

ALEXIS DEODATO S. ITAO

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF MARITAL DISCERNMENT: APPLYING KEY  
PRINCIPLES FROM PAUL RICOEUR AND KAROL WOJTYŁA  
TO RESOLVE FAMILY CONFLICTS

**Alexis Deodato S. Itoa**

Cebu Normal University, Social Sciences Department, College of Arts and Sciences,  
Cebu City, Philippines; University of Santo Tomas, The Graduate School, Manila,  
Philippines.

**Email:** itaoa@cnu.edu.ph, aliexisdeodato.itaog@ust.edu.ph

**Abstract:** In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Catholic Church describes marital discernment as the married couple's "common reflection and effort... [that] involves a consideration of their own good and the good of their children" and also as "an estimation of the good of the family... [that necessitates] prudent reflection and common decision." With this description, we can say that the Catholic Church expects and desires married couples to resolve marital and family conflicts by coming together in discernment. And yet, how should married couples discern? How should they exercise marital discernment? Since one cannot just go on discerning blindly without minding some rules, without following some basic steps, Ricoeur would emphasize that "discernment calls for a hermeneutics." But how should hermeneutics be integrated into the process of marital discernment? This paper makes an attempt to integrate hermeneutics into the process of marital discernment by drawing some key principles from Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology and Karol Wojtyła's phenomenology of spousal love. In so doing, this paper considers how the dynamics of marital discernment can be rendered more balanced, and hence more effective, in attaining conflict resolution within the family.

**Key words:** marital discernment, family, conflict resolution, Paul Ricoeur, Karol Wojtyła.

## 1. Introduction

Conflict is a reality in life that appears in many day-to-day experiences (Whatling, 2023). At work, at school, at home, or at any other place, conflicts emerge for various reasons. The noted French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1974, 151) acknowledged this fact, saying that indeed “conflict is inescapable in human interaction.”

According to studies, “conflict is a normal, expected, natural occurrence in family life” (Welch 2007, 127; see also Scanzoni 1995, 222). This is especially the case when the husband and wife building the family are still in the first few years of their marriage (see Girao 1994, 17). Whatever the case, most people are aware that conflicts within the family environment can be so stressful, and even to some degree, devastating (Benokraitis 1993, 259). That is why, no conflicts at home, especially those of greater magnitude, should be overlooked or left unresolved whenever possible. As Chukwuma et al. (2020, 1) put it, “conflicts should be resolved as soon as it erupts in any relationship because [oftentimes], the more a conflict lingers in a relationship, the more it gets difficult to be resolved.”

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981, no. 14), Pope John Paul II declared that “[a]ccording to the plan of God, marriage is the foundation of the wider community of the family.” Thus, when a conflict materializes in the family, it is the duty of both the husband and wife to initiate its resolution together. As it has long been observed, “much of the continued stability of the family as an institution lies in the strength of the ties that bind husband and wife together” (Go 1993, 66).

Now when problems at home occur, the husband and wife normally discuss them over to deal with them effectively (Girao 1994, 55). Especially when certain important decisions that concern the family have to be made, the husband and wife do not only enter into a serious discussion, they also make every effort to discern. This is so since “[a]ny serious dialogue with someone already entails an element of discernment” (Wolff 1998, 79). And indeed, “if we want to increase our chances of making fruitful choices for others and for ourselves... we need to learn to discern” (ibid., ix-x). In like manner, if husbands and wives desire to make fruitful choices for their families, they should also learn to discern together.

Further, what is significant about discernment is that it “is not a theory, but a concrete way of dealing with daily reality that leads to making choices that affect our lives and the lives of others” (Wolff 1998, x). Precisely because discernment is something concrete, when husbands and wives come together and exercise marital discernment, they are already practically making concrete steps rather than simply thinking seriously about their problems.

True enough, when marital and family conflicts are well discerned, they are resolved more properly. However, this does not presuppose that marital discernment is a guarantee of quick and easy success. As Wolff says: “[d]iscerning together is difficult and brings forth tensions and conflicts. This is normal and cannot be otherwise, and we do not have to be afraid of this. As it is implied in any other common-union, communion, some separations have to be overcome between the partners. Therefore, a kind of labor, which can be painful, must be done” (Wolff 1998, 88).

Apparently, we can never say that marital discernment is the easiest or the most convenient recourse in dealing with marital and family conflicts. As it were, it takes insight, determination, and courage on the part of the couple to properly discern together. All the same, it cannot be contested that marital discernment remains essential to any meaningful conflict resolution in the family. And yet, how should married couples discern? How should they exercise marital discernment?

To successfully exercise marital discernment, it is certainly imperative for both husband and wife to follow some proper procedures. As Wolff maintains, having “a systematic method of discernment” is necessary (Wolff 1998, 17). This means to say that one cannot just go on discerning blindly without minding some rules, without following some basic steps. This also applies to marital discernment, that is, if husbands and wives should discern, they should also know how to properly proceed in their discernment. Otherwise, they are bound to fail and get nothing. That is the reason why Ricoeur (1967, 308) would emphasize that “discernment calls for a hermeneutics.” But how should hermeneutics be integrated into the process of discernment, and even more so marital discernment?

This paper makes an attempt to integrate hermeneutics into the process of marital discernment by drawing key principles from Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology. In addition, it will further substantiate such integration by incorporating another set of key principles from Karol Wojtyła’s phenomenology of spousal love. In so doing, this paper considers how the dynamics of marital discernment can be rendered more balanced, and hence more effective, in attaining conflict resolution within the family.

## **2. A Quick Overview of Marital Discernment and Its Dynamics**

When a husband and wife enter into a sincere and profound dialogue to discuss how to better deal with the issues that affect their marriage and their family, more than simply cooperating with each other, more than

simply coming together to hear one another and exchange insights, they are already exercising marital discernment.

In *Gaudium et Spes* (1965, no. 50), the Catholic Church describes marital discernment as the married couple's "common reflection and effort... [that] involves a consideration of their own good and the good of their children" and also as "an estimation of the good of the family... [that necessitates] prudent reflection and common decision." With this description, we can say that the Catholic Church expects and desires married couples to resolve marital and family conflicts by coming together in discernment. And it is not difficult to understand why: marital discernment is crucial to conflict resolution within the family. As Ritz (1965, 86) would remark, "Talking things over is the bedrock cornerstone of successful marriage. Many a marital rift could be healed in minutes, or at least in hours, if both partners would subject themselves to an evaluation of the problem at hand."

Another reason why marital discernment is important is that it makes the couple achieve "unity of heart and mind in decision-making in the home" (Girao 1994, 72). Of course, it does not mean that every time a couple agrees to discern matters together, everything always goes smoothly. Marital discernment requires open discussion between the husband and wife, pertinent information at hand, or even a longer time and prayers (Girao 1994, 69). Even so, couples need marital discernment so that in their marriage they will not simply "co-exist" but also "merge into one" (Girao 1994, 100).

### 3. Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The entirety of Ricoeur's philosophical concerns may be summed up as "an attempt to answer Kant's famous question: What is man?" (Michel 2017, 9). Ricoeur (1995, 24) himself admitted in his very own intellectual autobiography that his entire oeuvre is indeed a "projet d'anthropologie philosophique" — that is, a "project of philosophical anthropology." As he digs deeper into the Kantian question, one of Ricoeur's (1974, 265) early realizations is the truth that human beings seem "to be no more than language." He ascertains that "it is in and through language that man expresses himself and manifests his being; in other words, it is by means of language that man relates with other beings and with the world" (Itao 2010, 2). In short, for Ricoeur, language is not just a significant part of human reality; rather, language is essentially what constitutes the very nature of man himself (Purwadi 2014, 51).

Thus, for us to understand what man is, and for man to also understand himself, it is necessary to employ a phenomenology of language in order to understand the phenomenon of man as a linguistic

being. However, since in general language “consists of words that are characteristically symbolic,” then any phenomenology of language cannot be without “a hermeneutics of symbols” (Itao 2018, 24). Ricoeur (1975, 85) himself underlined this point, stressing that “phenomenology is not able to establish itself without a *hermeneutical presupposition*.” For this reason, Ricoeur’s phenomenology of language has been identified as a *hermeneutic* phenomenology since its main goal is to understand man and enable him to understand himself by interpreting the various symbolisms that constitute his language. That is why at the center of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology is the hermeneutics of symbols.

Symbols refer to those polysemous words that “carry much deeper, latent meanings behind the patent ones” (Itao 2010, 3). Ricoeur (1970, 26-28) thinks that no one-size-fits-all method of symbolic interpretation exists; instead, we find two opposite types of interpretation, viz., the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith. With the former, symbols are met with suspicion and subjected to doubt – and so is the interpreter himself – to ensure that no misjudgements, biases, and prejudices cloud the process of interpretation; then with the latter, symbols are met with an open mind and a listening attitude (Ricoeur 1970, 27). Now as the two types of hermeneutics seem to stand opposed and contrary to one another, “it is necessary to set up a dialogue between them and demonstrate their complementary functions” (Ricoeur 1974, 319). It can be done by means of philosophic reflection, the process by which the two conflicting hermeneutics are reconciled by dialectically relating them to each other (Ricoeur 1974, 171). So with the dialectic of suspicion and faith, the hermeneutics of symbols reaches its culmination.

#### 4. Wojtyła’s Phenomenology of Spousal Love

In 1959, Wojtyła published *Love and Responsibility*. Sikorski succinctly describes the book as “a philosophical and personalist analysis of the human person and the phenomenon of human love and also includes a treatment of sexual ethics. The reflections in the book were the fruit of Wojtyła’s ministry among young people, particularly married couples, and Wojtyła himself notes that conversations with married persons about their experiences were a large influence for the argument in the book” (Sikorski (2017, 108).

Albeit Sikorski makes no mention of the book as a work of phenomenology, Wojtyła (2013, 283) himself confessed that “*Love and Responsibility ... is conditioned by the order of phenomenological thinking.*” Since meeting the works of Max Scheler (1874-1928), phenomenology has become Wojtyła’s preferred philosophical approach. As Weigel (1999, 129) confirms in his authoritative biography of the Polish Pope, Wojtyła utilizes

phenomenology as a particularly “important instrument for probing various dimensions of the human experience.”

In *Love and Responsibility*, though Wojtyła himself is an unmarried man, the direct experiences of married persons who shared with him their stories afforded him with what he calls “a phenomenological vision”, that is to say, the lens through which to view with some clarity what spousal love really is about (Wojtyła 2021, 286; emphasis original). Of course, in the view of Wojtyła (2013, 79) spousal love refers to the love between spouses – that is, between a man and a woman who, in marriage, enter into a “reciprocal self-giving of [their] persons.” Its essence lies in self-giving, in the donation of one’s whole person (Wojtyła 2013, 78). However, that does not mean or imply that one can simply give oneself to any random person; rather, this giving of self is solely “to another chosen person” (Wojtyła 2013, 81) who, in turn, likewise gives his/her whole self without any reservation in a permanent union.

Unsurprisingly, in line with traditional Catholic morals, Wojtyła (Wojtyła 2013, 82) restricts spousal love in a monogamous marriage. For him, the spousal love that “a man and a woman realize day by day and in the dimension of their whole life” through reciprocal self-giving is what makes their union a “*communio personarum*” – an exclusive communion of persons according to the will of the Creator (Wojtyła 2013, 288).

In an address delivered at an international congress held to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* in July 1978, just a few months before he was elected to the papacy, Wojtyła (1978, 17) reiterates the exclusive character of spousal love, emphasizing: “Such love [is] proportionate to the exclusive gift between persons to the end of their lives.” But this time, he also highlights how spousal love is first of all a gift that comes with the important responsibility of developing and nurturing this very love until it matures (Wojtyła 1978, 19-20).

Ideally, therefore, married couples are supposed to constantly “nourish and develop their wedlock by pure conjugal love and undivided affection” (Wojtyła 1978, 21). Realistically, however, this ideal condition does not always happen. Moments of tension, conflicts, and disagreements occur, during which spousal love could fall “in a very dangerous vacuum” (Wojtyła 2013, 83). And so to keep their spousal love burning and aflame, it is crucial that both spouses strive to maintain benevolence, sympathy, and reciprocity between them.

According to Wojtyła, benevolence is an essential element of spousal love. He says: “Benevolence is simply disinterestedness in love ... Therefore, benevolent love, *amor benevolentiae*, is love in a more absolute sense ... It is love that is most pure. Through benevolence we come as close as possible to what constitutes the “pure essence” of love. Such love perfects its object the most; it develops most fully both his existence and the existence of the person to whom it turns” (Wojtyła 2013, 67).

Recognizing its importance, Wojtyła (Wojtyła 2013, 67) insists that a “man’s love for a woman and hers for him ... should [become] ... more and more complete benevolence ... in every state and in every manifestation of their coexistence and interaction ... particularly in marriage.”

In addition to benevolence, another important element of spousal love is sympathy. Wojtyła (Wojtyła 2013, 71) believes that “sympathy signifies above all what ‘happens’ between people — that through which emotional-affective lived experiences unite people.” Its central role is that: “Only sympathy has the power to bring people closer together in a way perceptible to them, in an experiential way ... Sympathy places one person in the circle of the other as somebody close. Because of it, one can “feel,” so to speak, the other’s whole personhood, that one lives in the circle of the other, at the same time finding him at every step in one’s own. Precisely for this reason sympathy is for people an experiential and perceptible manifestation of love (a manifestation between a woman and a man that is so important) ... and without it they in a sense lose this love and remain in some vacuum, one they can perceive. Therefore, it seems to them that once sympathy breaks off, love ends as well” (Wojtyła 2013, 73).

Finally, Wojtyła counsels married couples not to lose reciprocity in their relationship. In the first place, spousal love “is not something one-sided but something two-sided, something ‘between’ persons, something social. Its full being is precisely inter-personal and not individual” (Wojtyła 2013, 68). That is why, for Wojtyła (Wojtyła 2013, 69), reciprocity “is decisive precisely for this ‘we’ to come into existence. Reciprocity reveals that love has matured, that it has become something ‘between’ persons, that it created some community — in this its full nature is realized.”

## **5. Resolving Family Conflicts through Marital Discernment**

For purposes of clarity and organization, I have divided this section into three subsections. Here I first seek to show that to be an effective instrument of conflict resolution in the family, marital discernment requires, on one hand, a certain degree of objectivity and benevolence; on the other, it also requires subjectivity and sympathy. Since marital discernment requires both objectivity and subjectivity, as well as both benevolence and sympathy, I subsequently propose that by applying some key principles from Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology and Wojtyła’s phenomenology of spousal love, it is possible to arrive at a more balanced and effective marital discernment in resolving various family conflicts.

### **5.1. Marital Discernment and the Need for Objectivity and Benevolence in Resolving Family Conflicts**

Like any discernment, marital discernment demands a certain amount of objectivity (see Wolff 1998, x). In marital discernment, two individuals having two different minds coming from two different backgrounds, and whose outlooks and personal preferences in life may not coincide with each other are meeting together to address a common concern. Therefore, it is almost always inevitable that husband and wife clash in the process of marital discernment. This is where the hermeneutic phenomenology of Ricoeur may be applied.

Applied to marital discernment, the hermeneutics of suspicion will allow the married couple to put under suspicion, first: their individual biases and inclinations; and second: their collective biases and inclinations as a couple. And so the husband for his part will examine whether or not he is too biased against or too inclined toward the issue/s that he and his wife shall address in their discernment. The wife for her part will also do the same as her husband does. Then collectively, both husband and wife shall see together whether or not they are too biased against or too inclined toward what they are discerning over in common.

The hermeneutics of suspicion, therefore, ensures objectivity in marital discernment by making the married couple see within themselves the things that could cloud their outlook on the issue/s under discernment. With the hermeneutics of suspicion, the need for objectivity in marital discernment is met so that after having cleared away their biases against and/or inclinations toward the issue/s they are discerning together, the married couple can now discern together minus bias and partiality, but with intelligence and prudence.

However, discerning together minus bias and partiality is not enough. There is equally the need for benevolence to ensure that in the process of discerning together, there is no iota of self-interest involved. Everything should be for the good of the couple and the whole family. This is where Wojtyła's phenomenology of spousal love may be applied.

Seeking to apply benevolence, the couple consciously think, "I long for your good," "I long for what is good for you," "I long for what is good for our relationship and our family" (see Wojtyła 2013, 67). In this way, their process of marital discernment is not only objective but also oriented toward the good of their relationship and family.

### **5.2. Marital Discernment and the Need for Subjectivity and Sympathy in Resolving Family Conflicts**

Aside from objectivity, discernment also requires subjectivity (Wolff 1998, x). Discernment is in every way a subjective activity because the one discerning is wholly involved in it not only as a conscious but also as a

feeling subject. While on one hand objectivity indicates an intellectual approach to discernment, subjectivity on the other hand points toward an affective approach — that which involves the core of one’s being, the “depth” within each self (Wolff 1998, 35-55). Accordingly, these two approaches — the intellectual and the affective — hint at the twin tools employed in any genuine discernment: the head and the heart (Wolff 1998, 4-6).

By and large, an intellectual approach to discernment is insufficient; the head is not enough; objectivity does not suffice. As Wolff expressed, “[I have] to check out with my heart the appropriateness of what my head has done” (Wolff 1998, 43). It goes without saying then, that subjectivity is as much called for as objectivity is in every act of discernment.

Inasmuch as any discernment necessitates subjectivity, so does marital discernment. Married couples must not only discern with their heads but also and especially with their hearts. They have to consider what they really feel about the issue that they are discerning together; they have to pay attention to what their hearts are truly telling them from within. As Wolff noted, “it is very important to be aware of our feelings in any situation... The ‘enlivening’ or ‘stifling’ taste of our emotions discloses to us that, in our depths, we feel good, secure, and energized — or insecure, threatened, and endangered” (Wolff 1998, 43). In a manner of saying it is only by going back to the “core” of their beings that both husband and wife are able to tell what they should really do about the matter that they are discerning over. This, again, is where the hermeneutic phenomenology of Ricoeur may be applied.

The hermeneutics of faith will enable the married couple “to listen” not only with their ears, but most especially with their hearts, to the deepest feelings that they have regarding the issue/s that they are discerning together. So when applied to marital discernment, the hermeneutics of faith will make married couples adopt an “attitude of listening and openness” that will let them become more sensitive to the deepest feelings in their hearts (see Ricoeur 1970, 27-28).

Consequently, as they become more sensitive to their deepest feelings through the hermeneutics of faith, the married couple will be able to identify what they truly feel about the issue/s under discernment: either “enlivening” as Wolff (1998, 43) calls it — meaning to say, it brings joy, contentment, serenity, etc.; or, borrowing again from Wolff, “stifling” — meaning, it brings a certain feeling of foreboding, restlessness, and the absence of inner peace. So even if with their heads they think it is much more practical to do something, it is much better to do nothing if the married couple discerned in their hearts a negative feeling. As Wolff stressed out, “People get into trouble by forcing themselves to make and adhere to a decision that was not in tune with their depth” (Wolff 1998, 44).

Thus, by applying the hermeneutics of faith to marital discernment, the married couple will recognize that in the deepest recesses of their hearts, there dwells a “truth” which they have to adhere to and “believe” (see Ricoeur 1970, 27-28). By means of the hermeneutics of faith, the married couple will likewise discover that this “truth” does not only call for their “belief” but also for their very “obedience” (Ricoeur 1970, 27-28).

However, it does not happen all the time that both partners feel the same way about something. It can often happen that only one of the two has some strong feelings about certain issues. This is where Wojtyła’s phenomenology of spousal love may again be applied. For where one does not have strong feelings about a certain issue but only his/her partner does, it matters a lot if he/she were to consciously bring himself/herself closer to his/her beloved by showing sympathy. Needless to say, without sympathy, spousal love would be at risk of turning “cold and incommunicative” (Wojtyła 2013, 75). And when this happens, it could trigger the rise of even more conflicts and relational problems. That’s the reason why sympathy is simply invaluable. It is sympathy that lets a husband enter more deeply into the sentiments and feelings of his wife, making him more open and understanding; in the same manner, if it is the wife who does not have strong feelings about a particular issue, then it is sympathy that will also let her enter more deeply into the sentiments of her husband, making her understand him even more.

### **5.3. Marital Discernment and the Need for a Balance of Objectivity and Subjectivity, and a Reciprocity of Benevolence and Sympathy, in Resolving Family Conflicts**

Just as any activity of discernment demands a balance of objectivity and subjectivity (Wolff 1998, 63-64), marital discernment similarly needs a balance of objectivity and subjectivity in order to be carried out more effectively. So firstly, married couples have to be objective about the issue that they are discerning together so that they can see it properly without partiality. Secondly, they have to be subjective about the same in order to understand even more deeply with their hearts what they have already understood with their heads. Their subjective understanding will make them more sensitive to their real feelings about the issue under discernment: either it evokes positive feelings or negative ones.

Finally, they need to proceed by looking at what they are discerning over with both objectivity and subjectivity. This is the only way that they are able to keep a balanced perspective. That is why, for it to be truly effective in resolving family conflicts, marital discernment needs to be accompanied by a balance of objectivity and subjectivity. This is where Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology may once again be applied.

As is already known, the wiser way to grapple with conflicts has always been by means of both the head and the heart. Balance, so to say, is

the gist of any effective conflict resolution strategy. Incidentally, the dialectic of suspicion and faith applied to marital discernment provides the kind of balance that will enable married couples to address family conflicts with objectivity and subjectivity.

So for married couples who intend to resolve family conflicts, they will not only have to apply the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith to marital discernment separately, but also dialectically. The application of the dialectic of the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith to marital discernment means: what the married couples have discerned objectively using the hermeneutics of suspicion will have to be balanced by what they have equally discerned subjectively using the hermeneutics of faith. With the application of the dialectic of suspicion and faith to marital discernment, the kind of balance that will make married couples approach family conflicts objectively and subjectively will then be met and achieved.

When, in addition to the application of the dialectic of the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith, married couples will also strive to maintain a reciprocity of benevolence and sympathy in their exercise of marital discernment, then I believe that no conflicts in the family, no matter how complicated, would be that impossible to resolve. For when there is a reciprocal effort from both the husband and wife to think only of what is good for the other (benevolence) and to feel and understand what the other is truly feeling (sympathy), the two of them will attain “unity of heart and mind in [their] decision-making in the home” (Girao 1994, 72), so that whatever conflicts they may have will eventually, and certainly, disappear.

## 6. Conclusion

I would conclude by asserting that the key principles from both the rich phenomenologies of Ricoeur and Wojtyła can provide married couples with helpful tips on how to attain a balance of objectivity and subjectivity and maintain a reciprocity of benevolence and sympathy in their common discernment which, consequently, will make them approach and resolve family conflicts with clarity of perspective and a deeper sensitivity and understanding. As David Olson and John DeFrain (2003, 137) argued, the first basic step in conflict resolution is the clarification of the real issues. Thus when both the husband and wife discern together to identify the causes behind their conflicts, the true nature of these conflicts is also clarified and hence, can be addressed more efficiently.

Definitely, there are already several couple and family conflict resolution strategies and marital discernment is just one of them. Nevertheless, integrating into it key principles from Ricoeur’s

hermeneutic phenomenology and Wojtyła's phenomenology of love renders marital discernment into a unique strategy of family conflict resolution. Marital discernment is now firmly anchored on solid philosophical groundings and what it brings about importantly is a balance of objectivity and subjectivity and a reciprocity of benevolence and sympathy, which any effective discernment very much demands and calls for.

Therefore, with such a promising instrument at hand, married couples can smile with confidence that what they have with them is a family conflict resolution strategy that significantly "reduces the hazards of being mistaken" (Wolff 1998, 14).

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