“Accipio te me”:
The Function of the Marriage Analogy in Johann von Staupitz’s Libellus

Jackson Lashier
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In the Advent season of 1516, Johann von Staupitz\(^1\) was invited by a group of prominent citizens in Nuremberg to deliver a series of sermons.\(^2\) What resulted from the invitation was one of Staupitz’s most polished theological works, *Libellus de executione*...
True to its title, the *Libellus* witnesses a strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God, the sinfulness of human creatures, and their concomitant inability to attain eternal life through their own merits. What is of interest in this set of sermons for the present essay is the manner in which Staupitz subtly, though clearly, undermines the Scholastic theology prevalent in his day, particularly in his vision of the union between the believer and God.

Nowhere is Staupitz’s understanding of the nature of this union (and its distinctions from Scholasticism) more apparent than in his dependency upon the marriage analogy to describe the union between the believer and Christ, an analogy that likens the union to that between a man and a woman in the human institution of marriage. For here, Staupitz emphasizes a personal, experiential union between Christ and the believer that can only be expressed in the intimate and at times mystical imagery of marriage. What is more, in this otherwise traditional presentation of salvation, he rarely addresses the sacraments, which, in the Scholastic understanding, were the primary means of effecting the union between Christ and the Church. It is the claim of the present essay that the presence of the marriage analogy in the *Libellus* reveals Staupitz’s fundamentally subversive understanding of the nature of the union between Christians and God to that which is envisioned in Scholastic theology.

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3 Predestination appears to have been a popular preaching topic in the high medieval age. In his *Forerunners of the Reformation*, for example, Oberman traces the interest in the doctrine of predestination through the figures of Robert Holcot, Thomas Bradwardine, and Gabriel Biel. He addresses Staupitz in this company. The unifying factor of these works, at least as Oberman draws out, is an anti-Pelagian focus which finds its primary source in the later works of Augustine. This emphasis would continue into the Reformation with works such as Luther’s *The Freedom of the Will* and, perhaps its zenith, Calvin’s *Institutes*.

4 As has long been recognized by scholars, there is a strong presence of mysticism in Staupitz’s understanding of the union with God, though there has been disagreement on precisely what his mystical sources were. According to Steinmetz, this was one of the three principle issues with which nineteenth century scholars concerned themselves. Steinmetz, *Misericordia Dei*, 16-22. For the purposes of the present essay, the question of sources is not directly relevant as much as the use to which Staupitz puts this mystic language.
In the following essay, I will proceed in three parts. First, I will briefly discuss the ordo salutis\(^5\) in Scholasticism particularly as it pertains to the sacraments and to the union of the believer to God.\(^6\) Second, I will analyze Staupitz’s ordo salutis in chapters one through eight of the Libellus. Here I will be concerned to display how his careful use of language reveals a preoccupation with a personal union with God throughout, showing itself to be the focus of nearly every doctrine.\(^7\) Finally, I will turn to the marriage analogy itself, where it is directly addressed in chapter nine, and where he continues to engage it throughout the work, to discern the nature of the union with Christ, and the entire Godhead, envisioned therein.\(^8\) My thesis is that Staupitz employs the marriage analogy both to (1) demonstrate the radical, personal intimacy that adheres between Christ and each Christian in salvific union and to (2) undermine the claim of Scholastic theology that it was the role of the sacraments to transfer the merits of Christ to the believer, which thereby implied that the Church stood as a mediator in the union between Christians and God.

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\(^5\) The ordo salutis, or the order of salvation, is a means of referring to theological discussions of the process or order of salvation. It finds its biblical warrant in Romans 8:29-30, where Paul discusses the various stages that happens in the transformation of a person from a sinner to his entrance into glory. Accordingly, discussions of the ordo salutis normally entail explications of the doctrines of predestination, justification, sanctification, and the like.

\(^6\) Space precludes a full treatment of Scholastic theology in relation to these doctrines. The intent of the present essay is not, after all, to fully convey the Scholastic understanding of predestination and sacrament, but rather to convey the logic of its presentation, particularly as pertains to the location and function of the sacrament.

\(^7\) Though Staupitz has many other works that would be profitable for study to gain an understanding of his various doctrines, this essay will limit its search to the 24 books of the Libellus. The point here is to understand Staupitz’s presentation of union with God in this set of sermons, not in his entire corpus.

\(^8\) When Staupitz uses the marriage analogy, he speaks exclusively of union with Christ as he takes his cue from the analogy in Ephesians 5. However, the broader outcome of this union is, of course, union with the entire Godhead. When not engaging the marriage analogy directly, therefore, I will generally use the language of union of the believer with God.
Union with God in Scholasticism

For the Scholastics, the presentation of the sacraments normally came at the end of the *ordo salutis*. The grace conferred by the sacraments makes predestined and justified sinners pleasing to God (*gratia gratum faciens*), went the common Scholastic expression. In Thomas Aquinas’ unfinished *Summa Theologiae*, for example, the sacraments occupy the final thirty questions. John P. Yocum writes of Thomas’ presentation of the sacraments: “it is grounded upon and develops what comes earlier in that work, portraying the appropriation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ that brings human beings to the fulfillment of their destiny, as creatures who worship God in charity in the mystical body joined to Christ.” Thus, according to Yocum, the sacraments come at the end of the *ordo* precisely because they are the means by which the acts of grace in the *ordo* are transferred to humans.

Accordingly, though Thomas holds to a strong doctrine of election, and, in a manner quite similar to what we witness in the *Libellus*, that the infusion of grace is necessarily the first grace that must occur in the salvation of humans, he equally holds that participation in the sacraments is necessary for salvation. He writes: “in some way the sacraments of the New Law cause grace. For it is evident that through the sacraments of the New Law man is incorporated with Christ” (*ST* III.62.1). To be sure, Thomas is

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10 Thomas died while the *Summa* was in progress. He was only able to comment on baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. This truncated presentation does not affect the use of the *Summa* for the purposes of the present essay because here we are concerned merely with the order of the presentation.
12 For example, Thomas writes: “The cause is naturally prior to its effect. Now the infusion of grace is the cause of whatever is required for the justification of the ungodly . . . Therefore it is naturally prior to it” (*ST* I-II, 113.8). All English citations of the *Summa* are taken from the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologica* (5 vols.; Repr. Christian Classics; Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1981).
quick to affirm that God is the primary cause of this grace. He does this by distinguishing between a principle and an instrumental means of an efficient cause. Thus, while God is the principle cause of grace, this grace is brought about by the instrumental cause of the sacraments. Still, Thomas viewed the sacraments as, he writes, “employed for the purpose of conferring grace” (*ST* III.62.2). Believers, in other words, needed to partake of the sacraments in order to acquire the grace freely given by God.

A concrete example of this understanding of sacrament comes in Thomas’ discussion of the Eucharist. The union with Christ effected by Eucharist is likened to Christ’s joining with flesh in the incarnation: “Christ: Who, just as by coming into the world, He visibly bestowed the life of grace upon the world, according to John i. 17: *Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ*, so also, by coming sacramentally into man, causes the life of grace” (*ST* III.79.1, italics original). In other words, it is through the partaking of the Eucharist that Christ is joined to a person.\(^\text{13}\) Because the Eucharist is the means by which this union is effected, Thomas naturally encourages Christians to partake of the Eucharist as much as possible, for the grace of that union thereby grows: “But by this sacrament [unlike confirmation] grace receives increase, and the spiritual life is perfected, so that man may stand perfect in himself by union with God” (*ST* III.79.1).

The same basic understanding of sacrament, particularly in relation to its location and function in the *ordo salutis* is witnessed in Bonaventure’s *Breviloquium*.\(^\text{14}\) In this manual of Franciscan theology, Bonaventure addresses the primary creedal beliefs

\(^\text{13}\) Yocum helpfully brings out this unifying effect of the sacrament: Yocum writes: “the sacraments cause grace efficiently, channeling grace into the soul, so that the human being may be changed, by becoming a partaker of the divine nature, into the likeness of God . . .” Yocum, “Sacraments in Aquinas,” 169.

\(^\text{14}\) Though the *Breviloquium* is different in kind than the Scholastic *Summas*, in that it is a short treatise that does not seek to be exhaustive and, therefore, does not follow the Scholastic method of question, objections, answer, replies, it still stands firmly within the tradition of Scholasticism.
including (and in order) the Trinity, creation, sin, incarnation, grace, and the sacraments. The chapter on the sacraments, following on the heels of his chapter on grace, addresses, as we saw in Thomas, how that grace is appropriated by believers. Bonaventure speaks of the sacraments in terms of remedies for sin, portraying the image that through the partaking of them, the believer is healed. He writes, for example, of the Eucharist: “anyone worthily receiving the bread, not only sacramentally but through faith and charity by spiritual digestion becomes more part of the mystical body of Christ and is in himself remade and cleansed” (Brev. VI.9.1). Bonaventure, like Thomas, sees the sacrament as the means by which the Christian is united to God: “the recipient does not transform Christ into himself but rather is himself translated into Christ’s mystical body” (Brev. VI.9.6).

Given the emphasis of both of these writers on the work of Christ, and particularly Thomas’ emphasis on election, it would be incorrect and too simplistic to attribute to either a doctrine of works righteousness. However, one can easily see how an understanding of sacraments as the means of conferring grace on the believer could quickly degenerate into a practice of partaking of the sacrament as a means of meriting grace. Additionally, the implication of the belief that the sacrament confers grace, results in an understanding of the Church, as the rightful dispenser of the sacrament, as in some way a mediator of the union with God. This implication can be discerned in the language of Bonaventure, who does not speak (at least in relation to the sacraments) of an individual union with God, but rather of the believer being incorporated into the mystical body of God. Having briefly explored the function of the sacraments in the ordo salutis of

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Scholastic theology, we are now better prepared to recognize the subtle critique Staupitz engages of this understanding through his use of the marriage analogy. Before addressing the marriage analogy directly, however, it will be helpful to understand its location in the context of Staupitz’s ordo salutis. It is to this context, then, that we first turn.

_Ordo Salutis in the Libellus_¹⁶

Though the _Libellus_, unlike the _Summa Theologiae_ or the _Breviloquium_, is not a manual for theological instruction¹⁷ and, therefore, is not systematic in its style, Staupitz’s order of topics, at least in the first eight chapters, witnesses several commonalities to both. Staupitz begins, for example, by addressing the nature of God (chapter one), moves to the nature of humanity (chapter two), the problem of sin (chapter three), and culminates with a discussion of the process of salvation through the work of Christ (chapters four through eight).¹⁸ As an occasional set of sermons, however, Staupitz is not concerned to be thorough in his presentation, but rather, he addresses each doctrine as it pertains to his purpose, namely the union with God which reaches its pinnacle in

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¹⁶ Though this work was originally delivered as a series of sermons, it very quickly, as we said above, became a theological work. Therefore, I will refer to his individual sermons as chapters in a complete book in order to emphasize the continuity of the argument.

¹⁷ The group of prominent Nuremberg citizens who issued the invitation for the 1516 Advent sermons were a sort of Rotary Club that met in churches to hear discourses about some desired theological topic. According to Posset, the group took Staupitz’s name, the sodalitas Staupitz, indicating his prominence in certain circles in the city. Posset, “The Sweetness of God,” _ABR_ 44:2 (1993): 143-178. The published version of the _Libellus_ was addressed to a senator from Nuremberg, Jacob Ebner. Posset speculates that this dedication was a tactical move on Staupitz’s part to appease Nuremberg citizens for some of his unpopular monastic reform work. Posset, _The Front-Runner_, 167. Regardless of its intent, the dedication shows the level of citizens who were in the crowd. Moreover, it has been speculated that the Nuremberg group was a Circle of Humanists. If true, this suggests that Staupitz could have assumed a high level of theological knowledge which would have allowed his presentation to stay on topic without following tertiary details, which is indeed what we find in the _Libellus_. Wriedt, _Late Medieval Augustinianism_, lectures delivered at Marquette University, February-March 2008.

¹⁸ This is the general outline of the work, though, as we shall see, discussion of the doctrines bleeds into each chapter, such that the divisions are not pure.
chapter nine. As such, one is able to discern how this end goal colors his understanding and explication of every doctrine in the *ordo salutis*.

For Staupitz, God is the “creator of heaven and earth and all things contained in them” (*Libellus* 1). Additionally, he is the redeemer, both in the sense that he sustains his creation and that he “restores the fallen ones” (*Libellus* 2). By virtue of these acts, God is the sovereign king: “He himself knows all there is to know, and perceives it in the mirror of eternity, and grasps the past, present, and future all at once” (*Libellus* 1). No work of creation is “hidden from him” (*Libellus* 1). As the sovereign king, God “has made all things in and for Himself” (*Libellus* 2). In other words, God creates in order to be in union with his creation. Crucially, however, this is not to be understood as a symmetrical relationship in the sense that God and creatures are equal entities. Rather, it is the creature’s purpose to praise the one with whom he is in relationship: “the goal of creation and restoration is the praise of the Creator and Redeemer” (*Libellus* 3).

The praise of God, Staupitz affirms, is how human creatures become united to God: “By praising God, immense in Himself, we make Him great in us . . . Thus we prepare a worthy habitation for God and we erect a temple for the Holy Spirit, full of God.

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19 That the *Libellus* is not intended as a thorough theological treatise is evident from the fact that there is no reference to the Trinity or to the distinction of divine persons in this opening chapter on God, which one might expect given Staupitz’s orthodox Trinitarian belief. He writes later of the Trinity, for example, in terms of Nicene orthodoxy: “to know God as the Three in One (*deum trinum et unum*), and to know the Son of God, God of God, Light of Light (*deum de deo, lumen de lumine*), who was incarnate, suffered, was crucified, and died” (*Libellus* 16). That Staupitz believes in the Trinity but fails to address it in his discussion of God reveals the nature of this discussion as preparation for a larger argument, an argument which necessitates establishing God as a sovereign king, to which the doctrine of the Trinity adds little. For the same reason, Staupitz does not describe a list of divine attributes as, for example, Thomas does in Questions 14-26 in the Prima Pars of the *Summa*. Staupitz certainly discusses certain attributes of God, such as “infinite perfection” (*Libellus* 3). However, these attributes are discussed only as they relate to and enlighten the acts of creation and redemption, acts which most clearly show, in Staupitz’s understanding, the sovereignty of God.

20 Steinmetz makes the important distinction that to say God created the world to be in union with him is not to hold that he needed creation for his own fulfillment, as certain process theologies fashionable today would hold. Rather, “He was pleased to create something which He could love and which He could share what He is and has.” Steinmetz, *Misercordia Dei*, 58.
and empty of all creatureliness” (*Libellus* 4). Thus, humans are not, by virtue of their creation, in union with God; this must come through praise. Moreover, human creatures are by their very nature nothing and thus “tend toward nothingness and . . . return to nothingness” (*Libellus* 1). This means that creatures are by nature ignorant of the God they were created to praise. This ignorance is what ultimately prohibits full union with God, even if willful sin was never committed: “we do not love unknown things and insufficiently love that which we do not know at all and have no reason to love” (*Libellus* 8). Even without willful sin, then, union with God apart from the incarnation is not, in Staupitz’s terms, *optima.*

“Since, however, no one knows the Father except the Son and the man to whom the Son wishes to reveal Him, no one can rightly praise God who does not believe and confess Christ to be the true Son of God” (*Libellus* 8). To be sure, Staupitz does have a robust notion of willful sin, but his definition of the creature as by nature “nothing” allows the incarnation to be essential to the economy of God, as opposed to a secondary reaction to the sin of Adam and Eve. For creatures would have needed the incarnation to be fully united to God whether or not they had ever willfully sinned. In this sense, the incarnation is predestined to take place from the beginning of time. It also allows Staupitz to make union with God the purpose of creation, as opposed to the *de facto* result of creation.

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21 In *Libellus* 29, however, Staupitz appears to have a higher view of created beings saying: “From the beginning God created man righteous and good according to the image and likeness of Christ . . .” Yet, it is possible to square this description with Staupitz’s description in chapter one of creatures created valde bona but not *optima.* Moreover, Staupitz elsewhere speaks of the image of the Son of God as something that the elect are not created with but are rather “destined to” be conformed to (*Libellus* 18). According to Staupitz, then, to be created with the image of God is to be created very good but it is not a guarantee of personal union with God because the creature by nature is ignorant. This union, then, will result in an even greater conformity to the image of the Son of God.

22 I agree with Steinmetz that the problem with creatures in the *Libellus* is not their creatureliness *per se,* for he makes this clear enough by referring to the willful choice of humans as the cause of the fall. However, I do not believe Steinmetz allows adequately for the fact that, at least in the *Libellus,* humans, by virtue of their creatureliness, are in need of something more for the full personal union with God. Steinmetz, *Misericordia Dei,* 59-61.
Staupitz’s discussion of sin as a willful act occurs in the context of justification where he contrasts the sin of Adam and Eve to the process of justification. He describes the first temptation thusly: “Man has, however, by his own free will involved himself in endless questions” (*Libellus* 29). Humans ask questions because they are by nature ignorant, and it was this ignorance which led to the first willful sin. Furthermore, the sin of Eve is described not just in terms of a general ignorance, but a specific ignorance as to what true union with God entails: “When she heard that this was a tree of the knowledge of good and evil she did not want to be subject to God but rather she wanted to be like Him” (*Libellus* 31). Eve mistakenly thought that union with God could be one of equality, a union where she and God would both be deserving of praise. Staupitz describes her sin, therefore, as one of self-centeredness: “Wrapped up in herself she broke the commandment and rejected obedience” (*Libellus* 31). This willful sin led to misery and torment as she was bound now to service and union with the devil. Staupitz writes: “She had neither the knowledge nor the will to be free from this, let alone to free herself” (*Libellus* 31).

As Staupitz has described the problem, both in terms of the creatures’ natural ignorance of God and in terms of their willful turning from his Lordship, the cure he envisions is for creatures to leave ignorance and to come to know Christ, specifically “(t)hat Christ is believed, acknowledged, and worshipped as the Son” (*Libellus* 9). In other words, the cure for the ignorant sinner is to recognize God’s rightful place in the union as the one deserving of worship. But humans, ignorant creatures that they are, are unable to gain this knowledge by themselves. Staupitz is clear that it cannot come apart from the revelation of God.
Chapters four through seven, then, are a prolonged exegesis of Romans 8:29-30, the so-called Golden Chain of salvation, which describes the process whereby certain creatures come to know Christ. In Staupitz’s reading, the Golden Chain begins with predestination and ends with glorification. The emphasis of these chapters is twofold. First, faith in Christ is a gift from God and there is nothing that humans can do to earn this faith. Staupitz is so clear on this that he even rejects the idea that God foreknows human merit and thus rewards them by granting them faith.\(^{23}\) Rather, he maintains, “the sole source of this grace is the most kind and generous will of God” (Libellus 19). Accepting one’s own inability to earn one’s salvation is part of what is entailed in placing God in his rightful place in the union, for the creature realizes that it is God’s work alone that affects her justification and, therefore, God’s work alone that is deserving of praise. Second, to those who are predestined, God has pledged himself to carry the process of salvation to its completion in glorification. Staupitz uses strong language in making this point. For example, he writes: “Once this first grace is given, other graces follow one by one without fail, and Christ is put under obligation to save the elect” (Libellus 21) and “God owes to the elect not only the call but also justification” (Libellus 33). Glorification, Staupitz maintains, is assured to all of the elect. Once the ordo salutis begins, there is no reversion.

Justification is described by Staupitz as the restoration of the right union with God, where God is the sovereign of the relationship deserving of praise from the creature. This is the import of the curious spin Staupitz gives to the traditional phrase gratia

\(^{23}\) This point is presumably why Staupitz begins with predestination, though the first link in the chain as Paul related it is God’s foreknowledge: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His son” (Rom 8:29, NASB). To begin with foreknowledge, however, suggested the belief that it is God’s foreknowledge of human merit that leads God to predestine certain people.
gratam faciens, which, as we witnessed in the Scholastics, referred to the sacramental grace that makes humans pleasing to God. Staupitz maintains, in contrast to this traditional understanding, that it is the prior act of predestination that makes humans acceptable to God “through the love which restores the obedience stolen by concupiscence” (Libellus 36). Justifying grace, therefore, “makes God pleasing and acceptable to us” (Libellus 36). Altering the gratia gratum faciens, Staupitz writes that God becomes acceptable to humans in justification precisely because he has now been placed in his rightful position in the union as the one deserving of praise. A person cannot praise, after all, that which is not acceptable to him.

Through justification, then, humans are brought into union with God, and, through glorification, to the very place of Christ himself: “Then certainly this fire kindled by the heavenly flame does not die down but surges up until it reaches its origins, the love of God, the very place of the aforementioned eternal fire. This place is Jesus Christ, God and man” (Libellus 40). Staupitz puts the same reality in a different image when he writes that the elect are assured “conformity of the image of the Son of God: to the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Libellus 20). This image also comes from Romans 8, where Paul wrote that conformity is the end to which the elect are predestined.

In chapter eight, Staupitz briefly discusses the human works that follow upon justification. Here again, he is concerned with union with God, namely to show that it is not something that begins at the Eschaton. Rather, it begins at the moment of justification, which happens in this life: “The man who is predestined, called, and justified surely does not live his life without good conduct and holy works. The justified

\[\text{\textsuperscript{24}}\text{ Posset remarks that this alteration of the Scholastic gratia gratum faciens is Staupitz’s “great and revolutionary theological discovery.” Posset, The Front-Runner, 179.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{25}}\text{ This translation is mine.}\]
man cannot but love. He loves God above all things” (*Libellus* 45). Staupitz conveys that right union with God has been achieved by the justified man through inverting the same imagery he used when describing the sin of Eve. The self-centeredness of the first sinners has been reversed in the justified human: “From Christ comes love of God to the point of disregard for one’s self, love of justice to the point of disregard of one’s own life” (*Libellus* 46). He speaks now of obedience: “justification (is that) by which transgression is reshaped into true obedience to God” (*Libellus* 33). He speaks of the works of the justified as works done “in Christ renewed by grace . . . These works are not self-centered but Christ-centered” (*Libellus* 50).  

Even these works, however, are not in any way merits for salvation for they specifically happen *after* the justified human begins living in union with God. What ultimately makes the chain of salvation possible is not the merits of the justified but the merits of Christ, merits which Staupitz summarizes in one sentence: “the personal actions and suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ which He did and sustained for our salvation” (*Libellus* 41). These merits are the foundation of the works of the justified: “His merits are given to us to be ours and on them we found and build our firm hope, for we know our hope is firmly founded on them” (*Libellus* 51).

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26 The image of God-centeredness over self-centeredness reaches its zenith in chapter 24, where Staupitz claims that if the glory of God can increase through the believer’s renouncing of his right to heaven through the merits of Christ, then the believer should indeed renounce Christ.

27 Compared to other contemporary treatments of Christ’s works for the salvation of the world, Staupitz spends surprisingly little space on the actual work of the cross. The reason for this is because of his understanding of sin as, fundamentally, ignorance of the Father and, hence, inability to rightly praise. As a result, the work of Christ is not primarily framed as a sacrifice for sin. Rather, Christ is the Savior because he alone sees God. Thus, “the sublimity of God’s mercy is not seen, indeed, cannot be seen apart from Christ” (*Libellus* 13, italics original). The work of Christ, then, is primarily framed in terms of the revelation of God. Staupitz does occasionally reference the work of Christ in terms of a sacrifice for sin, which I will address below.
At the end of chapter eight, Staupitz provides a summary statement of his argument thus far, highlighting that all of the achievements he discussed are “not of nature but of grace” (Libellus 52). He has maintained throughout that this grace is made possible by the merits of Christ, which, through faith made possible by election, are transferred to the believer. He has left to explain, however, how these merits are transferred to the believer or, to put it in other terms, how the believer appropriates the merits of Christ for herself. Given the above discussion of the Scholastic presentations of the ordo salutis, one might expect to follow a discussion of the sacraments as the means of this appropriation. However, one looks in vain for an extended discussion of the sacraments following chapter eight. Instead, Staupitz engages in a lengthy comparison of the union between Christ and the believer to the union between a man and a woman in marriage. In the final section of this paper, I have left to analyze this comparison.

The Sacramentum of Marriage

Staupitz opens chapter nine with a transitional statement: “Perhaps you would like me now to state briefly how the merits of Christ really become ours” (Libellus 53). Given that this statement follows the summary statement at the end of chapter eight, and the concomitant end of the exegesis of Romans 8:29-30, the introduction of the marriage

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28 There is a fleeting reference to the sacraments at the end of chapter seven: “the merits of Christ entitle us to enter the eternal kingdom. It is with regard to the call of the elect soul to this kingdom that God has said: ‘Come quickly to me, my friend, my dear one, my dove.’ He went on to say: '[Settle down] within the holes in the rock,’ that is ‘in the wounds of Christ’ and ‘in the open cave,’ that is ‘in the opening of the heart of Christ,’ whence the power of the sacraments bursts forth” (Libellus 44). Here again, however, the emphasis is not on partaking the sacraments as a means of appropriating grace as it is in the Scholastics. Staupitz addresses and interprets the sacraments only in light of Christ and his merits. Without the merits of Christ, Staupitz is clear that the sacraments have no power. This mention of the merits of Christ links this statement on the sacraments, then, to the discussion of the marriage analogy in chapter nine. Posset remarks that chapter seven is one of the few times that Staupitz mentions the sacraments. Posset, The Front-Runner, 174.
analogy marks a turning point in the argument. Having discussed the doctrines of salvation, Staupitz will now discuss the experience of salvation, the culmination of which is union with God.\(^\text{29}\)

Staupitz begins with a description of the marriage analogy in traditional language: “between Christ and the Christian *(inter Christum et christianum)* there is a true, nay the truest, marriage of which our earthly marriage is the sacrament *(sacramentum)*, and but a shadow in comparison with the sacred marriage of Christ” *(Libellus* 53). His use of the descriptor *sacramentum* suggests that he is drawing this image from the Vulgate translation of Ephesians 5:31-32. This is confirmed with a direct citation from Ephesians 5:21, which he attributes to “the Apostle”: “‘Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the Church’” *(Libellus* 53).

In his use of the analogy, Staupitz magnifies the dissimilarity in the comparison, a dissimilarity at which Paul had hinted with his use of *μυστήριον* *(sacramentum)*, but never fully developed. First, Staupitz notes that in human marriage, two become one flesh, but remain two in their souls. As a result, the spouses have no power over each other’s souls. They remain merely partners, and fundamentally two beings. Human marriage is, consequently, primarily functional: “they are partners and they help each

\(^{29}\) Posset marks the transition between chapters 14 and 15, stating that the first part in whole addresses doctrine, while the second part shifts to mystical and ascetical language. Posset, *The Front-Runner*, 169. While I certainly agree that the mystical language becomes more prevalent after chapter 14 (with chapter 15 being the high point), I am unconvinced that one should discern the structure of the argument based on this fact. In truth, mystical language appears throughout the tractate. For example, at the end of chapter seven, Staupitz discusses the wounds of Christ in highly mystical language likely influenced by Bernard. Additionally, Posset’s breakdown ignores the clear transitional statement at the beginning of chapter nine. It may be objected that chapters 10 through 14 continue to discuss doctrinal issues. In my reading, however, these chapters are expounding the experiential aspects of the doctrines discussed in chapters one through eight. It is surely significant that Staupitz himself refers back to chapter nine in chapter 15’s discussion on experience, a reference that indicates the experiential nature of both chapters. And as Posset himself acknowledges, the *Libellus* “may be considered Staupitz’s commentary on Rom. 8: 30.” Posset, *The Front-Runner*, 168. If this is the case, then it follows that the doctrinal content ends when the direct discussion of that passage ends.
other in procreation . . . (t)he marriage claim which the spouses have on each other is therefore limited and not all-embracing” (Libellus 55). Conversely, in the marriage between Christ and the Christian the two become one flesh and one spirit.\(^\text{30}\) Thus, the union between Christ and the Christian runs much deeper than human marriage because it encapsulates the entirety of the person, flesh and spirit.

Staupitz underscores the deeper unity that exists in the union with Christ through a discussion of the vows entailed in the marriage. In human marriage, there is fundamentally only one vow: “I accept you for me” (Libellus 56).\(^\text{31}\) This is the vow that signifies two becoming one flesh. The marriage between Christ and the Christian begins with this same vow but includes two more: “I accept you with me,” and “I accept you into me.”\(^\text{32}\) As the Latin clearly shows, this is a series of progressing vows until finally Christ and the believer are totally and completely one: “Ego accipio te in meam, accipio te mihi, accipio te me.” Staupitz later interprets these vows as Christ saying: “The Christian is mine, the Christian is with me, the Christian is I (Christianus est ego)” (Libellus 56).\(^\text{33}\) Likewise, the Christian says to Christ the same vows culminating in the statement: “Christus est ego.”

In the latter part of chapter nine, Staupitz more fully explains the nature of the progressing vows through scripture citations. For the first vow, that which corresponds to

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\(^{30}\) Nyhus’s translation fails to show the nature of this distinction: “In matrimonio hominum sunt duo in carne una, immo iam non sunt duo sed caro una. In matrimonio Christi Christus et christianus sunt una caro, sunt unus spiritus.” The distinction is not that there remain two in human marriage but only one in the marriage to Christ. Staupitz is clear, as is the scripture he is quoting, that in both cases the two become one. But in the union with Christ, the union runs deeper, uniting not just the flesh, but the spirit or the soul as well.

\(^{31}\) My translation.

\(^{32}\) These translations are mine to better reflect the progressing parallelism of the Latin.

\(^{33}\) My translation.
human marriage, he cites Psalm 18:6-7 of the Vulgate for its obvious marital imagery.\footnote{He has set His tabernacle in the sun and He Himself comes as a bridegroom to His marriage bed. He exults like a giant as He goes on His way. His going out is from the highest heaven and His meeting with the heights of it” (Libellus 58).}

For the second vow, he cites, among others, Song of Songs 2:16, whereby we learn that the vow “accipio te mihi” is a vow to care completely for the other to the detriment of oneself: “Regarding ‘His concern with me and not with himself,’ the bride has explicitly said, ‘My beloved is my concern and I am His’” (Libellus 58). Here we are reminded of Staupitz’s earlier description of justification as overturning the self-centeredness of Eve’s sin to a God-centered obedience: “From Christ comes love of God to the point of disregard for one’s self, love of justice to the point of disregard of one’s own life” (Libellus 46). For the third vow, Staupitz draws from Jesus’ prayer in John 17, a text that biblical scholars have long interpreted as witnessing to, in the most intimate of terms, the relationship between the Father and the Son. Staupitz quotes Jesus: “‘I am in them, as You, O Father, are in Me, so that they might be completely one’” (Libellus 58).\footnote{Biblical citation is from John 17:23. Staupitz here further confirms that all of scripture is in agreement on the intimacy of this union.}

These vows indicate that the union between Christ and the Christian is not a marriage of mere partnership where the partners remain two separate souls. Rather, in this spiritual marriage, Christ and the Christian become one person in toto: “by virtue of the third vow, he is Christ as much as he is himself” (Libellus 57).\footnote{According to Steinmetz, the union envisioned by Staupitz is one of will only. Steinmetz, Misericordia Dei, 156-58. I grant that, as opposed to the present essay, Steinmetz is drawing from the whole of Staupitz’s corpus; however, I confess that I do not see how Steinmetz can conclude such a limited union from the Libellus, for these vows surely go deeper than the will. The one text Steinmetz cites as proof of his view from the Libellus, 153, itself goes beyond a union of the will: “Another is added, not less necessary, namely conformity of action: for whatever pleases Christ, also pleases the Christian. There is of them one will, one heart, one spirit.” My translation.}

Thus, while human marriage serves as a pointer to the union between the Christian and Christ, it is ultimately only a pointer, for the true nature of the union with Christ far exceeds the human reality.
In this sense, marriage is a sacrament in the original sense of the word, a mystery by which we catch only a glimpse of the divine reality.

The result of this union is that whatever was Christ’s possession now becomes the Christian’s: “From all this it follows that all things which Christ, the Incarnate Word, possesses, He makes ours by the assumption of human nature. He has given us all things for our salvation” (*Libellus* 61). As scriptural support, he quotes Paul’s similar statement in Romans 8:32: “‘God, Who did not spare His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, will He not surely give us all things in Him?’” (*Libellus* 61). This verse is Paul’s own conclusion to the Golden Chain of salvation discussed in Romans 8:29-30. The image of God’s gracious gift at the conclusion allows Staupitz to make the connection to the marriage analogy for in his mind, it is precisely through this union that God is enabled to give. Staupitz subtly alters Romans 8:32, however, for Paul never explicitly connects the gift of the Son and all other gifts. The connecting factor in Paul’s statement is simply the grace of God which motivates both gifts. For Staupitz, however, there is an intrinsic connection between the incarnation and all other gifts. In the gift of the incarnation, Staupitz believes, Christians have been unified to Christ, and have thus been given all things: “if Christ is I, I have a claim to heaven, I have hope, and I glory in that hope which belongs to the children of God” (*Libellus* 62).

After a spontaneous prayer of thanksgiving for the incredible grace of God that makes this union possible, Staupitz returns to the marriage analogy in chapter 11 to draw out a further implication: “He makes our sins His own. Just as the Christian is just

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37 Staupitz affirms that it is not the sacrificial death on the cross that enables the elect to be unified to him. To be sure, these are the merits which the Christian receives, but the union is made possible by the union of the incarnation. This is confirmed later when Staupitz writes of the incarnation: “out of this union comes salvation for the sinner, out of this union proceeds the Savior’s highest glory” (*Libellus* 64).
through the righteousness of Christ, so Christ is unrighteous and sinful through the guilt of the Christian” (Libellus 71). Thus, through the union, the Christian not only receives the merits of Christ, but her sins are also taken from her. Staupitz intentionally employs shocking language here, attributing two seemingly blasphemous adjectives to Christ, namely *iniustus* and *peccator*. He counters the objection of blasphemy by attributing such a response to the Jew. Likewise he says that a Greek would say that such a claim is madness. But the faithful one, he gently corrects, should say, “Yes I see” (Libellus 72). The Christian, unlike the Jew and the Greek, should not be surprised at the implications of this union for he is no longer ignorant. Having been united to Christ, he now knows God in the manner that Christ does. Staupitz’s comparison to the Jew and the Greek is a gloss on 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, as confirmed by his quotation of the verse.\(^{38}\) Additionally, Staupitz cites Christ’s words on the cross as proof that the latter had become a sinner: “‘God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from helping me who is involved in transgressions’” (Libellus 74).\(^{39}\) This statement itself is a citation from the Psalms which the Gospels of Matthew and Mark put on the lips of Jesus when he is dying. Though significantly both the Gospel writers only attribute the first question to Jesus, stopping short of the second, presumably because the latter clearly states that the speaker is involved in sin.\(^{40}\) Staupitz uses the whole verse to support his conviction that Jesus indeed took the sins of the world and *became* a sinner.

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\(^{38}\) Here again, however, Staupitz subtly alters Paul’s meaning. For Paul attributed the folly and madness of the Jews and Greeks in their failure to understand that the Christ was crucified. Staupitz applies the folly and madness to the thought that Christ actually becomes unjust and a sinner. The emphasis in Staupitz is on the jarring reality of the incarnation itself.

\(^{39}\) Biblical citation from Psalm 21:1 (Vulgate).

\(^{40}\) Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.
To this point in the argument, Staupitz’s presentation of Christ has been primarily concerned with the incarnation as the divine act that occasioned the union between Christ and the Christian, and thus the salvation of the Christian. The reader, or listener as it were, might ask whether Christ ever had to be crucified. Staupitz now affirms that he did have to die, precisely because in his union with the elect, he became a sinner by taking on their sins and the sins of the world:

God has placed upon You (Christ) the iniquity of all and You alone are the lamb of God Who bears the sins of the world. You are like the two goats at one and the same time. In Your human nature You sacrificed by lot to the Lord for sin; as immortal God You live in eternity and hence are like the goat that was sent out. They put on Your head all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their trespasses and sins (*Libellus* 75).

The allusion to the Passover lamb and the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement demonstrate the need for Christ’s death. As Israel put all her sins on the Passover lamb and slaughtered them through its death, and as she also put all her sins on the scapegoat and banished them through sending the goat away, so the sins of the world are destroyed through the death of Christ.41

This is a traditional understanding of Christ’s sacrificial death going back to the Pauline epistles and the Epistle to the Hebrews. However, traditionally it was also understood that the death of Christ (and the death of sin) *enabled* the union to occur between Christ and the Church.42 Staupitz has, again, altered this traditional understanding by maintaining that the union between Christ and the Christian *precedes*

41 Staupitz later writes: “by the imposition of sin on Christ He condemned sin. For the violation of the law ceased when the Son became a sinner. The disruption of sin in man is eradicated when the highest mercy is united with the lowest misery. The sentence to punishment for sin is void when the infinite God suffers and frees man from his punishment, finite both in quality and quantity . . . (thus) when sin is transferred to Christ, sin’s claim on man has no legal basis” (*Libellus* 82, 83).

42 The reader will recall in the above discussion of Thomas on the Eucharist that Thomas believed it was through the partaking of the Eucharist that the believer is united to Christ. If this is the case, then obviously Thomas envisions a union which necessarily follows Christ’s sacrificial death.
the death of Christ. Indeed, it is by virtue of the union that the sins of the elect become his. In Staupitz’s understanding, then, Christ’s death could not have preceded the union, otherwise there would have been no sin in Christ to crucify and destroy. The union then, as we have said, occurs at the incarnation: “all things which Christ, the Incarnate Word, possesses, He makes ours by (per) the assumption of human nature” (*Libellus* 61, italics added). Here, then, we are returned to Staupitz’s insistence on predestination. Those who are elect are united to Christ – come into Christ according to the marriage vow – when the Son becomes incarnate. No merit of theirs earned this union, not even God’s foreknowledge of their righteous acts. It was only by the grace of God in electing them, and by the decisive divine act of the incarnation, that made this union possible.43

From the foregoing analysis of Staupitz’s use of the marriage analogy, we can draw two important observations of how it functions. First, it is clear that Staupitz is drawn to the analogy of marriage in explicating the union between the believer and Christ because his understanding of this union is of the highest, personal intimacy. Marriage is the most intimate earthly example of union available to him.44 For the truth of human marriage, as Staupitz underscores, is that two become one flesh. This is a much more intimate image of union than, for example, the image of the Spirit indwelling his temple.45 In this image, there is no intrinsic connection between the Spirit and the Temple

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43 The other place that the union with God is addressed is in chapter 15, where Staupitz talks about the different levels of union with God experienced in this life. On my reading, however, the point of that discussion is not an illumination of the union with God *per se*, as it was in chapter nine, but rather with the different vocations to which Christians are called in this life. As such, it is ancillary to the purposes of the present essay and, for space limitations, will not be discussed.

44 This is confirmed by a later statement in chapter fifteen: “Nor is that love of Christ able to be shown more pure, sweet, just, honest, fruitful and stable than by those signs by which the groom shows the bride his love and conversely the bride to the groom. Thus, through such [signs] the innocent love presents a witness of the most innocent and most salutary love” (*Libellus* 113). My translation.

45 Staupitz is aware of this image, as he uses it in *Libellus* 4. There, he is concerned not with the nature of the union as such, but rather with how the praise of God prepares the creature as “a worthy
that he indwells. Nor is there anything keeping the Spirit in the Temple. Presumably, the Spirit is not constrained to stay. These are not appropriate images for the marriage between Christ and the Christian, a union which is much more ontological in effect. However, Staupitz also draws the analogy in order to transcend it, for as intimate as the union of human marriage is, as we saw, the union between Christ and the Christian goes deeper, to the very core of the person, such that Staupitz can maintain that Christ is now the sinner and the sinner is now Christ.

Second, as his introductory statement to chapter nine makes clear, the marriage analogy enables Staupitz to demonstrate how the merits of Christ are transferred to the Christian. Accordingly, because in this intimate union the Christian vows to Christ that, as Staupitz interprets, “Christ is me,” the Christian, as Christ, receives all of the possessions of Christ. Crucially, then, the marriage analogy reveals that this transfer of merit happens apart from any partaking of the sacrament, as is necessitated in Scholastic theology. Union with Christ as means of the transfer of merits, therefore, allows for no perversion to a works righteousness doctrine. For in the marriage analogy, the believer can do nothing either to earn the union or to keep the union. She is merely taken into Christ by the vows Christ makes to her, and by the exchange of merits effected by the union, she is enabled to repeat those same vows back. What is more, because the sacrament is taken out of the equation, the Church’s role as mediator, as demanded by Scholastic theology, is also undermined. Christ says the three vows of the human directly to the Christian, without any aid of sacrament or communal mediation. As such, each individual Christian is united to Christ making the union radically personal.

habituation for God.” However, when he turns to discuss the nature of the union between the believer and Christ, he does not stray from the image of marriage. Presumably, then, the marriage analogy is better for describing the nature of the union.
Conclusion

This essay has attempted to demonstrate how Staupitz worked for reform from within the walls of the Roman Catholic Church through his use of the marriage analogy in explicating the union of the Christian with God. The marriage analogy was a common part of the Church’s tradition dating back to the Apostle Paul himself. Yet, it was the meaning which Staupitz wrought from the analogy that subverted the establishment’s understanding of the union with God. In Staupitz’s able hands the marriage analogy demonstrated how Christ is intimately joined to each individual Christian apart from any ecclesial sacrament or structure. And it demonstrated how the sinful Christian was able to claim the merits of Christ independent of any works he or she was able to do. Within a generation of his death, Staupitz’s writings were included on the Roman Index of Forbidden Books, an indication, perhaps, of his success in his subversion of Scholasticism. Unfortunately it may be equally a testament to his failure in subtlety.
Bibliography

PRIMARY


SECONDARY


