

Courtship

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The Purpose of Courtship

If, in the Services, it happened that one from every three recruits had soon to be discharged as unfit, responsible officers would doubtless presume that something was wrong with the life, or with the standard of selection, or with the method of training, or with all three. When we are faced with a rapid increase in divorce, when Marriage Guidance Councils have to be set up throughout the country to deal with the number of marriages which are failures, or threaten to become so, one would expect a similar conclusion to be drawn, namely, that something is wrong with the way people view the nature and purpose of marriage, and, consequently, with the way they prepare for marriage during courtship.

A courtship is influenced throughout by how marriage is viewed. It is, then, important to have the right view. Marriage has been called a "total community of life on the mental and spiritual levels." It is, therefore, a great undertaking. A "total community of life" between two people is not lightly to be entered upon. The surrender which it supposes of "exclusive and perpetual rights" over each other is too complete for that. These rights deal with the primary purpose of marriage, the having and training of children, and the value we set on our own life should give us some clue to the nobility and the responsibility of the married state in which husband and wife have it in their power to give life to other human souls, so sharing in the creative work of God and achieving what they could never otherwise do, something eternal, immortal. By training and fashioning the life they give, they share also in the sanctifying work of God. The second purpose of marriage, the "mutual help" of each, means that each sets up a firm barrier against that enemy of many beautiful things, one's selfishness. May it not be that marriage is not to-day sufficiently seen as a noble responsibility embraced and shared by two people? Its nobility is set as high as it possibly could be set, by St Paul when he said of married love that it was to be like that with which "Christ loved the Church."

Courtship, then, is also a noble responsibility. It is the time when it is discovered whether the final responsibility may be safely accepted, whether or not a "total community of life" is possible, whether each can share not only the physical life of the other, but also the mental and spiritual life. It is a seeking for the assurance that the attraction really does come from such a harmony of characters that eventually each may make confidently the surrender of self to the other in marriage. It is for courtship to discover and bring into play the delicate instincts which are in all of us by grace and which are necessary for the nobility and the full happiness of marriage to be realised. Because it is an intimate approach to another human soul, courtship must always be carried on in an atmosphere of delicacy and reverence if these fine instincts, from which alone true love springs, are to be revealed and be seen as part of one's strength for the future.

"Shall I marry?—whom shall I marry?"

The questions may come from new, hardly recognised impulses marking the break-away from the individualism and self-sufficiency of childhood. They indicate the grown-up need to share one's living with another. Feeling oneself to be "in love" should raise another question: "Is it an attraction which will lead to true married love?" Love is a word with many meanings—we speak of loving sport, teaching, gardening, reading—indeed, almost any human activity. Even when we talk of loving people there is a wide variety of meaning. There is the love of friendship, a deep affection for one whose influence both steadies and enriches our own character, and this plays in courtship an important part. But there is also the love of desire, the urge to possess the loved one as one's very own. It differs from the love of friendship—we can share our friends, but not our partners in marriage. These two loves together form the strong natural basis for the lasting union in marriage, which consists in each completely possessing, and being possessed by, the beloved.

If in a courtship there is that feeling that one's character is being steadied and, as it were, added to and strengthened, the love of friendship is leading on to married love, and this suggests that there really is the required compatibility on the mental and spiritual levels. The absence of this, it should be remembered, is even more easily recognised because one is dealing with facts. For instance, on the mental plane, besides possessing the other qualifications for marriage, one partner appreciates good music, has some artistic sense, the other "cares for none of these things," but is limited to the headlines, the comic strip, the fashion or the sporting page, is impatient of any music except that of a stove-pipe band, of any entertainment above the level of the cheap variety.

On the spiritual plane, one may have a conscience that sees the issues between right and wrong quickly and correctly, and a will that decides with little hesitation for the right, whilst the other partner is uncertain in conscience and wavering in will, with a definite inclination to the wrong in such matters as honesty, truth, the lawful use of marriage, and so on. The one does not wish to be merely a Sunday Mass Catholic, but feels the need of a fuller use of the Sacraments and the devotional helps of the Church, finds that Catholic reading helps to maintain a more correct and a happier outlook, considers it a duty to take a reasonable part in Catholic, and particularly in parish, activities; the other may be quite content, and indeed quite good, with doing no more than the Church demands as a minimum.

Mixed Marriages

It is inescapable that a large proportion of mixed marriages are failures and tragedies, proving that the difference of religious outlook does cause serious strain. Religion is an essential part of life. That makes it just as unwise to marry anyone who has little, if any, religious sense as it would be to marry one who preferred a wandering life to a home life. The Catholic partner has to reflect seriously that having grown up in a Catholic atmosphere there is a tendency to take for granted the value of this example. In our Catholic home it is likely that everyone understood why one got up early for Mass and Communion, gave up an entertainment to wait one's turn for Confession, or to attend Benediction, felt it necessary to go to some trouble to keep the laws of fasting and abstinence, to pause and kneel, even when dog-tired, to say one's prayers at night, to be particular about the books one read, the films one saw, the plays one heard, the kind of conversations one carried on, all following out our belief that life was not just a matter of cleverness or good luck, but a matter of co-operation with God. It is quite a different undertaking to keep up these things in

married life, deprived of that sympathetic example and opposed, it may be, by definite misunderstanding. Not that the difference of religion is a hopeless difference since many a fine Catholic has grown out of a marriage convert.

It is likely that the partners will be at different levels on all these planes, and yet it is important that each should vary from the other as little as possible, particularly in the matter of religion. It will not do if the weakness of one is beyond the other's strength to inspire and support. It is easy to see that any one of the differences might become a cause of serious conflict when both partners have to adjust themselves, not just during the infrequent hours of courtship, but during the unceasing companionship of married life. Admittedly one does meet husbands and wives of widely differing temperaments who provide excellent foils to each other, as the genial husband is prevented from becoming a gadabout by the tranquillity of a wife who in turn is helped by his cheerfulness not to lapse into over-seriousness.

Training for Marriage

Marriage is rightly called a vocation. That is a state of life as opposed to just a job in life. In spite of a thoroughly bad private life, it is possible to be a successful business man, but it is not possible to be a good father and husband. It is an important point, then, that marriage should be considered as a vocation because it is a freely chosen state of life. Like every other vocation, it has to be decided, and therefore has its period of preparation. Courtship is the noviceship of marriage, serving the double purpose of testing and training. Carried on as a training, it provides, at the same time, the test whether one is meant to marry at all, whether to marry this particular man or woman, whether one is being rightly drawn to some other, or whether the right partner has yet appeared.

Courtship, then, should be seen primarily as a training, but a training with a difference. It cannot be given by others. The two have entered a world which is wonderfully private and intimate, new to themselves and closed to others. Each must help the other, and learn from the other the meaning of this new phase of existence. Turning its opportunities to advantage is the real purpose of courtship. The opportunities for teaching and learning are sure to be there—one may not have had the advantage of a Catholic school, the home may not have been thoroughly Catholic. There may be a wrong attitude to doubtful books, plays, films, a want of reverence for parents (no happy augury for the future home). Here the other partner will bring to bear the finer influence of one's own home. One may have a quarrelsome, easily offended, critical disposition. Here the other partner will show the value of self-control and reasonableness. By showing, for instance, that discussing others freely is not one of his or her faults, there will be created that valuable understanding which should exist between husband and wife, that neither ever discusses the other with anyone at all, not even with one's closest relatives. The Sixth and Ninth Commandments are still more obvious examples of the duty of teaching. Wherever there is a coarse approach, a persistent desire to have what is not lawful, the other will oppose an attitude which by its clear, delicate reverence is bound to make one even more desirable to the partner who is worthy. If it does not, the signal is set at "danger". Faults in courtship are not like those in "rehearsals" which, miraculously, do go right, "on the night". Never delude yourself that it will be all right after marriage. Faults not corrected in courtship will stay. The stronger partner should let it be seen that the continuance of the courtship depends upon definite improvement where weaknesses seem likely to cause unhappiness in the future. All this is even more important where one partner is not a Catholic. A large number of mixed marriages would have been fine Catholic ones if this clear-sighted training had gone on from the start.

Many a novice in a religious order has seemed at first to lack every qualification except goodwill until training gradually discloses the hidden apostle, the future saint. So, many an unsatisfactory character has just been waiting for some good man or woman to do what even his or her parents could not do—bring to bear in courtship the one influence which will be successful. The truth of this is certain: because we "needs must love the highest when we see it", the partner who sets out to be an influence for good is bound to appear so desirable in the eyes of the other that the required improvement is seen as a small price to pay. If the other is unwilling, or not able to pay it, the training has been given, the test has been failed, the courtship should cease, remembering that a wrong marriage is a marriage spoiled, not just for one, but for both.

Each shaping the other for a partnership in which all the virtues and qualities required for a good Catholic life come into action and prove their value—that is surely how happy marriages are made. It is using properly a unique relationship where the influence of one upon the other is at its most powerful. But "no one gives what he does not possess." Courtship should do what every new experience does, bring an awareness, not only of the defects of one's partner, but of one's own. The opportunity is for both and what should be going on is a gradual raising of the level, an enriching of the character through each seeking to be more worthy of the other. The Breviary speaks of the priest as being "increased by the priesthood." Husband and wife should be increased in worth by marriage, and the increase should begin in courtship. Each has to discover whether the one has enough to add to the strength of the other so that life will be fuller and happier for both.

Sex and Emotion

What has been said is of itself almost enough to write off an emotional affair as a failure. Animals respond easily to each other's emotions, but then, they do not have to live together afterwards in the same intimate way that human beings do, and for that, character is needed more than emotion. If the hours of courtship are made just an opportunity for emotional satisfaction, the real purpose, just described, is clearly missed, and it may not be long after marriage that one will ruefully regard the other and think:

"I cannot say
If thou hadst ever met my soul."

It will not be met in an emotional affair. Moreover, there is danger here. The sex impulse which leads men and women to seek life together must, because of what it has to achieve, be a powerful urge. We surround high explosives with all sorts of precautions. God and the Church have surrounded sex, as much because of its sanctity as because of the dangers of its misuse, with clear precautions. Through its associations with the creative activity of God it must be a sacred, beautiful thing and, therefore, more easily spoiled.

The proper training of courtship must produce a marked delicacy and reverence which are the light but powerful hold of the capable rider on the reins of a fine but highly-strung animal ready to tighten at the first sign of panic. In courtship, the reins of delicacy and reverence once slackened, the bounds of lawful intimacies once passed, control is easily lost, and there may be that tragedy, all the sadder because never intended, a painfully regretted betrayal of each other. Couples are often mistaken in thinking they can keep control all along the line just as those who dangerously overwork are convinced they will stop in time before the inevitable breakdown which always takes

them by surprise. We must speak about these things, because all too often the good fall into the trap which the less spiritual are cunning enough to avoid.

The girl partner has a special responsibility to remember that sex is usually much more at the alert in the man, and that her seeking a great warmth of affection, which merely gives her innocent pleasure, may involve the other in a serious struggle for self-control, and in painful questionings of conscience. Generally, too, a decent man will not go further than a decent girl wants.

Whenever there is a premature grasping of the privileges of the married state, the feeling that each holds the other in trust is lessened. Each betrays to the other a weakness of will, and there cannot be the same trust and reliance again. The courtship becomes charged with a certain compelling quality which often makes it difficult, if not impossible, to withdraw from a relationship which perhaps is not convincing to either party and which reason tells them should be ended. It is well to be clear-minded, through the guidance of others whom we respect, or of a wise confessor, as to what intimacies are allowed, and when even these are unwise. One must be alone with a person to discover certain aspects of his or her character, but to be alone at certain times or in certain moods may be something more than dangerous. When one knows where the line is drawn for us it is easier to stay on the right side.

If courtship is looked upon as a time when restraint and the practice of doing good to one another brings the reward of an ability to see and appreciate as part of one's own life, the best in each other's character, this will so fill the courtship that the difficulties mentioned in the previous paragraphs will hardly arise. St Augustine says regretfully of the youthful days of himself and his friend, Alypius: "Such honour as there is in marriage and from the duty of well-ordered life together and the having of children had very small influence with either of us." He meant that it should have been the overwhelming influence.

Living Together

"Life together" means innumerable things—what sort of house; how it will be furnished, showily and uselessly, or simply and efficiently; out of income, or by running into debt. If the couple are lucky enough to have a house to go to, there can be hours of useful planning. It is being discovered how much drudgery can be saved by a thoughtfully-planned kitchen. One cannot help feeling that if the husband developed an interest in the house before he lived in it he might not spend so much time out of it. If they have to live with others in the first days of their marriage (and living with in-laws should be a desperate last throw), the planning is even more necessary. In these days of housing shortage, too, the difficulty should not be exaggerated, real as it is. There is more to a home than many rooms and much furniture. Home is not so much a place as an atmosphere. Home is where you are.

"Thy Kingdom come! Yea, bid it come!
But when Thy Kingdom first began
On earth, Thy Kingdom was a home,
A child, a woman, and a man."
(Katharine Tynan)

No mention of rooms, furniture or gardens! There is, too, the standard of one's housekeeping. Some families can live, and be better fed and clothed, at half the cost of others. Even menus might make a pleasant evening for a couple! There can be discussions as to the things that are to be the first

charge on one's income, and what provision shall be made for a rainy day, what money the wife is to have, and how far the husband has a right to know about its spending. Frequently recurring "financial embarrassments" destroy the peace of many a family. Even the timetable of the home is worth foreseeing, and making sure that it includes the time for taking each other out, and for going to church, for family prayers, and so on. It is not too early in courtship to discuss children and their training, so that each may learn the other's views and avoid divided counsels afterwards. There are ways in which these discussions can be stimulated by books and pamphlets such as those listed on the covers of this pamphlet. There are sometimes Catholic courses on marriage guidance to be attended. Even the smallest details are worth while. How much trouble would be saved, for instance, if each made a resolve never to discuss the other with anyone at all after marriage.

The last suggestion, however, has an application to courtship. It is certainly worth while to examine fairly hints which others may give, especially if they come from one's own parents, who, whilst they may not know so well the partner of one's choice, do know their own child. This attending to the opinions of others has its value, and those which are inspired by the right intention are soon recognised. It is to-day somewhat necessary. Once, the partners in a courtship usually knew each other from childhood. Now it frequently happens that they have never met before the moment of the first attraction. They have scant knowledge of how each behaves in the home setting, or at what worth they are estimated by others who know them well.

Not All will Marry

It is a mistake to imagine oneself a failure because no partner comes one's way. Not all are meant to be husbands or wives. Some may be fit for marriage but have not met a suitable partner. Others may have to delay marriage because of some other pressing duty which might in circumstances become imperative, such as the care of parents. There are others again who, for reasons of temperament, or some other defect, are unsuited for married life. It is usually a tragedy for such people to marry perforce. Let them realise that they can lead full and happy lives as single men or women. The ranks of social and welfare workers are full of these. They often make great educators, artists, inventors. Freedom from the responsibilities of a family is undoubtedly a great advantage to many and a great benefit to the world.

Some are not meant to marry because God wants them for His own special work, and it does seem that our young Catholics, girls in particular, are not giving as much thought as they should to the possibility of a religious vocation. Perhaps they are bewildered by the wide range of trades and professions which have been thrown open to them during the last thirty years. It is not at all unlikely that many are leading not very happy lives because a religious vocation was not considered.

But, if it is to be a courtship, let it be so carried on that you can feel that the grace of God is with you in all you do. Each must be able to go on thinking that it has fallen out extremely well that they have met. Nothing should ever be done to destroy that estimate of each other.

"All other things to their destruction draw,
Only our love hath no decay;
This no to-morrow hath, nor yesterday;
Running it never runs from us away,
But truly keeps its first, last everlasting day."
