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# AQUINAS ON POLYGAMY

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I will present Thomas Aquinas's discussion of whether polygamy is contrary to the natural law. My goal is to give Christians living and ministering in Papua New Guinea conceptual tools for thinking about polygamy and the Christian understanding of marriage. In Papua New Guinea today pre-Christian marriage practices still exist, and there is some confusion among Christians regarding whether polygamy is contrary to Christianity, especially since there are many examples of polygamy in the Old Testament. First, I explain in detail Aquinas's teaching that God's law for creatures manifests in nature (natural law) and that this natural law should be the basis for the human laws of a community. Humans sometimes err in understanding or applying the natural law, so God has revealed the divine law through Scripture in order to guide us to him and to correct human error. Second, I cover Aquinas's explanations of the natural purposes of marriage, and his judgment that polygamy partially agrees with the natural law regarding marriage and partially disagrees. By contrast, monogamy fully agrees with our rational and social nature. Third, I discuss Aquinas's belief that Scripture reveals God's original plan for marriage, and that in Christianity marriage becomes a sacrament signifying the relationship between Christ and the Church. Aquinas presents a number of arguments for why polygamy is incompatible with Christianity. No Christian should be a polygamist, and all polygamists have excluded Christ from the life of their family.<sup>1</sup>

## **Key Words**

Marriage, polygamy, natural law, sacramental theology, Catholic moral theology, Thomas Aquinas, sexual ethics

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a paper delivered at the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools 2017 conference, entitled "Church and Politics," held at the Catholic Theological Institute, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea on 10–13 July. I thank the participants for comments on the paper, and I am grateful to Angus Brook for comments on an earlier draft.

## INTRODUCTION

Why should twenty-first century Melanesians care about what Thomas Aquinas, writing in thirteenth century Europe, had to say about marriage? There are four reasons. First, many Christians with an interest in philosophy and historical theology consider Aquinas to be a model for Christian thinkers, because Aquinas was convinced that right reason and Christian truth are always in harmony. For Aquinas, Christians need not fear advances in science or philosophy, but should strive to use secular learning to better understand and defend the teachings of the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> Second, while Aquinas is often regarded as the greatest medieval philosopher, he was a theologian by profession, and so his work is a synthesis of philosophical and biblical arguments. Insofar as human nature and Scripture do not change, his arguments remain relevant. Third, Aquinas himself lived before the modern era, so some of his ideas resonate better with non-western cultures than with the modern West. In particular, some parts of his teaching on the purpose of marriage fit in well with the traditional understanding of marriage in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG). Fourth, Aquinas is well aware that many Old Testament patriarchs and kings had multiple wives and that polygamy is the norm in certain cultures;<sup>3</sup> therefore, Aquinas does not simply condemn polygamy, but tries to understand the manner in which polygamy partially agrees with and partially disagrees with human nature. Aquinas's basic position is that polygamy may have been permissi-

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<sup>2</sup> In the Catholic Church, Aquinas was put forward as a model for theologians by Pope Leo XIII, a recommendation repeated by John Paul II. See Pope Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1879). Online: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_04081879\\_aeterni-patris.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html). Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), Chap. 4, §43–45. Online: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (ST), trans. English Dominican Fathers (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947) III, Suppl., q. 65, a. 1, obj. and ad 1–2, and ad 8; a. 2, sed contra and corpus; and a. 5. Thomas's work is divided into questions (a general topic), which are in turn divided into articles (a specific question about that topic), which are composed of objections (arguments for positions against Thomas's own, indicated by "obj."), sed contra (support for Thomas's position), corpus (Thomas's position), and replies to the objections (Thomas's responses to the objections, indicated by "ad"). The entire *Summa* is available in English translation at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.html>.

ble in some circumstances and cultures in the past, but is completely incompatible with Christian marriage.

In this paper, I will present my own synthesis of Aquinas's discussion of polygamy and marriage from his works, with a focus on the *Summa Theologiae*. My goal is to give Christians living and ministering in PNG conceptual tools for thinking about polygamy and the Christian understanding of marriage. My presentation is selective. Aspects of Aquinas's thought which I disagree with or find unhelpful will generally be passed over in silence. I do not endorse all of Aquinas's teaching on sexual ethics and male-female relations, but I find the material I present here at least plausible, unless otherwise noted. The way he analyses polygamy is essentially correct. From my own experience of living in PNG as a Catholic missionary, I observe that traditional pre-Christian understandings and practices of marriage exist side by side with outward profession of faith in Jesus Christ. In the Catholic Church, this has created a difficult pastoral situation in which many Catholics never receive the sacrament of marriage and some even practice polygamy. In the Catholic tradition, adults practicing polygamy are still members of the Church, but are not permitted to receive the Eucharist. In general, my impression is that a large number of Melanesian Christians do not understand why polygamy is wrong.<sup>4</sup> This paper is my small contribution to this pastoral and catechetical problem, which is faced by all the churches in Melanesia who wish to uphold the Christian understanding of marriage.

### A NOTE ON SOURCES

Before presenting Aquinas's thoughts on polygamy, I must note a methodological problem. The *Summa Theologiae* ("the whole of theology") is Aquinas's systematic introduction to Christian truth. The first part of the *Summa* explains God's creation and governance of the world. The second part argues that all humans seek to be in union with God, and either draw towards God through good acts or move away from God through wicked acts. The third and final part covers salvation and how God makes it possible for us to be in union with him. Aquinas covers the mystery of the incarnation, the sacraments, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment.

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<sup>4</sup> These claims are based on the unpublished research work of my undergraduate students, Daniel Sakias and Solomon Bom, who studied the ways in which marriage problems keep Catholics from actively practising their faith, and on my conversations with estranged first wives of polygamous husbands.

The section on the incarnation and part of the section on the sacraments were completed before Aquinas died in 1274. His secretary and students, perhaps working from Aquinas's outline, constructed a Supplement to the *Summa Theologiae* after his death which completed Aquinas's project. They put together excerpts from Aquinas's discussions of the sacraments and the next life from his *Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences*, which was Aquinas's first work of systematic theology, written in 1252–54 as part of the requirements for becoming a Master in Theology.<sup>5</sup> While the Supplement may not express his mature thought on the sacrament of marriage (which we will never know), because the Supplement contains Aquinas's most detailed and accessible discussion of polygamy, it will be the main source for this article. The discrepancies between the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Sentences Commentary* will not affect my main argument. I will also draw upon Aquinas's discussions of marriage in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, written in 1259–65, which is a more concise summary of Christian truth.<sup>6</sup>

Questions 41–68 of the Supplement discuss marriage and question 65 discusses polygamy. In q. 65, a. 1, Aquinas asks “whether it is against the natural law to have several wives?” His answer consists of a careful examination of the natural meaning of marriage and of the Christian sacramental meaning of marriage. In what follows, Aquinas's understanding of natural law,<sup>7</sup> his application of natural law to polygamy, his understanding of marriage as a sacrament, and his sacramental and scriptural arguments against polygamy will be discussed in order.

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<sup>5</sup> See Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. I: *The Person and His Work*, rev. ed., trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 39–45 and 332–33, for further detail about the *Sentences Commentary*.

<sup>6</sup> See *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG) III, trans. Vernon Bourke (New York: Hanover House, 1955–57), chap. 122. Online: <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles.htm>. The arguments in this work simply focus on why polygamy and polyandry (a wife with many husbands) are wrong. Aquinas's *Commentary on the Sentences* has the same discussion of polygamy as the Supplement, but is not available in English translation. Aquinas also discusses polygamy in some of his biblical commentaries.

<sup>7</sup> *ST* III, Suppl. Q. 65, a. 1 begins with a lengthy discussion of natural law. I will unpack this discussion with material from the “Treatise on Law” in *ST* I–II, even though the original background for q. 65, a. 1 would have been in the *Sentences Commentary*.

## NATURAL LAW

According to Aquinas's discussion of law in *Summa Theologiae* I–II, qq. 90–108,<sup>8</sup> a law is “an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, a law is a public directive on how to act which originates from the understanding and reasoning of a proper authority. The purpose of law is to direct individual members of the community towards the common good, which is the flourishing of the whole community both corporately and individually.<sup>10</sup> This flourishing is similar to the Melanesian ideal of *gutpela sinduan*. Aquinas recognizes four kinds of law: eternal, natural, human, and divine.

As a Christian, but also as a philosopher, Aquinas believes that God is the eternal creator and ruler of the universe.<sup>11</sup> God creates all things according to a divine design, similar to the way in which an architect first formulates a plan for a house in his mind, a plan that governs the building of the house and according to which the finished house is judged. The Creator can also be compared to a statesman who formulates a constitution which orders and calls into being a political community and which serves as a standard for judging the behaviour of the community and the justice of the laws that the community makes.<sup>12</sup> God's design is the plan according to which the whole universe was created, against which all creatures are judged, and by which God directs all the actions of creatures.<sup>13</sup> Since God is eternal, Aquinas calls the design in God's mind the eternal law.

Just as a built house expresses the plan of the house that is in its maker's mind, the nature of every creature is an image of God's design for that kind of creature. All creatures have certain purposeful properties that follow from their nature: fire is hot and burns upwards, cats grow fur in order to

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<sup>8</sup> Q. 90 explains what a law is in general. Q. 91 summarizes the eternal, natural, human, and divine law. The first three are then discussed in more depth in qq. 93–94 and 95–97 respectively. The rest of the treatise is on divine law, as revealed in the Old and New Testaments.

<sup>9</sup> *ST* I–II, q. 90, a. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *ST* I–II, q. 90, a. 2.

<sup>11</sup> See *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3 for arguments for God's existence; qq. 44–45 for arguments for creation; and qq. 103–105 for God's providential rule over all.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas gives both examples briefly in *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 1.

<sup>13</sup> *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 1. Aquinas is quite firm that God's providence rules infallibly over all creatures. See *ST* I, q. 22.

stay warm, plants grow leaves in order to collect sunlight. There are certain things that are naturally good and naturally bad for each kind of creature. For example, air is bad for fish but good for mammals; milkweed is poisonous to humans but good for monarch caterpillars. Aquinas believes that God has imprinted within the nature of creatures inclinations that direct them towards what is good and away from what is bad.<sup>14</sup> For example, the continuation of a species is good, and all living things naturally seek to reproduce. Animals do not learn how to conceive, bear, and care for children; rather they are directed towards the behaviours appropriate to them by their nature. Thus, salmon swim up river to their spawning grounds, birds build their nests, and spiders spin egg cases in accordance with God's design for them, the eternal law. To build nests for the sake of its young is natural for an eagle, and to do otherwise would be against its nature. "God imprints on the whole of nature the principles of its proper actions."<sup>15</sup> Thomas calls these innate inclinations within creatures the natural law, for these inclinations direct creatures to accomplish what is good for them in the natural order.

Humans also have these inclinations for what is naturally good and away from what is naturally bad. Unlike animals, humans are also able to reflect upon their own nature and thereby reach an understanding of what is naturally good and bad for humans. Thus, Aquinas says that humans have a two-fold participation in the eternal law. First, like all creatures, we have natural inclinations to what is good for humans and to actions that achieve that good. Second, we naturally understand certain things and activities as good, and we consciously direct our behavior to the good. Thereby, we become "provident" for ourselves and others.<sup>16</sup> Regarding the second point, Aquinas teaches that humans act according to practical reasoning, through which we articulate and then follow basic principles for individual actions. The most basic principle is that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided."<sup>17</sup> All humans naturally and consciously seek what they perceive to be good and avoid what they perceive to be evil. Furthermore, our natural inclinations guide us to what is good and bad for humans, on the basis of which we formulate principles that govern our actions. For exam-

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<sup>14</sup> *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *ST* I–II, q. 93, a. 5.

<sup>16</sup> *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 3; q. 93, a. 6.

<sup>17</sup> *ST* I–II, q. 94, a. 2.

ple, like all animals, humans naturally desire to reproduce, and so we naturally recognize the relationships and materials needed for reproduction and the raising of children as good, and what hinders or makes reproduction and the raising of children impossible as evil. Likewise, we naturally recognize that living in community with other humans is good, and so we understand that actions which destroy community life such as lying and stealing are evil.<sup>18</sup> Our natural understandings of good and evil act as basic principles or precepts that guide our behaviour, such that Aquinas calls them the natural law. Due to our rational powers, the natural law exists more properly as a law within the human mind, whereas in animals the natural law is only present unconsciously in their instincts. The natural law supports what helps humans to achieve the good and opposes what hinders our achievement of the good.

Unlike animals, which unreflectively follow their inclinations, humans consciously understand what is naturally good and bad and choose how to act, with the result that humans are able to act contrary to the natural law. We can perform acts that are contrary to our rational natures and which deprive ourselves and others of happiness. For example, meat naturally satisfies our hunger and eating meat correctly results in health, but eating meat incorrectly, by being gluttonous, results in sickness. Those who violate the natural law ultimately harm themselves. Aquinas, however, does not think that we simply will to do what we know to be evil. Rather, when we do wrong, we will to achieve something that is good in general, but in a way that is wrong. For example, in a developed society, one needs money in order to secure the material goods necessary for life. Therefore, money is good, but, at the same time, stealing undermines the trust and security needed for communal living and so is wrong. The bank robber chooses to break the natural law in order to gain something that is good. For Aquinas, almost all wrong-doing is based on the false principle that the end justifies the means.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, since humans are rational animals, our rationality transforms the inclinations and actions we share with animals such that actions

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<sup>18</sup> *ST* I–II, q. 94, a. 2. Unfortunately Aquinas merely sketches the connection between natural inclination, natural understanding of good and bad, and our articulation of the precepts of natural law. His examples are quite brief.

<sup>19</sup> These comments are inspired by *ST* II.1, qq. 6–21, on human action. Aquinas’s own investigations of human freedom, what makes an action wrong, and why we choose what is wrong are far too detailed for me to summarize here.



that would be natural for animals are often irrational and, therefore, unnatural for humans. For example, animals, lacking any sense of property, cannot steal but take what they can for survival. On the other hand, humans, who survive by altering their environment through their labour, understand what property is and have a basic understanding that stealing is wrong, though the nature of property differs in different cultures.<sup>20</sup> Our rational nature transforms the desires which we have in common with animals and is the source of uniquely humanly desires, such as the desires for truth and for the divine. To intentionally act in a manner that prevents a human act from accomplishing its natural purpose is to act against the natural law.<sup>21</sup> For example, the purpose of speech is to share our ideas with each other; therefore, lying is against the natural purpose of speech and so is against the natural law.<sup>22</sup> Also, eating is for the sake of the health of the body and so gluttony, which destroys the health of the body, is against the natural law and wrong.<sup>23</sup>

When humans live together in community, they create human laws and develop customs that apply the natural law to their own particular circumstances and set in place punishments for violating the law. Aquinas will often explain the creation of human laws in terms of the application of the general principles of the natural law to the particular circumstances of human life which often involve conflicting factors.<sup>24</sup> For example, humans naturally understand that killing other humans is bad, but human laws will determine for that community exactly which kinds of killing are wrong, what the punishment for the wrong kinds of killing should be (jail time, execution, compensation, and so forth), and what can be done when the natural law seems to make conflicting demands regarding human life. For

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<sup>20</sup> *ST* II–II, q. 65, a. 1 says that it is natural for humans to possess external things. A. 2, ad 2 explains that the details of private property are created by human law.

<sup>21</sup> *ST* III, Suppl., q. 65, a. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *ST* I, q. 110, a. 3.

<sup>23</sup> A further aspect of our rational nature is that humans can choose to not satisfy a natural desire for certain lower goods in order to achieve a higher good. Thus, for example, a hermit may give up the good of human society and a priest may give up the good of the married life in order to better satisfy his or her desire for God. A consideration of celibacy is important and relevant to this discussion, but is beyond the scope of this paper. However, see *ST* II–II, q. 152, a. 2 on why virginity is lawful, and my own “Plato’s Argument for Celibacy,” *Australasian Catholic Record* 92 (2015): 473–81, for an attempt to reconcile celibacy and the desire for reproduction.

<sup>24</sup> *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 3; q. 95, a. 2.

example, if I am attacked, my desire for self-preservation seems to be at odds with respect for my attacker's life, but most law codes allow one to kill in self-defense. These laws can be explicitly formulated by the leaders of the community, and/or they can be found in the customary practices of the people.<sup>25</sup>

Human laws and customs can also be in error. Just as individual humans make errors in speculative reasoning (for example, a mistake in a maths problem), so too can individual humans and communities make mistakes in practical reasoning. Obviously those in power can simply legislate in their own self-interest against the common good, as for example when the white people in South Africa and the American South developed law codes to subjugate black people. In these cases, such laws are unjust and have no moral force.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, a community may genuinely think that certain practices follow from the natural law and so develop human laws and customs that support them. Aquinas argues that the basic principles of the natural law cannot be ignored, but their application to actual life can go awry. A community may simply not think through what the natural law requires of them regarding a certain behavior, or a community's practical reasoning may be dulled through vice so that it refuses to apply natural law to a certain situation.<sup>27</sup> Just as humankind's power to engage in speculative reasoning develops over time (as seen in the historical progress of the sciences), so too does humankind's moral reasoning develop over time, such that the political institutions developed by an older generation may come to be seen as deficient and unjust by future generations. Thus, Aquinas teaches that it is natural for human laws and customs to progress and become more accurate reflections of the natural law.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See *ST I–II*, q. 90, a. 3, on formulating laws and q. 97, aa. 2–3 on custom as law. In the latter, Aquinas suggests that customs can actually be more rational than written laws, as it can become customary to not follow an impractical or unjust law. Thus, custom sometimes corrects poor laws.

<sup>26</sup> See *ST I–II*, q. 90, a. 2 and q. 96, a. 4, on unjust laws.

<sup>27</sup> See *ST I–II*, q. 93, a. 6; q. 94, aa. 4–6; and q. 97, a. 1, on the difficulty of making human laws and the common reasons for failure. The laws and customs that one grows up with shape one's apprehension of the moral law, so that a community can be blind to the fact that a behaviour violates the natural law. Thomas offers as examples the acceptance of stealing among certain Germanic tribes and of homosexuality among the ancient pagans.

<sup>28</sup> *ST I–II*, q. 97, a. 1. In a. 2, Thomas, however, advises caution in changing the law, since much of the force of law comes from custom and habit. The law should only be changed when the benefit is clear.

Because of the natural limitations and fallibility of humans in expressing and enacting the requirements of the natural law, God has also revealed the divine law in the Bible. The divine law is a standard that corrects mistakes in human law, addresses moral issues that human law cannot touch (such as impure thinking), and directs us towards right relations with God.<sup>29</sup> Just as our understanding of the natural law progresses over time, so too does the revelation of the divine law and the human understanding of the divine law.<sup>30</sup> According to Aquinas, the Old Testament law was directed towards humans at an earlier stage of moral, intellectual, and spiritual development. Even though the Old Testament law and the New Testament law have the same goals – directing humanity towards its flourishing, promoting righteous action, and simply encouraging people to behave lawfully – the provisions of the Old Testament law tend to be earthly and imperfect in comparison to New Testament law.<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that the Old Testament law is bad, but simply that it is imperfect in comparison with New Testament law, just as an essay by a university student may be quite good in itself, but imperfect in comparison to an essay by a scholar. Therefore, practices permitted by the Old Testament may have to be abolished or modified in the light of the New Testament revelation.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, human laws and customs

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<sup>29</sup> See *ST I–II*, q. 91, a. 4, on the limitations of human law which are overcome by the divine law. Aquinas also says that the goal of human law is to bring peace to the human community, whereas the divine law directs us to everlasting happiness.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas mentions in *ST I–II*, q. 106, a. 4 that the understanding and enactment of the divine law varies in regard to different places, times, and persons. Thomas, however, believes that the Apostles enacted the divine law as perfectly as possible. I do not know if Aquinas explicitly recognized that Christian doctrine develops over time, which is the current official teaching of the Catholic Church. See the following notes for the progression of divine revelation.

<sup>31</sup> *ST I–II*, q. 91, a. 5. See also q. 98, a. 1; q. 98, a. 2, ad 1–2; q. 107, a. 1, corpus and ad 2. Aquinas is extremely interested in the relationship between the Old and New Law, so these are only representative texts. Aquinas insists that there is only one divine law, given imperfectly to the Jews and then perfectly in Jesus Christ.

<sup>32</sup> Aquinas divides the Old Law into moral precepts which indicate clearly what is good and bad for humans to do, ceremonial precepts which indicate how God is to be worshipped, and judicial precepts which make up the Jewish human law (e.g., what to do when someone steals). The moral precepts are eternally valid, but are clarified and intensified by Christ. The ceremonial precepts are abolished (*ST I–II*, q. 103, aa. 3–4). The judicial precepts can be adopted as the human law of a community, but are no longer binding in themselves (q. 104, a. 4). See q. 107, a. 2, for a summary of how the New Law fulfills the Old, and q. 108, a. 3, with the replies for examples of Christ's clarifications of the moral precepts.

may be revealed by the New Testament Law to have erred in their application or understanding of the natural law, such that they must be replaced or modified.<sup>33</sup>

### NATURAL LAW AND POLYGAMY

In *ST* III, Supplement, q. 65, a. 1, Aquinas applies these distinctions between natural law, human law, and divine law to the question of “whether it is against the natural law to have several wives?” Aquinas understands that judging whether polygamy is against the natural law is difficult because many societies have accepted polygamy and many societies still practice polygamy.<sup>34</sup> Many of the Old Testament patriarchs and kings also had multiple wives. Were they wrong to do so?

In Supplement, q. 41, a. 1, Aquinas argues that humans are naturally inclined to marriage, meaning that marriage is a good which the natural law directs us towards and protects. There are two reasons that marriage is naturally good for humans.<sup>35</sup> The first reason is that the natural purpose of the sexual act is production of offspring and all living things naturally desire to reproduce. Human offspring require extensive education and development until they are able to live on their own. Therefore, performing the act, whose natural consequence is conceiving a child (i.e., having sex), naturally obliges the sexual partners to stay together to raise the child by establishing a stable home for themselves and their offspring. For Aquinas, to perform the sexual act simply for pleasure is to act against the natural law, because then the man and woman are treating the production of offspring as

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<sup>33</sup> That the divine law is meant to correct human law is most clearly stated in *ST* I–II, q. 99, a. 2, ad 2. According to q. 100, a. 1, all of the moral precepts of the Old Law are in agreement with the natural law, though it may have been nearly impossible to clearly articulate them through natural reason alone. In *SCG* III, chap. 123, §7, Aquinas specifically mentions divine law as clarifying the natural law regarding marriage.

<sup>34</sup> In addition to the references given in note 3, it is probable that Aquinas was aware of polygamy in Islamic societies. Though *Reasons For The Faith Against Muslim Objections* does not explicitly mention polygamy, in chap. 7, lectio 1, §1000, of his *Commentary on I Corinthians*, trans. F. Larcher and D. Keating. Online: <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/SS1Cor.htm>, he claims that Muslims and Jews imagine that after the resurrection they will receive many wives. In *SCG* III, chap. 124, §4 and 6, Aquinas mentions what experience has shown regarding polygamy, though he may be referring to historical testimony.

<sup>35</sup> I note that Aquinas thinks there is nothing specifically Christian about these natural reasons for marriage, since Aquinas himself takes them from Aristotle. *ST* III, Suppl. q. 41, a. 1 references Aristotle, *Ethics* bk. VIII, chap. 11–12.

an accident or unwanted consequence of sex, whereas reproduction is the very purpose of sex. To conceive a child and not take care of it is an irrational act contrary to the natural law.<sup>36</sup> Given the time, materials, and educational opportunities needed for the successful raising of children, marriage is the human way of fulfilling the desire to reproduce, which is common to all animals but carried out by each animal in a manner appropriate to its species.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, Aquinas strongly believes that a human child will best be cared for by his biological parents, and that marriage ensures that a child's parents are known. It is unjust to the child for his potential parents to engage in sexual activity that leaves his paternity or his upbringing uncertain.<sup>38</sup> "Hence human nature rebels against an indeterminate union of the sexes and demands that a man should be united to a determinate woman and should abide with her a long time or even for a whole lifetime."<sup>39</sup> Therefore, marriage is the only appropriate setting for sex, and one should only engage in sexual activity if one is willing to raise the possible offspring with one's spouse. The first natural purpose of human sex is the

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<sup>36</sup> See *ST* I–II, q. 154, a. 1, on sinful behaviors that are against the nature of the human sexual act. See q. 154, a. 1 and *SCG* III, chap. 122, on why fornication—sex outside of marriage—is wrong.

<sup>37</sup> *ST* III, Suppl. q. 41, a.1; q. 65, a. 1, ad 4; q. 65, a. 3; and *SCG* III, chap. 122, §6 say that pairing for life is not natural in animals in which the young are able to quickly take care of themselves or in which the mother is capable of carrying for the young herself. By contrast, pairing for life is natural for some birds who must care for the offspring together!

<sup>38</sup> *ST* III, Suppl. q. 41, a. 1: "Now a child cannot be brought up and instructed unless it have certain and definite parents, and this would not be the case unless there were a tie between the man and a definite woman and it is in this that matrimony consists." Q. 62, a. 4 says that the adultery of the husband and wife are equally sins against the marriage relationship, but the adultery of the wife is a worse sin against the child because it confuses the paternity. Q. 65, a. 4, says that fornication is a mortal sin because it "destroys the due relations of the parent with the offspring that is nature's aim in sexual intercourse." Likewise, Aquinas in q. 65, a. 1, reply to ad contrary 8 and *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, q. 124, §1–2, says that polyandry is completely against natural law and has never been accepted in any society, because in polyandry it is unknown which man is to care for the child. Aquinas here seems bound by his own culture in which men had almost all the political and economic power. I note that polyandry was practiced in some eastern cultures.

<sup>39</sup> *ST* I–II, q. 154, a. 2. Aquinas also has several arguments for why marriage is naturally indissoluble. See *SCG* III, chap. 123, for the clearest presentation. In *ST* III, Suppl., q. 67, a. 1, he argues that divorce is against the natural law.

production of healthy, educated, virtuous, and loved human beings,<sup>40</sup> and marriage is the natural means to this end.

The second natural reason for marriage is that human beings are naturally social, for humans are “not self-sufficient in all things concerning life.”<sup>41</sup> Aquinas follows Aristotle in teaching that humans cannot be fully happy without friendship and community life. Even when a human is mature and no longer needs care and education, she cannot flourish on her own, for our rational abilities are only fully developed when we live in community. No human can reinvent the full wealth of human learning, and Aquinas notes that humans simply enjoy talking to each other. Furthermore, people have different gifts and interests, and community life is easier and happier when people are allowed to specialize and then share the products of their work with each other.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Aquinas believes that there are naturally certain tasks that men are better at than women and others that women are better at than men.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, when a man and a woman establish a family together, their abilities complement each other, and thus enable them to live a richer and happier life together.<sup>44</sup> In Supplement, q. 49, a. 1, obj. 2, Aquinas summarizes with approval Aristotle’s analysis in *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.12, that “the friendship between husband and wife is natural, and includes the virtuous, the useful, and the pleasant.” For Aristotle,

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<sup>40</sup> I thank Angus Brook for help with this formulation (personal communication). *ST* III, Suppl. q. 41, a. 1 says that parents provide existence, nourishment, and education to their children. See also q. 47, a. 2, ad 1.

<sup>41</sup> *ST* III, suppl., q. 41, a. 1.

<sup>42</sup> These last few lines are a summary of chapter 1 of Aquinas, *On Kingship*, trans. G. Phelan, rev. I.T. Eischmann (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1947). Online: <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/DeRegno.htm>. *On Kingship* is a recasting of Aristotle’s arguments in *Politics* I.1 for why humans naturally create communities.

<sup>43</sup> Notoriously, Aquinas considers that a man would be better helped in all activities by another man except in procreation and family life: “we may say that woman was made chiefly in order to be man’s helpmate in relation to the offspring, whereas the man was not made for this purpose” (q. 44, a. 2, ad 2). Aquinas explicitly denies that Eve was made to help Adam in works other than procreation in *ST* I, q. 92, a. 1, and he repeats this in q. 98, a. 2, sed contra. This sexism is also found in Aquinas’s presentation of the first reason for marriage, for he thinks that women generally lack the developed reason and physical strength to successfully raise children by themselves. I in no way support Aquinas’s theory of gender inequality, but I believe that his arguments for marriage can be disentangled from his thought on gender.

<sup>44</sup> *ST* III, suppl., q. 41, a. 1: The secondary end of marriage “is the mutual services which married persons render one another in household matters.”

friendships are based on utility (e.g., you are friends with your business partners), on pleasure (e.g., you are friends with those you play sports with), and on virtue (e.g., you are friends with someone because he or she is a good person). A good marriage is based on utility, pleasure, and virtue. Aquinas, in fact, goes beyond Aristotle by suggesting that marriage is the “greatest friendship” since the husband and wife are united together in the sexual act and “the partnership of the whole range of domestic activity.”<sup>45</sup>

For Aquinas, marriage is the foundation of the household, the first and most basic human society, through which humans can acquire the basic necessities of life and achieve a degree of self-sufficiency. In this regard, the traditional Melanesian understanding of the household may be closer to the medieval and ancient view than contemporary Western practice. By domestic activities, Aquinas probably has in mind the management of productive activities such as weaving and farming and caring for livestock and servants, just as the Melanesian husband and wife traditionally work together to keep gardens, raise pigs, and care for and direct their dependents. The husband and wife form the foundation of the basic unit of communal life. Following Aristotle, Aquinas teaches that families unite to form villages, villages unite to form cities (which includes all the territory that supports the city), and cities unite to form a kingdom.<sup>46</sup> Each higher level of community provides greater material security and further opportunities for our rational capacities. In sum, marriage is not merely a private affair, but is intimately connected to fulfilling humanity’s rational and social nature.<sup>47</sup> The marriage relationship is to be the greatest earthly friendship because it is the foundation for the household – the “society set up according to nature

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<sup>45</sup> *SCG* III, chap. 123, §6. The friendship of spouses is only mentioned in passing in the Supplement (e.g. q. 41, a. 2). It is a pity that Aquinas did not live to give his full thoughts on marriage in the *Summa Theologiae*, for the discussion of marriage in *Summa Contra Gentiles* stresses the friendship of the spouses in a way that the material from the *Sentences Commentary* does not.

<sup>46</sup> Aquinas, *On Kingship* I, chap. 2, §14. In this text, Aquinas mentions province as the highest community. In *ST* I–II, q. 40, he interchanges province with kingdom. Unlike Aristotle, but like Plato (*Laws* III), Aquinas recognizes that a city by itself is not sufficient for protection against political enemies. A kingdom or league of cities is required.

<sup>47</sup> The social dimension of marriage is one basis for Aquinas’s opposition to consanguineous marriages (marriage of people related by blood). In *ST* III, Suppl. q. 54, a. 3, he writes that “the accidental end of marriage is the binding together of mankind and the extension of friendship,” and there is no extension of friendship when kin marry (see also a. 4).

for everyday life.”<sup>48</sup> Marriage itself is a partial fulfillment of our natural desire to live in community and is the basis for the further fulfillment of that desire. To merely want to sleep with someone and not to live with him or her is contrary to the social nature of humanity, and thus is against the natural law.<sup>49</sup> In fornication, one treats the other as an object or tool for pleasure and not as a person with whom to enter into friendship.

Aquinas’s sexual ethics may initially come across as impersonal, namely that sex and marriage are only for procreation.<sup>50</sup> Aquinas, however, speaks from a biological point of view when explaining the natural end of sex, which is also the first end of marriage. As seen above, the proper human context for sex is the friendship between the spouses and the establishment of the household, the most basic human community. In the marriage relationship, a sexual partner is neither a tool for pleasure nor a tool for offspring, but is a friend for life.<sup>51</sup> Marriage itself is a “certain inseparable union of souls, by which husband and wife are pledged by a bond of mutual affection.”<sup>52</sup> Through sexual intercourse, this union is perfected (consummated), such that “the joining of husband and wife by matrimony is the greatest of all joinings, since it is a joining of soul and body.”<sup>53</sup> Therefore, Aquinas’s teaching on sex and marriage are consistent with the Catholic Church’s current teaching that marriage “is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of off-

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<sup>48</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics*, trans. E.L. Fortin and P.D. O’Neill, book 1, chapter 1, lectio 1, §26. Online: <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/Politics.htm>. The household is composed of three relationships: husband and wife, parents and children, and master and servant. Both Aquinas and Aristotle make it clear that the role of the wife and of the servants are different in nature, though, unfortunately, some of Aquinas’s arguments for the difference show his sexism. Wives have their own authority over children and servants.

<sup>49</sup> Thus, Aquinas, *ST III*, suppl., q. 65, a. 3, says that it is wrong to keep a concubine because then the sexual act is being done for pleasure alone and not for the sake of the offspring or to establish a family. A. 5 implies that a man wrongs a concubine by not treating her as a partner in “the community of works necessary for life.”

<sup>50</sup> Aquinas has an unfortunate tendency to focus only on procreation when explaining why fornication is wrong in *SCG III*, chap. 122 and *ST I–II*, q. 154, a. 2.

<sup>51</sup> When arguing for the indissolubility of marriage in *SCG III*, chap. 123, and against polygamy and bigamy in *ST III*, Suppl., qq. 65–66, Aquinas is often concerned that the man will use a woman and not treat her as an equally human partner in the marriage relationship.

<sup>52</sup> *ST III*, q. 29, a. 2.

<sup>53</sup> *ST III*, Suppl., q. 44, a. 2, ad 3.



spring.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, due to our rational natures, human sex has the twofold purposes of uniting a married couple together and generating children. Marriage is an indissoluble friendship which exists for the sake of that union and its natural product – the children. Therefore the two natural goods of marriage are well-raised children and faithful friendship between the husband and wife.<sup>55</sup> To these two natural purposes for marriage, Aquinas adds a supernatural or sacramental one, namely that marriage between Christians has the goal of signifying the mystical relationship between Christ and the Church, following Paul in Ephesians 5 and John in Rev 19:9 and 21:2.<sup>56</sup> I will further discuss this specifically Christian purpose in the next section.

In sum, Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* III, Supplement, q. 65, a. 1, considers whether polygamy is contrary to the purpose of marriage according to three viewpoints: first, insofar as humans are animals who seek to reproduce and raise offspring; second, insofar as humans are rational animals who seek a community of love and support; third, insofar as humans are Christians seeking union with Christ. An act is completely against the natural law if it makes the achieving of the natural end impossible, or it is partially against natural law if it makes the achieving of the end difficult or unlikely.<sup>57</sup> Aquinas judges that polygamy is not contrary to the first natural purpose of marriage, because a man, with the proper cultural and community support, is able to care for multiple wives and their offspring. The par-

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<sup>54</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Homebush: St. Pauls, 1994), §1601 and repeated throughout. This teaching is often referred to as the unitive and procreative significance of the sexual act. Aquinas normally emphasizes the procreative aspect of sex and marriage, whereas the *Catechism* tends to list the good of spouses first.

<sup>55</sup> These goods are summarized in *ST* III, Suppl., q. 49, a. 2 and q. 65, a. 1, and *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, trans. C.J. O’Neil (New York: Hanover House, 1955–57), chap. 78. Online <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles.htm>.

<sup>56</sup> In *ST* III, suppl., q. 65, a. 1, Aquinas simply writes that marriage between believers has the goal of signifying Christ and the Church. He does not give scriptural references, but Jesus himself compares the Kingdom of God to a wedding feast and himself to the bridegroom, an image developed by Paul and also used by John.

<sup>57</sup> To use a perhaps infamous example, according to Aquinas homosexual sex is completely contrary to the natural law because procreation is impossible, whereas fornication is partially against the natural law because it makes the natural ends of marriage—the successful raising of children and friendship of spouses—unlikely to take place (see *ST* I–II, q. 154, a. 1).

entage of such children is clear and the children can be cared for adequately.<sup>58</sup>

Aquinas argues that polygamy is against the second natural purpose of marriage, because it is nearly impossible for the husband, wives, and children to all come together into a single harmonious community. Rather, the husband's attention will be divided between the different wives and their children, and the relationships between them all will be imperfect. Furthermore, the wives will be jealous that they must share their husband with each other. Instead of a husband and wife forming one household and one community, a husband and many wives will tend to form overlapping households and a divided community. That polygamy causes a divided community can be observed in the traditional PNG Highlands practice of men living with each other in a Man's House and each man building a separate house for each wife, so that husbands and wives did not actually engage in daily living together.<sup>59</sup> The imperfect community that polygamy causes is very clearly seen in the Bible in the hostile relations between Sarah and Hagar, between Jacob's wives and sons, between Hannah and Elkannah and Penninah, and between the children of king David. Perhaps treating the Old Testament as a source of case studies for polygamy, Aquinas judges that it "is contrary to good behavior for one man to have several wives, for the result of this is discord in domestic society, as is evident from experience."<sup>60</sup>

In his discussion of polygamy in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas adds that polygamy is against the friendship proper to marriage. In a polygamous marriage each wife is bound to her husband for the necessities of life and for the education of her children and for sexual fidelity, but the husband is

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<sup>58</sup> In contrast, as mentioned above, Aquinas argues in *ST III*, suppl., q. 65, a. 1, ad 8, that polyandry is completely against the first purpose of marriage because the wife will continue to have sexual relations with her husbands while she is pregnant, thereby jeopardizing the health of the foetus, and because the husbands, not knowing whether they are the father of any child, will refuse to help raise the child. Thus, from Aquinas's cultural conditioned viewpoint, polyandry makes it impossible, in principle, for the child to be raised well.

<sup>59</sup> This observation is based on my visits to cultural centres in Banz, Jiwaka and Wabag, Enga, and from conversations with anthropologists in PNG.

<sup>60</sup> *SCG III*, chap. 124, §6. It is possible that Aquinas is speaking from some knowledge of Dominican contacts with Muslim lands or from irregular arrangements of mistresses or concubines in his own society. I note from my conversations with doctors at Kudjup Nazarene Hospital in Jiwaka that a large percentage of trauma cases are caused by domestic violence between polygamous spouses.

not so bound to any of his wives. The husband materially benefits from the work of all his wives, uses all to procure children for himself, and is not sexually faithful to any one of them. Therefore, the friendship between a wife and a polygamous husband “will not be equal on both sides.” So, the friendship of the wife with the husband “will not be free, but servile in some way.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, Aquinas concludes “among husbands having plural wives, the wives have a status like that of servants,” which he again claims “is corroborated by experience.”<sup>62</sup>

There is still some love and support between spouses in polygamy,<sup>63</sup> and presumably divided households can still serve as a basis for the political community, which is why certain cultures have accepted polygamy. Aquinas argues, however, that monogamy more perfectly satisfies our social nature, produces a deeper friendship between spouses, and results in a united household and a more peaceful community. Therefore, polygamy is partially against the natural law, because it is partially contrary to the second natural purpose of marriage. It is more rational and human to be monogamous.<sup>64</sup> Aquinas even claims, for humans, “that one female is for one male is a consequence of natural instinct.”<sup>65</sup>

## MARRIAGE AS A SACRAMENT

In considering polygamy with respect to the specifically Christian purpose of marriage, it is necessary to explain Aquinas’s teaching on marriage as a

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<sup>61</sup> *SCG* III, chap. 124, §5.

<sup>62</sup> *SCG* III, chap. 124, §4

<sup>63</sup> *ST* III, Suppl., q. 65, a. 2, ad 5, argues that there is still some faith between polygamous spouses.

<sup>64</sup> In *ST* III, Suppl., q. 65, a. 1, Aquinas considers polygamy to be in agreement with the primary end of marriage and partially opposed to the secondary end of marriage, which is friendship between the wife and husband. In contrast, polyandry is against the primary end of marriage (because men will not raise children of unknown paternity) and the secondary end of marriage (because men will not agree to share the same woman with each other). In *SCG* III, chap. 124, he sets out why both polyandry and polygamy are against the nature of human sexual relations, arguing that husbands and wives must be held to the same moral standard for marital fidelity as each other. In other words, if it is wrong for a woman to have several sexual partners, it is also wrong for a man to have several sexual partners, even if the unions are sanctioned by human customs.

<sup>65</sup> *SCG* III, chap. 124, §1. Aquinas argues for this conclusion based on the nature of sexual desire, and on the natural need for both parents to be involved in raising the offspring (*SCG* III, chap. 124, §3; *ST* III, Suppl., q. 65, a. 1, ad 4).

sacrament. I will do this in four steps, bridging this section and the next. First, what is a sacrament? Second, how is marriage a sacrament? Third, can a polygamous marriage be a sacrament? Fourth, what is the relationship between the natural and sacramental understandings of marriage? In his explanations of what a sacrament is and how marriage is a sacrament, Aquinas was systematizing the Christian understanding of sacraments and marriage of his time, an understanding more or less common to Eastern and Western Christians. In the Reformation, many Protestant groups challenged and rejected these understandings, whereas the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches have maintained them. It would, however, be anachronistic to place our denominational labels on Aquinas's ideas, so I will simply present Aquinas's understanding of Christian marriage, accepting that many Protestants would disagree with him. Even if one rejects that Christian marriage is a sacrament in the Catholic sense, I judge that most Christians will agree with Aquinas that Christian marriage is intended to be an image of the relationship between Christ and the Church, such that his teachings on Christian marriage remain relevant.

Aquinas defines a sacrament as a “sanctifying remedy against sin offered to man under sensible signs.”<sup>66</sup> A sacrament is a religious rite which signifies some aspect of the mystery of the Incarnation.<sup>67</sup> During the rite, material things act as an instrument for God's grace, such that a human is sanctified by God through the material.<sup>68</sup> As the Catholic Church currently teaches, sacraments are “efficacious signs of grace.”<sup>69</sup> A sacrament is not simply a physical sign of a concurrent spiritual action or a memorial of

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<sup>66</sup> *ST III*, supp., q. 42, a. 1. I warn my readers that I am not a trained theologian and that my explanation of a sacrament combines together material from *ST III* and the Supplement, even though the former represents some of the last work of Aquinas and the latter some of the first work.

<sup>67</sup> *ST III*, q. 60, a. 3: “Consequently a sacrament is a sign that is both a reminder of the past, i.e. the passion of Christ; and an indication of that which is effected in us by Christ's passion, i.e. grace; and a prognostic, that is, a foretelling of future glory.”

<sup>68</sup> *ST III*, q. 60, a. 1: “[N]one but God can cause grace: since grace is nothing else than a participated likeness of the Divine Nature.” Sacraments only effect the salvation they signify as instruments used by God. A. 2 says that all sacraments derive their power by the grace that God gives through the incarnation. In q. 62, a. 2 (cf. ad 3), Aquinas strongly argues that since God is the principle agent of a sacrament, only he can initiate a sacrament; therefore, God, and not the institutional church, is the founder of the sacraments.

<sup>69</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §248. Aquinas affirms that sacraments effect the grace that they signify in *ST III*, q. 62, a. 1, ad 1.

what God has done, rather it is a means by which God is present in our lives and by which we enter into the life of Christ. For example, the waters of baptism not only symbolize our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ but are the means by which we participate in these spiritual realities. It is through the physical waters that God sanctifies the soul of the new believer, and it is through the act of baptism that the believer enters into the mystical body of Christ. Grace is our participation in the life of God and the sacraments are material instruments of that participation.

Why and how is marriage a sacrament? Aquinas believes that his Latin Bible tells him that marriage is a sacrament. For him, Eph 5:32 reads “*Sacramentum hoc magnum est: ego autem dico in Christo et in ecclesia* (“This is a great sacrament; but I speak in Christ and in the Church”).<sup>70</sup> Aquinas straightforwardly interprets this verse as meaning that from the viewpoint of the Christian faith, marriage is a sacrament, according to the full meaning of sacrament in Aquinas’s own day. Aquinas knew no Greek and had different exegetical methods than we do today. Is his reading of this passage at all plausible? Now, the Latin *sacramentum* translates the Greek μυστήριον (*mystērion*). In secular Greek, μυστήριον meant both a secret religious rite and the mysteries about the divine symbolized or revealed in that rite. In Paul’s letters, μυστήριον generally refers to the content of divine revelation, especially the highest teachings about God, Christ, and salvation.<sup>71</sup> Eph 5:22–33 explains the relationship between a Christian husband and wife by comparing it to that between Christ and the Church, but at the same time the marital relationship is used to illumine the relation of Christ to the Church. Paul interprets the description of the physical union of husband and wife in Gen 2:24 as a sign of the spiritual union between Christ and the Church. Just as a man nourishes and cherishes his own flesh,

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted by Aquinas in *SCG*, bk IV, chap. 78. Aquinas also appeals to this passage in *ST* III, q. 61, a. 2, obj. 3; q. 65, a. 2; and Suppl., q. 42, a. 1, sed contra. I have checked the Latin against the Vulgate: Iohannes Wordsworth and Henricus Iulianus White, eds., *Nouum Testamentum Latine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911). Cf. τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν, ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω εἰς Χριστὸν καὶ εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν.

<sup>71</sup> See Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967), s.v. μυστήριον; W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature*, trans. W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich; rev. and exp. F.W. Danker; 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. μυστήριον; and Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), s.v. μυστήριον.

so should a husband nourish and cherish his wife, so does Christ nourish and cherish the Church. Therefore, it is perfectly plausible to interpret Paul as teaching that Christian marriage “is the symbol of a sacred reality, namely, the union of Christ and the Church.”<sup>72</sup> Aquinas, however, is also reading the original sense of religious rite back into *μυστήριον*, whereas Paul seems to use the word to mean symbol of a divine mystery, but obviously marriage is a religious ritual. Therefore, Aquinas’s claim that his understanding of Christian marriage is biblical is at least plausible.<sup>73</sup>

Regardless of what one may think of Aquinas’s reading of Ephesians, according to him, in Christian marriage, when a Christian man and a woman freely consent to beget and raise children and to establish a common life together, God works through their consent to unite the married couple together, body and soul (Eph 5:31). The couple themselves are the material causes of the sacraments. Through his grace, God establishes an indissoluble personal union between the husband and wife, a union which is the foundation for their begetting and raising of children and for their common Christian life. The personal union between the husband and wife is a sign of the present and future union between Christ and Church, and is also the unity of the Body of Christ as lived out in their life together.<sup>74</sup> The family

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<sup>72</sup> Aquinas’s *Commentary on Ephesians*, trans. M.L. Lamb (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1966), chapter 5, lectio 10. Online: <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/SSEph.htm>. The online edition gives the Greek and the Latin. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. IV, p. 823 wishes to restrict *μυστήριον*’s reference to the quotation of Gen 2:24 and not apply it to marriage itself, but this is disingenuous since Paul (like Jesus in Matt 19:3–9) interprets Gen 2:24 as a description of marriage. If Paul is saying that this verse applies to the mystery of Christ and the Church, then he must mean that marriage is a sign of a sacred reality.

<sup>73</sup> PHEME PERKINS, “The Letter to the Galatians,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol XI (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2000), 451–52, mentions that certain gnostic sects that had their own view of marriage as a sacrament and would quote Ephesians in support of their view. I am inclined to conjecture that the gnostics were distorting an original Christian understanding of marriage as a sanctifying sign rather than to suppose that the gnostics were the first to treat marriage as a sacrament.

<sup>74</sup> This paragraph is a slight expansion and combination of *ST III*, Suppl., q. 42, a. 1 (with replies) and q. 45, a. 1. In precise terms, the expressed consent of the couple is the form of the sacrament, the couple is the matter, and the effect is the personal bond between them, a bond which images Christ and the Church. For Aquinas, following Augustine, the chief remedial effect of marriage is that sex can take place without sin, thereby removing the manner in which sin has tainted human sexual activity and desire ever since the first sin (cf. q. 42, a. 3). In *SCG IV*, chap. 78, Aquinas speaks more positively of Christian marriage as

manifests the mystical Body of Christ; the husband gives himself completely to the wife as Christ gave himself completely to the Church, and the wife gives herself to her husband as Christians offer their whole persons to Christ.<sup>75</sup> Christian family life is a participation in the life of Christ and is thus a means of God's grace to the family members.

## SACRAMENTAL AND SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST POLYGAMY

In Supplement, q. 65, a. 1, Aquinas teaches that polygamy is entirely against the sacramental nature of marriage. Just as there is one Christ, so there is one Church, his Body. Consequently, “the sacrament of marriage signifies the union of Christ with the Church, which is the union of one with one.”<sup>76</sup> As Aquinas explains in more detail in *Summa Contra Gentiles*,

the union of Christ and the Church is a union of one to one to be held forever. . . . [M]atrimony as a sacrament of the Church is a union of one man to one woman to be held indivisibly, and this is included in the faithfulness by which the man and wife are bound to one another.<sup>77</sup>

Polygamy destroys the ability of marriage to signify and manifest the Body of Christ.<sup>78</sup> Polygamy institutionalizes the marital infidelity of the husband, therefore a polygamous marriage cannot signify the faithfulness of Christ to the Church or of the Church to Christ. Polygamy disrupts the personal bond of the husband and wife, for how can the husband give himself completely, body and soul, to two or more women simultaneously? If a Christian man takes a second wife, the Christian character of his first mar-

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bestowing a grace whereby the spouses, precisely as physically united, are included in the union of Christ and the Church.

<sup>75</sup> This sentence is based more on John Paul II, *Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline, 1997), who emphasizes the mutual submission of spouses to each other, than on Aquinas, who focuses, unfortunately, on the submission of the wife to the husband. See Mary Healy, *Men and Women Are from Eden: A Study Guide to John Paul II's Theology of the Body* (Cincinnati: Servant, 2005), 79–90, for a summary of the Pope's interpretation of Ephesians 5 with references to his works.

<sup>76</sup> *ST III*, Suppl., q. 66, a. 1. Here Aquinas says that having plural de facto spouses or even having spouses serially destroys the sacramental character of marriage.

<sup>77</sup> *SCG IV*, chap. 78, §5.

<sup>78</sup> Aquinas seems to find this point extremely obvious. In q. 65, a. 1, he simply says that polygamy “removes altogether . . . the signification of Christ and the Church.”

riage is destroyed. His relationships with his wives are unredeemed, because these relationships cannot conform to the spiritual reality of Christ and the Church, the reality of which Christian marriage is a symbol. By practicing polygamy, a Christian man refuses to allow his family life to be a participation in the life of Christ, such that his most intimate human relationships conform to the pattern of the world and not to the pattern of Christ.

A general principle in Aquinas's thought is that grace perfects nature.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, Christianity does not destroy a non-Christian society's marital practices, rather sacramental marriage purifies, perfects, and affirms what is naturally good about marriage. There are reasons based on the natural law for the wrongness of fornication, the indissolvability of marriage, and for monogamy; but, according to Aquinas, certain societies have permitted sexual relations simply for pleasure,<sup>80</sup> legalized divorce in order to prevent violence against unwanted wives,<sup>81</sup> and have practiced polygamy because polygamy encourages human procreation.<sup>82</sup> Conversely, the Christian, sacramental vision of marriage as one man and one woman for life is how marriage was designed by God. According to Aquinas, Scripture reveals to us the divine law, which is God's original plan for humanity (the eternal law) expressed to us in a direct and understandable manner. As explained above, divine law thus purifies our understanding and application of the natural law and corrects mistakes that societies have made in their human laws and customs.<sup>83</sup> For example, Aquinas notes that some societies do not charge a husband who kills an adulterous wife with murder, whereas Aquinas says that according to Scripture wife-murder is never lawful and that

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<sup>79</sup> See, e.g., *Commentary on Boethius's De Trinitate*, trans. R.E. Brennan (New York: Herder, 1946), q. 2, a. 3 and *ST I*, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

<sup>80</sup> *ST III*, suppl., q. 65, a. 4, ad 1: "Among the Gentiles the natural law was obscured in many points: and consequently they did not think it wrong to have intercourse with a concubine, and in many cases practiced fornication as though it were lawful."

<sup>81</sup> *ST III*, Suppl., q. 67, a. 3

<sup>82</sup> *ST III*, Suppl., q. 65, a. 2. Aquinas says that polygamy was allowed among the patriarchs in order to physically build up the people of God. He does not speculate on other goods that could come through polygamy such as lifelong security for women and the possibility of marriage for women in a society in which constant tribal war would reduce the male population.

<sup>83</sup> The relation of divine law to the other forms of law is explained in *ST I–II*, q. 91, a. 4.



such a husband will have to answer to God, no matter what his culture.<sup>84</sup> Divine law instructs us how to live a truly human life as images of God who is love. It guides us towards right relations with God and our fellow humans. In general, the divine law calls us to live according to a higher moral standard than the natural law clearly reveals.

Aquinas gives a number of reasons why polygamy is against the divine law and is thus absolutely contrary to the Christian faith. First, Scripture itself says of the husband and wife that “they shall be two in one flesh” (Gen 2:24), which is repeated by Jesus Christ (Matt 19:5) and Paul (Eph 5:31). Thus the original plan for marriage is one man and one woman becoming one flesh, not a man somehow being one flesh with multiple women.<sup>85</sup> Second, Paul writes in 1 Cor 7:2–4 that the body of the wife is no longer her own but belongs to her husband and the body of the husband is no longer his own but belongs to the wife. They have given themselves bodily to each other, and they have a responsibility to physically love each other. Therefore, once a man is married, he is no longer free to give his body to another woman, for his body belongs to his wife. Therefore, when a husband tries to marry a second wife he is stealing from his first wife and violating her conjugal rights.<sup>86</sup> Third, “Do not do to another what you would not have done to yourself” is a command of the natural law which is expressed in Tobit 4:15 and then restated positively by Christ: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Mt 7:12, Lk 6:31). But if a man is not willing to share his wife with another man, then it is not right for him to expect her to share her husband with other women. A polygamist is unjust in expecting his wives to be faithful to him while being unfaithful to them.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *ST III, Suppl.*, q. 60, a. 1. Being Italian, Aquinas may be thinking of traditional Roman culture in which the male head of the household had the power of life and death over its members.

<sup>85</sup> *ST III, Suppl.*, q. 65, *sed contra* 1.

<sup>86</sup> *ST III, Suppl.*, *sed contra* 2. The paying of the marriage debt is discussed at length in q. 64.

<sup>87</sup> *ST III, Suppl.*, *sed contra* 3. In q. 49, a. 2, Aquinas says that one of the natural goods of marriage is the faith between the husband and the wife, which he tends to define from the viewpoint of the man: “whereby a man has intercourse with his wife and with no other woman.” This faith is a part of justice, namely keeping one’s promises. This faith is presumably destroyed by polygamy, so that a polygamous marriage is naturally less good than monogamy.

What about the Old Testament patriarchs? As explained above, Aquinas believes that both the Torah and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ are the divine law; however, the old law is related to the new law as the imperfect is to the perfect. Thus, “Now, marriage was at no time a perfect state until the law of Christ came.”<sup>88</sup> Just as the revelation of God in the Old Testament is incomplete in comparison with the full revelation of God in the Incarnation, so too the Old Testament reveals an imperfect knowledge of human nature, which is clarified and corrected by the New Testament.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, though the patriarchs and kings knew that Gen 2:24 says that a man and his wife are joined together and become one flesh, it was not fully understood that God’s original plan for marriage was incompatible with divorce until Christ clarified that Gen 2:24 means that marriage is naturally indissoluble (Matt 19:1–10). Likewise, Gen 2:24 was not understood to be incompatible with polygamy until Paul explained the sacramental nature of Christian marriage in Ephesians 5, which was reinforced by the wedding imagery in Revelation. God permitted polygamy among his chosen people during the time of partial and incomplete revelation,<sup>90</sup> but, according to Aquinas, the New Testament reveals that husbands and wives are equal to each other in their marriage rights, such that polygamy, which advantages the husband over the wife is no longer allowed.<sup>91</sup> “But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is partial will be done away” (1 Cor 13:10). Therefore, with the coming of Christ, the people of God are no longer permitted to practice divorce or polygamy.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Aquinas, *Explanation of the Ten Commandments*, trans. Joseph B. Collins, Online: <https://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/TenCommandments.htm>, article 8.

<sup>89</sup> See *ST I–II*, q. 91, a. 5, and q. 107, a. 1–2.

<sup>90</sup> Aquinas discusses whether polygamy was ever lawful in *ST III*, suppl., q. 65, a. 2. His own answer is not based on the ignorance of the patriarchs, but that God gave them an exemption from the full force of the natural law. Aquinas defends the thesis that the patriarchs, David, and Solomon were morally righteous and holy men. Therefore, it is difficult for him to admit that they sinned and suffered from ignorance, even though such a view of the Old Testament heroes is perfectly compatible with his understanding of the relation between the Old and New Law.

<sup>91</sup> As I noted earlier, Aquinas’s commitment to the equality of the spouses in regards to marriage rights and fidelity seems to become more pronounced in his later works. In his *Explanation of the Ten Commandments*, a. 8, he references Paul’s discussion of marriage in 1 Cor 4:2–4 as revealing that the origin of Eve from Adam’s side signifies the equality of spouses within the marriage relationship, an equality that the Jews did not recognize or practice.

<sup>92</sup> See *ST III*, Suppl., q. 65, a. 2, ad 4 on polygamy, and q. 67, a. 2, ad 3 on divorce.

## CONCLUSION

For Thomas Aquinas, polygamy is disallowed by a full understanding of the natural law regarding marriage, because polygamy makes it difficult for the husband and wives to maintain a harmonious and unified household and because the wives tend to be reduced to a servile status. Conversely, polygamy can be consistent with the natural human inclination to have and care for offspring, which is why certain cultures adapted it. Divine revelation, however, shows that monogamy more perfectly fulfills humanity's rational and social nature. Polygamy destroys the sacramental nature of Christian marriage, is contrary to God's original plan for marriage, and breaks Jesus's Golden Rule by being unfair to the wife and denying her conjugal rights. Therefore, no Christian should be a polygamist, and all polygamists have excluded Christ from their marriages.

Likewise, Christians of all cultures must turn from unredeemed and imperfect marriage arrangements – whether polygamy, or common law marriage, or concubinage, or cohabitation – and embrace the sacramental marriage of the New Covenant. In *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas teaches that the divine law regarding marriage corrects “those who state that fornication is not a sin” (cohabitation),<sup>93</sup> “the custom of those who dismiss their wives” (divorce),<sup>94</sup> “the custom of those having several wives” (polygamy),<sup>95</sup> and “the custom of those who practice carnal relations with their relatives” (consanguineous marriage).<sup>96</sup> From Aquinas's examples and explanations, we can draw the exhortation to be open to the ways in which the Gospel challenges and corrects the laws and customs of our own society. Perhaps due to sin or ignorance, our society is mistaken about what is natural and best for humans. In such circumstances, I say, let us no longer live as the non-believers do, but as children of the light.

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<sup>93</sup> *SCG* III, chap. 122, §12.

<sup>94</sup> *SCG* III, chap. 123, §10.

<sup>95</sup> *SCG* III, chap. 124, §8.

<sup>96</sup> *SCG* III, chap. 125, §9. In these four chapters, Aquinas argues that these practices are contrary to the nature of human sexual relations, and then he concludes by quoting Scripture passages.