice. Through its witness, the family can impact a society which is in desperate need of a vision of hope:

Consequently, faced with a society that is running the risk of becoming more and more depersonalized and standardized and therefore inhuman and dehumanizing, with the negative results of many forms of escapism – such as alcoholism, drugs and even terrorism – the family possesses and continues still to release formidable energies capable of taking man out of his anonymity, keeping him conscious of his personal dignity, enriching him with deep humanity and actively placing him, in his uniqueness and unrepeatability, within the fabric of society.²²

Each member of the family, through his or her particular role, contributes to this vision.

Although not delving into the issue of the role of women in detail as elsewhere, John Paul II nevertheless praises the woman’s role of wife and mother in the context of the family.²³ While acknowledging the “equal dignity” of women in the public realm, the Pope contends “the true advancement of women requires that clear recognition be given to the value of their maternal and family role, by comparison with all other public roles and all other professions.”²⁴ In the recognition of her role as wife and mother, a woman’s dignity is elevated. Likewise, the man is “called upon to live his gift and role as husband and father.”²⁵ A husband is to regard his wife as his equal, and as his very special friend. Furthermore, “love for his wife as mother of their

children and love for the children themselves are for the man the natural way of understanding and fulfilling his own fatherhood.”²⁶ The role of the father is vital and irreplaceable in this community of persons; additionally, through his unique role as husband and father, the man’s own dignity is realized. Great devotion and attention must be given to children who, as the “crowning” of the nuptial union, have profound dignity and rights of their own:

Acceptance, love, esteem, many-sided and united material, emotional, educational, and spiritual concern for every child that comes into this world should always constitute a distinctive, essential characteristic of all Christians, in particular of the Christian family: Thus, children...offer their own precious contribution to building up the family community and even to the sanctification of their parents.²⁷

Additionally, beyond the immediacy of the nuclear family, a brief yet valuable mention of the elderly is made; the elderly are not to be forgotten, but because of their “witness to the past” and “wisdom for the future” are to be valued in the familial community, and shown the utmost respect and love.²⁸

John Paul II describes the “ecclesial task” of the Christian family as one of fundamental importance: “The family is placed at the service of the building up of the Kingdom of God in history by participating in the life and mission of the Church.”²⁹ As the “first experience of the Church,” Christian parents are obligated to educate their children in the faith by introducing them to the Word of God and the sacraments, a task that is rooted in the Prophetic office of Christ in which they share.³⁰ Through their own lives, parents witness to the Gospel of Christ, and serve as models of truth, humility, forgiveness, justice, reconciliation, and love. In this “domestic church,”³¹ of particular importance is family prayer which, as Marc Cardinal Ouellet writes, “refers to the family as a domestic sanctuary where prayer and worship are offered.”³² One may be familiar with the axiom, “The family that prays together, stays together”; this brief statement holds a profound truth, to which John Paul II attests:

Family prayer has for its own object *family life itself*, which in all its varying circumstances

is seen as a call from God and lived as a filial response to his call. Joys and sorrows, hopes, and disappointments, births and birthday celebrations, wedding anniversaries of the parents, departures, separations and home-comings, important and far-reaching decisions, the death of those who are dear, etc. – all of these mark God’s long intervention in the family’s history. They should be seen as suitable moments for thanksgiving, for petition, for trusting abandonment of the family into the hands of their common Father in heaven. The dignity and responsibility of the Christian family as the domestic Church can be achieved only with God’s unceasing aid, which will surely be granted if it is humbly and trustingly petitioned in prayer.³³

Ultimately, when the Christian family is fulfilling its role, the Church flourishes and society benefits. Moreover, the family is a fundamental source of growth in the spiritual life, as each member grows in virtue and love and is drawn further into the Divine life.

B. The Hindu Family – A Union of Generations and Center for Worship

The family holds a very important place in the Hindu tradition, for not only is the family fundamental to the continuity of society, but also in terms of one’s sacred duty: “The householder stage endorses the idea that it is one’s *dharma* to marry, raise a family, and provide for that family in whatever way is necessary. Family life, in this case, becomes a religious obligation.”³⁴ Thus, the family life provides an essential stage of personal spiritual development, for “through the discipline of *dharma*, the householder purified the desires for wealth and sensual enjoyment carried over from his past lives and transformed them into spiritual benefits for himself, his family, and society.”³⁵ The Hindu family structure differs from the “nuclear family”³⁶ in that it is normally an extended family, consisting not only of a married couple and their children, but also may include the parents, their unmarried daughters, sons, grandparents, grandchildren, and other relatives. According to Stephen Huyler, “a family’s relationships are considered sacred,”³⁷ and thus, within this familial community is much respect, devotion, and love.

Within the home, women are responsible for its daily running, including its maintenance and financial management, as well as for raising the children. Wifhood and motherhood are extolled in Hinduism; in fact, a woman is considered to be a “failure” if she does not have any children, especially if she does not bear a son.³⁸ In their relationships with their husbands, wives are to be “loving, faithful and loyal, and willing to share even in the misfortunes of their husbands; they are expected to be perfect and to treat their husbands like gods.”³⁹ Husbands, in return, are not to treat their wives like slaves, but are to honor them, regarding them as queens, for this is pleasing to the gods, who would bestow blessings upon the entire household:

Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law, who desire their own welfare. Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honored, no sacred rite yields rewards.⁴⁰

This sentiment is echoed in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which notes the importance of women within the context of the family as well as society: “In overwhelming chaos, Krishna, women of the family are corrupted; and when women are corrupted, disorder is born in society.”⁴¹ Children are to express filial love and obedience, and are to be honored as “a guest in the house, to be loved and respected, never possessed, for he belongs to God.”⁴² Finally, because of the incorporation of the extended family in the household, respect for the elderly is a commonplace of Hindu tradition, and as an extension of this, so is hospitality. Thus, all guests are received and treated as God in the Hindu home; this reception of all as God in the Hindu home includes God himself, and thus, the Hindu home is also regarded as a prime locus of worship.

Daily devotion is obligatory in Hinduism, and it pervades all aspects of one’s day. Daily worship, or *puja*, is a family affair in the home, beginning in the morning and occurring at various points throughout the day. Women, as with all other matters pertaining to the management of the household, are responsible also for performing *puja* in the home. In the home a shrine is constructed, in which images of the deity protecting the household and family, as well

as images of personal deities chosen by devotees within the home are displayed, in order to provide opportunity for continuous worship.⁴³ The home is also the place in which the *samskāras*, or sacraments, that mark important stages in a person's life, are held, such as birth, coming of age, betrothal, marriage, and funeral rites.⁴⁴ Although in modern times the daily devotions in the home may not be as elaborate as those of previous generations as a result of contemporary adaptations, the Hindu tradition of home *puja* is still strong. To this end, Huyler observes, "The home is still the center of activity and decisions, and the household shrine and rituals that surround it continue to be at the heart of the Hindu experience."⁴⁵

C. A Comparison of Familial Traditions

The importance and integrity of family life is undoubtedly attested to in both Roman Catholicism and Hinduism. Though the structures of the Christian and Hindu families are different, they are valuable in their own regard and can speak to one another, despite their differences. For instance, John Paul II calls for daily "mutual service" within the family, along with a "sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows." Additionally, "Family communion can only be preserved and perfected through a great spirit of sacrifice. It requires, in fact, a ready and generous openness of each and all to understanding, to forbearance, to pardon, to reconciliation."⁴⁶ Although different from the Christian nuclear family, the Hindu joint family certainly fulfills this call in several ways. The community of the extended family provides for the best training in the humanities, for attitudes of cooperation, mutual respect, loving-kindness, tolerance, and forgiveness are cultivated and displayed by family members in daily interaction with one another. A great spirit of equality is fostered, as well as a spirit of sharing, as the family shares not only a common living space, but a common income and food, among other things. Selfish, individualistic tendencies are curbed, for the common good and welfare of all is sought.

The sense of respect and admiration that John Paul II calls for in regard to the elderly is realized in a special way within the Hindu home, for the presence of several generations therein provides for a fostering of respect for elders on the part of the younger family members, as well as the bestowal of the wisdom and guidance of these elders to the younger family members, especially the children. Thus, the extended Hindu family fulfills, in a very unique way, the special character of the Christian family to which John Paul II attests.

Additionally, the notion of Hindu home *puja* gives special witness to the Christian notion of the family as the domestic church, that is, as the first experience of the faith. As already noted, all aspects of daily life are saturated by worship for the Hindu; thus, within the Hindu home, the lived experience of faith pervades family life. God is at the center of the family, as the family comes together at various points throughout the day for prayer and worship. Also, through the celebration of the *samskāras* within the familial context, the Hindu family joins together in celebration, in thanksgiving, and in petition to God regarding the many transitional moments of life, an ideal to which the Christian family is called to aspire to.

Although the Hindu family can fulfill, in a unique way, the call of John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*, the value and importance of the Christian nuclear family is by no means diminished. In contrast to the Hindu family, the Christian family begins as a small unit, founded upon the nuptial union of a man and a woman, wherein “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.”⁴⁷ From the beginning, special attention is given to the interpersonal relationship of the husband and wife, who are called to foster a unique and exclusive communion with one another. This interpersonal communion is then extended, as the fruit of the spousal love is manifested in the begetting of children. The special and unique relationship of this community of persons allows for the free and full

development of the individual family unit; indeed, through the “giving and receiving” of the parents and children in the “educational exchange” spoken of by John Paul II, the full development of the children as persons is effected.⁴⁸ The Christian family, an interpersonal communion reflecting the Trinitarian God, serves as the foundation upon which the extended family is built, and further, upon which society as a whole finds its support.

IV. Human Love as Manifestation of the Divine

A. Marriage as Reflective of Christ’s Redemptive Sacrifice for the Church

The conjugal union of the Christian husband and wife becomes a sacramental re-presentation of God’s abiding love for humanity. Thus, John Paul II writes:

The communion of love between God and people, a fundamental part of the Revelation and faith experience of Israel, finds a meaningful expression in the marriage covenant which is established between a man and a woman... Their bond of love becomes the image and the symbol of the covenant which unites God and his people.⁴⁹

In the sacrament of marriage, the very love of God for his people, and ultimately for each individual soul, is realized. This nuptial mystery is woven throughout the Old Testament, but finds its “definitive fulfillment” in the New Testament, in the incarnation of Christ and his sacrifice on the Cross. Christ, the eternal Bridegroom, “reveals the original truth of marriage,” as he gives himself entirely for his Bride, the Church. Thus, Christ “makes man capable of realizing this truth in its entirety,” enabling a baptized man and woman, in and through their marriage, to express the same love to one another as Christ has for his Church: namely, self-sacrificing love.⁵⁰

This mutual self-giving, this intense loving-devotion, which has as its archetype the loving self-surrender of Christ on the Cross, is what Saint Paul speaks of in his letter to the Ephesians:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her... For this reason a man shall leave [his] father and [his] mother and be joined to his wife,

and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church. In any case, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and the wife should respect her husband.⁵¹

Thus, Christian husbands and wives are called to emulate the self-sacrificing love of Christ in their conjugal love, in which they are “truly two in one flesh,” and thus “bound to one another in the most profoundly indissoluble manner.”⁵²

As a sacramental sign, the conjugal union of two baptized persons, then, is a symbol of the event of salvation and the “original means of sanctification” for not only the married couple, but for the family, as well. Through their constant self-giving and fidelity to one another, spouses witness to the event of salvation for they are “the permanent reminder to the Church of what happened on the Cross.”⁵³ Additionally, by fulfilling their duties toward one another, as well as their family, they “increasingly advance toward their perfection, as well as towards their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute justly to the glory of God.”⁵⁴ The love expressed in the nuptial relationship of a husband and wife is a symbol of the nuptial relationship between Christ and the Church, and ultimately between Christ and each individual soul, as each is “penetrated with the Spirit of Christ, who fills their whole lives with faith, hope, and charity.”⁵⁵

B. Two Divine Love Stories: *Krishna and Rādhā* and *Rama and Sita*

The marriage union between Hindu spouses can be characterized as one of self-sacrifice, and so Satyavrata Patel writes “Conjugal love would demand most exacting sacrifices, but that raises human love to the likeness of the Divine.”⁵⁶ The Hindu concept of *bhaktiyoga* refers, generally speaking, to the yoga of devotion, but ultimately it refers to the loving-devotion which enables a devotee to surrender himself or herself to God. However, in the Epic literature of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*, *bhakti* is employed not only in terms of religious love, but also secular love. Thus, this loving-devotion to God can be expressed through human relationships in

which are characterized by a “surrender of self for the good of the other” as between parents and children, friends, or most especially, between lovers, particularly in terms of the conjugal love between husband and wife.⁵⁷ The culmination of *bhaktiyoga* is reached in *madhunabhāva*, in which “the lover and the beloved become one through the intensity of love.”⁵⁸ This love is the aim of the conjugal union, and is a participation in the divine life.

This type of love is the love that exists between *Krishna* and *Rādhā*⁵⁹ and which serves as a model for those who desire to become one with God. *Rādhā*, out of her intense love for *Krishna*, leaves her husband and overcomes all obstacles to be one with him. This love, through *Krishna*, is transformed from that of selfish, worldly love into a pure, holy, self-giving love, which, “if it were sufficiently intense, could result in *moksha*.”⁶⁰ The love of *Rādhā* for *Krishna* represents the highest form of devotion, for it is total and all-consuming. The story of the love affair of *Krishna* and *Rādhā* is not one about marital infidelity, but rather, it is one of the highest love, of an indissoluble union which serves as the original principle for the conjugal bond; thus, the intense, rapturous love of *Rādhā* for *Krishna*, the undying commitment she displays to and for him, not only represents the individual soul’s loving-devotion to God, but symbolically represents the intense, loving-devotion between a husband and wife, in which the spouses are so intimately connected that they become one.

In the *Rāmāyana*, a second divine love story is recounted, that of *Rama*,⁶¹ portrayed as the ideal husband, and his wife *Sita*, portrayed as the perfect, dedicated wife.⁶² In this Epic story, *Sita* willingly and devotedly follows her husband into exile, refusing to abandon him in time of challenge and sorrow. When abducted and kept in captivity, *Sita* remains faithful to *Rama*, protecting her chastity and yearning for reunion with her beloved. *Rama*, having lost his beloved *Sita*, suffers greatly, and wills to rescue her. Upon rescue, *Sita* willingly undergoes the *Agni-*

Pariksha, the testing by fire, from which she emerges unscathed, proving her purity and devotion to Rama, who has always remained confident of her virtue. However, despite her proven chastity, Sita is banished once again into the forest by Rama, as his duty as king preceded that of husband. Nevertheless, Sita remained ever-faithful to Rama in her second exile, giving birth to twin sons, who were eventually reunited with their father, Rama. For his part, Rama did not take another wife, but remained faithful to Sita, keeping her always in his heart.

Thus, the marriage of Rama and Sita is one characterized by great loving-devotion and unwavering fidelity. Despite great hardships, the husband and wife persevere in their love, standing by each other in the face of sorrow, yearning for one another in separation, and rejoicing in reunion. Consequently, their divine marriage becomes a prototype for all others.

C. The Martyrdom of Marriage

In both the Catholic and Hindu traditions, marriage can be viewed as a manifestation or reflection of Divine love. In the Hindu tradition, the love modeled by Krishna and Rādhā lends to human couples the notion of intense, loving-devotion, a total, all-consuming love in which the lovers are so intimately connected that they become one. This love exhibits the characteristics of unity and indissolubility that are essential to marriage, both in the Christian and Hindu contexts; however, this type of love does not entail the suffering and self-sacrificing that is required of the spouses in Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The love modeled by Rama and Sita, by contrast, does entail a degree of suffering on the part of the spouses due to their hardships, challenges, and separations from one another. Sita, through her intense desire to prove her love and fidelity to her husband, undergoes a great deal of suffering, and displays a certain willingness to sacrifice herself completely for him. However, this model of love is still different

from that love modeled by Christ for his Church, and which Christian spouses are called to imitate, for this latter love is one which requires mutual suffering and death.

Thus, the love intrinsic to the Roman Catholic understanding of marriage diverges from the Hindu in that it absolutely requires mutual self-sacrifice, to the point of death, on the part of the spouses. A husband is called to pattern his life, and his love for his wife, after the love of Christ for his Church; in return, a wife is called to reciprocate that same love to her husband. Thus, their marriage is a martyrdom: it is a continual dying to self, in which selfishness is minimized and the love of the spouses is constantly purified.⁶³ Each spouse sees and loves the other for the very sake of the other. This love withholds nothing, but rather pours itself out completely. This is the love perfected by Christ, and when imitated by husband and wife, is a love that manifests the eternal redemptive love of Christ for his Church.

V. Conclusion

In *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II asserted that “marriage and the family constitute one of the most precious of human values;”⁶⁴ accordingly, both the Roman Catholic and Hindu hold the integrity of marriage and family life in great esteem, a notion which has been underlined throughout this essay. These two traditions converge on many points in regard to issues of marriage and the family: for both, marriage is a sacred and solemn institution upon which the family, and society, depends. Furthermore, whether one speaks in terms of the Christian, nuclear family, or the Hindu, extended family, both traditions emphasize the importance of religion within the daily, familial context. Even where the two traditions diverge, the traditions still speak to one another. Whereas the Hindu joint family fosters an atmosphere of cooperation, respect, loving-kindness, and tolerance, among other things, the Christian family,

reflective of the interpersonal communion of the Trinity, pays special attention to the full development of the individual family unit.

Additionally, both traditions view the conjugal union as a manifestation of Divine love; while the models of Divine love within the Hindu tradition promote intense loving-devotion, fidelity, unity, and indissolubility, the love modeled by Christ for his Church, to which Christian spouses are called, is a love which requires suffering and death within the context of the marriage. Thus, the spouses are called to mutually surrender themselves to one another, and in so doing, reflect the redemptive love of Christ. Ultimately, for both the Roman Catholic and the Hindu, marriage and family life are raised to the spiritual plane, and are a necessary means of salvation/liberation.

¹ The Latin title is roughly translated as “of family partnership.” Although the English subtitle indicates the focus on the role of the *Christian* family, I believe this document can be a lens through which the role of the Hindu family can be viewed, as well.

² For further discussion as to the notion of Vaishnavism as a certain “microcosm” of the “macrocosm” that is Hinduism, as well as discussion on the Vaishnavite thrust of the Epic literature, see Steven J. Rosen, *Essential Hinduism*, (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006). Along with the Epic literature, I will also refer to the sacred texts of the *Rig Veda*, *Manu Dharma Shastras*, and *The Bhagavad-Gita* throughout this essay.

³ Although there are a variety of points of comparison between these two traditions, whether mere parallels or otherwise divergences, I do not intend to exhaust all possibilities in this essay. Thus, I will limit my discussion to the points outlined in this introduction. Additionally, I will not offer a strict comparison of these two traditions in Part I, but will save the comparison to the specific points raised in Parts II and III.

⁴ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio: The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, 1981, 11. Hereafter referred to as FC. The Pope notes two specific ways here in which this fundamental human vocation is realized: along with marriage, virginity or celibacy also actualizes this profound truth of human nature as one of loving communion.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14. John Paul II goes on to speak of those marriages in which procreation is impossible: “It must not be forgotten however that, even when procreation is not possible, conjugal life does not for this reason lose its value. Physical sterility, in fact, can be for spouses the occasion for other important services to the life of the human person, for example, adoption, various forms of educational work, and assistance to other families and to poor or handicapped children.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹² FC, 13.

¹³ As I have alluded to in the Introduction, the Hindu tradition is but a macrocosm for a variety of traditions, and thus quite complex. So, too, might the understanding of marriage be considered, presenting a number of intricacies which I do not intend to delve into here, such as the tolerance of polygamy, the allowance of divorce (on the part of the man), child marriage, and the place of women within marriage, to name a few. Rather, I intend to present a

broad, generalized view of the nature and purpose of marriage in Hinduism. Additionally, for the purposes of this essay, I am speaking in terms of “arranged marriage,” which is the traditional and normative practice of Hindu marriage.

¹⁴ *Dharma* has no direct English translation, but, according to Barbara Holdrege, *dharma* can be understood as “the inherent nature of a human being that determines his/her particular duty or role in society.” See Barbara A. Holdrege, “Hindu Ethics,” in *A Bibliographic Guide to the Comparative Study of Ethics*, eds. John Carman and Mark Juergensmeyer, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13. The four stages of life, or *asramas*, are first, *Brahmacharya Ashram* (student), second, *Grihastha Ashram* (householder), third, *Vanprastha Ashrama* (forest-dweller), and finally, *Sanyasa Ashrama* (renouncer).

¹⁵ *Rig Veda* X.85.44. Translation by Ralph T.H. Griffith.

¹⁶ The fourth and final end or goal of human life, is *moksha*, which is the release or liberation from *samsara*, the endless cycle of death and rebirth, and is an end that is primarily pursued in the fourth stage of life.

¹⁷ *Rig Veda* X.85.47. Translation by Ralph T.H. Griffith.

¹⁸ Sacrament, in this sense, is different from the Catholic notion, and is meant, generally speaking, as a religious ceremony, or rite of passage, marking the most important life events of a person, and giving those occasions “socio-religious significance by which life is sanctified.” See Satyavrata Patel, *Hinduism: Religion and Way of Life*, (New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1980), 62. Typically, there are sixteen Hindu *samskāras*, ranging from conception to marriage to death.

¹⁹ FC, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42, referring to the Second Vatican Council, *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, 11.

²² *Ibid.*, 43.

²³ For a substantial evaluation of the issue, refer to John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, 1988.

²⁴ FC, 23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

³¹ This designation, used by Pope John Paul II throughout this document, can be found in *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* of the Second Vatican Council: “In what may be regarded as the domestic church, the parents are to be the first preachers of the faith for their children by word and example” (LG 11). The term was employed by St. John Chrysostom on several occasions, of which the following is an example: “If we regulate our households in this way, we will also be fit to oversee the Church, for indeed the household is a little Church” (Homily 20).

³² Marc Cardinal Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 42.

³³ FC, 59.

³⁴ Jeaneane Fowler, *Hinduism: Beliefs and Practices*, (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 1997), 51.

³⁵ Thomas J. Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, (Encino: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), 78.

³⁶ In employing this term, I am referring to the notion of father-mother-child/children.

³⁷ Stephen P. Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 77.

³⁸ Fowler, 57. For a feminist critique of this, as well as other issues concerning the treatment of women, such as the practice of (female) infanticide, *sati* (widow-burning), dowry, etc., see Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850-1920*, (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 51. A parallel can be noted in Christianity, specifically in regard to the context of the Fall, in which the punishment of the woman is not only pain in childbearing, but also that “your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall be your master” Gen. 3:16. Also, Saint Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, particularly Ephesians 5, which will be spoken of later, has been regarded in similar terms, as the Apostle exhorts women to be “submissive” to their husbands. Despite the tendency to regard these texts as promoting the subjugation of women, John Paul II, in *Familiaris Consortio*, but especially *Mulieris Dignitatem*, has painstakingly striven to promote the dignity and equality of women alongside that of men.

⁴⁰ *Manu Dharma Shastras* 3.55-56. Translation by G. Bühler.

⁴¹ *The Bhagavad-Gita* 1.29. Translation by Barbara Stoler Miller.

⁴² Patel, 59.

⁴³ Huyler, 79.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁶ FC, 21.

⁴⁷ Genesis 2:26, NAB

⁴⁸ FC, 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵¹ Ephesians 5:25;31-33 NAB

⁵² FC, 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Patel, 58.

⁵⁷ Fowler, 123.

⁵⁸ Patel, 73.

⁵⁹ Krishna is recognized as an *avatar*, or incarnation, of the Hindu god Vishnu, particularly within the Vaishnava tradition. The story of his love affair with Rādhā is can also be found in the religious text of the *Puranas*.

⁶⁰ Fowler, 126.

⁶¹ Rama is the seventh avatar, or incarnation, of Vishnu, and thus worshipped among the Vaishnavites.

⁶² See Rosen, *Essential Hinduism*, p. 102-105.

⁶³ This notion is especially preserved in the Orthodox tradition, in which the crowning of the spouses during the service of Marriage is not only a signification of their status as king and queen of their kingdom, the household, but ultimately an indication of their martyrdom. Paul Evdokimov, Orthodox theologian, has written beautifully on marriage, the sacrament of love, and concludes, "Perfect love is Love crucified." See Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition*, (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 155.

⁶⁴ FC, 1.

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