
**Commentary on an unpublished work of Antonio Moreno
Almárcegui:
GRACE AND CONSANGUINITY, 11ST – 15TH CENTURIES**

by **George N Njenga**

1. Introduction

1.1 In “Grace and Consanguinity”, still an unpublished work,, Prof. Antonio Moreno Almárcegui discusses the impact of the Christian revolution in Europe on the concept, meaning and practice of Marriage. He approaches this question from a historical perspective. He bewails the absence of a sincere dialogue on the effect of Christianity on the changes that took place in the cultural practice of marriage in Europe. His purpose is to explain that Christianity had a profound effect on marriage meaning and practice in Europe, especially as concerns the interrelationship between Grace and consanguinity. Could a historian speak of supernatural phenomena? And if it does, How must deal with it? For Moreno, answering this question is central to his argument against the Philippe Aries and his ilk, that the transformation of the family in Europe took shape in the early 17th century when children and their education became the central theme for the European families.

1.2 His work primarily revolves around the effect of the Christian devotion to saints in the 1st to the 10th Century, the development of devotion to Mary, the mother of God and the fact that deep Christian roots took shape in Europe starting from the monarchs, then to the aristocrats, to the nobility and finally by the end of the 20th century the understanding of the significance of Grace over Consanguinity had reached the working class. Further, that the effect of Grace

as understood in Christianity transformed the secular dimension of consanguinity by, first linking consummation in marriage with the concomitant sharing in Grace among the couples in marriage and secondly, by transforming the concept of consummation as central to the marital relationship to that of consent by the turn of the 11th century. Ultimately, this spiritualization of consent in matrimony gave place to a new sense of family structure. In this new structure consummation assumed a secondary place and we can say that the marital relationship imitated that of “Mary and Joseph and Jesus”. New Christian families emerged that were strongly based on consent to family life, such as the Confreres and brotherhoods in Spain.

- 1.3** Christianity took centuries to effect these cultural changes mainly because it preached a new way of life which would change the cultural perspective of the family from a natural consanguineous relationship to the concept of a supernatural universal family based on Grace. Grace is a Universal gift which slowly transforms the secular consanguineous relationship of man to a relationship based on a supernatural reality. Christianity is a way of life as well as a religion, or put in another way the religion transforms the way of life of the faithful. It preaches a salvific message to man. History demonstrates that as Christian life, culture and understanding deepened in Europe so did the culture, society and government. The foundation of this change was a new relationship based on the gratuitous gift of ‘Grace’ which substitutes the natural consanguineous relationships with a supernatural relationship whose author is God. Two questions related to the history of the family in Europe brought Prof. Almarcegui to this research; the subject of consanguinity and Grace, and the

subject of the maternity of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as an image and model of maternity in the West, and indirectly, archetype of the “femininity”.

2. Consanguinity and Grace

2.1 From the theological perspective, the Grace is a supernatural gift makes a Christian believer ‘like’ to God; a child of God; it establishes and confers a relationship which becomes the central reality of the spiritual life of each Christian. During the first ten centuries of Christianity, Grace was defined as a “supernatural consanguinity”. That is, Grace establishes a family whose reality forms a church, which in turn is the family of children of God. The children of God form the body of Christ on earth because they are filled with his blood and are like Him. Christ becomes the head, He who generates the family made of Christians. Each action of the Child contributes something to the body of the children who in turn share in the communal life.

2.2 Grace in the Pauline doctrine of the Church is equivalent to “blood” in the Jewish concept of the body; blood is the foundation of the unity and the vital power of the body. It would be possible to say that Grace is to Christians what consanguinity is to Jews

2.3 Upon its institution and in so far as it took effect, Grace became the new “real consanguinity”. It became the foundation of personal identity and social order leaving in its wake uncertainty on the status of human consanguinity. Almárcegui believes that the final effect of that process was a certain “secularization” of the cultural concept of consanguinity. In brief, consanguinity as a cultural category historically became irrelevant and was

surpassed by grace and consent. He believes that the significant progress in the popular devotion to the saints at the early stages of the Christian era, and later changing to the devotion to the Virgin Mary during the 11th- 12th century Europe, had something to do with changes in the relationship between the concepts of consanguinity and Grace; that is between the natural and the supernatural realities of matrimony.

2.4 From 5th century a.d. onwards, the expansion of the Catholic Church depended largely on the development of religious orders. This situation was engendered, on the one hand, by the 'elite society' (monarchy and then aristocracy) whose kinship was based on consanguinity, and on the other hand, the "spiritual" elites (the Religious), who constituted in great part the "supernatural families" founded on consent and the Grace.

3. 'The Child' and the 'Motherhood of Mary' as Foundations of the Christian Family

3.1 Philippe Aries' thesis is that the Western family is now centered on childhood¹. He proposes that during the Medieval Age or the beginnings of the Modern Period, childhood did not exist, and the education and place of the children 'was not guaranteed nor controlled by the family'². Children would be treated like mascots, entering the adult world soon after attaining the minimum autonomy necessary. The adult world was an extensive, dense and affectionate social circle made up of neighbors, friends, masters and servants, children, women and men; where affection was not an obligation, and conjugal family

¹ Aries, Philippe *The boy and the familiar life in the Old Regime*, Taurus, Madrid, 1987

² Ibid., P. 10

relationships almost immaterial.³ Everyone agrees that the modern family is centered in the Child and that this was one of the key Western transformations during the medieval age. It is usually accepted that the key to Western development has everything to do with education, and that that power derives from the peculiar structure of the Western family.

3.2 However, according to Almárcegui, the family transformation during the 11-12th century has to do with the growth and deepening in the understanding of the Christian family which taught the importance of children in the family. The growth and deepening of Christian doctrine in western family culture is attributed to the devotion to the lives of the saints in the early part of the Christian era. The life of the saints and their families had shown an extraordinary interest in the well-being and happiness of their children. This thesis partially contradicts Aries' "On the Origin of Childhood in the 17th Century".

3.3 Given this perspective, Aries' thesis could be reframed in the following way; "Cognizance of the importance of infancy as a decisive phase of the development of the people had already begun among a few families at the beginning of the early Medieval Age, particularly among the families of the saints toward the 11th and 12th centuries. From there -after a certain decline that took place between the late medieval age and the beginning of the modern period – this practice became popular among the aristocracy in the 17th and 18th centuries, expanding to the working classes in the 19th century. It was

³ Ibid., P. 11

later extended to most of the Christian West during the first half of the 20th century.

3.4 This brings us to the history of motherhood, because it is not clear whether the child is the center of the family in the West any longer, especially in the last thirty years⁴. Secondly, it seems that the “liberation” of the woman has been defined many times as the liberation of motherhood, or at least, as an attempt to make motherhood and other professional tasks, that appear more important than the motherhood, compatible. The thesis of the centrality of the child had in it the implicit idea that motherhood justifies life, which the elite environment of the West does think about.

3.5 To place the origin of the history of the western childhood in 11th and 12th centuries also takes us to motherhood, because in the biographies of saints’ mothers appear to be of singular importance⁵, and because the development of the cult to the Virgin Mary is associated with a great anthropological and social change that explains, among other things, the origin of the feminine concept in the West. It identifies it with a certain conception of motherhood, which is at the origin of the modern western family. Mary is in the first place, Mother: Mother of God, Mother of the Church and Mother of each faithful.

⁴ See Aries context in favour of the Eastern family.

⁵ Op. Cit. p. II

3.6 It also has to do with the development of the doctrine of “spiritual childhood” that identifies childhood as that stage in man’s life highest perfection, because it is associated to innocence, especially sexual innocence⁶.

4. The change from the popular devotion of the saints to Mary

4.1 Sabbé indicated that around 11th century a remarkable change took place in the north of Europe in the Christian devotion to the cult of the saints practiced by the Christian faithful. It was substituted by the cult to the Virgin Mary.

4.2 Under protection of the monastic reforms, especially that of Cluny, the devotion to the Virgin extended to all Christianity. Not only were very many shrines and sanctuaries dedicated to the Virgin constructed, but the old shrines dedicated to the saints were changed in honor of Mary. For the many Christians she now the main ‘door’ to heaven.

5. The cult to the saints in the first centuries of the Christianity: Blood and Grace. 9th Century

5.1 There are two distinguishing characteristics of the cult to the saints; first was the visits made to the saint’s sanctuaries (where the tomb or relics were found); and second was the importance of lineage and consanguinity in relation to Grace.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 19-47. Wallstein-Bell - authors who already defend the relevance of the childhood in the families of the saints of centuries XI-XII-, also observe a certain minor importance of the childhood in the final centuries of the middle ages. This would explain the situation that is Aries to beginnings of the Modern Age. That is, there would not be radical contradiction between theses of both works.

5.2 The people went in large masses to the sanctuaries to request all types of favors and evidence shows the effectiveness of the saints' intercessions.

5.3 Another distinguishing characteristic is the importance of the blood in the sanctity. Sorokin (1950: 128) elaborates that they saints during the 1st to the 9th centuries dominated by the Royalty centuries, then the high aristocracy and dynasties. They accounted for over two thirds of the saints.

5.4 In a certain sense this dominion is explicable, because the formation of a "social elite" was based on those who received education from the monasteries. But in another sense, it shows the importance of the "blood" in the social transmission of the Christianity: both Aristocracy and Monarchy are primarily distinguished by the importance they place to hereditary transmission. Kinship transmits social identity. At first it was the monarchy and the later the aristocracy when the monarchs declined in importance from the 9th century onwards. From the 13th century aristocracy gave way to the nobles. We should note that that this is the moment when sanctity reaches the ordinary people in form of devotion to the Virgin.

5.5 The examples described by Herlihy on the biographies of the first Irish saints are spectacular. This author describes a remarkable number of cases of true matrilineal transmission of the sanctity - of maternal uncle to uterine nephew, in some bishoprics during several generations⁷. Hungary had the privilege of

⁷ HERLIHY, David, *La Famiglia nel Medioevo*. Biblioteca Universale Laterza, Rome, 1989, pp. 42-54

having several kings considered saints in the 11th century. We see that phenomenon throughout the north of Europe.

6. The power of the Grace: the spiritual kinship in the begging orders; 9th to 15th Centuries

6.1 During the 9-13th centuries the role of teaching and spreading Christianity becomes the work of religious institutions especially the Mendicant orders. At his stage the notion of virtue starts to be spiritualized and young people can decide who to marry by themselves.

6.2 From the sociological point of view, these changes described the progressive substitution of the “brotherhood of the blood” as a source of sanctity, to an institutional brotherhood or, better, a 'spiritual brotherhood'. Better still, if in the first stage Grace and consanguinity are superimposed, now there appears the power of Grace as founder of new relations able to transmit sanctity through merit and virtue. In the imagination of many Christians of this time Abraham becomes the model and perfect archetype of the new spiritual paternity, founded on the Grace (Basset). It can be argued that this idea belongs to the origins of the Christianity; the separation between blood and Salvation⁸. One can affirm that the bonds of the blood are necessarily limited, whereas the redemption by Jesus Christ is Universal.

⁸ MITTERAUER, Michael, “Christianity and endogamy”, in *Continuity and Change*, Vol 6, part 3, December 1991, pp 297-324

6.3 Between consanguinity and Grace there are three analogies.

6.3.1 That Grace is reality freely bestowed on someone and gratuitous just like consanguinity. Therefore, while grace is the foundation of supernatural life, consanguinity is the foundation human life.

6.3.2 Secondly, Grace founds and gives substance⁹ to a relation that becomes the foundation of the basic identity of the Christian making him Child of God and member of his Church. Just as with consanguinity which founds a sustainable relationship and gives one a personal identity.

6.3.3 Thirdly, that Grace introduces us into a community, by which we participate as protagonists of History, bestowing meaning to our lives. In the same way, consanguinity introduces to us into a community of relations, in whom we share a historical moment. From these relations we received culture and the language enables us to think.

6.4 Moreno sees the problem of reconciling Grace and freedom, typical of our Modern epoch, as having appeared at a similar moment in time when consanguinity and Grace became the same reality as opposed to the different realities they were before. Two different realities become one.

⁹ Founding and giving substance mean two different things. With founding I mean 'to give origin to'; where there was nothing, a new reality is given. With substance I mean that it is real and permanent. With real I mean that it is the relation that founds the new identity of the Christian; with permanent I mean that this relation is destined to last always, therefore, that the relation founds an essential or primary identity.

7. The evolution of the canonical doctrine of marriage; consent means consummation

7.1 The evolution of the canonical doctrine of marriage helps reinforces the idea that a deep cultural change took place around the 11-12th centuries. At the beginning of Christian tradition consent is rarely considered a serious theological issue. However, consummation of marriage is, as much from the point of view of the meaning, as that of a sacrament or the legal contract. It is consummation that carries the meaning of 'Christ's union with the Church'; the nucleus of marriage as a sacrament, as an unbreakable union, is consummation. The change begins in the 4-5th centuries when a radical transformation in the concept of "affinity" or the notion of the incest takes place. This change ends up radically changing the internal family relationship structure later in the 11-12th centuries.

7.2 How was the nature of the new sexual relationship expressed from a cultural perspective? Until the 4th century consummation makes the fiancés true relatives, in a similar way to that of blood relatives. A man, through marital consummation, becomes a brother to his wife, and therefore treats his brother-in-law as his blood brother.

7.3 Affirming that marital consummation engendered a consanguineous relationship between the couple, one also affirmed that the consummation allowed Grace to flow between the spouses; even in the case of a mixed marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian. This superimposition of Grace upon consanguinity slowly strengthened the concept of consent. This did

not change the Catholic doctrine but rather that, after the 11th century, the concept of consent was increasingly spiritualized until it became the core principle of both sacramental marriage and the cultural marital union.

7.4 The relationship between Mary and Joseph, the Mother and foster father of Jesus became the true figure of a Christian marriage. In this relationship of Mary and Joseph consent is what makes bond of marital union. Consummation, as sexual union, is not necessary for marriage. Moreno believes that in this process of doctrinal evolution, the consummation was now considered as foreign to what is properly human and also, that the new concept of Grace, the parallelism between consanguinity (nature wounded by original sin and corrupted) and Grace (spiritual reality) were more and more inadmissible. Not only that, but also that the new concept of the conjugal relation which the canonical right now recognizes will not only be applied to conjugal relations, but also to many other sectors of the society, until it becomes a new model or archetype of relations. A good example of this relationship will be the development of Brotherhoods or Confreres.