

Sex and Love in the Home and A Daring Promise

reviewed by [Caroline J. Simon](#) in the [July 17, 2002](#) issue

The true superiority of sexual intercourse in marriage is that it does not have to mean very much," says David Matzko McCarthy. Equally provocative is Richard R. Gaillardetz's statement that "marriage, like all sacraments, is paschal to the core, and consequently it is as much about dying as it is about new life." Though the plethora of books on Christian marriage might make one wonder whether there is anything new to say about the subject, these statements are so novel that they and the books in which they are embedded merit careful evaluation.

Both McCarthy and Gaillardetz are Catholics who seek to take a fresh look at marriage and marital sexuality. Both seek a realism that counters the romanticism of modern secular culture. Both acknowledge the authority of Roman Catholic teaching. Yet they differ in emphasis. McCarthy enriches Christian views of marriage by placing marriage in its broader social context, while Gaillardetz traces and deepens marriage's roots in Christian doctrines of conversion and the trinity.

McCarthy, who teaches theology at Maryland's Mount St. Mary's College, argues that Christian theologies of marriage are all too prone to bless romanticism under the guise of promoting a high view of marriage. McCarthy faults the 20th-century Catholic theological movement called personalism, claiming that it attempts to "out-romance romantic love on its own terms." Personalism seems to assume that every sexual act within marriage is or should be the bearer of complete and ultimate self-giving. But for McCarthy, the significance of marital sexuality is cross-temporal: "For sex to have depth, it needs extended bodily communion over time."

McCarthy also objects to an over-emphasis on marriage as an "I-Thou" relationship. This emphasis ignores the embeddedness of marriage in extended families, neighborhoods and parishes.

Sex and Love in the Home might have been more aptly titled "Sex and Love in the Neighborhood." McCarthy advocates what he calls "open households," households

that live in the awareness that marriage is more than a personal relationship between a dyad. In open households, "spouses and children will look beyond the walls of their homes for friendship and intimacy, not when the family system breaks down, but as a matter of its good working order." Open households are part of neighborhoods that are networks of gift exchange, where people swap vegetables from their gardens, watch one another's children, shovel one another's sidewalks and "gossip well." Hospitality and generosity are the cardinal virtues of these households.

For McCarthy, American suburbs are the physical manifestation of the closed household. Suburbs promote privacy, independence and isolation, not communal gift exchange and interdependence. In suburbs, houses are built far enough apart that neighbors need not hear one another. Suburban neighbors often do not know one another's names and could not say for sure where the kid riding by on her bike lives. Payment for services--to lawn-care and snow-removal companies, day-care providers, repairmen--takes the place of gift exchange.

What do all these observations about neighborhood economy have to do with sex in the home? McCarthy thinks that by broadening and deepening the social context in which marital sexuality is understood, a burdensome weight can be lifted from marital sex. Because couples will see themselves as having a robust network of social relationships, they can be less clingy. Sex that is just ordinary will be valued for its own sake. Passion and romantic desire may or may not be accoutrements of quotidian marital intercourse and will be seen as gifts rather than as hard-won achievements earned by following the right strategies to keep the "flame" alive.

Like McCarthy, Gaillardetz, a professor of Catholic studies at the University of Toledo, emphasizes the quotidian. A Daring Promise characterizes marriage as risky, costly and disorienting, as well as sacred and sacramental. Fairly conventional theological observations about covenant, mutuality, companionship and intimacy are salted with more startling themes such as marriage as an aesthetic practice. In entering and sustaining a marriage we give up freedoms, narrow choices and leave fantasies unfulfilled. We find intimacy and fulfillment but also disappointments and loneliness. Gaillardetz argues that "an adequate Christian understanding of marriage must emphasize the sacramental significance, not only of marital intimacy but of this sense of absence, longing and the embrace of the limits of the relationship."

Both McCarthy and Gaillardetz maintain that the Christian view of marriage is a needed antidote to American consumerism's pernicious influence on our view of relationships. McCarthy gives an especially revealing portrait of what he calls the economy of desire. Our consumer economy succeeds all too effectively in creating a permanent state of dissatisfaction which sends us out to buy more or better or latest-model products. This sense of restlessness affects both our sense of self and our sense of relationship. Why is eating out or "going away for the weekend" more titillating than staying home? Because our culture has convinced us that newness is sexy. If we cannot allow ourselves new partners we can at least seek new settings for romance. Perhaps Christians would be more content in their marriages if their view of marriage was less influenced by the surrounding culture and more informed by Christian theology and social teaching.

Both books remind Christians of their calling not to be conformed to the world but to transform it. Perhaps if McCarthy's "sociology of faith" and Gaillardetz's marriage as a "crucible of grace" are taken seriously, Christian marriages can become more dynamic nodes in the network of societal transformation that the community of Christ's people is called to be.