

GOTANISM: A CANONICAL PERSPECTIVE ON RT. REV. MSGR PROFESSOR CLETUS TANIMU GOTAN'S THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

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Abstract

This paper takes a look at Rev. Msgr. Prof. Cletus Gotan's theological ideology of marriage (Gotanism) as a journey of spiritual and human growth. It further considers marriage as a freely consented partnership of the whole life established between a man and a woman. This partnership is geared towards achieving the two ends of marriage, the good of the spouses and procreation. As a journey marriage is not an end in itself but a mode through which a couple arrives at a greater sense of oneness. Since marriage is a journey that is distinctively planned by the intending couple, the paper also examines some obligations of the laity and the clergy to serve as supportive assistance in preparation of marriage and continued pastoral care after marriage.

Keywords: Gotanism, Gotan, Theology, Marriage, Journey

Introduction

The name Gotan (Rev. Msgr. Prof. Cletus TanimuGotan) is a household name in Northern Nigeria and some other parts of Nigeria. His ministries as a Catholic priest ordained on 15th of December, 1974, by the Servant of God Archbishop Gabriel GosumGanaka and as a professor are unparalleled. His influence is ongoing through his homilies, books, retreats and lectures. His unique ability to illustrate biblical truth in very practical terms makes his homilies amazing by any standard. No wonder, he has served as the homilist in hundreds of nuptial ceremonies both for the highly placed and the lowly.

Marriage is an intimate community of life and love, established by the Creator and endowed by Him with its own proper laws. God, Himself, is the author of marriage. The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the Hand of the Creator. In his book, “A Compendium of Selected Homiletic Reflection at Thanksgiving, Nuptial and Funeral Ceremonies” Msgr. Gotan considers marriage to be the first and most important institution that was

created by God himself primarily for the purpose of companionship, for “The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Gen 2:18). For him, the purpose of marriage in the 21st century remains the same as it has been for thousands of years – two lives on a journey to become one (Mt.19:5-6; Mk 10:7-8).

Marriage though a gift from God, is a legal and socially sanctioned union, usually between a man and a woman (Can 1055 § 1), that is regulated by laws, rules, customs, beliefs and attitudes that prescribe the rights and duties of the partner and accords status to their offspring's if any. Due to the reverence which the Catholic Church has for the Sacrament of Matrimony and its indissolubility there are very specific laws governing marriage as contained in the 1983 Code. Such laws have helped Msgr. Gotan in shaping his thoughts and teachings on marriage.

The socio – juridical problems affecting the institution of marriage and the slowly but increasing rate of divorce cases prompt the need for sober reflection so as to reposition the distorted perception of marriage. To achieve this, this paper shall focus on Msgr. Gotan's theology of marriage as a journey of spiritual and human growth and its canonical implications.

The Concept of Gotanism

Gotan is the Surname of Rev. Msgr. Prof. Cletus TanimuGotan. Apart from Msgr. Benedict Obidiegwu who calls him “BalaBala,” he is scarcely called by his personal name – Cletus or Tanimu. The name Gotan is a combination of two Ngas words, “go” which expresses masculinity and “tan” which means to shiver. Put together, the name means “One or man who shivers,” the history behind the name cannot be traced to any literature. It is however a known fact that African's give names according to circumstances. The suffix “-ism” at the end of the name Gotan with particular reference to this work represents a specific theological ideology of marriage as a journey captured in many of Msgr. Gotan's wedding homilies spanning over four decades. It is in this sense that we speak of Gotan's theology of marriage.

Gotanism: Marriage a Lifelong Journey

Marriage is a unique sacrament (Canon 1055) which binds one man and one woman together in a covenant under God and his Church. It is avocation, a response to a specific calling that God has placed in the heart of a couple. On their wedding day, the couple says a definitive 'Yes' to their vocation of marriage. Then the real work begins. It is in this light that Msgr. Gotan sees marriage as a journey of spiritual and human growth.

Marriage is not a destination but a journey towards each other, towards God, towards growth, towards maturity, perhaps towards children and eventually heaven. Each

stage of marriage has its own joys and sorrows, opportunities and challenges. Pope Francis emphasizes in *Amoris Laetitia* that married love is “a process of constant growth,” such that “a love that fails to grow is at risk”¹. This is so true because as couples set out on the journey called marriage, in the words of Msgr. Gotan, “They will begin to see the true habits they did not bother to notice in each other before. It is at this time that they begin to discover different editions of incompatibilities in each other. Such problems go ahead to determine the survival or failure of marriage”². Most times when intending couples “dream” of the journey called marriage, the dream of it as a goal not a process of growth, they do not dream of things to overcome; they dream of battles already won. They dream of victory, not the fight; the ecstasy, not the moments of doubt. They dream of moments of tenderness, not the storms of misunderstanding. They dream of intimacy, not the lonely nights of distance but it is the battles, the fights, the doubts and storms that often times bring about growth.³

Just as there are traffic lights on motor ways, there are traffic lights of marriage that try to stop couples on their journey of marriage. The traffic lights on the roads do not stop travellers permanently from the journey. They just slow down for a while and off they go again towards the direction of their journey. In the same manner, marriage traffic lights may sometimes slow couples down for a while but they are not there to stop them permanently from their vision, purpose and direction of the union. It is in this light that Pope Francis states:

The Paschal Mystery unfolds again and again throughout marriage and invites spouses to continually grow in love. There are Holy Thursdays, times of loving service when couples put their own needs in second place. There are Good Fridays, times of suffering, tragedies, even death. There are Holy Saturdays; times of waiting and uncertainty when all seems dark and the couple wonders what is to come and even if their marriage will survive. Then there are Easter Sundays, when renewed faith or celebrations such as the marriage of a child or the birth of a grandchild bring new hope. Through all of these moments, a couple can grow in love and holiness.⁴

As a journey therefore, marriage is not an end in itself but a mode through which a couple arrives at a greater sense of oneness. Some guidelines for marriage as a journey as proposed by Msgr. Gotan are:

¹ Francis, (2016, May 6). Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, no.134.

² Gotan, T. Cletus (2019), *A Compendium of Selected Homiletic Reflections at Thanksgiving, Nuptial and Funeral Ceremonies*, (p. 215). Jos University Press Ltd.

³ Cindi and Hugh McMenamin, February 22, 2011. [https://www. Crosswalk.Com](https://www.Crosswalk.Com)

⁴ Francis, (2016, May 6). Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, no.134.

1. You are in it for life: Marriage really is designed to be forever. The problem however, is that we live in a society that does not know what forever means anymore. Society today according Gotan “does not view marriage as a life-long commitment based on a covenant with God. One Hollywood couple's marriage lasted fifteen days. Any couple married more than ten years in Hollywood is considered a rarity. The Church is not following Hollywood's lead where marriages do not last and couples say “as long as our love shall last” in place of “till death do us part”⁵. Knowing you and your spouse are committed until your dying day will save you from some disasters that might seem bigger than they really are.

2. Receive help along the way: Once you get onboard a flight, you are putting your trip, and very life into the hands of a skilled, capable pilot. Whether you acknowledge personal trust or confidence in the Pilot or not, He is still the one getting you where you need to go. In addition, there are skilled flight attendants on your flight who know far more about flying than you do. When it comes to marriage, God is the Pilot. Gotan opines that “since it is God that created marriage, it is only right to build ones' marriage on the solid rock of His son Jesus Christ who said; “A wise man builds his house on Solid Rock. And even though the rains come and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it will not collapse, because it is built on the solid rock. But a foolish man builds his house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will fall with a mighty crash (Matt. 7:24-27).⁶ In addition, God may strategically place certain skilled couples or individuals in the life of a couple who may know more about marriage, take advantage of their experience. Heed their advice when it comes to what might make one's trip more enjoyable. Canon 1063 points to four principal ways in which clergy and laity are obliged to cooperate in this supportive assistance:

- i. Remote preparation – this is based upon the words and particularly the example of originating parents and thereafter consolidated and developed 'by preaching, by catechetical instructions and the use of the means of social communication.⁷
- ii. Proximate preparation – a stage in which those who are about to be married focus on 'the holiness and obligation of their new state'.⁸
- iii. Immediate preparation – this concentrates on the community aspect of marriage in ensuring a fruitful celebration of the marriage liturgy. It helps the couple to be married to participate in the mystery of unity and fruitful love

⁵ Gotan, T. Cletus (2019), *A Compendium of Selected Homiletic Reflections at Thanksgiving, Nuptial and Funeral Ceremonies*, (p. 294). Jos University Press Ltd.

⁶ Gotan, T. Cletus (2019), *A Compendium of Selected Homiletic Reflections at Thanksgiving, Nuptial and Funeral Ceremonies*, (p. 229). Jos University Press Ltd.

⁷ Gerard Sheehy et al (1995), *The Canon Law Letter and Spirit: A Practical guide to the Code of Canon Law*, (p. 579). The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Geoffrey Chapman.

⁸ Gerard Sheehy et al (1995), *The Canon Law Letter and Spirit: A Practical guide to the Code of Canon Law*, (p. 579). The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Geoffrey Chapman.

which is the special focus of this stage.⁹

- iv. Continued pastoral care after marriage – the obligations of the community do not cease on the wedding day but extend to the whole married life.¹⁰

3. Handle the Takeoff and Landing carefully: The two most dangerous segments of any airline flight are the takeoff and the landing. And how well you get started and how well you finish are the two most crucial steps in a marriage, as well. People often say that one's wedding day is the happiest day of one's life. Gotan however, does not buy into that view because to say that it is the happiest day of one's life is to buy into the view that getting married is the end of the journey rather than the beginning. Many Hollywood films end with a wedding, as if that is the climax to the relationship, as if that is where the journey ends. Wedding day should not be the happiest day of one's life even though it is important, it does not make a marriage, a lifetime makes a marriage.¹¹

Departure: Marriage Send Forth

Marriage send forth is usually held by a family for a soon to be married daughter. At the event which usually would take place at a time not too far from the actual wedding day. At the event, prayers are offered, words of assurance are delivered and gifts are presented to the celebrant to help her begin marriage in a stable manner.

The use of the expression “Send forth” instead “Sendoff” is somewhat deliberate. Sendoff according to Macmillan Dictionary “Is a party or celebration to say goodbye to someone who is leaving a place.” The emphasis should ordinarily be on the words 'goodbye' and 'leaving,' since, “For this reason am an will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one” (Gen.2:24). Similarly in accordance with the prescript of Canon 1056, the “leaving” should ordinarily take the center stage because it enables the couple establish the essential properties of marriage which are unity and indissolubility. It is however, not the case. The choice of “Send forth” is mostly because of the ambassadorial nuance it portrays. Send forth as used in the context of preparing for marriage carries a sense of mission. A mission to be an ambassador of one's family and faith to one's husband and family; meanwhile, since it is an era of gender equality, it will be nice if the same gesture is extended to men to help them begin marriage in a stable manner too.

⁹ Gerard Sheehy et al (1995), *The Canon Law Letter and Spirit: A Practical guide to the Code of Canon Law*, (p. 580). The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Geoffrey Chapman.

¹⁰ Gerard Sheehy et al (1995), *The Canon Law Letter and Spirit: A Practical guide to the Code of Canon Law*, (p. 580). The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Geoffrey Chapman.

¹¹ *Reflections at Thanksgiving, Nuptial* Gotan, T. Cletus (2019), *A Compendium of Selected Homiletic and Funeral Ceremonies*, (p. 220). Jos University Press Ltd.

1. **Prayer:** When faced with potentially life changing decision such as marriage, prayer is immensely important. Within the framework of marriage send forth the celebrant is invited to pray for a successful marriage even as family and friends pray for her. For Catholics, the prayer mostly takes place within the Mass, which is, the highest form of prayer. Msgr. Gotan who has been the homilist at so many marriage send forth never ends his homily without praying for the celebrant. For instance:

Our prayer for you today, Simi, as you leave home to embark on this journey of togetherness is that the Lord blesses you and your husband with true and real love to bear life's trials together...¹²

Having lived long in ministry and shared in the marriage experiences of many families Gotan knows that marriage is not a bed of roses hence he continues:

... when the horizon grows dark, and the night is starless, when the wind blows cold or there are calvaries to be climbed, may the flame of love that burns in you brighten your faces, warm your hearts and cheer your lives. When your eyes are misty with tears or pain and sorrow and your hearts are aching in a gloomy shadow, may you rejoice in each other just as when the cup of joy is full and flowing over.¹³

The place of prayer in the life of Christ's faithful cannot be overemphasized. Little wonder the Church seeks in Canon 1125 1^o to protect the faith of the Catholic party in cases of mixed marriage. Like a master key that opens any door, prayer opens several doors in marriage. In the place of prayer several battles are won, situations are resolved, hearts of stone become flesh, aching hearts are soothed, wounds are healed, and storms are stilled.

2. **Words of assurance and encouragement:** Marriage takes a lot of effort, time and patience and the struggles of daily life can drive a wedge between spouses. Consequently marriage send forth ceremonies whether inside the church or outside during the reception party afford the celebrant the opportunity to know that though she leaves family and friends for her husband, they will always be by her side. Since as Gotan puts it, at a marriage send forth, the celebrant is about to “Set out on a road which has its potholes and its steep climbs and occasional collisions” therefore, the presence of loved ones at a marriage sent forth “is to encourage and assure the

¹² Gotan, T. Cletus (2019), *A Compendium of Selected Homiletic Reflections at Thanksgiving, Nuptial and Funeral Ceremonies*, (p. 208). Jos University Press Ltd.

¹³ Gotan, T. Cletus (2019), *A Compendium of Selected Homiletic Reflections at Thanksgiving, Nuptial and Funeral Ceremonies*, (p. 208). Jos University Press Ltd.

celebrant that she won't be alone on the journey called marriage”¹⁴. On the marriage send forth of Miss Rosemary Simi Mancha, Gotan encourage her thus:

As you embark on this journey of love, we are here to assure you of our solidarity and togetherness as we join you and your parents to storm the heavens with petitions and intercessions that the Lord may guide and direct you and your partner in the days ahead and be with you in every of your activity.¹⁵

Moments of self-doubt, insecurity and discouragement are not alien to any human being, especially at moments of critical decisions, at such moments words of encouragement and assurance impart courage.

3. Reception party: The reception party is usually held after the Mass or any other form of worship. The celebrant together with her family receives relatives, friends and well-wishers. At the reception, the social aspect of the ceremony comes to play, music is on play, there are various cultural displays, food and drinks are served, more prayers are said and gifts are presented in form cash or material items, such as gas cooker, fan, mattress etc.

The presentation of gifts is vital. It is a practical show of support. It is not out of place to do so, since the Bible instructs believers “Not to neglect to do good and to share what they have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God (Heb. 13:16). The gifts are expected to help the celebrant begin the journey of marriage in a stable manner.

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Partners on the Journey

Marriage is a journey for two, a man and a woman. Gotan succinctly describes it as:

... a union of an adult man and an adult woman, freely entered into with the intention as canon law says, for mutual love, procreation and upbringing of children.¹⁶

¹⁴ Gotan, T. Cletus (2019), *A Compendium of Selected Homiletic Reflections at Thanksgiving, Nuptial and Funeral Ceremonies*, (p. 207). Jos University Press Ltd.

¹⁵ Gotan, T. Cletus (2019), *A Compendium of Selected Homiletic Reflections at Thanksgiving, Nuptial and Funeral Ceremonies*, (p. 207). Jos University Press Ltd.

¹⁶ Gotan, T. Cletus (2019), *A Compendium of Selected Homiletic Reflections at Thanksgiving, Nuptial and Funeral Ceremonies*, (p. 225). Jos University Press Ltd.

The Code of Canon Law, in canon 1055 §1 described marriage as “a partnership of the whole life established between a man and a woman, which by its nature is ordered to the well-being of the spouses...” The partnership referred to must be freely consented to hence Canon 1057, §2 states that the “matrimonial consent is an act of the will by which a man and a woman, through an irrevocable covenant, mutually give and accept each other in order to establish marriage.” The intimate partnership of life and love which constitutes the married state as established by the creator is a community of love, an intimate union of persons, a process of growth, of experience in oneness, of continuing perfection of mutual self-bestowal, a mutual gift of two persons.¹⁷

Partnership therefore implies one heart, one mind in the day-to-day communal living of a couple; no wonder while preaching at the wedding between Abel and Kathryn Gotan advised them:

Be partners. You enter this sanctuary called marriage today through two different doors. You will leave through one door together. You stand here today at this altar as individuals from two different homes; you have journeyed from two different directions to this sacred meeting place. Here you take vows that forever change your relationships to your families and to each other. You will acquire a title here today, which you never had before; husband and wife. Henceforth, you are meant to walk with each other, to work as partners in the grace of life.

Expatriating further on this point, Gotan continues with a question:

How does this partnership work? Can two separate and distinct persons become one, as Scripture says? The key to partnership is this word from St Paul, “Submit yourselves one to another” or, “Be servant to one another”¹⁸.

Consequently, each spouse is to assist and support the other in all areas of their common life, the best he or she is able, so long as the other spouse is alive. Such self-giving and acceptance gives rise to correlative obligations and the right to an intimate conjunction of persons and works by which they complete each other and associate their actions to God in the procreation and education of new lives and their personal sanctification. Thus, the persons who marry must be capable of interpersonal

¹⁷ Egbuna Miriam Perpetual (2012), *Enjoy Your Marriage: A Handbook for the Married and those Preparing for Marriage*, (p. 153). Snaap Press Nigeria Ltd, 1 Snap Drive, Independence Layout, Enugu.

¹⁸ Gotan, T. Cletus (2019), *A Compendium of Selected Homiletic Reflections at Thanksgiving, Nuptial and Funeral Ceremonies*, (p. 225). Jos University Press Ltd.

relationship in a human, satisfying manner and must be able to fulfill those obligations inherent in the state of life they embraced.¹⁹

Pope Paul VI in his Encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* gives five Characteristics of conjugal love necessary for the development of partnership:

- i. It must be fully human, an expression of the senses and of the spirit, arising from the unity of heart and soul, presented in the light of an integral vision of human perfection.
- ii. It must be total, generously sharing everything in an oblation love that excludes selfishness and undue reservation.
- iii. It must be faithful and exclusive until death.
- iv. It must be fruitful, ordained toward the rearing of new life.
- v. It must be moral, in the sense that the responsible exercise of parenthood implies that the husband and wife fully recognize their own duties toward God, toward themselves, toward the family and toward society in a correct hierarchy of values.²⁰

Couples are bound to preserve conjugal fidelity both internally and externally, and to render mutual aid in the carrying out of their respective duties and functions, in bearing the burden of marriage, especially in times of adversity.

Ends of Marriage: Good of the Spouses and procreation of Children

End of marriage means the natural finality to which a marriage is ordered. The 1917 Code, reflecting the theology of marriage in the post-Tridentine era, asserted that the primary end of marriage was procreation and education of children and the second mutual assistance and the remedy of concupiscence (Can. 1013 §1). Paragraph two of Canon 1081 of that code further defined the object of matrimonial consent as “the perpetual and exclusive right to the body for acts which are *per se* apt to generate offspring.” This emphasis on procreation as the primary end diminished the so-called secondary end of marriage (mutual assistance) and its personal dimensions. Vatican II brought about a radical change in the understanding of the ends of marriage (GS, nn.48-52), which is faithfully replicated in the post- conciliar teaching and the current codes of canon law²¹.

Both the good of the spouse (*bonumconiugum*) and the procreation and upbringing of children (*bonumprolis*) are now equally essential to and inseparable in marriage.

¹⁹ Egbuna Miriam Perpetual (2012), *Enjoy Your Marriage: A Handbook for the Married and those Preparing for Marriage*, (p. 156). Snaap Press Nigeria Ltd, 1 Snap Drive, Independence Layout, Enugu

²⁰ Paul VI, Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, July 29, 1968, AAS 60 (1968), nos 9-10

²¹ Karambi, Sabastian .S. (2015), *Ministers and Ministries in the Local Church: A Comprehensive Guide to Ecclesiastical Norms*. (p. 438). Second Revised Updated Edition, Brilliant Printers Pvt. Ltd., Bengaluru and St. Pauls, 58/23rd Road, TPS III, Bandra, Mumbai.

Neither is designated as the primary end of marriage (Can. 1055 §1, CCEO, Can. 776,§1). Both are co-equal. Pope John Paul II elucidates:

Conjugal love, while leading the spouse to the reciprocal 'Knowledge' which makes them 'one flesh' does not end with couple, because it makes them capable of the greatest possible gift, the gift of which they become cooperators with God for giving life to a new human person. Thus the couple, while giving themselves to one another, gives not just themselves but also the reality of children”²².

The same pope again ascertains:

Marriage and family are inseparable, since the masculinity and the femininity of the married spouses are constitutively open to the gift of children. Without such opening, neither could there be any good of the spouses worthy of that name²³.

The other concrete elements of the good of the spouses are: physical living together, the duty of assisting of common life, and the participation of both in the matrimonial decision.

Since the achievement of the ends of marriage is somewhat beyond the power of the spouses, the failure to attain them does not in itself affect the validity of marriage. For example, even though marriage is ordered to the procreation and education of offspring, childless marriages are presumed to be valid. Hence Gotan posits that at “God's own time and pleasure he can bless a marriage with children. Couples must therefore pray and wait patiently for their own gift of children”²⁴. If one or both spouses deliberately exclude the essential ends of marriage from their consent by positive act of the will, they contract invalidly (Can. 1101 §2). It is to be noted that recent Rotal jurisprudence has treated excluding good of the spouses as autonomous ground of nullity. In other words, when a partner enters into marriage (at the time of consent) with the explicit or implicit purpose of fulfilling his/her own gain or betterment, or does not recognize the fundamental human rights of the other spouse (Can. 1135), the marriage will be invalid on the ground of exclusion of *bonumconiugum*. Likewise, serious inability due to psychic causes to foster good of the spouses (e.g violent, rude behaviour, egotism, etc.) is also a ground of nullity of marriage (Can. 1095 3^o)²⁵.

²² John Paul II, (1981, November 22). *Familiaris Consortio*, no.14.

²³ John Paul II, (2001, February 1). *Allocutio* to the Roman Rota.

²⁴ Gotan, T. Cletus (2019), *A Compendium of Selected Homiletic Reflections at Thanksgiving, Nuptial and Funeral Ceremonies*, (p. 226). Jos University Press Ltd.

²⁵ Karambi, Sabastian .S.(2015), *Ministers and Ministries in the Local Church: A Comprehensive Guide to Ecclesiastical Norms*. (p.440). Second Revised Updated Edition, Brilliant Printers Pvt. Ltd., Bengaluru and St. Paul's, 58/23rd Road, TPS III, Bandra, Mumbai.

The two ends – the good of the spouses and procreation and education of children together form a unity, they are of equal importance and make up the integral purpose of marriage hence the complementarity and the inseparability of the two give a better idea of the mutual relation between these two ends.

Conclusion

In the face of many threats (civil partnership, cohabitation, same-sex marriage etc.) against the institution of marriage, Mgrs. Gotan's theology of marriage (Gotanism) as a journey of spiritual and physical growth no doubt, seeks to solidify the traditional understanding and canonical concept of marriage via an illustrative vehicle. Marriage as a union of a man and woman remains the foundation of family life which is the bedrock of every society. Though a gift from God, it is not a finished affair. Like all careers, it demands long preparation, hard work and self-sacrifice.

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