Marriage as a Sacramental Reflection of the Passion: The Mirror in Jan van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Wedding*

For Carol Herselle Krinsky

Despite the numerous publications on Jan van Eyck’s ‘Arnolfini Wedding’, the central symbolic function and religious meaning of the mirror has yet to be understood (fig. 1-2). Surrounded by the Passion and reflecting the wedded couple, it makes explicit the common link between Christ’s sacrifice and the sacraments, in particular, marriage. Beyond this, it points to the late medieval topos of the human soul as a mirror or image of God, an image soiled by the Fall but cleansed (to a bridal immaculacy) by participation in the sacraments and by meditation on the Passion. It is this rich yet essentially simple theme, depending on the mirror’s ability to link Passion and the sacramentally renewed soul, which is explored below. After first establishing the link between the Passion and matrimony, we can move on to the subsidiary question of the soul as a (bridal) image of God, renewed by sacramental grace and ascending transcendentally toward a final union of salvation and nuptial bliss in the New Jerusalem.

Marriage, like all the sacraments, was directly related to the Passion. As Thomas Aquinas put it:

‘Hence as a sign a sacrament has a threefold function. It is at once commemorative of that which has gone before, namely the Passion of Christ, and demonstrative of that which is brought about in us through the Passion of Christ, namely grace, and prognostic, i.e. a foretelling of future glory.’

Late medieval and Renaissance iconography of the seven sacraments invariably showed a crucified Christ, His blood streaming out to nourish each of the rites. Numerous texts speak of the sacraments springing from the wound in His side, uniting all the members of His ‘Body’, the church, in communion, a ‘community’ of the faithfull. Illustrating these simple concepts and clarifying the salvational meaning inherent in all sacramental themes is a drawing from a fifteenth-century English manuscript (fig. 3). In the upper center left, the blood of the crucified Christ flows out to each of the sacraments, including marriage just below and to Christ’s left. Arranged left to right along the course of a human life, from baptism to last unction, the sacraments lead the fallen soul from the ‘Expulsion’ at the upper left corner, back to Paradise itself, depicted in the upper right corner as a circular fortress enclosing Christ and all those saved through the sacraments. The journey to this New Jerusalem is an ascending path, and leads the pious souls away from the World, symbolized by an ornately dressed woman holding two mirrors, here traditional symbols of worldly vanity.
and pride. Needless to say, the souls grouped around this figure follow a different path which leads straight to the jaws of hell shown at lower right. The sacraments then lead the soul away from the world and upward to the final union with God.

Beyond the general relation of the sacraments to the Passion, marriage enjoyed a special tie because of Paul's comments in Ephesians 5:25-33.

'Hebards, love your wives, as Christ also loved the Church, and delivered himself up for it: That he might sanctify it, cleansing it by the laver of water in the word of life: that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot