

# Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages—I

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John Noonan's long history of contraceptive practice and prohibition<sup>1</sup> demands and merits a second reading—a cautious one. For all the intelligence and careful research that has obviously gone into it, still it has its gaps and misreadings, some of them by no means peripheral to the author's overall picture of an 'evolving', 'developing' ecclesiastical doctrine of love and marriage and the Church's consequent attitudes toward contraception. One of the wider gaps is the failure to consider a man named Nicole Oresme; and one of the more serious misreadings is of St Thomas Aquinas.

Noonan proposes that Martin le Maistre—a late fifteenth-century layman of considerable standing and reputation in the University of Paris—was the first theologian to make the 'modern' breakthrough.<sup>2</sup> Prior to him the Augustinian insistence, found also in St Thomas, on procreative purpose as the only justifying motive for conjugal intercourse held all but exclusive sway. Marriage was rarely or only secondarily thought of in terms of love, and where love happened to be encouraged it was not the kind that had to do with sex. Sex as a biological function productive of the child, well and good (for the most part); but as an expression of love, as an experience of joy and pleasure, no—on pain of at least venial sin. But with le Maistre we have 'the beginning of a new stage in the Catholic approach to marriage'. His ethics offer reasons justifying conjugal intercourse other than procreation and even suggests (though hesitantly) venereal pleasure as a licit motive. The trend was now at least initiated whereby due consideration was to be given to husband and wife in their mutual relationship of love and sexual fulfilment.

But if one is looking for beginnings he might easily reach back to at least a century prior to le Maistre and find them in the popularized conjugal ethics of another, even more prestigious, University of Paris don and in the theological climate in which he wrote. Nicole Oresme studied theology at the University of Paris around 1348. He became Grand Master of the College of Navarre (the same college at which le Maistre was to function over a century later), was attached as confessor, scholar, and personal friend to the court of Charles V, and ended his days as Bishop of Lisieux. 'Of all the learned clerics who contributed to the remarkable flowering of

<sup>1</sup>*Contraception: A History of its Treatment by Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1965. Newly published by Mentor-Omega Books, New York and Toronto, 1967.

<sup>2</sup>Mentor edition, p. 372.

scholarly productions under the encouragement of Charles V, by far the most distinguished and certainly the most competent was Nicole Oresme.<sup>1</sup> Oresme's teaching on marriage is found in his translation of a commentary on the *pseudo-Economics* of Aristotle, one of the many translations of the Aristotelian writings that Nicole undertook, as he himself tells us, at the request of Charles V for 'the common good . . . so that he [the king] and his counsellors and others may understand them'.

The first of the two books of the translation-commentary 'examines broadly all the parts of the household and all the interrelated divisions of a household'. The second book 'considers particularly and more fully married life or marriage'. Actually, both books are concerned mainly with the relationship between husband and wife, and the last book almost exclusively so. Thus by the sheer weight of the consideration given to husband and wife and their mutual relations it may be understood what for commentator and author alike is of most importance in marriage. But of this we can have no doubt as we begin to examine what is actually said.

*Text.* The first concern of every man must be for his wife.

*Gloss.* For after the Lord [of the household], his wife holds first place as his companion. Next come the children and then the servants and possessions. Afterwards he [Aristotle] declares that this concern is primary because of six conditions which obtain in the nuptial relationship between husband and wife more than in any other domestic relationship; for it is natural, reasonable, tender and loving [*amiable*], profitable, divine and harmonious [*divine et convenable*].

The union is natural, Oresme explains, because the begetting of children is natural, and for this living together is necessary. But among men the union of male and female is not simply natural; it is also the fruit of reason and deliberation, and therefore it is even 'more natural' (*plus naturele*) than among the beasts. The latter 'dwell together indifferently in one species, without reason or election. But it often happens that two young people, a man and a woman, love each other in a special way by choice and with heartfelt joy (*plaisance de cuer*), with a love that is reasoned, though at times not correctly reasoned. . . . Sometimes this is a chaste love and prepares for marriage. And if sin should enter in it is a human fault (*vice humain*). But to approach anyone indifferently with no other love than the desire to satisfy one's concupiscence, this is a bestial sin (*vice bestial*).'

The union between husband and wife is also *amiable*, a word which connotes 'friendship', 'love', 'delight', and so much more to Oresme's thinking, as is evident from his long and engaging explication of it.

<sup>1</sup>*Le Livre de Yconomique d'Aristote*, critical edition of French text with English translation and introduction by Albert Douglas Menut, in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, vol. 47, part 5 (Philadelphia, 1957), p. 796.

His *text* reads that men and women marry not only that they might survive and live but that they might *be* more fully (*bien estre*) and live a *better* life (*bien vivre*). Oresme comments:

That is [that they might live], virtuously as in married friendship,<sup>1</sup> which includes all the causes and kinds of friendship as stated in *Ethics* VIII, 17. For this friendship comprises at once the good of usefulness, the good of pleasure, and the good of virtue and double enjoyment—that is, both the carnal and the virtuous or the sensual and the intellectual pleasures. This friendship exists between two individuals only; for it concerns but one man and one woman as we have said and this is clear from the reasons indicated in *Ethics* VIII, 17. . . . This friendship is, moreover, permanent and stable and is not to be broken, as pointed out in *Politics* VII, 14. It accords with the injunction of Scripture: ‘Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder’ (Matt. 19, 6). Such a friendship is extremely great, as the Scripture notes in the Book of Kings, where it says that Jonathan was more lovable than women: ‘Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women’ (II Sam. 1, 26). And Solomon states it thus: ‘The beauty of woman brightens the countenance of her husband and excels every delight of the eye’ (Ecclesiasticus XXXVI, 24). It is said of this love of which we are now speaking that Jacob served seven years for the love of Rachel and the time seemed short because of the greatness of his love (Gen. 29, 18). And the Scripture states that a man will leave his father and mother for this love of woman and cleave to his wife (Gen. 2, 26). And the Apostle Paul commands that each man love his wife as himself (Eph. 5, 28). This is also clear from the fact that nature granted carnal pleasures to the animals only for the purpose of reproduction; but it accorded the human species this pleasure not only for reproduction of its kind but also to enhance and maintain friendship between man and woman. This is implied in Pliny’s statement that no female, after she has become pregnant, seeks sexual union, except woman only (*Nat. Hist.* VII, 5). And this greater unity is a cause of greater friendship. This explains the statement in *Politics* II, 1, that two friends desire to become a single being. Thus we may say that husband and wife are more nearly a unit than the male and female of other species because the first woman was formed from a rib of her husband and this was not the case of the other animals. For this reason, Scripture says that a married couple is two persons in a single skin (Gen. 2, 24). Thus we may now perceive how this life of husband and wife together is based upon friendship.<sup>2</sup>

In the chapters in which he outlines the rules that ought to govern a man in his relations with his wife, Oresme nicely advises the husband as to his sexual conduct. He does not establish a time-table of sexual performance and abstinence. Rather he suggests the need to develop

<sup>1</sup>It is evident from the context throughout that ‘friendship’ (*amisté*) is very much a matter of *love*. This is true generally in medieval theology and literature. So T. Dunning, for instance, warns that to translate the Latin *amicitia* simply as friendship is to mistranslate it.

<sup>2</sup>Menut’s translation of the French text. Other translations throughout this paper are my own.

an *art of love*. The husband, he says, must take good care to satisfy his wife's desires, such that she will not be tempted to look for love elsewhere. But he must not over-engage her in sexual love lest she become dangerously restless in his absence or when he is sick; and he must perform the marriage act decently, such as befits its generative purpose. Courtesy (A. D. Menut's translation of *moult grande honesté*), modesty, and self-restraint are advised. The husband must be sensitive to his wife's feelings, must come to her only when she is 'well disposed' (*bien composée*). He must not abuse her as though she were a *fole femme*, treating her roughly (*trop hardiment*) and in a dissolute way with dirty speech (*paroles dishonestes*). In short, his love-making must be refined (*de bonne manière*) as well as licit and honourable.

But the husband's art of love must extend further than the sexual act. By his *general* attitude toward his wife and daily treatment of her he must constantly prove his love and esteem for her. Thus in the husband's rules of conduct the very first rule is that he must not wrong his wife and must treat her not as a servant but as his partner: 'The wife is his companion (*compaigne*), not his servant.' Another rule is that he must demonstrate his love and respect by limiting his sexual activity to her alone, and if he does not he does wrong—does wrong, it is noted, because he thereby violates the love he should have for his wife. Not so much the fact of the wrong, but the reason why there is wrong is what Oresme seems to be stressing.

Both the author and his commentator are one with the tradition of the centuries in holding that the husband is the master of the household and head of his wife. He is to rule and instruct her, and she is to obey. But even here Oresme insists that the wife's obedience and goodness will be secured only to the extent that her husband proves his love and reverence for her. So in the fourth chapter of the second book which proposes to show 'how and by what rules the husband should act so that his wife may be good', the first rule is fidelity:

*Text*: For an honourable woman it is a very great honour if she sees that her husband keeps chaste for her sake. . . .

*Gloss*: For he is obliged to do so, as has been said, and in this he does her very great honour.

*Text*: And if he cares for no woman as much as he cares for her and holds her above all others as his very own (*propre*), his beloved (*amie*), and his loyal and faithful spouse. . . .

*Text*: For if the wife knows and sees (*cognoist et apparcoit*) that her husband loves her and is for her, and that he treats her loyally and justly, she in turn will study to be loyal and just with him.

*Text*: And nothing does a woman value more from her husband than his honourable and faithful companionship.

*Gloss*: And thus if she is robbed of it she becomes sorrowful and troubled and cares less about other things, and thus the home falls to ruin.

And, our commentator adds by way of conclusion to this particular

chapter, the husband must be even more careful about his fidelity than the wife about hers:

*Gloss:* It is a very great villany that is done to a man when one can say that his mother was not chaste. But a man must be more virtuous than a woman. Thus, according to truth and reason, it is an even greater reproach when it can be said that one's father kept neither faith nor loyalty with his mother, but was promiscuous (*un ribaut*).

Oresme, however, is really not much interested in whose virtue, or fall from virtue, is the greater. His chief concern by far is the love and friendship between husband and wife and the equality born, and required, therein; and if grades of perfection are to be measured then each should regard the *other* as the better:

*Gloss:* For it is possible that one surpass the other in some virtue and is surpassed in another. Therefore, let each consider the other as the better; and let the man think that his wife does him greater good than he does her, and let her think the same with respect to him.

It would be difficult to conceive a more integrated doctrine of marriage than that set forth in Oresme's commentary. Marriage, love, and sex are all of a piece, and all is good. The union between man and woman in marriage is fully natural. It is meant to spring from love and to be grounded upon love—a love that is both physical and spiritual, that is productive of an intensity of joy and pleasure, that makes equals of a man and woman and makes each to be supreme in the other's affections. The marriage act is good if decently and lovingly engaged in. It has purposes beyond generation: it preserves fidelity and deepens and intensifies the love between husband and wife. Sin may enter into the union, but if the union is of reason and is basically good, there is no need to worry about it. It is only when love becomes 'bestial'—when one is intent only upon his isolated pleasure—that there is cause for concern. Marriage is for children, but it is first and foremost for husband and wife and their mutual fulness of love and lasting fidelity.

Had Noonan known of him, Oresme assuredly would have appeared in his history, but as a maverick—a lone and ineffectual voice in a hostile theological world. But it may be observed that Oresme did not think of himself (in this matter of marriage) as such, nor was he, apparently, so regarded by his contemporaries. There is nothing of polemics in his commentary, his arguments are drawn from Scripture and the secular wisdom of the classical past, and the very book he expounds—itself remarkably 'modern' in its doctrine—is one that had long been respected, and commented upon, by some of the greatest of the late medieval theologians. This of course is no absolute warranty against Oresme's originality. Medieval theologians were adept at easing their opinions into circulation by couching

them in an abundance of Scripture and classical reference; and it is notorious that not everybody's Aristotle was like everybody else's; and one might be most original while appearing least polemical (witness, for example, St Thomas Aquinas). Still, the open and theologically knowledgeable historian will not have to search far, or long, before discovering that Oresme was writing his comments on marriage within a prominent, unquestionably orthodox tradition. He simply spelled out for the layman in the warm French vernacular what some of the greatest of his contemporaries and near-contemporaries had written for the professional theologian in the more coldly scientific and technical Latin of the schools, and what the Church was for long widely inculcating in and through the poetry of her nuptial liturgy.

Take Oresme's emphasis upon the bond between husband and wife precisely as a love bond and as the most important element in marriage. Of the marriage goods distinguished by medieval theologians—fidelity, progeny, the *sacramentum*—it was the last which was commonly given the edge over the other two: fidelity and progeny were what marriage *intended*, but the *sacramentum*, which was defined as the indissoluble bond between husband and wife as reflective of the love of Christ for the Church, was what marriage *is*. In true scholastic form, Albert the Great maintained that from different points of view each of the goods may be regarded as supreme. Others—Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Scotus, etc.—were a little less democratic: whatever the respective values of fidelity and progeny, it is the *sacramentum* that is 'more essential' to marriage and the 'more principal' of its goods. That they were thinking of the bond precisely as a love bond is evident from their linking it with the love of Christ for the Church, and from their insistence that both marriage and the marriage act be grounded in charity in order that they be meritorious. But they are likewise clear as to their appreciation of the natural, carnal element in the bond. Thus in the thirteenth-century *Summa* of Alexander of Hales—which, it is essential to note, was not the work of a single, rare 'liberal' theologian (so Noonan regards Alexander of Hales) but is a compilation by many theologians representing, as Gilson points out, 'the spirit of the Franciscan thirteenth-century school of theology at the University of Paris'<sup>1</sup>—an objection is raised against the appropriateness of the derivation of human kind from a single ancestor. Such a derivation (it is argued) only serves to increase the intensity of carnal love which is an impediment to spiritual love. In reply, three kinds of love are distinguished: carnal, natural, and spiritual. Natural love, or carnal love purged of all lust (*amor carnalis . . . nullo modo libidinosus*), is no obstacle to spritual love; on the contrary, it is through natural love that spritual love should come to be (*per naturalem amorem induceretur spritualis*), and natural love is meant in

<sup>1</sup>*History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, London, 1955, p. 327.

turn to be perfected (*perficiendus*) by the spiritual love toward which it disposes (*disponit*). In this question of our common origin the love treated is not specifically sexual love, but rather the more generalized love of all men for one another—although the reference to lust (*libido*) suggests that sexual love was by no means excluded from the author's (or rather authors') present consideration.

The specific type of sexual love, however, receives direct and explicit treatment in a following question: 'Whether the woman should have been formed as a helpmate for man?' The answer is affirmative, and four substantiating reasons are given according to the traditional fourfold meaning of the Scriptures: (1) the *literal* value of a female helpmate for man is the consequent avoidance of 'the confusion of the sexes' which, as evidenced in the case of the hermaphrodite, nature abhors; (2) the *moral* value is 'that man might be instructed thereby in the exercise of humility and charity, for seeing himself in need of the other he learns to humble himself, while seeing the other in need of him he strives to be charitable and liberal'; (3) the *allegorical* value lies in the supernatural symbolism thus made possible: 'in the distinction of the sexes and their consequent meeting in carnal union (*in carnis unitatem*)' there is signified 'the union of Christ and the Church'; (4) and the *anagogical* value—'that in that loving embrace (*amicabili coniunctione*) of a man and a woman there might be symbolized the union of the soul with God both as to the intensity of that union (*magnitudo adhaerentiae*) and its fruitfulness (*fructus foecunditatis*). . . .' Here, as elsewhere, the *Summa* seems to be all for love, the fulness of love between a man and a woman—a love that involves both spirit and flesh, a need-love (promoting humility) as well as a gift-love (promoting charity), a love, moreover, that is based on the equality of man and woman (which the *Summa* develops more fully elsewhere), for there is *mutual* need and help.

One of the likely contributors to the *Summa of Brother Alexander* was St Bonaventure. In his own proper work we find the same respect for and emphasis upon the natural bond of love between husband and wife. In answer to the question as to the propriety of Eve's having been formed from a rib of Adam's side, he writes:

Man and woman, according to the nature and properties of their respective sexes, were so made that they might be united to one another and thus have rest and support in and through each other. Because, therefore, man and woman are joined to each other by a strong and singular bond (*forti vinculo et singulari*), one sex was produced from another. Because that union gives man rest (*dat viro quietationem*) the woman was taken from man while he slept. Because a man is a woman's strength and support it is said that the woman was made from his bone. And because in all these things there is a certain equality in a shared society (*quaedam aequalitas mutuae societatis*), the woman was taken not from any old bone, but from the man's rib and from his side.

Note that in this first moment of the formation of woman all that is envisaged is the relationship of the man and the woman to each other; no external considerations are allowed to impinge. The woman is not seen as having been produced for the sake of procreation or for society at large or even for the Kingdom of God; rather she is viewed as being for her man, as he for her. As for Oresme and, as we shall see, for St Thomas too, so for St Bonaventure the prime social relationship, the very first and best love, under God, is that between a man and his wife. And this love remains a natural and a naturally intense one even when informed by the Christian *caritas*—or rather, especially when so informed—as appears for instance from St Bonaventure's defence of the exclusiveness of the conjugal bond:

In marriage there is a certain exclusive love (*amor singularis*) in which another does not share. Whence it is that naturally a man is jealous with regard to his wife, wanting her to love no other in that act [i.e. the act of intercourse] as she loves him; and every wife is similarly jealous with regard to her husband. . . . Likewise, when charity accrues, which makes all things to be common, it never makes one's wife to be common, because of the private love (*privatum amorem*) that must be in marriage, which is, indeed, the sacrament of that love by which one's spirit is so inflamed that he wants no one to be loved as much as he. So also the soul in no way wants to be deserted by God because of any other.

The moral manuals of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, such as the popular *Ayenbite of Inwit* and the *Book of Vices and Virtues*, show a similar appreciation for marriage as fundamentally and principally a bond of love, carnal as well as spiritual; and they locate that love in the context of the virtue of chastity, which Noonan believes (somehow) was the fifteenth-century Martin le Maistre's original development. Thus the *Book of Vices and Virtues*:

The third branch [of chastity] is the state and the bond of marriage, for they [husband and wife] shall keep themselves entirely for each other, cleanly and truly, without any wrong-doing the one to the other; and the law of marriage demands that the one keep truth and faith in body to the other. For after they have been knit together in flesh, they are all one body and one soul, and as wholly as they are one body, they should be of one heart by true love, nor ever separate in heart or body while they live.

Nowhere, however, does the idea of marriage as a bond of full and perfect love emerge more strikingly or more beautifully than from the thirteenth-to-fifteenth-century nuptial liturgy:

Lo, brethren, we are come here today before God and his angels and all his saints, in the face and presence of our mother holy Church, for to couple and to knit these two bodies together, that is to say, of this man and of this woman, that they be from this time forth but one body and two souls in the faith and law of God and holy Church, for to deserve everlasting life, whatsoever they have done here before.

So begins the fourteenth-century nuptial rite of 'the great Church of



York'. Similar introductory words were designated for other marriage liturgies of the time. In the liturgy of the diocese of Hereford, for example, the priest is directed to announce to the bride and groom 'the law of marriage' (*lex conjugii*), 'namely, that they will be two in one flesh, and that each be subject to the other (*uterque alteri obnoxius sit*), keeping one another in sickness and in health, and for no cause can they be separated'. The couple are asked if they will 'love and worship' each other 'to thy life's end', and they promise 'to have and to hold' each other 'till death us depart'. There is the ring ceremony, with the directive that the ring is to be placed on the fourth finger because in that finger 'there is a vein that reaches into the heart'. This rubric appears in many of the rites. And there is good evidence that the priest verbalized this symbolism to bride and groom and congregation, for in an early fifteenth-century marriage sermon we read:

For this cause is the ring put and set by the husband upon the fourth finger of the woman, for to show that a true love and precordial affection must be between them. Cause why, as doctors say, there is a vein coming from the heart of a woman to the fourth finger; and therefore the ring is put on the same finger, that she should keep unity and love with him, and he with her.

The marriage complete, the wedding is brought into the church (having begun outside before the church door) and the couple stand within the sanctuary for the Mass of the Holy Trinity. And another preacher of the time suggests in his marriage homily why the nuptial Mass is that of the Trinity:

Wherefore, ye sovereigns, at this time being disposed in mind and will by one consent through the means of perfect love, ground and beginner of all virtues, to receive this blessed sacrament of matrimony, I shall say to you at this time as Christ said to his disciples: *Estote perfecti sicut pater vester celestis perfectus est*—be ye perfect in body and soul as your father in heaven, almighty God, is perfect. The father of heaven is so perfect that no strangeness of mankind will cause him to withdraw the sun-beams from the heart; and he makes the sun to do his office and to shine both upon those that are good and upon those that are otherwise disposed. So in like manner ye two sovereigns at this time. Stable yourselves so steadfastly in love that neither word, nor language, countenance nor deed make you to withdraw the beams of perfect love as long as ye live together, for love is the beginner and ground of this blessed sacrament of matrimony. As the father of heaven is so perfect that the father and the son and the holy ghost are three persons and one god, so that in these three persons resteth unity and oneness in all their works, likewise ye sovereigns at this time by means of this blessed sacrament be ye perfect as long as ye shall naturally live together. As ye shall be one in body, flesh, and in blood, likewise to be steadfast and perfect with oneness in love in your souls. . . .

At communion time the husband goes up to the altar and receives the kiss of peace from the celebrant and returns and is directed to

give it 'to his bride alone, and she to him alone'. At the end of Mass, 'because of the solemnity of this sacrament', the bride and groom are blessed with the chalice. And in the evening the ecclesiastical ceremonies are brought to a close with the blessing of the bridal chamber and bed.

It may be noted that little reference is made in the western liturgies of the late medieval world to the procreative purpose of marriage. That purpose is certainly there, as part of the total love vowed between the man and the woman. In the nuptial blessing, then as now, as it is prayed that the wife be as loving and beloved to her man as was Rachel to hers, so it is prayed that she see 'the children of her children unto the third and fourth generation'. But the emphasis throughout is on the 'young ones' (*adolescentes*) there plighting their troth and on the love that is bonded between them—the love that is 'the beginner and ground of this blessed sacrament of matrimony'.

The liturgy is thus one with the theology of the *sacramentum*, and together liturgy and theology may be seen to have formed the climate in which a man like Nicole Oresme might confidently express his 'modern' ideas on marriage, long before Martin le Maistre expressed his. The present paper has not considered the medieval casuistry on the conjugal act—its motivation, for instance, and the place of pleasure therein. This is reserved for another article in which the marriage doctrine of St Thomas will be detailed. But perhaps the present sketch may serve at least to suggest that whatever the fine points of the casuistry may have been, the general doctrine of the goodness of marriage and the need that it be grounded in a fullness of love was sufficiently clear and forceful as to enable an honest Christian couple to make love without scrupulous concern over the details of their motivation and the pleasure they would experience. As good an indication as any as to how the people of the time in general understood, or *could* have understood, the Church's doctrine on marriage and love-making within marriage may be found in that very fine, unquestionably orthodox fourteenth-century English poem, *Cleanness* (or *Purity*). Here we are made to feel all the harsh severity of the medieval Church against sins of lust: unnatural vice, adultery, fornication. But in the midst of all this sombre jeremiad, conjugal sexual love emerges unscathed, as God himself speaks and explains its rationale:

I set them a natural power and secretly taught them its use,  
 And held it in mine ordinance singularly dear,  
 And placed love therein, the sweetest of joys,  
 And the play of passion I depicted myself,  
 And made thereto a manner merrier than any other,  
 When two true ones had tied them together:  
 Between a man and his mate such mirth should come  
 Well nigh pure paradise might prove no better;  
 Providing they hold each other in honest wise.