



Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps
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MARRIAGE SPIRITUALITY IN “L’ANNEAU D’OR” MAGAZINE, FOUNDED BY FATHER HENRI CAFFAREL

Sister Fernanda Barbiero

A retrospective look at a magazine on conjugal spirituality requires particular attention to enable a meaningful presentation of the theology on which *L’Anneau d’Or*’s originality was focussed. A theology that did not neglect the concrete, sometimes contradictory, character of an experiment in progress, and which is elaborated in and through this experience. A theology that is a true experience that has been put through the intelligent scrutiny of critical reflection.

L’Anneau d’Or magazine founded its existence on experienced values, on choices, orientations, conceptions that were more or less complete, on the deepening of a spirituality that founded its truth in the most concrete aspects of the spouses’ lives. It put its thinking to the test of an experience that arose and marked its time, a prime mover simultaneously positive and symbolic of spiritual study in the life of the Church.

The magazine began in 1945 and continued until 1967. An evaluation of its influence in the complex adventure of couples’ movements enables us to define fairly easily its role in the group of cultural currents where it is well known and distinctive. Retracing the theological and spiritual profile of *L’Anneau d’Or* within the perspective of deep research into marriage and conjugal life makes people realise that the magazine itself was a journey of conjugal spirituality that was significantly valuable.

It is difficult to explain why the attention brought to the magazine through theological criticism has never been synthesised by an authoritative voice. However, the readers’ esteem gave it a positive evaluation that understood its novelty and its stimulating vision, during the times when it was being indiscriminately criticised.

Be that as it may, the significant role of *L’Anneau d’Or* in the history of French spirituality movements compels us to ask questions about its sources, its characteristics and its composition, and the rich and vast topics it covered. Unquestionably, the magazine set out to found a conjugal spirituality, that was understood as an art of experiencing marriage in a Christian way, that could not be dissociated from cultural sensitivities and the theological institutions of its time.

It influenced the spouses’ spiritual journey, full of similarities and differences, in affinity and complementarity to the renewal movement in the Church. It did not appear as a closed, complete whole, with defined limits, but more as research open to listening to those who experienced and lived out their marriage. This is where it ran risks, but also had its opportunities. Undoubtedly, it found within it the possibility of avoiding simplistic rigidity that would have broken the impetus of its research.



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The Attractiveness of a Crisis. The Core Revelation

The reasons that caused *L'Anneau d'Or* to begin its original thinking and research, according to its own methods, were declared unambiguously by Father Caffarel, its founder. From the beginning, spouses had sincere questions about the meaning of their love and about the commitment undertaken in the sacrament of marriage, to live out love, not starting out from their limited aspirations, but in the name of Another, whom they would never cease to discover.

Father Caffarel welcomed and thought about these questions with the conviction that the sacrament gave the conjugal experiences an unsuspected depth. The conjugal experience is, in itself, a sign of human beings' inadequacy, and thus the possibility of discovering one's personal identity through the mediation of another person, endless reflection of another identity that cannot be considered as the ultimate authority.

The sacrament '*through the grace of the other*' opens up to the Other, whence derives all otherness, all demand for desire, all words never heard, every mission to accomplish, through the reciprocal gift of life and death, the face of love that is always "*Other*" and forever "*Beyond*." In the spouses' love, something of God's love is born, precisely because it is an open book, not yet fully completed.

In order to understand the spiritual scope of the magazine, it is necessary to go back to the sources, which are Father Caffarel's thoughts, the goals he aimed for, and the crises that brought them to life. The fundamental orientations and choices that marked its unusual vitality need to be explored, but, in the interest in brevity, we will have to skim over the comparison with the works and movements that represent the immediate context in which *L'Anneau d'Or* sprung forth.

In comparison to the attempts in certain French circles, that had their specific aims and features, *L'Anneau d'Or* reduced the range of its reflections. The conjugal spirituality created by the magazine was built around a central intuition that was related to the demands of their historical context in which it arose and defined itself.

The magazine concentrated on a unique attitude of spiritual renewal that revealed marriage as a place where the holiness of spouses would happen, where Christ's face would be recognised and where he would be followed. Couples, who wanted to know each other and to love completely, needed to enter fully into the mystery of Christ.

In discovering the deep soil where the nourishing roots of *L'Anneau d'Or* are plunged, we ought not to forget, without necessarily make it the reason for everything, the rich proliferation of movements and groups for couples that were messengers of a particular feeling within the Church. Between these movements and the magazine, there was almost a silent exchange, a reciprocal interaction that nonetheless excluded any dependency.

The Teams of Our Lady, born in the Paris region in 1938, were founded and structured by Father Caffarel, whose intention was to give a solid Christian formation to spouses through the means of reciprocal support, and that answered a great and unique intention: to live out the ideal of love and unity that Christian marriage demands and celebrates.



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Indeed, it was necessary to dig down to the roots of the conjugal experience and the Christian reality of marriage had to be understood completely. *L'Anneau d'Or* has been rightly recognised as a living commentary, defined by the *Caffarel Teams*, of new elements that justified its motives and structure and stimulated its research: expansive vigorousness and enthusiasm, desire and inventiveness for a renewal, a desire for unity in the spouses' life and love. The magazine was thus presented in the press, "*Beside the Church's teachings, transmitted by priests, one will read the experiences of couples who strive to live as Christians.*"¹

New Seeds straining towards Life

The analysis and in-depth study of the Christian dimension of conjugal love also fixed attention on the thanksgiving aspect of marriage and on the mystical opening that countered, by finding a cure for it, the unease that prevailed in the modern world and Christian marriage.

Marriage is a life of holiness and considering it to be a separation between the Gospel and life is an unwarranted and false manoeuvre. It is a question of the spouses being face to face with the mystery of Christ. "*The mystery of marriage can only be truly understood and experienced by Christians keen to know, to contemplate and to live the mystery of Christ. I assure in no uncertain terms: if this stipulation does not occur, what we have to say about marriage will lose its transcendent originality, its essence, its essential truth.*"²

L'Anneau d'Or became a progressive elaboration of spirituality for spouses, a theological and spiritual work as well as a philosophical and anthropological reflection. The choice of arena where it operated enabled it to warmly welcome the sensibilities of the intellectually and spiritually better prepared ambience.

The variety of topics and problems treated gave the journal's production a complex richness thanks to new analyses and new syntheses, in order to be able to understand and express more global values and dimensions, to create movements that concentrated on the theological and spiritual meaning of the sacrament of marriage, to grasp the particular emphases that make man and woman the bearers, inseparable from the mystery of Christ's marriage.

The Magazine

It is important to say that *L'Anneau d'Or* is something more than a simple title. It is the work of a large team that made it into something very lively, efficient, thorough, and eagerly awaited by its readers. The readers could be considered to be the critical and provocative conscience of the magazine, because they were like a tuning fork for the editorial committee.

In a few short words, we can distinguish certain periods that correspond to the development of *L'Anneau d'Or's* thinking.

From 1945 to 1953, the journey of marriage spirituality is that which led the spouses to the discovery of love and to the wealth of intrinsic values that the sacrament's grace provides, according to God's definitive

¹ "Présentation," *L'Anneau d'Or*, n°1, 1945-1946.

² Ambroise-Marie CARRE, *L'Anneau d'Or*, n° 99-100, 1961, p. 352.



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will. This was not a moralising perspective that suggested “experiencing marriage well or correctly,” but instead by theological research made finding the mystery of salvation in the experience that the spouses lived out constantly every day. “Married life is considered to be ‘sequela Christi’ (walking in Christ’s footsteps).”

From 1954 to 1960, the magazine went through an evolution stage of great importance for its theological-spiritual orientation. It opened up to an ecclesial dimension. Centred on the relationship between the Christian community and the wedded community, it was resolute on an important point: that of the ‘domestic church’, a community of salvation that reproduced the great characteristics of the Church on a lesser scale. The spirituality of marriage was a call to live out an ecclesial harmony, intended to ‘benefit the Church.’

1961 to 1965 represents the richest and most positive phase of this spiritual research. It was a time of returning to the sources, rich in maturity, of fruitful resumption of the initial plan, of happy consolidation in the sacramental perspective of marriage, henceforth recorded within the fundamental dogma of Christianity. The favourable climate enabled a united vision of marriage in which dogma, morality, the sacraments and spirituality were intimately linked in a lively unity with the Pascal mystery of Christ, who gives himself to the Church. It is in this period that marriage becomes visible as a way of living/experiencing charity, as a spiritual environment that finds its inner guideline in the mystery of Christ and its ultimate origin in Trinitarian love.

The two years between 1965 and 1967 are the years of decline and will be studied further on.

Marriage, a Reality to be Revealed

L’Anneau d’Or’s spirituality cannot be considered to be a commentary on a theology that should be applied to life. The originality of its method lies in the fact that the theology was taken from the spouses’ lives. It is the experience of the reality of marriage. As such, it interpreted and revealed what was experienced. It was a process and an explanation that revealed all the treasures of love and marriage.

A theological truth appeared to be essential: God is Love. Thinking of marriage as based on love, explaining it through an analysis of what love motivated, had been the magazine’s point of departure. Once centred on this love - the framing structure of matrimonial spirituality - *L’Anneau d’Or* developed and progressed with a clearly defined identity. It constituted a serious and radical revision of conjugal spirituality.

The couple became important. Its nature is a reciprocity of mind and body, a concrete state of being that allows love to be realized by being faithful to itself in the indissoluble weaving of the flesh and the spirit and in the drive towards total and divine love: God. All this meant that there was no opposition between human love and divine love. The former is the seeking of the latter.

Divine love is a call made to human love. “It does not mean leaving one for the other.”³ The importance attributed to conjugal love in the project of Christian marriage was formulated based on a dynamic principle of development: it is by going beyond oneself that love becomes even more itself; it is in the practise of purification and patient transformation that love develops. The idea of recreating it continually,

³ Henri CAFFAREL, “Vocation de l’amour,” *L’Anneau d’Or*, n° 2-3-4, 1945, p. 17.



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in order to bring it back to its true origin, is the spiritual journey that the magazine defined for the spouses. And in that idea, the fact that a love of God and a love of the spouse co-exist, is highlighted. The knowledge that one loves God in the person to whom one is united and that one loves the other with the love that God loves is also found there. Conjugal love, by aligning its pattern on gift, transcends its own possibilities and natural structure and yet remains as it is, as much in its tenderness as in its temptations.

The close relationship between love and divine grace helps conjugal spirituality to be integrated into new larger directions that can immediately be linked to the sacramentality of marriage.

The sacrament specifies that the spouses' love is a privileged manifestation of the love of Christ and of the Church, but on top of that, it is made accessible to God in order to be experienced as a way of salvation, as a permanent place of holiness. Starting from a definite necessity that sought a Christian way of living from conjugal love, *L'Anneau d'Or*, at the end of its reflection on the sacrament, simultaneously developed a 'mystique' of marriage.

Conjugal spirituality as a search for holiness does not resemble a summary of principles where the answers could be considered as solutions. It is a very real inner sphere, in which the man and woman journey together in a fidelity that they live not as an exterior rule, but as a requirement of love. Furthermore, by offering modes of fulfilment that are not results of incoherence or fantasy, in faith the sacrament sets down fidelity as another aspect of love. Without fidelity, there is no love. All this is naturally taken into consideration "*for better and for worse.*"

The sacrament creates the vital atmosphere in which spirituality can develop its most radical meaning. It is a path to holiness where the state of being is original. The couple is called to love without end. This implies that through God the spouses meet their partner in a relationship that satisfies all their capacities for knowledge and love. For the couple, agreeing to this encounter means reaching the truth of their being.

Themes that Generate Conjugal Spirituality

We already said that *L'Anneau d'Or*, obviously, did not start from scratch. Everything the magazine said plunged deep and solid roots into the area of the identity of the laity's role in the Church. Being spouses is typically and specifically a lay experience. Let us say that the human experience of a man and a woman's love is contained in a continuous relationship with the Christian experience. The two are linked according to a logic of intrinsic excess that is a logic of increasing spiritualisation, centred on charity. Rediscovering the mystique of marriage, restoring strength to its theological meaning gives marriage an admirable human quality.

The Primacy of the Spiritual

The need to refocus on a larger dimension of conjugality emerges from married life that is intensely experienced. This "augmentation of the soul" gives strength and vigour to the spouses' lives, that purifies its roots by bringing them to a greater depth without which existence remains disordered and valueless, caught up in dull monotony and deprived of meaning.

The consciousness that the soul at the summit of spiritual concentration frees up divine energy, prompts the spouses' need to pray, provides a means of encountering God, of feeling themselves to be connected



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by his call in their own personal lives. Prayer makes one go beyond one's limits and participate in the intensity of existence. It generates a search for communion in a true abandoning to life without the vulnerability of insecurity, without the emptiness of things "unresolved" that feed worry. It recreates the soul in truth and tenderness to rediscover within it the place that is destined to be the temple of God, the living place of the Spirit, the field where the Word grows.

The Sit-Down

In the wisdom that the "Sit-Down" encourages, the spouses find time to offer themselves to each other 'face-to-face' without any other concerns other than listening to the Lord, like two children who question their Father. A lucid and religious look at their life together, made up of revealing oneself to the other, of discovering the other, of calling on them, this is, at heart, responding to the person's needs. Love has a need to know, to communicate the most rare and truest reality of one to another.

Marriage involves the slow and hard work of knowledge and love that is resolved in "*knowing in order to love.*" Love cannot ignore the value of knowledge without degenerating into sentimentalism that is false. Father Caffarel wrote, "*I was telling you that conjugal love declines when the spouses give up on seeking to discover each other every day. Similarly, in relationships with God, love declines when the effort for knowledge slackens.*"⁴

The Couple; a Church Treasure

Within the conjugal values that marriage consecrates, the consideration of the sacramentality of fecundity topics becomes a consideration of ecclesial significance. The couple thus becomes a treasure for the entire Church. Fecundity appears as an obvious essential to a permanent spiritual reality. It involves giving oneself. Fecundity is the couple's achievement in the giving of themselves. The biological fact is not to be excluded, but undoubtedly, the perspective is larger; it is that of the mystery of love, which, through itself, is creator. In order to bring love to its completion, fecundity becomes a permanent aim that the couple cannot give up. It is the fruit of the love that unites man to woman, with ever-greater means and with particular emphasis on prayer and vocation.

Results

Placing love at the centre of marriage is a truth that can indeed be termed as innovative if one considers the era and the theological doctrine current at that time. Marriage thought of, and expressed, as a mystery of love in all its manifestations and in all its dimensions requires the highest standards of charity for the spouses' spiritual life. The conjugal experience that takes place in the human being has become theological.

The sacramental dimension that was extended to all conjugal realities enlarged the traditional horizon of theological reflection. In this particular perspective, *L'Anneau d'Or* opened up ways that still remain to be explored. It established the fact that between Christ and the Church and between man and woman there is an attraction towards interiority. A reciprocity that could be called mystical. Developed in such a manner,

⁴ Henri CAFFAREL, "Lettres sur la prière", *L'Anneau d'Or*, n° 75-76, 1957, p. 229.



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conjugal spirituality enables a morality, that is an impetus that pushes towards holiness, to emerge from the depths.

Demise of the Magazine

L'Anneau d'Or ceased publication in 1967. On the face of it, an unexpected end. Let us just say, "on the face of it," because in reality, this ending was brought about by a combination of diverse factors. The magazine disappeared before the general crisis of May 1968, but this crisis was already festering, what with the depletion of research subjects, the loss of certain collaborators who had been its driving force, and a fermentation of new ideas that *L'Anneau d'Or* did not succeed in controlling. The new generation had some reservations and probed problems that partially preceded and partially were to follow Vatican II's work.

Questions about birth control, contraception, divorce, family breakdown, non-marital cohabitation emerged. In France of the 1970s, 18% of youth between 20 and 24 years old were concerned with these ideas. These problems also figured on the pastoral horizon of the 1980 Bishop's Synod.

L'Anneau d'Or would have needed to renew itself in order to have been able to rendezvous with History and life. The testimonies of, and calls from, spouses led to new paths. Marriage themes were going to be confronted with larger and more complex issues than those whose dimension was theological and spiritual. The moral, legal and socio-cultural aspects of married life could no longer be separate from the theological and spiritual aspects that had once been so happily explored. The new spirit of the times demanded a cultural metamorphosis of *L'Anneau d'Or*.

Must we deduce that it was unfit for a given moment in history? It would be unfair not to recognise that *L'Anneau d'Or* had the merit of having illuminated the path of conjugal spirituality and of having given zeal and strength to those who read it. *L'Anneau d'Or*, at heart, is the story of a leaven that never ceased working in the Church, always subject to the times. Its contribution to the Church's pastoral activity was valuable.

The absence was felt in the years that followed its demise. If we look back on the work accomplished, we can recognise its quality and depth. If we look ahead, we ought to note certain unrealised possibilities. This dual gaze enables us to correctly judge its work by measuring its importance, the theological and spiritual phenomenon that *L'Anneau d'Or* embodied: a fruitful period, an enriching period in French spirituality.