

On intuition in spousal love and on the nature of love, as expressed in the life of St Agnes

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Abstract:

It is argued in this essay that we can have an »original knowledge or recognition« (»originales Erfassen«) of a person's acts, like for example love, which is the reason we know about love and not only due to our self-awareness. In this essay I examine two different kinds of spousal love and compare them with each other. For this examination I am using the example of the spousal love of St. Agnes, the bride of Christ. When we love someone, our love is our »response« to the intrinsic preciousness of the beloved, of his uniqueness and exclusivity as *this* person and his beauty. The lover belongs to the beloved and the beloved to the lover, they live within each other, in each other's hearts and »lost is the key« as the poet says. It is an incredible eternal joy for the bride of Christ not only to love her Bridegroom with all her heart, with all her soul, with all her strength, but also to be able to adore her Bridegroom, in the strictest sense of the word. For the bride of Christ, Christ's desire becomes her very own desire. And similar to the mundane bride who wistfully awaits her wedding night, the bride of Christ also awaits her wedding night, the spiritual union with her Lord, »sweeter than milk and honey, the eternal kiss of the Beloved«.

Keywords: love, nature of love, spousal love, God, bride of Christ, St. Agnes, Dietrich von Hildebrand

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I. Introduction

This essay is an attempt »to get into deeper contact« with the spousal love of a saint. With Max Scheler and Dietrich von Hildebrand I think that we can have an »original knowledge or recognition«¹ (»originales Erfassen«) of a person's acts, like anger, love etc., which is the real reason we know about love and not only due to our self-awareness.²

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¹ Hildebrand, "The Essence of Love and the Need for "Phenomenological Metaphysics"," 11; cf. Hildebrand, *Das Wesen der Liebe*, 25-26.

² Cf. Ebd.

»It was rightly pointed out ... that all attempts to derive the knowledge of other persons and their behavior by concluding from an analogy to one's self, or to reduce this knowledge to an empathy with the other person, or however the projection may be conceived, are untenable.«³

If we read a good biography of a saint and are astonished at his act of holy love, we have a mystical »Sachkontakt« (a contact with the things). We are astonished (θαυμάζειν) because we receive a new and deeper contact with the arch-datum of love.⁴

A. The method

For our topic it is important to understand that we do have a direct intuition on the nature of love, not only if we love, but also more generally by being aware of the acts of love of others. »[W]ithout the possibility of a reference to a common »Sachkontakt« and to intuition which goes beyond sense-perception,«⁵ we are not able to examine more deeply the essence of this specific spousal love, namely the spousal love of someone who chooses »voluntary continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven«⁶

This means, that we have to imagine a saint's spousal love, in this case the spousal love of St. Agnes. For this reason I have translated a few stanzas of my poem »Martyrdom of St. Agnes«⁷ into English. With the following stanzas, we should get a deeper »Sachkontakt« with St. Agnes' spousal love of Christ.

³ Hildebrand, "The Essence of Love and the Need for "Phenomenological Metaphysics", 11. Cf. Hildebrand, *Das Wesen der Liebe*, 25-26.

⁴ Cf. »Der griechische Ausdruck φαίνόμενον, auf den der Terminus »Phänomen« zurückgeht, leitet sich von dem Verbum φαίνεσθαι her, das bedeutet: sich zeigen; φαίνόμενον besagt daher: das, was sich zeigt, das Sichzeigende, das Offenbare;« Heidegger, *Sein Und Zeit*, Kap. 2. § 7, 28.

⁵ Seifert, *Back to Things in Themselves*, 74.

⁶ L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English 3 May 1982, page 3 "Celibacy Is a Particular Response."

⁷ Cf. The German original poem: Raphael E. Bexten, "Ausgewählte Gedichte."

II. Martyrdom of St. Agnes – the poem

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The Lord has created a garden – an Eden for Him
Still delicate and graceful the garden thrives
Imbued with pure water, nourished by the sun.-
He loves it, His precious pearl, His secret treasure.

Early the yearning for the Beloved awakes in the garden
pure and noble. The young garden is enclosed by a high
delicate fence, with a golden gate, which shelters
the garden's maturing and growth in love.
(...)

However, one evening, under the cloud of night the garden
trembles, since the revelers come and raze its
delicate fence, desire the garden for themselves
but there the fountain seals itself in protection.

Wild foxes invade, shatter and tread on the precious
flowers, devastate the beloved garden.

They want to tarnish the fountain, but as with the revelers,
the fountain eludes them, sentinelled by the Beloved.

Furious about the enclosed fountain
the revelers set fire, to burn down the garden,
but the fountain is unaware of all this,
knowing only the longing for the Beloved.

A heavy rain quenches the burning garden –
Meanwhile the fountain in the middle of the garden
dreams, it dreams of the thirsty stag, who bends his
lofty antlers over it, so as to drink.

Light shines, brighter than a Thousand Suns –
After torture and pain, the fountain awakes, awakes
from the dream – enjoys, sweeter than milk and honey,
the eternal kiss of the Beloved.

III. Why is it right to call »spousal« the love of someone who lives in »contenance for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven«?

A. What does it mean to love? – Short overview

Dietrich von Hildebrand, in his important book »*In Defense of Purity*«⁸, shows in accordance with Pope John Paul II, that marriage and continence complement each other⁹. The human person, as man and woman, is destined to love God and other persons.

⁸ Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*.

⁹ Cf. "Marriage and Continence." *L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English* 19 April 1982, page 10.

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1. Love and the difference between the »merely *subjectively* important« and the »important *in itself*«

What does it mean to love? With Dietrich von Hildebrand we have to distinguish between the »merely *subjectively* important« and the »important *in itself*«¹⁰ We can say that we »love« a cold beer¹¹, but then we are not using the term »to love« authentically, but use an analogous meaning of »love«. If we contemplate the *objectively necessary essence*¹² of love, together with von Hildebrand we have to say, that in an ultimate and direct sense we are only able *to love other persons*.¹³

2. Love as a value-response

What is a sufficient reason for the fact that in an ultimate and direct sense we are only able *to love other persons*? As we have mentioned above, love in a wider sense implies something which is »important *in itself*«. »To be a person is an objective inestimable value, it is *the* objective value par excellence«. ¹⁴ This means that love is a *value response*¹⁵. When we love someone, our love is the »response« to the intrinsic preciousness of the beloved, of his uniqueness and exclusivity as *this* person and his beauty. Love is therefore not a

¹⁰ Cf. Hildebrand, *Ethics*; Hildebrand, *The Dietrich von Hildebrand Lifeguide*, 9.

¹¹ »Usually a beer or a cold bath is something neutral for me, but under certain circumstances it becomes pleasant for me. Then it is not a neutral thing for me, because it is physically pleasant for me. This does not mean that the same thing is also pleasant for other people.« Bexten, "Is beauty a pure perfection?" 2.

¹² For a deeper explanation of *objectively necessary essences* see Hildebrand, *What Is Philosophy?*, ch. 4; Seifert, *Back to Things in Themselves*, Part I.

¹³ Cf. Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, Ch. 1; »Love as Value-Response « Hildebrand, *Das Wesen der Liebe*. Kp. 1.

¹⁴ Cf. Bexten, "Was ist der zureichende Grund für die unverlierbare Würde des Menschen?"; Bexten, "Lässt Person-Sein absolute Unendlichkeit zu?"; Bexten, "Was ist der zureichende Grund für die unverlierbare Würde des Menschen?"; Bexten, "Lässt Person-Sein absolute Unendlichkeit zu?"; Bexten, "Hirntod: Lebendiger Körper – tote Person? - Ist der „Hirntod“ der wirkliche Tod des Menschen?"; Bexten, "Da Gott Gott ist, ist Gott (Si Deus est Deus, Deus est)."; cf. also Seifert, *Essere e Persona*; Seifert, *Wahrheit und Person*.

¹⁵ Cf. Seifert, "Dietrich von Hildebrands philosophische Entdeckung der 'Wertantwort' und die Grundlegung der Ethik"; Shank, "Von Hildebrand's Theory of the Affective Value Response and Our Knowledge of God"; Miceli, "Von Hildebrand and Marcel Philosophers of Communion."

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»simple response«, it is the »response« to the intrinsic preciousness, to the uniqueness and exclusivity of a person, that is very mysterious.

So we notice a difference between love and other value responses, like the value response to a great book. This is one of the reasons why Dietrich von Hildebrand declares love to be an »Überwertantwort« (»super value-response «)¹⁶. We do not love a person's value or other attributes of his, but the person himself.¹⁷

Furthermore, there is a deep qualitative relationship between love and beauty. If we contemplate the essence of love, we understand that love is a value response to beauty.¹⁸ The only adequate response to the value of beauty is love. We notice that everything we love (I mean real love) is beautiful in a particular way. If we really love, we are not able to love something which is totally bad or ugly, like actual hate.¹⁹

3. Transcendence in love

Love is not the will's pure subject matter, but rather is an affected value-response of our heart.²⁰ Only with love is a real *material* community²¹ of persons possible²², because in love the two persons involved totally give themselves away to each other. In marital love the Lover and the Beloved »become one flesh«²³, Salomon expresses this in the Song of Songs: »My love is mine and I am his«²⁴ and we also find it in the very »first« German love poem »Dû bist mîn, ih bin dîn«²⁵ («You are mine, I am yours»). Lovers do not merge in

¹⁶ Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, ch. II, IV-IX; Hildebrand, *Das Wesen der Liebe*, Kap. II, VI-IX; Gorczyca, "Zur Metaphysik der Liebe bei Dietrich von Hildebrand."

¹⁷ Cf. Gorczyca, "Zur Metaphysik der Liebe bei Dietrich von Hildebrand."; Pascal, *Pascal's Pensees*, no. 323; 141.

¹⁸ Cf. Hildebrand, von, *The Heart*; Hildebrand, *Das Wesen Der Liebe*.

¹⁹ Cf. Bexten, "Is beauty a pure perfection?", 8-9.

²⁰ Cf. Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, ch. II, IX; Hildebrand, *Das Wesen Der Liebe*, Kap. II, IX.

²¹ Cf. Hildebrand, *Das Wesen Der Liebe*, 175f. Ebd. Von Hildebrand precisely explains the differences between formal and material community in Hildebrand, *Metaphysik der Gemeinschaft*.

²² Cf. Hildebrand, *Metaphysik Der Gemeinschaft*; Hildebrand, *Das Wesen Der Liebe*, Kap. III, IX.

²³ Cf. Gen. 2, 24.

²⁴ Song of Solomon 2:16; Wansbrough, *The New Jerusalem Bible*.

²⁵ »Dû bist mîn, ich bin dîn. / des solt dû gewis sîn. / dû bist beslozen/ in mînem herzen, / verlornt ist das sluzzelîn: / dû muost ouch immêr darinne sîn. «anonymous, "BSB Clm 19411." » You are mine, I am yours./ You can be sure it's true. / Into my heart, I've gotten you, / Locked its lock, Lost the key,/ So you'll never get back out, you see.« Closs und Williams, *The Heath*

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their love, because love does not destroy, on the contrary - through love a person becomes fulfilled in his personal being. Persons who love each other are in a »*deep mental contact*« with each other, they penetrate each other mentally, without intermixing with each other.²⁶ Therefore they get to know each other; they see within and out of each other. The lover belongs to the beloved and the beloved to the lover, they live in each other, in each other's hearts and »lost is the key« as the poet says. »I shall climb the palm tree, I shall seize its clusters of dates!«²⁷ »In the inner cellar / Of my Beloved have I drunk«²⁸ »Thus has the Bridegroom entered into me«²⁹ Therefore, with Dietrich von Hildebrand we have to emphasize that the »*intio unionis*« is an essential characteristic of love³⁰. The gift of mutual self-giving in love is the union and the happiness that emanates from the union. A small proportion of the transcendence in love appears, when we notice that the »objective good« for the beloved person becomes an indirect objective good for the lover.³¹

B. What is the specific spousal love of someone who lives in »contenance for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven«?

Why do marriage and continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven complement each other? Together with Pope John Paul II we have to discover more clearly »the nuptial meaning of the body in the personal makeup of the subjectivity of man and woman«³². »[T]he nuptial meaning of the body in the personal makeup of the subjectivity of man and woman« is also one of the main ultimate grounds for conjugal love, the

anthology of German poetry, 73. zit. n. Krey, "Du bist mein, ich bin dein" translating a love poem « peter krey's web site."

²⁶ Hildebrand, *Das Wesen der Liebe*, Kap.VI; Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, ch.VI.

²⁷ Song of Solomon 7:9, Wansbrough, *The New Jerusalem Bible*.

²⁸ St. John of the Cross, *A spiritual canticle of the soul and the bridegroom Christ*, 7.

²⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux in Harkness, *Mysticism*, 92.

³⁰ In supernatural love for our enemies (cf. Matthew 5:44) we desire community with our enemies in eternal glory. In »love of neighbor« does not lie the motive of *intio unionis*, but as in love of our enemies, we desire community with our neighbors in eternal glory.

³¹ Cf. Hildebrand, *Das Wesen der Liebe*, Kap. 7; 200ff.

³² L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English 3 May 1982, page 3 "Celibacy Is a Particular Response."

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conjugal becoming one flesh and the continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. »At the same time it is the only appropriate and adequate concept.«³³

Moreover, if we love someone, we say to him »You will not die«³⁴, as Gabriel Marcel writes. »[F]or love is strong as death«³⁵, or better, love is stronger than death. However, here on earth we live and love in the drama, face to face to death.³⁶ If we consider this, we understand that the supernatural spousal love of the Supreme Being, of God, of Jesus Christ is a true spousal love. Someone who lives this supernatural spousal love with Jesus Christ fulfills the claim of love, because the beloved will never die³⁷.

As the mundane bride totally gives herself, heart and soul, to the bridegroom, the bride of Christ totally gives herself, heart and soul, to her bridegroom Christ. What incredible eternal joy for the bride of Christ to not only love her Bridegroom with all her heart, with all her soul, with all her strength³⁸, but also to be able to adore, in the strictest sense of the word, her Bridegroom. For the bride of Christ, Christ's desires become her own desires. And similar to the mundane bride who awaits wistfully her wedding night, the bride of Christ also awaits the wedding night, the spiritual union with her Lord. St. John of the Cross expresses this in his great poem »Living Flame of Love« in XI stanzas: »Reveal Your presence, / And let the vision and Your beauty kill me, / Behold the malady / Of love is incurable / Except in Your presence and before Your face.«³⁹

As these few thoughts have indicated, we can state, that marriage and »continen-
ce for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven« really do complement each other very well.

³³ Ebd.

³⁴ Marcel, *Being and having*, 95.

³⁵ Song of Solomon 8:6.

³⁶ Shakespeare expresses this very well in *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*: »JUL. Go get thee hence, for I will not away. What's here? A cup clos'd in my true love's hand? Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end. O churl, drunk all, and left no friendly drop To help me after? I will kiss thy lips, Haply some poison yet doth hang on them, To make me die with a restorative. Thy lips are warm.« Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1137.

³⁷ And Christ responds to his bride »Everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die.« John 11:26

³⁸ Cf. Deuteronomy 6:5.

³⁹ St. John of the Cross, *A spiritual canticle of the soul and the bridegroom Christ*, 4.

We can only understand »continenence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven«, if we understand marriage, just as we understand the Song of Songs only, if we understand the literal meaning of the Song of Songs.⁴⁰

IV. Final conclusion

We want to conclude this short analysis of spousal love, with the three crucial distinctions concerning the three forms of self-abandonment (Hingabe) in love, which underline the importance of Dietrich von Hildebrand's philosophical investigation of the *mirandum*, of the arch-phenomenon of the arch-phenomena, the nature of love.

With von Hildebrand we can distinguish three forms of self-abandonment (Hingabe) in love:

- a) Stepping out of one's own life, as in loving one's neighbors.
- b) Another form of self-abandonment (Hingabe) in love, »is present in the quality of *caritas*«⁴¹

Von Hildebrand emphasizes, that this form of self-abandonment in love is present in loving one's neighbors, but is not identical with loving one's neighbors. The self-abandonment (Hingabe) in the *caritas* »is not stepping out of one's own life [like in a)], but is a transfiguration of one's own life. It is self-abandonment (Hingabe) in goodness«.⁴²

- c) The third form of self-abandonment (Hingabe) in love »is an abandonment of the heart«⁴³. The beloved becomes the center of one's own life, »the source of personal happiness«⁴⁴. »This kind of self-abandonment (Hingabe) in its highest form we find in the love of God. Nevertheless it is characteristic for spousal love as well«.⁴⁵

⁴⁰Cf. Johannes Paulus, *Communio personarum: Die Erlösung des Leibes und die Sakramentalität der Ehe : Katechesen 1981 - 1984*, bd. 2; Johannes Paulus, *Communio personarum: Die menschliche Liebe im göttlichen Heilsplan : Katechesen 1979 - 1981*, bd. 1; Paulus Johannes, *Communio personarum: Die Familie, Zukunft der Menschheit : Aussagen zu Ehe u. Familie 1978 - 1984*, bd. 3.

⁴¹ Hildebrand, *Das Wesen der Liebe*, 486.

⁴² Ebd.

⁴³ Ebd.

⁴⁴ Hildebrand, "The Essence of Love and the Need for 'Phenomenological Metaphysics'," 11.

⁴⁵ Hildebrand, *Das Wesen der Liebe*, 487.

It is the spousal love to Christ, St. Agnes' bridegroom, which raises St. Agnes up to her Bridegroom Christ. »You'd think her on her way to the wedding /As they lead her out with smiling face«. ⁴⁶

For the loving couple death is an objective evil, because of the separation from the beloved⁴⁷, but for the bride of Christ, like St. Agnes, it is an objective good; it is her eternal wedding day:

»XXII The bride has entered / The pleasant and desirable garden, /And there reposes to her heart's content; / Her neck reclining / On the sweet arms of the Beloved. XXIII Beneath the apple-tree / There were you betrothed; / There I gave you My hand, / And you were redeemed / Where your mother was corrupted.«⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ambrose of Milan, Hymn to St. Agnes (trans. Grace Andreacchi and Daniel Hadas) in: "Amazing Grace: AGNES - A Wise and Foolish Virgin."

⁴⁷ See the quotation of *Rome and Juliet* above.

⁴⁸ St. John of the Cross, *A spiritual canticle of the soul and the bridegroom Christ*, 6.

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