

God in the Tangled Sheets

BY VALERIE SCHULTZ

MY MARRIAGE IS NOT what saints are made of.

I concluded this after reading Pope John Paul II's homily on the occasion of the first-ever beatification of a married couple, Luigi and Maria Beltrame Quattrocchi. Maria and Luigi, an Italian couple who lived in early to mid-20th century, led holy lives. They attended daily Mass, prayed a nightly rosary and raised two priests, a consecrated lay woman and a nun. They devoted their lives to various Catholic organizations. Because the cause for canonization treated the two together, a single miracle attributed to their intercession cleared the way for beatification in October 2001. The prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints considered them together because of "their experience of sanctity, lived together so intimately." In other words, their marriage made it impossible to separate them.

The part that remains off the record is that, after giving birth to their children, Maria and Luigi stopped having sex.

On a typical evening at our house, one might observe a table strewn with algebra homework; a basket of

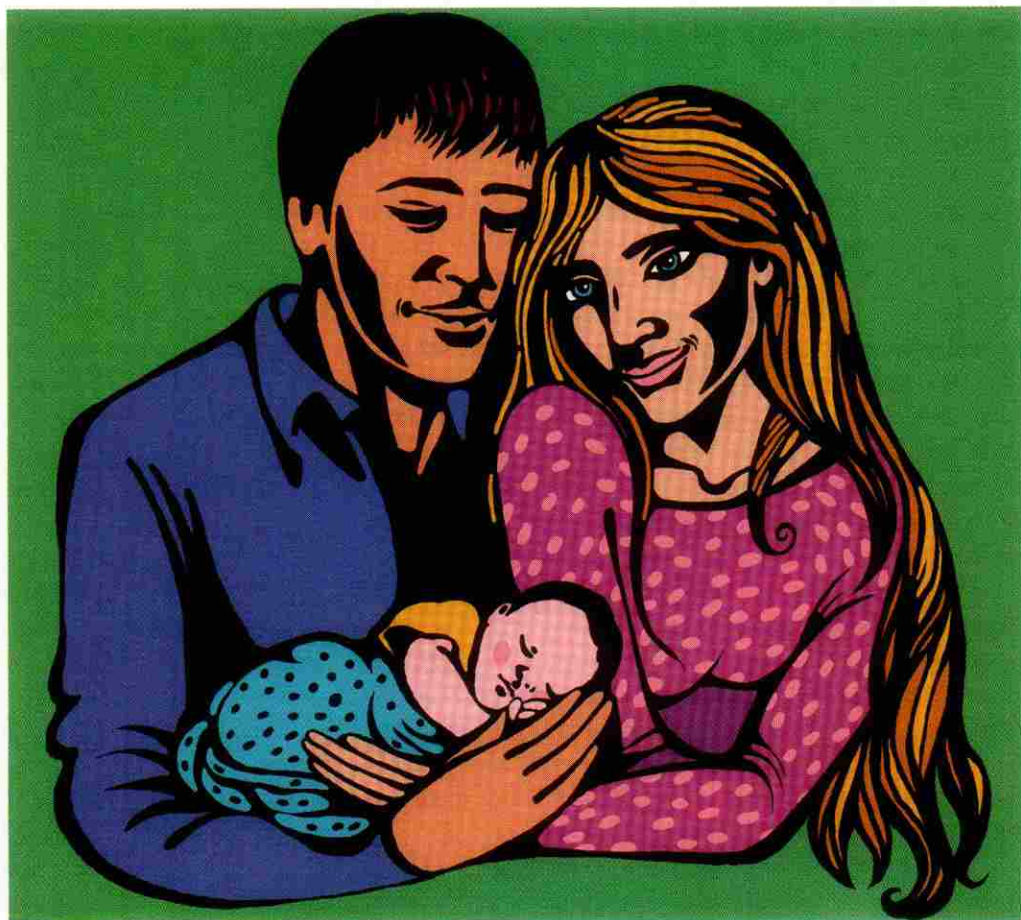
unfolded laundry; a frantic search for an important permission slip that is due the next morning (or else); a very full dish rack; the sounds of a phone, a stereo, a shower, cello practice, two dogs who want to play and perhaps a sisterly squabble; and two parents who, though tired, entertain at least a random thought about having sex. Where is the holy in all of that?

May I gently suggest: everywhere?

I don't mean to be snide about the shining example of the Blessed Beltrames. Their faith and accomplishments are surely to be emulated. As the pope noted, they "kept the lamp of faith burning." The pope beatified them on the 20th anniversary of the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, a document that highlights "the centrality of marriage and the mission of the family." The Beltrames as a married couple are a milestone along the path of the communion of saints.

But if marriage is a source of sacramental grace, why are we as a church so uncomfortable about sex?

When two people who chose celibacy as a way of becoming closer to God are beatified as a married couple, the message to us married people is mixed. Because we are the ones who are supposed to be having sex! We are allowed and encouraged to have sex. We are the celebration of sex. All of those shoes and



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backpacks in a pile in my front hall belong to the embodiments of sex. I'm taking a Catholic stand when I say that sex is good.

Of course I am not talking about casual, sporting, movie sex. I'm talking about married sex: user-friendly, loving, unitive, procreative—and also, to be honest, hot, satisfying and the most fun of all earthly pleasures. Married sex may not always be glamorous and candle-lit. But intercourse is the closest one can be to another human being. It is a bond, a sharing, a trust, a deeply intimate human encounter. It is no wonder that the relationship of Christ to the church is modeled on that of a groom and bride: we are to be that connected.

The pope sees the Beltrames as “confirmation that the path of holiness lived together as a couple is possible, beautiful, extraordinarily fruitful, and fundamental for the good of the family, the church and society.” As my children say: totally. We married people are on the path of holiness as surely as anyone else who is following the call of a vocation. While I respect the choice the Beltrames made on their journey to God, I do not believe post-children celibacy is necessary for a marriage to become holier. God can also be in the tangled sheets and tangy sweat on skin.

Is this shocking? It should not be. We are designed for this perfect fit. For biblical proof, I offer the glowing embers from the Song of Songs.

Says the bride:

“Awake, north wind, and come,
south wind;
blow upon my garden that its
perfumes may pour forth,
that my beloved may come to his
garden and enjoy its rare fruits.”
(4:16)

Says the bridegroom:

“May I find your breasts like
clusters of grapes on the vine, the
scent of your breath like apricots,
and your whispers like spiced
wine flowing smoothly to we
come my caresses, gliding
down through lips and teeth.”
(7:8-9)

The bride and bridegroom sing a

delicious, teasing ode to sex, full of juicy and physical imagery, with which any happily married couple would agree. Sex is that good, and we thank God for this gift. Too often we Catholics treat sex as an impediment to the mission of marriage rather than a glorious manifestation and integral piece of that mission. We view sex as a necessary evil, prone to abuse and scandal, rather than a transcendent joy.

The Beltrames bore a sadness of which I must make note: they were never grandparents. All four of their children chose lives of celibacy. While I encourage my four daughters in vocational discernment, I'm afraid that if they all someday choose childlessness, I will mourn my unborn grandchildren. My father often watches my children at play and then says to me, “It's what makes the world go round.” I never tire of hearing him say that: the continuing generations not only spin the globe; they are a gift from heaven too. Perhaps the Beltrames' example of celibacy contributed to their children's choices.

I have to hope that when a husband and wife demonstrate physical affection, that too is a positive example of divine intimacy to their children. I must credit my wise and learned friend, Dr. Greer Gordon, with the reflection that healthy examples of sexuality in the context of marriage are essential to form sexually healthy future adults, which is a painfully lively concern for Catholics right now. Dr. Gordon, speaking at the 2002 Los Angeles Religious Education Congress, challenged married theologians to write about their sacrament and vocation, about what it means to be married and to be in relationship with God. While I claim no theological credentials, I offer this beginning advice: the sublime Song of Songs needs to be lived in the rush and routine of the everyday.

In our house on a typical night, one may not find a rosary in use. But there are bedtime prayers and blessings, hugs and kisses, a spirit of love, the quiet world turning and maybe even the love-making of two searching, aging, journeying, married souls. In our house can be found the reach for what is holy—even though there are no resident saints. **A**

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