

Response to Guiliano
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Guiliano helpfully clarifies for me the position of the MCC document. Procreative sex between a man and woman within marriage amounts to a sacramental participation in the procreative relationship between Christ and the Church: the one relationship points to the other, insofar as the husband in such a married relationship corresponds to Christ and both the wife and their children, to the church. What I thought they were saying on pp. 3 and 16-17 (and what I still believe to be the obvious sense of those words) is not what they intended. I thought they said there that husbands and wives give themselves away in a shared love that passes along new life as Christ's procreative love did (3), and that the suffering procreative love of both partners together (in relation to their children) is an icon of the way Christ give himself away for new life. That sort of correspondence associates both partners with Christ (and the offspring of their procreative activity with the church).

Both Guiliano and I express surprise at the novelty of such a view, so I'll take him at his word. My misinterpretation, however, had a charitable intent, for how much sense does their now-clarified position make? I'll limit myself to two remarks.

1) Christ's relationship to the church is productive of new life by way of the suffering of the cross. This must now mean (according to the clarified view) that a husband's procreative sexual activity in relation to his wife (and to the children that issue from that activity) is a sacramental participation in Christ's suffering love for the church. I remain puzzled as to why this sort of relationship with one's wife and children should bring crucifixion to mind. And, even if in a world of sin, suffering, and death, such a relationship has its trials, by what right ought we to single it out as

an irreplaceable sign of Christ's passion? Every form of relationship in this fallen creation brings suffering in its train; and all suffering for Christ's sake, and for the mission of God he undertook, participates in that suffering of Christ for the church's sake. Among all the other possible forms of sacrificial self-giving in married relations that might participate in Christ's passion, why assume that husbands having sex with their wives for procreative purposes, and then helping to raise their children, are so singular in their character as to be sacramental? Having sexual intercourse with one's wife is perhaps more self-sacrificial than remaining faithful to her in sickness and in health? Given the mixed character of the motives for sexual intercourse (hardly entirely Christ focused), such a case would be hard to make.

2. The authors would no doubt answer that it is the specifically procreative character of that sexual activity (and not anything peculiar to its self-sacrificial form) that makes it an irreplaceable marker within Christian marriage of Christ's love for the church. Christ's loving relationship with the church is procreative or fruitful and so is a husband's engagement in sexual intercourse with his wife. But what *are* the fruits of the loving relationship between Christ and the church, and does sexual intercourse really have anything very directly to do with participation in them? Those fruits, which the church in and through its love for Christ helps to bring about, are people who live in conformity with Christ; the church is fruitful in good works and virtuous lives that abide by Christ's own witness of what God desires from us, lives of faith, hope, and love. Irrespective of their sexual activity, married persons can participate very directly and quite literally in that fruitful relationship between Christ and the church by sustaining one another, with the

church's help, in the effort to be more Christ like; in and through their loving relations with one another they can endeavor to 'give birth' to Christ in their own lives and in all whom they touch, both within their household and in their engagement with the wider world. It's hard to see how procreative sexual activity within marriage involves this same sort of direct participation in the fruitful relationship of the church and Christ; at best it would seem to be ordered to that fruitfulness as an optional means to an end—if a married couple has children they are to raise them as Christians, and for that to happen those children obviously have to be born.

The church in its love for Christ does give birth, so to speak, to new Christians. But these new children of the church, born of the church's love for Christ, are always at the same time adopted in that their birth is a rebirth or new birth by grace. No one is a Christian by birth (in the way having a Jewish mother makes one a Jew at birth), and therefore a Christian couple's procreative sexual activity per se has no direct hand in the church's procreative process; parents' participation in that process comes later when they take on a status comparable to godparents at their children's baptism. The procreative activity of the church is of a spiritual sort, meaning that it's achieved by grace through the power of the Holy Spirit. The language of procreation, birth, etc, may be retained here but, I think the historical record makes clear, most often for the purpose of *contrasting* spiritual procreation with the procreation that results from sexual activity between men and women, and stealing its thunder (so to speak). When, for example, theologians who are celibate members of religious orders talk, as they often have done, about giving birth to

Christ in their souls through spiritual procreation it is hardly likely that they are trying to elevate the significance of sex in marriage by doing so. That would be difficult to do in any case, since physical procreation, besides having no direct contribution to make to it, is nothing at all like spiritual procreation: again, it's the contrasts that are being played up in using the language of procreation here, not the similarities. Guiliano would have us believe that the procreative activity of the church is so like sexual intercourse between men and women in marriage as to make that intercourse a rule for married life. But is baptism, the process by which the church makes new members, really best understood along the lines of sexual intercourse? The water is the womb, Christ is the semen, as Guiliano suggests on the basis of some scattered texts from the history of Christian thought, and perhaps we should take the Holy Spirit to be the organ of insemination? While the rite of baptism has an incredibly complex semantic valence (the water, for example, representing both participation in Christ's death and a cleansing bath from sin) and is allusive of many different scriptural passages (the waters of creation and of exodus, for example, are both referenced), I really see no reason, provided by the current baptismal liturgy or the theological witness of the church, to privilege this way of reading it. Is there anything, for example, about the current baptismal liturgy that seems designed to call such sexual associations to mind? If Guiliano and the other authors of MCC are serious about all this, perhaps they should call for a new ECUSA task force to recommend modifications to the baptismal liturgy, a sexualization of its terms, so that baptism's purported aim (according to them) of

sanctifying heterosexual intercourse becomes much more explicit than it certainly is
now.