

Living the Sacraments

Man and Woman Before God

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INTRODUCTION

In this study of the sacrament of Matrimony there are four sections corresponding to the four phases in the unfolding, of God's plan of salvation. The principal thought of each section may be summarized briefly.

1. Marriage in Israel

A study of the relationship between man and woman in Israel points to such permanent values as the importance of the mutual affection of both partners in the marriage union and the dignity of human sexuality. In addition we see how the relationship between man and woman throws light on the relationship between God and his people. Reciprocally marriage in Israel draws a special sacredness from the Covenant. In all of these respects the Old Testament prepares for the part that marriage is to play in God's plan of salvation after the coming of Christ.

2. Marriage as a Sacrament

Christ gave the relationship between man and woman in marriage the status of a sacrament of the Church. As a sacrament it becomes a symbol of Christ's love for his Church and deepens our understanding of his redemptive activity. A couple united in Christian marriage draw on a rich source of divine grace in the very action of taking each other as man and wife.

3. Christian Marriage Today

There is a constantly deepening spirituality of marriage in the Church today. Many couples are aware that they marry not for each other alone but for the Church, in the sense that they become by their love for God, for each other and for their children a living symbol of Christ's deep love for his bride the Church.

4. Marriage looks to the Future

Married love and life within a Christian family are a preparation for and an anticipation of the full sharing in the risen life of Christ that will become possible at his second coming.

FOLLOWING GOD'S PLAN

As has been said, this study follows the development of God's plan of salvation from his first revelation about marriage in the Old Testament, to his transformation of the marriage union by the redemptive work of Christ, to the spirituality of marriage in the Church today and finally to the promise of eternal life that is necessarily associated with each sacrament. There is a sound reason for this approach. In the Church today we have recognized the idea of Christianity as "a timeless

relationship with God, with truths to be believed and obligations to be fulfilled." We are now even more conscious that God has given himself personally to us, and continues to give himself to us, by his interventions in our history. The gift of divine grace makes possible for every believer an intimate personal relationship with each divine person, a relationship that is unique for every individual.

This concept is an important preliminary idea for our understanding of Christian marriage. It would be a pity to think of it merely as an institution for mass-producing Christian families. No two people love each other in quite the same way. No two married couples love God in quite the same way. The love of two people for each other and their mutual love for God is a precious thing to be preserved at all costs. The graces given in marriage are in no sense impersonal. They are meant to sanctify and preserve a quite unique love. It would be true to say, and it is often said, that God loves each partner in the marriage union; but the fact that God loves and regards as precious their love for each other and their mutual love for him, though equally true, is not often stated or appreciated. The relationship established with God through a sacrament is certainly not timeless. It varies with the sensibilities of people from age to age and culture to culture; it varies from individual to individual even within a given culture at a given time; it varies within the life of a given person in accordance with his growth to maturity and the development of his Christian sensibility.

One result of this is that the Church, in continuing the redemptive action of Christ, is continually gaining new insights. These insights are necessarily related to the culture of a particular time and place and they make it possible for individual Christians to live the life of Christ ever more deeply in their unique situations. Although the Church in recent years has gained deeper insights into the real worth of Christian marriage (the sole purpose of this study is to present some of those insights), many aspects of the Christian significance of the relationships between two people and their God in marriage remain obscure. Nonetheless it is possible, even in a brief study, to do something towards locating the sacrament of marriage in that personal and historical perspective in which it rightly belongs.

I

MARRIAGE IN ISRAEL

Two in One Flesh

In the early chapters of the book of Genesis there are two separate and supplementary accounts of the creation of the world. In the second account, a much earlier tradition, we read how God first created Adam (Gen. 2:7) and then created Eve to be his companion (Gen. 2:18-22). They are to become two in one flesh (Gen. 2:24). They go naked and it is no embarrassment to them (Gen. 2:25).

The primitive (meaning ancient) earthiness of this account embodies a number of deep insights:

- i. There is a real feeling for the dignity of the two persons, Adam and Eve. This conception of the dignity of the human person is basic to a true theology of marriage.
- ii. There is an equally genuine feeling for the mutual affection of Adam and Eve. Eve is created to be Adam's companion. In the concept of the two becoming one flesh there is the suggestion of a profound relationship, a deeper than physical union.

iii. There is a genuine idealism about their relationship. "Both went naked, Adam and his wife Eve, and thought it no shame." This harmony is clearly approved by God and must be regarded as the ideal. It was only after sin that harmony was disrupted.

iv. In the tradition of a people who practised polygamy, it is significant that the ideal presented here is that a man should leave his father and mother and cling to one wife. Their becoming two in one flesh is the basis of society.

Increase and Multiply

The other (the so-called later) account of the creation of the world (Gen. 1:1-2:3) is a tradition that was probably written down by a tribal 'priest' closer to Moses' time many centuries before Christ. Its insights are more deeply theological.

i. God makes man and woman in his own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-28). They therefore have that capacity for union with God which is to be so important in the Christian concept of marriage.

ii. Both Adam and Eve are given the same destiny. They are to be partners in dominating the earth (being its overlord and care-taker) (Gen. 1:27). Again this concept of partnership between man and woman has a peculiarly modern flavour.

iii. Adam and Eve are given a joint vocation "to increase and multiply and fill the face of the earth (Gen. 1:28). This vocation emanates from God and is an extension of his creativity.

iv. This tradition insists that "God saw all he had made and found it very good" (Gen. 1:31). It forcefully implies that sexuality is good when harmonized with the intention of the creator.

Marriage is Sacred

These two accounts come at the beginning of the bible; revelation began with them. They belong to an advanced stage of revelation. They are very remarkable by contrast with the ideas on marriage current in other cultures of the day and of many of the later cultures with whom the Hebrews were to come in contact. Marriage, love and human fecundity have their origin in God and as such are sacred. Their misuse in Israel never quite dims the nobleness of these basic ideals; they are to remain through all the vicissitudes of marriage as an institution in Israel, where polygamy will be practised, divorce permitted, ritual impurity not unknown and prostitution commonplace; they are to remain and become the structure for the sanctification of marriage by Christ in the new creation.

Before the Prophets

Between Abraham and the prophets there lies a period of perhaps a thousand years or more in the history of Israel. Such couples as Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Elkanah and Anna, David and Michal, Ahab and Jezebel, who lived during these years, are well known to the reader of the bible. Some were happy marriages; others were not. Well known, too, are such aberrations and affairs as the vice of Sodom, Lot and his daughters, Onan's refusal to beget sons to his brother's name, Samson's seduction by Delilah, David's adultery with Bathsheba and various instances of debauchery and ritual prostitution. In the narration of these and similar events, we can detect a scale of values in regard to human sexuality and the institution of marriage.

i. Although there are instances of genuine human affection between various of these couples, the emphasis is always on physical love with a view to the procreation of children and the continuance of a family line.

ii. Although there are numerous instances of disorder in sexual and marital relationships, including polygamy, concubinage, divorce, adultery, incest, fornication and unnaturalness, resulting from both ignorance and ill-will, there is a code of sexual morality which refuses to condone lust and values marriage as such.

In these values there are glimmerings of the redemption of marriage that is ultimately to be effected by Christ. But a long period of preparation still remains before the final sanctification of conjugal love.

The Teaching of the Prophets

When the prophet Hosea set out to deepen Israel's understanding of its true relationship with God, he did so in terms of his own unhappy marital experience. He had married his wife out of love; she had proved unfaithful to him, at first accepting the advances of other men and finally turning to prostitution; but he had forgiven her, helped her to reform and finally had restored their home.

In his own story Hosea found a parallel to God's relationship with Israel. God had entered into a covenant with his people. It was an alliance based on love and fidelity and expressed in a mutual pledge. Israel had proved unfaithful to God on many occasions and had turned to false gods.

However, God had forgiven Israel many times. He looked forward to a time in the future when he and his people would share a new covenant.

Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the prophet Isaiah (from chapter 40 on) all take up Hosea's theme. Jeremiah, uses it to castigate Israel for its infidelity; but he introduces a new concept by suggesting that a miracle of divine grace will finally transform the infidelity of Israel into love. (Jeremiah, Chs. 1-3 and 31). Ezekiel presents the whole history of Israel as a drama of love between God and his people (Ezekiel Ch. 16). The prophet Isaiah is more concerned with the final success of God's love Isaiah Chs. 54, 60 and 62). It is interesting to see that Isaiah Chs. 54, 60 interesting to see that Isaiah looks forward to the day when the virginity of Israel will be restored and she will again be given as a chaste bride of God.

Approaching the Ideal

Hosea began by using the marriage contract to give insight into the Covenant. But it was inevitable that once this process was set in motion God's covenant with Israel would give deeper insight into the meaning of marriage. The mutual love between God and his people, their pledge to each other, the constancy of God, the fidelity of the new Israel, the fruitfulness of the relationship became ideals for marriage in Israel. These ideals were further to be clarified in the period after the exile; but already we note the contrast drawn by the prophets between the actual state of human sexual relationships under the old and imperfect covenant and the faithfulness, fruitfulness and perpetuity of married love in the new covenant. What eventually will restore human sexuality and make possible this ideal is the redemptive grace of Christ given through the Sacrament of matrimony.

After the Exile

The Jewish people were never so near extinction as during the exile in Babylon from 587-538 B.C. Their holy city was destroyed; their temple, the symbol of God's presence in their midst, was razed to the ground; their national identity seemed to be lost. But God's purpose in allowing their humiliation by the Babylonians was to heal, not destroy them. After the exile a purified remnant returned home and set about the restoration of the holy city and the temple. The centuries that

followed saw the weakened nation in a constant struggle for survival; but God continued to work amongst his people, purifying them yet further in what was to be the final stage of preparation for the coming of his Son.

What was happening in Israel generally at this time is discernible in the contemporary teaching on marriage. There is space to consider here only two of the writings of the time. In the book of Tobit we read the love story of Tobias and Sarah, who lived at the time of the Israelite exile. Theirs is a chaste love, a love sanctified by prayer. Their marriage relationship is seen clearly in its religious perspective and integrated into the spiritual life of each partner. In the "Song of Songs which is Solomon's" (1:1) we read a poem that tells of joyous love based on a delicately evoked sexual pleasure and on deep mutual affection. This book is our clearest insight into human love in a biblical context; but behind the description of human love light is thrown on to the relationship of love between God and his people and between God and the individual human soul. For this reason Christian mystical writers turn frequently to this book in search of expressions to describe their love for Christ.

There was still polygamy in Israel at this time after the Exile, but it was the exception; divorce was still permitted, but now the law as administered by the Rabbis was much tighter; there were still sexual abuses, but the code of sexual behaviour no longer turned a tolerant eye towards prostitution. The thought of the time on marriage, particularly as seen in the "Song of Songs which is Solomon's", looks back both to the ideal harmony of love between Adam and Eve before the fall and to the divine archetype of devotion and fidelity in God's love for his people under the Mosaic Covenant. It looks forward to a future time when the dialogue of love between redeemed humanity and God will become a source of sanctification for love between man and woman.

This has been a very long look at the Old Testament; but it was necessary to dwell on these thoughts because the sacramental action of Christ always involves a transformation of a basic human experience and the fulfilment of a promise made in Israel.

II

MARRIAGE AS A SACRAMENT

An American theologian has pointed out that the sacrament of marriage is so basic to Christian thought that we simply cannot understand Christianity without an understanding of this sacrament. What he has in mind in saying this is that by the institution of Christ, two Christians do not marry for themselves alone. They marry for the Church. Now when he says this he does not for one moment merely mean that two Christians marry primarily for procreation, for the building up of the body of Christ through their children. He means something much more basic even than that.

When we say that two people marry for the Church, and we must say this if we have any insight at all into the meaning of a sacrament, we mean that their relationship reveals to the Church the deepest truth of scripture, namely that love is life-giving. God's whole purpose in sending his Son and Christ's whole purpose in establishing his Father's kingdom was to create a new mode of existence by which He could communicate his love to us in Christ and we could enter into a relationship of love with God in Christ. Hence the human experience of a man and a woman in the sacrament of marriage is meant to clarify for the whole Church the relationship between Christ, who is the life of God given to us, and his Church, the new people of God, loved by God as his own Son. This relationship, the new covenant, can be understood only in terms of the most intimate human experience, the consummated love of husband and wife. The gradual transformation of married love

in the Old Testament was, therefore, directed towards the time when it could bear the meaning of Christ and his Church.

Fidelity

In the marriage ceremony there is an exchange of wedding rings. In blessing the wedding rings the priest says in the name of the Church, "Bless, O Lord, these rings which we bless in your name. May they who wear them, keep ever faithful to each other in unbroken loyalty. May they ever remain at peace with you, obedient to your will, and live together always in mutual love. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen."

Then the bride and groom, in exchanging their wedding rings, say to each other. "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Take and wear this ring as a pledge of my fidelity."

These concepts of unbroken loyalty, harmony with the will of God, and mutual love evoke the ideal state of Adam and Eve before the fall. Through the coming of Christ and his new creation these ideals may be attained by any Christian couple who are willing to make full use of the graces placed at their disposal in the sacrament they have conferred on each other. Their love for each other is the source of the sacrament and it is precisely their love for each other which is sanctified by Christ. We are reminded again at this point that the love of a Christian couple for each other and their mutual love for God are unique. They are valued by God who loves them not only individually, but in their love for each other.

The consequence of this is that the fidelity of a man and wife to each other is more than a personal thing. It is their duty to God to live in mutual love; but it is also their Christian vocation and privilege to live in mutual love. By so doing they provide the Church with a witness of the love of Christ for his Church.

What God has joined...

In a Christian marriage the couple love each other not with their own love alone but with the love of Christ placed at their disposal through the gift of divine charity and through the sacrament. The outpouring of divine love that makes this possible is redemptive action which restores the institution of marriage to the perfection lost by sin. The Christian couple must therefore return to the kind of conduct that conforms to the original ideal. Man and wife are to become two in one flesh. Hence, when the Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is lawful for a man to put away his wife, he refers back to the book of Genesis and says,

"What God has joined, let no man put asunder."

The ideal that he embodies in this statement is a striving for the perfection of God. Thus a Christian who attempts to understand Christ's teaching on divorce solely in terms of natural law is failing to see that Christian morality is largely a matter of faith.

The Marriage that Fails

It is a sacred moment of Christian experience when a couple take each other as man and wife. "I, John, take you, Mary, for my lawful wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."

This pledge is an act of faith taken by two people in each other and in God. But it is a sad fact of experience that this act of faith that the couple make in each other is sometimes misplaced. For a

variety of reasons, it becomes impossible for some couples to live together as man and wife. After the separation one partner, or occasionally both, faces a lonely life without the possibility of valid remarriage. In this case it is necessary to recall that it is God's intention that the bond of marriage should remain and so the initial act of faith in him is not misplaced. A person with faith may expect from God the grace to live even a lonely life with benefit to himself and the Church. In Christian life we share both the cross and the resurrection of Christ. For reasons known only to God the cross casts a darker shadow over some lives than others; but in every case the cross, even of separation and loneliness, when taken up leads to the victory of Christ.

Children

When God told Adam and Eve to increase and multiply, he gave married couples the vocation of sharing in his creative work. Human love in marriage is a profound relationship that can never be understood in terms of physical love alone; but there is no doubt that it finds its deepest expression in the sexual relationship and is strengthened by this relationship. Children born to a Christian couple become for them living symbols of the love they have shared. The creativity that has led to the birth of the child culminates when it is baptized as a child of God. It continues as parents do all in their power to awaken and nourish the faith and the personalities of their children.

In the Family Circle

The tendency these days is to think of Christianity more and more in terms of personal relationships. God is love and it is in loving others that we best express our love for him. It becomes evident, then, that our capacity to live a deeply Christian life depends largely on our capacity to receive and give love. The child's capacity to love God and others is going to depend largely on his experience within the family circle. If he grows up confident of his parents' love for God, confident of their love for each other and confident in their love for him, the foundations for his growth in Christ are being laid. This places the responsibility on parents of nourishing their love for each other by every means in their power and of looking to the sacrament of marriage for the graces they need both to nourish their own love and the faith of their children.

What Saint Paul Teaches

In the Pauline concept of Christianity the Church is a pure, holy and sinless bride who has been perfectly prepared for a devotion that is the expression of generous love. Thus the union of a man and wife in chaste love is the foundation of a sacrament that symbolizes Christ's love for the Church.

However, following the pattern of the nuptial theme in the Old Testament, Christ's sanctifying love for the Church sets the standard for Christian married love. "Let wives be subject to their husbands as to the Lord; because a husband is head of the wife, just as Christ is head of the Church." Eph. 5:22. "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the Church, and delivered himself up for her." Eph. 5:24.

Saint Paul envisages marriage as a companionship of mutual love; but he also sees it as a partnership in which the husband is head of the household.

St. Paul's teaching may be briefly summarized by saying that the husband and wife in Christian wedlock may find Christ in their love for each other; children in a Christian household can acquire their first experience of Christ's love for his Church in the mutual love of their parents; all Christians can gain insight into the love of Christ through the witness of married love. The

sacramentality of marriage rests on these truths and in them a husband and wife find the inspiration to be constant in their love for each other and in their mutual life in Christ.

III

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE TODAY

In the fifth chapter of the Constitution on the Church issued by the Second Vatican Council in 1964 we read a passage that deserves prayerful thought, "Married couples and Christian parents should follow their own proper path by faithful love. They should sustain one another in love throughout their entire lives. They should imbue their offspring, lovingly welcomed as God's gift, with Christian doctrine and the evangelical virtues. In this manner they offer all men the example of unwearied and generous love; in this way they build up the brotherhood of charity; in so doing they stand as witnesses and co-operators in the fruitfulness of the Church; by such lives, they are a sign and a participation in that very love with which Christ loved his bride and for which he delivered himself up for her."

Here there is an emphasis placed on married love as part of the apostolate of charity in the Church. The Church invites an idealism by which married couples will live their marriage in faith, hope and charity, in poverty, chastity and obedience. What does this involve?

FAITH: This is a power of soul given us in Baptism which enables us to accept God giving himself to us in Christ and to respond to God by living the life of the Church. It is exercised in marriage by the willingness of a couple to give themselves to each other for the sake of Christ and the Church and to live out their mutual self-gift in Christ and in the Church.

HOPE: This is a power of soul given to us in Baptism which enables us to have confidence in the victory of Christ over sin and death. It is exercised in the confidence of happiness that a young couple have in making their initial pledge of fidelity and in the confidence with which they meet the demands of Christian marriage, demands which often seem beyond human solution. Despite the best intentions, Christian couples will at times fail both Christ and themselves; and so this virtue is closely related to the proper use of the sacrament of Penance by a Christian couple.

CHARITY: This is a power of soul given in Baptism that makes it possible for the Christian to love God and his fellow men with the love of Christ. The mutual love which makes Christian marriage possible is an exercise of this gift of divine love. It must be fostered in marriage by every human means and especially by the Eucharist.

POVERTY: Every Christian is called to share the poverty of Christ and to love Christ in the poor. Poverty of spirit enables Christian parents to place the needs of their children before their own. It ought to make every Christian home a place where the love of the poor has a high priority.

CHASTITY: Chastity in marriage recognizes as good and desirable the pleasures of sexual relationships and is concerned with their proper use. It recognizes that the exercise of physical love in marriage is subject to Christ's law of love. The tensions involved in the control of sexual relationships within marriage are deeply felt in the Church today. We need to pray that all couples will be given the strength and guidance to resolve these tensions.

OBEDIENCE: Christ's most outstanding characteristic in his devotion to his Father's will. Christian couples may unite their interior dispositions most closely with his by their acceptance of the responsibilities of Christian marriage as being God's direct will for them.

A life lived according to this pattern demands a real understanding of Christ's redemptive activity, particularly in relation to the married state. The action of Christ in giving himself to his Father on Calvary transforms the action of a husband and wife giving themselves to each other in married life. Their action can be identified with his self-gift. It transforms the action of Christian parents in giving themselves in the clothing, feeding and education of their children. This action, too, can be identified with the self-gift of Christ. These actions are truly redemptive in the sense that they lead to salvation as surely as the cross of Christ led to glory.

"Married Love"

Is the idealism suggested for married couples by the Constitution on the Church misplaced? Has marriage really been "restored" by Christ to this extent?

The answer to these questions is given in a Pastoral Letter, called Married Love, issued by Bishop de Smedt of Bruges, Easter, 1963. Bishop de Smedt wrote to the married people of his diocese and asked them to meet in small groups to discuss ways and means of strengthening the unity of their homes. He requested them to return their findings in writing to him. He then summarized and collated the returns and issued them as a pastoral letter. In this letter we find an idealism just as deep as that of the Constitution. It is impossible to summarize it but perhaps something of its spirit is conveyed by this single extract, written by a teacher,

"The mission of husband and wife is extremely exacting; it supposes an ever-growing will to self-sacrifice, and a dedication to unselfishness taken to ever greater lengths. Only married people who have penetrated the mystery of union in marriage can surrender themselves with rapture to what becomes for them the supreme realization of themselves in self-giving and self-forgetfulness. But total giving is fully achieved, and the virtue of self-surrender gradually acquired, only when husband and wife have effective faith in the living God. For God himself is present at the heart of this mystery, because he is the source of all true love."

IV

MARRIAGE LOOKS TO THE FUTURE

Every sacrament is in some way a preparation for and an anticipation of the future. The sacrament of matrimony is a preparation for the future in so far as it confers on a couple a mission and a grace. In working out their mission or their vocation by their mutual love for God, for Christ, for the Church, for each other, for their children and for their fellow men, especially as suggested earlier for the poor, a married couple are both building up the body of Christ and working out their own salvation.

The sacrament of matrimony is an anticipation of the future in being a sign of the new and eternal covenant. The marriage between Christ and his Church is going to bring to eternal life "an innumerable generation of redeemed souls". At his second coming Christ will hand over the kingdom of the redeemed to his Father. In this gesture God's plan for the salvation of men will be completed. From that time onwards the redeemed will live in a state of perfect harmony with God and with each other. The happiness of that time is beyond all imagining; but we are given some kind of a glimpse of the future in the harmony and happiness that is the ideal of the Christian couple.

Nihil Obstat: BERNARD O'CONNOR, Diocesan Censor. Imprimatur: + JUSTIN D. SIMONDS,
Archbishop of Melbourne. 3rd September, 1965.

RECOMMENDED READING:- Man and Wife in Scripture .. Pierre Grelot (A Compass Book)
Married Love .. Bishop of Bruges (Geoffrey Chapman) The Bible on Marriage .. G. N. Vollebregt
(Sheed and Ward)
