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# Hitched Versus Hooking Up

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**Timothy P. O'Malley**, *Off the Hook: God, Love, Dating, and Marriage in a Hookup World* (Ave Maria Press, 2018).

It is news to no one that young adults approach relationships differently today than their counterparts did 50 or even 15 years ago. In the last half-century, the institution of marriage has suffered one blow after another, culminating in a society where fewer and fewer people seem interested in any committed relationship at all, let alone the sacramental union of husband and wife. Concerns about the rising divorce rate gave way to a rise in cohabitation before marriage, and then an increase in the average age at which couples marry. Now, though, as more and more young people opt to forgo marriage altogether, the rituals of courtship in our culture have eroded as young people choose instead casual sex or other forms of physical intimacy with minimal communication and no commitment: hooking up.

Nevertheless, for those of us who have spent time working with young adults, it is clear that there is still some attraction to marriage. In my six years working in campus ministry, one of the most popular events was the Newman Center's annual Valentine's Day tradition of hosting a retired professor who would tell the story of the love he had shared with his late wife and for whom he had left his career to become the primary caregiver as she was dying from ALS. This was not simply an idealized romantic story, but a glimpse into the real beauty of marriage, with all its struggles. Many tears were shed, and students came to trust and seek out the professor for advice on relationships, discernment, and all sorts of life questions. He was not there to preach or moralize, though of course he gave his frank opinion on things like chastity when asked, but he probably did as much to help young people with the struggle for purity as anyone I know. It was clear to anyone in the room at that Newman Center event: members of this generation, despite having access to all sorts of depersonalized pleasure at their fingertips, are still drawn to the sacramental reality of marriage at some deep level.

In *Off the Hook: God, Love, Dating, and Marriage in a Hookup World*, Timothy O'Malley takes this same approach of using the simple beauty and joys of marriage to draw people away from hookup culture. O'Malley relies on his own discussions with college students about the Sacrament of Marriage to propose to young people that marriage—and in a particular way the liturgical Rite of Celebrating Matrimony—is itself a medicinal “counter-liturgy” to hookup culture. Much like the wise professor at the Newman Center, O'Malley presents the full Catholic view of marriage simply but with an appealing tone, with an eye toward changing hearts as much as minds. While O'Malley does take time to discuss the state of things on the ground—alcohol abuse, pornography, Tinder, and so forth—and contrast it to the Christian understanding of love (with particular reference to the writings of John Paul II and Dietrich von Hildebrand), this book is not primarily a sociological study, nor a treatise on moral or sacramental theology.

Instead, *Off the Hook* can best be viewed as an introduction to the Sacrament of Matrimony for young Christians who have grown up immersed in today's culture. In addition to this audience, O'Malley proposes three others toward whom the book is aimed: engaged or recently married couples, longer-married couples seeking to enrich their own love and form their children in it, and those involved in marriage preparation at the diocesan or parish level. I would add one more: even among informed Catholics, the book could serve as a helpful discussion of the wedding liturgy. With the decline in the number of people being married in the Church, it is not at all uncommon for Catholics to grow up never having attended a Catholic wedding Mass. In all cases, O'Malley avoids anything approaching polemics, instead mostly letting the Church's ritual and understanding of marriage speak for itself as he proposes it in an engaging way to men and women weary of hookup culture.

O'Malley's work is very approachable, interspersing anecdotes from his own life as he moves through the marriage rite. He uses each point of the wedding Mass as a springboard to demonstrate the value of authentic married love, and often counters popular misconceptions about Church teaching. For example, in the chapter discussing some of the options for readings in the wedding Mass, he provides a simple yet effective discussion of Ephesians 5. But perhaps the most striking part of the wedding liturgy in contradistinction to hookup culture is the Act of Consent. O'Malley unpacks the Catholic wedding vows and exchange of consent with reference to communication and consecration, and to sexual intimacy in consummation. This is an especially rich explanation in layman's terms of what it means to say that marriage is a Sacrament, and why Catholics believe that it is indissoluble:

The act of consent shared by husband and wife is no ordinary promise. It is akin to the moment of Baptism when the human being enters into a new relationship with the triune God. It is akin to the Eucharist, when bread and wine are transubstantiated, consecrated, into Christ's Body and Blood. The love of husband and wife is sanctified, transformed in order to become an image of Christ and the Church.

This account of consent starkly contrasts with the discussion of "affirmative consent" that is ubiquitous in university freshman orientation programs and has become a watchword in the media coverage of sexual assault in the past several years. Whereas the consent of hookup culture is a contract for the pleasure of a single night, the consent of marriage unfolds the full proper end of sexual intimacy:

This sacramental account of intercourse in marriage is healing of the act of sex. For those reared in the creeds of hookup culture, sex is not a sign of anything at all. It is meant purely for pleasure, for enjoyment, for the sake of the orgasm alone....The act of consent in the Sacrament of Marriage is about a deepening of communion. In the hookup, sex and love are separated. Sacramental marriage not only unites sex and love through the communion of husband and wife, but it goes further, inviting the couple to see their love as participating in God's own communion.

An even deeper analysis and sharper contrast between hookup culture and marriage would have been welcome, especially on other issues similar to consent where the Church's ritual and language most directly provides an attractive counter-narrative. However, this would certainly take the book beyond the scope of a 130-page overview designed simply to lead young people to a greater love. Instead, O'Malley pushes readers toward further discussion with exercises and discussion questions at the end of each chapter, making it even more suitable for a book group with college students or those in proximate marriage preparation. This way, O'Malley sets the table and encourages continued conversation on difficult questions, perhaps with the guidance of a campus minister or retreat leader.

The cheapening of sex and the affront to human dignity perpetrated by hookup culture has left countless young people deeply wounded. *Off the Hook* offers them simply what Christ offers them as a

healing balm: his own sacrificial love as communicated through the Sacraments of the Church. Timothy O'Malley has provided an important resource to reach into this destructive piece of our culture with a glimpse of the reality of love that we all crave.

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