

Polygamy and Tyre Pressures: the Sacramentality of Customary Marriage

Michael Singleton

I

The average car-owner is usually unaware that he could safely put twice as much pressure in his tyres than that stipulated as ideal in the manufacturer's manual, without having them explode in his face. What would happen where he to be appraised of this possibility? He would probably be less apprehensive of his tyres bursting when he sees a lackadaisical garage boy nonchalantly filling them. He would certainly not exceed the specified norm each time he had occasion to put some air in his tyres.

What they (mis)take for the Maker's absolute norm regarding Christian marriage, fascinates many Churchmen as fearfully as the tyre manufacturer's presumed upper limit. The average pastor assumes that one cannot sacramentalise beyond monolithic monogamy without destroying dogma if not the natural ideal of the family itself. Yet too neat a notion of what the Natural Law allows, coupled with a naive understanding of Revealed Truth, can block an adequate and adapted pastoral approach to marriage in the same way that a literal reading of the maker's instructions can prevent a suitably supple attitude towards tyre filling. In both instances a perspective is urgently needed which will liberate people's minds. Both the pastor worried about polygamy and the car-owner concerned with his tyres would benefit from a point of view which would free them from false fears. But in neither case would these new horizons automatically entail practical excesses. The car-owner's new-found knowledge would not lead him to put twice as much air in his tyres at the first opportunity. Likewise a priest's new awareness that customary marriage is perhaps already really sacramental, and therefore sacramentalisable, would not normally lead him to impose his insight regardless of pastoral common sense.

A higher viewpoint, as Lonergan would say, enables one to relocate the heart of the matter. Some still wonder whether the ordination of women might not run counter to Revelation. Others would query the validity of a Eucharist where elements other than bread and wine had been used. Given that the Natural Law can know no exceptions. But what if the real problem was the point of the priesthood as such or the exportability of the Eucharist to cultures where the meal is not a symbolically central experience, then the passionate debates about women

priests or alternative elements would seem to be much ado about nothing. What if the Natural Law is not what one culture—the Roman Catholic—has arbitrarily absolutised and hypostasised as ‘the very Nature of things in themselves’ but is merely what people consider to be natural because of their cultural conditioning, then the problem of explaining away exceptions evanesces.

Should the African church be round or rectangular? Such is the circular debate afflicting Christian architects in Africa. To wonder whether Christianity in Africa needs churches at all would not necessarily be tantamount to calling for the demolition of existing ecclesiastical edifices nor to suggesting that all future plans be scrapped, but it would at once put the discussion in a different and deeper perspective as well as preventing the generation of pointless steam. But Christianity is first and foremost preoccupied with people not projects. Which, whether one likes it or not,¹ means to say Christianity is largely concerned with marriage and the family. Which, for the Catholic Church at least, means to say how to reconcile the African way of life with the Christian way of life. Which more specifically means how to relate constructively, customary marriage and the sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

Reading the literature on this score one cannot escape the impression of watching flies beating against the side of a jam jar when all they have to do to escape is to fly out through the top. Is it really so difficult to discover a perspective which would liberate the protagonists from their toing and froing? We would like to examine here some points of view which we think could relativise and perhaps eventually render otiose the opposition between customary marriage on the one hand and the sacrament of marriage on the other. We might possibly come to see that the reality of Christian marriage (the ‘*res sacramenti*’) is in fact realised in most customary marriage, despite its seeming shortcomings, and that in theory the Church need only cross this Christ-coloured psychosociological reality with some ritual or other. Pastoral prudence could conceivably demand that the present discriminatory practices with regard to polygamists be continued for a while so as to avoid scandalising the weak by too abrupt a *volte face*.² But the mere fact of having realised that the traditional position does not represent the upper limit would make, potentially, for a greater plasticity of approach to polygamy.

¹Political theologians such as J. B. Metz do not like it. They find that the Church, oblivious like a bully, to the fact that she is being egged on by a crowd of socio-cultural pressures, picks on those she knows she can beat, fighting shy all the while of explosive political issues for fear they blow up in her face. But by picking on the moral or personal dimensions to human problems and even then on aspects other than those of truth, justice and liberty, the Church privatises and spiritualises what are basically socio-economic matters. Contraception, for instance, is not primarily a problem of subjective sexual morality but is above all the result of objective injustices perpetrated by the capitalist system, such as lack of housing or unemployment.

²It has been suggested that the ‘no surrender’ attitude of *Humanae Vitae*, stemmed in part from Rome’s reluctance to reverse previous rulings and thus upset unfairly those who had abided by the party line.

II

Each successive survey about Christianity and Marriage in Africa only serves to rub yet more salt into the running sore of the Catholic Church, namely the small number of her members able to receive the sacrament of Matrimony, let alone able to persevere in it. Having inspected the wound, the specialist never fails to come up with some soothing salve. The simplest of these stop gap solutions is that the present sacramental theory and practice be maintained but that baptised polygamists be no longer discriminated against. Provided they neither take their situation for granted nor glorify in it, they would be discreetly allowed to receive the sacraments and even hold office within the Church.

A slightly more revolutionary remedy is the suggestion that couples progress by stages towards the fullness of Christian marriage. Their growth in Christ would be ritualised but the sacrament as such would be reserved for their crossing that threshold where their intentions are not only seen to be genuine but are above all guaranteed by their overall condition, namely their foyer is socio-economically stabilised, their characterial compatibility established and a child or two already born.³

Several other solutions of great speculative subtlety and canonical complexity have been aired but as they all seem vitiated by a streak of masochistic fatalism they will not be detailed here. The resignation implicit in the following quotation is symptomatic of even the more liberal positions: 'Whether we like it or not, customary marriage, as it exists and especially as it exists at present, is not fitted to express the fullness of Christian marriage'.⁴ The supposition seems to be that the Catholic Church because of her high standards—standards imposed from on High—is unfortunately bound to suffer until such a time as customary marriage comes to embody the essential requirements of Christian marriage. On the one hand stands the revealed ideal of marriage, sacramentalised in Holy Matrimony and realised in the Christian family, while on the other, lie the imperfect ideas of marriage variously institutionalised as Customary Marriage. Until the gap can be bridged, the Church must inevitably suffer.

But what if this suffering is self-inflicted? It would not be the first time in her history that the Church had imagined she was being 'a fool for Christ's sake' when in fact she was simply making a fool of herself. What if the gap between customary marriage and Christian marriage were an ethnocentric illusion, generated by less than adequate understandings of sacramentality, revelation and the natural law? The possibility must be faced even at the risk of losing face. What if, having

³In the town of Lugny in the diocese of Autun, this is no longer theory but practice. Out of 70 couples who came to ask for the sacrament in 1973, 40 opted for a blessing on their desire to found a foyer, as they did not feel their attitude to marriage coincided with that canonised by the sacrament. Cf. *Information Catholique Internationales*, n. 465, 1.10.1974, p. 28-29 and *La Vie Catholique*, n. 1520, 25.10.1974, p. 14-15.

⁴'Qu'on le veuille ou non, le mariage coutumier, tel qu'il est vécu, surtout dans la situation actuelle d'évolution, n'est pas apte à exprimer la plénitude du mariage chrétien'. B. Tenailleau, *Mariage coutumier et Eglise*, *Spiritus*, n. 55, Janvier 1974, p. 39.

adopted a different set of postulates, it suddenly seemed plausible that the *res sacramenti*, the whole point of the sacrament of marriage, had been realised without our realising it, in a customary marriage between African Catholics? Even to make these suppositions might seem outrageous. But the suggestion that Anglicans can 'really say mass' would have sounded even more outlandish until the recent shift in sacramental theology made it more than an acceptable hypothesis.⁵

III

But before stating roundly our positive conviction let us approach the problem from a minimalist or quasi negative angle. Let us accept, for argument's sake, that customary marriage in general and polygamy in particular, fall short, even far short, of Christian marriage as it has been condensed out of the New Testament by the Church's tradition. If it can subsequently be shown that the Church has accommodated herself and comfortably so, to institutions as far removed from the Gospel ideals as she claims customary marriage and polygamy to be, then she would have to find very cogent reasons indeed for not coming at least temporarily to terms with these latter too.

One need not look far for examples of institutions which are now considered unChristian in their very constitution but which the Church once condoned uncritically. The Church inculcated submissiveness and respect in slaves and though she urged their masters to be gentle and just, it was ages before she awoke to the essential inhumanity of slavery.⁶ The Church reminded the divine king that he too was subject to the Divine but she accepted, none the less, the disastrous absurdity of absolute human authority. Nor does it seem to have occurred to the nineteenth century Popes that the workers might be radically right in

⁵In days when even the most sacred of a priori assumptions appear to be collapsing before the results of a posteriori research it would be rash to take anything for granted until Popper's last word had been said, i.e., until it had finally proved impossible to demonstrate the statement's falsity. Many of the statements in this article should be read as queries to which it is not possible to give apodictically certain answers. It is impossible, however, not because of insufficient information but simply because, epistemologically speaking, at the level of the plausibility of postulates either the penny drops or it doesn't, either you see it or you don't. In the moral theologian's textbooks, a tile was forever falling on the head of a passerby. There are at least three ways of accounting for this according to one's initial assumptions. Either it fell on me because a witch had it in for me, or it fell on me simply because of bad luck, or it fell on me because of divine Providence. There is no absolutely sure way of proving which of the three explanations, the primitive, the agnostic or the deeply religious is right. Each of us lives within mental worlds which are self-explanatory and self-confirmatory within their appointed horizons. One cannot step with inductive logical smoothness from one world to another. The overall credibility of one's outlook can crumble slowly or collapse suddenly before the plausibility of alternative perspectives, but one can never move between universes without some kind of intuitive leap beyond the power of irrefutable logic. Consequently we will not be trying to prove our point of view in these pages but only to persuade people that it is plausible.

⁶Historians seem to have noticed the Church's moral selectivity as early if not earlier than the theologians, as regards polygamy and slavery. Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi observes that 'what is surprising is the relative emphasis the missionaries placed on (polygamy) in the middle of the nineteenth century in comparison with, e.g., domestic slavery . . . they did not condone slavery, but they regarded it as a social evil to be reformed with time . . . (whereas polygamy was) declared a direct violation of the laws of God which had to be rejected by the faithful *ab initio*'. *Christian Missions in Nigeria: 1841-1891*, London, 1965, p. 103-108.

rejecting the impressive charities of their employers and demanding rather a more direct control over their destiny. Neither did the majority of mission hierarchies realise until it was almost too late the unnatural nature of colonial rule.

It is all too easy for later generations to condemn such ecclesiastical compromises with the established powers as unedifyingly unworthy. At the time, of course, it was far less easy to discern what was and above all what would become irredeemably reprehensible. It would be unfair, moreover, to imply that the Church was usually inspired by the opportunistic pragmatism of *realpolitik*. Throughout history the Church has sincerely sought to make the best of a bad situation, to obtain the fairest deal for her members. It is simply that as an institution with vested interests herself in maintaining order, circumstances have to become utterly intolerable before the Church will approve of anyone rocking an institutional boat, let alone sinking it. Her initial attitude towards Hitler's Germany or Caetano's Mozambique shows how patent such inhumanity must become before she will react unequivocally.

In what way is African customary marriage essentially different from slavery or the divine monarchy? There is so little difference in fact, that the real problem is not so much whether customary marriage is less intrinsically compatible with Christianity than capitalism or colonialism but rather why the Church picked on the former and turned a blind eye to the latter. The answer she herself is most likely to give is that whereas she had to discover for herself that slavery was wrong she had been clearly told from the outset that only monogamy was right. It is God and not the Church who refuses the sacrament of matrimony to potential polygamists.⁷

But can this conviction of an unbroken continuity between Christ's intentions and contemporary Catholic legitimisations be founded other than on a rather naive notion of how Revelation works? Did God really feel that circumstances were ripe for the first Christians to realise that polygamy was displeasing to Him but that they were as yet unable to understand how unnatural slavery was? Did Christ really believe that His Heavenly Father had been obliged to modify His initial monogamic blueprint by all too human weakness and that he himself had been sent to bring the age of concessions to an end?⁸

In an age of scientific exegesis and serious ecumenism, it is no longer possible for the Catholic Church to prove apodictically her position by alone claiming to have a hot-line to the Divine. The only alternative to hesitating with the exegetes or wondering with other Christian bodies

⁷If one can imagine a car owner saying: 'I would like to put more air in but the manufacturer said 20 lbs. and no more', one can also imagine the future African Pope about whom the magazines speculate, privately admitting and apologetically, that if it had been left to him, he would have sacramentalised polygamy too, but the Church's Founder drew the line at monogamy.

⁸Even if Christ really did believe that this was his mission it would not advance the argument much further, since he believed literally in a lot of other things which we no longer believe in in quite the same way. A.v. one would have to account for the criteria which allow for it now to be theologically respectable not to take Christ at his word when he speaks about the Devil but which demand on the contrary that when he spoke about monogamy his words must be taken at their face value.

is a take it or leave it fideism founded on an authoritarianism as arbitrary as it is arrogant: 'we are right and they are wrong because God is ultimately with us and not with them'. Far from all exegetes feel that Christ excluded the eventuality of remarriage after divorce. It is in any case difficult to understand how one can conclude to the metaphysical nature of marriage from what was essentially a moral context. Christ and his immediate followers were more concerned with the egoistic immorality then attendant upon a given form of marriage than with defining the nature of marriage 'in se et per se'. That other respectable and responsible Christian bodies admit of divorce, albeit in well defined circumstances, should make us think if not doubt.

A more credible account of how the Church came to find herself in the present cul-de-sac would be that she linked the sacrament of Matrimony to monolithic monogamy partly because of what she (mis)took to be the meaning of the New Testament and partly because of what historical circumstances convinced her to be the most human and natural form of marriage. Since she is now so sure of the fact, there must have been a time when it dawned upon the Church that she knew how God wanted Christians to be joined in marriage, that she was within her rights in declaring a, b and c to constitute a Christian marriage and x, y and z to be contrary to Christian marriage. As Clifford Longley said in *The Times* (21.10.1974): 'the origin of the present dilemma lies far back in time, at the point when the pre-Reformation church decided to establish clear criteria for Christian marriage'. But, as he pertinently remarks, in so doing is it not possible that 'the Church laid claim to an insight into human nature to which it may not have been entitled'?

It would be illogical to imply that a social group as important as the Church gradually came to be had no right whatsoever to legislate about marriage according to her own lights. It was as inevitable that the medieval Church meddle in matters matrimonial as it is that the State seek to codify kinship patterns. Where Churchmen probably exceed their rights is (1) in believing that God automatically backs up their culturally conditioned intuitions and their codified concretisations, (2) in acting as if the plausible positions of the human sciences with regard to sexuality, marriage and the family can only accidentally affect but never essentially alter the traditional teaching about Christian marriage.

It is difficult to see in what way, regarding even Christian marriage, it would be meaningful to speak of a doctrinal core let alone a theological tenet which could escape the control of the human sciences such as psychology, sociology or anthropology. Is it not rather the case that when the theologian speaks of an irreducible Christian dimension to marriage, he is simply speaking as the ethnographer of Christian kinship customs in the same way that ultimately Nuer marriage is not Dinka marriage? One must be careful of removing to the theological realm a simple *de facto* difference of behaviour resulting from straightforward cultural conditioning. Equally one must be careful of concluding from the theological realm to concrete patterns of behaviour. If theological concepts are meta-empirical and thus escape from the control of the

human sciences then it is also out of the question to use them to establish exact empirical life styles. From the theological fact that the Church is the mystical body of Christ one cannot conclude that a monarchic form of authority is more fitting than a democratic one. Likewise, from the fact that a Christian man and wife are theologically said to be like Christ and the Church one cannot conclude to monogamy as being more Christian than polygamy.

There is, however, to return to our main argument, one serious disadvantage in suggesting that since the Church had few misgivings about slavery she should have even less about polygamy, and it is the implication that the latter is as intrinsically imperfect, not to say evil, as the former. This implication is quite unacceptable for it would mean that we were still in the same impasse as those moral theologians who feel they can save the situation pastorally by distinguishing between subjective good faith and an objectively sinful state. Such casuistry is called for because of an initially short-sighted point of view. These theologians cannot account convincingly for those societies where *not* to take a second wife would be selfish and sinful.⁹

We need to discover a perspective which will enable us to be more than compassionately charitable to the man who finds himself through no fault of his own or through a fault long since regretted, in an impossible situation.¹⁰ We must try and work our way round to a point of view

⁹There are societies, for example, where not to take the wife of one's deceased brother, even though one is already married, would be to condemn her either to an unnatural widowhood or to a life of impecunious prostitution. In such a society a man could use the Christian commandment to justify an unChristian refusal to help his neighbour. An example such as this should bring home the extent to which any application of the word 'natural' to what is essentially a phenomenon belonging to the human sciences, is to beg the question. In calling a certain form of the family 'natural' we either mean 'that kind of family taken for granted in a given culture' or 'the very nature of the family is x, y and z'. To imply the latter would be to illogically apply a term proper to philosophy or rather metaphysics, to the domain of the human sciences. An example will perhaps clarify this theoretical but important point. When Mircea Eliade in order to underline the momentousness of the change initiation effects in a person's life, speaks of it as an 'ontological break through'—'une rupture de niveau ontologique', he is merely using metaphysical language metaphorically, in order to bring home the importance of the event. Logically, however, initiation as initiation, has nothing to do with ontology as such. Likewise in dealing with problems in the field of kinship one must be very careful not to use a term such as 'nature' in an ontological sense. The nature of the family and marriage can be entirely unpacked by the empirical sciences—when the theologian or exegete speaks of the nature of Christian marriage they are speaking as ethnographers of Christianity, at least in so far as they seek to state what has been the case. There is no such thing as the metaphysical nature of the marriage or the family as marriage or family—though as beings it would be possible to describe their ontological status. Unless one sees this one is likely to ontologise what merely happens to be the case as a result of cultural conditioning. Marriage is essentially a psycho-sociological phenomenon and can only be spoken about metaphorically in a metaphorical sense. As Lonergan succinctly puts it: 'metaphysics is transcendental, an integration of heuristic structures, and not some categorical speculation that reveals that all is water, or matter, or spirit, or process, or what have you'. (*Method in Theology*, London, 1972, p. 25.)

¹⁰Take, e.g., the case of a man whose wife abandons him after a mere week's cohabitation and disappears without trace. In rural Africa it would be inhuman to expect him not to take another wife—indeed unless he does so, he is likely to be a burden for others. The man in question—for we are alluding to a concrete case—did marry again, proved to be an excellent father to his children, a loving husband and a solid Christian as well as a pillar of the community. All found it a shame that he could not receive communion nor be a member of the parish council, indeed, the parishioners would dearly have loved to make him catechist if he had not been canonically living in a state of sin.

where actions which we are at present obliged to consider at the best as lesser evils—the use of artificial contraceptives or the taking of a second wife—can be seen as positively required by the circumstances.¹¹ We are already in possession of a point of view which allows us to cope more charitably than in the past with remarried divorcees, homosexuals, and hippies practising group marriage, at the pastoral level. By distinguishing between an almost impossibly remote ideal on the one hand, and the distance still to be covered by most people before they come anywhere near it, we feel justified in helping them even sacramentally along the way provided they are already heading in that direction.

But what we need in the last analysis is a point of view which will enable us to shed that residue of mental reservations which still mars even such a liberal pastoral approach. As long as we cling, even at the back of our minds, to the conviction that ultimately and absolutely monogamy is the most natural and the only Christian form of marriage, then we will be unable to understand the past, the present or the future aright or to adopt a genuinely open pastoral understanding. While as priests with bourgeois backgrounds it might be difficult for us to sympathise with the marital arrangements of a hippy commune it should eventually be possible for us to accept that God would no more object to them than he did to the patriarchs.¹² While Huxley's *Brave New World*—where, because of test tube babies the word 'mother' has become a dirty word—now appears abhorrent to us, we must bring ourselves to suspect that a time may come when *the* or any family will be redundant. We should really be wondering why the polygamist or remarried divorcee was ever excluded from the full life of the Church in the first place and not how to welcome back people who have put themselves in a permanent state of sin.

A point of view which would allow us to sacramentalise whatever kinship structures seem suitable in view of the circumstances, supposes a deeper understanding of the sacraments in general. In the following section we will ask ourselves what is the purpose of the sacraments and how do they relate to non-ritual reality.

IV

People who arrive on the scene long after, perhaps centuries after, the formative period of the movement to which they belong, are likely to labour under a double liability. In the first place they are liable to be

¹¹A morality of the lesser of two evils 'risque de signifier qu'il existe des situations dont toute issue est un mal; que finalement on se voit contraint à pécher . . . c'est la morale de la culpabilité inéluctable. En ce sens il faut la refuser: lorsqu'un sujet conscient et libre, après mûre délibération, décide le 'moindre mal' celui-ci n'est plus un mal, mais Le Bien, purement et simplement, et il *pêcherait en ne le faisant pas*. Voilà précisément ce qu'occulte l'abus des recours trop fréquents à des absolus qui interdisent la possibilité du débat moral'. Père Roqueplo O.P., I.C.I. 1.4.1974, p. 19.

¹²We must avoid putting ourselves in need of making such peculiar post factum rationalisations as the Fathers of the Church undertook on God's behalf. The marital morality of the O.T. is relative but not primarily in the sense of relative to the perfection of the N.T. but relative to the socio-economic conditions of patriarchal existence. In this sense the marital morality of the N.T. is not absolute either but relative to the conditions of the N.T. world.

faced with a highly stable series of end products in the realms of ritual and rationalisations. In the second place they are liable to find a greater degree of continuity is posited between these final fruits and the effervescent informality of the earliest period than is probably the case.

Though occasionally a superb piece of art, the Baroque altar is a far cry from the wooden table Christians happened at first to employ for their eucharistic meals. Yet the cries of 'sacrilegious vandalism' which greet the destruction of even an insignificant specimen are indicative of the feeling shared by many Christians that if Christ had been able to make the choice he would have preferred the Baroque altar to the simple table.

The sacraments slowly acquired a similar venerable intangibility. We tend to be fascinated by the number and superficial structure of the sacraments foisted upon us by the Middle Ages. We are gradually getting used to the fact that they can change ritually but any suggestion that there could have been more or less than seven will strike us as odd, while a hint that in certain circumstances, sacramentals such as exorcism can amount to sacraments for some people, will appear heretical. But our minds are human, it should be possible to snap out of our moth-like fascination by the sevenfold.

It is possible if we begin at the beginning, not in the impossible sense of wanting to make an absolutely new start but simply by asking ourselves what is the whole point and purpose of the sacraments. Having put our perspectives into focus, we might then realise there is more of the 'just-happened-conveniently-to-be-so' about the number and nature of the sacraments than we had at first imagined.

Some Founding Fathers determine the physiognomy of their movements down to the last detail, others do not. Frank Duff started the Legion of Mary off with the rules and regulations of the Handbook, Cardinal Cardijn was content to communicate his enthusiasm to the Young Christian Workers. Christ did not live long enough to leave his followers much in the way of a ground plan, Mohammed did. However, although exegetically speaking it is not clear in what sense Christ intended there to be any sacrament let alone seven, sociologically speaking it was foreseeable that a religious movement such as the one which arose out of the resurrection experiences would develop: (1) some form or other of ritual aggregation and re-aggregation (Baptism and Confession), (2) some way of remembering and re-enacting what its founder stood for (the Eucharist), (3) some institutionalised pattern of leadership (Holy Orders) and (4) some means of helping its members cope ceremonially with life crisis moments (Matrimony, Anointing of the sick).

The sacraments as they begin to take shape in Church history simply appear as the most suitable ways Christian communities found of making Christ count for them on those occasions when, psychosociologically, they needed to reiterate what he stood for. Though there is a certain inevitability about the number seven, it is important to realise not only that there could just as well have been more or less but also

that even the deep down symbolism and structure of the seven sacraments is affected by a large measure of cultural conditioning.

If, for instance, the early Christian communities had been subject to spirit possession to the extent that some African communities now are, it is more than likely that exorcism would have become as full-blooded a sacrament as say Confirmation now happens to be. If Christ had happened to live in a culture where the climax of community life centred around formalised conversation, e.g., the palaver or shauri, rather than coinciding with a meal, he would have told his disciples to continue the former and not the latter in his memory—or they would spontaneously have done so themselves.

Applying this perspective to the sacrament of Baptism might make it clearer. Perhaps we would agree that a community needs some ritual means of formally admitting new members and that Baptism represents the specifically Christian way of doing this. We might even accept that Christ himself is unlikely to have explicitly envisaged Baptism in the same fashion that his followers eventually did. But we would probably hasten to add that once initiation into the Christian community had been linked with a particular ritual—water, Trinitarian formula, etc.—and a precise ideology—dying and rising with Christ, etc.—then the point of no return had been passed irrevocably. We would then conclude that, though the study of African initiation rites was useful, the Church could only absorb into any renewed or adapted baptismal ritual the more superficial symbols and ceremonies of the former.

This conclusion could be correct but there are at least two ways of arriving at it, the one quite inadequate the other less so. The former appeals beyond purely pastoral considerations to the authority of Christ or the Church, to prove that Baptism, minor modifications apart, must remain as it is. (We have already suggested that it is not credible to pass without further ado from what ‘culturally happens to be so’ to the ‘dogmatically must be so’, consequently we need not tarry over this first approach.) The latter consists in admitting that although a priori, the Christian ‘rite de passage’ could have dispensed with water—it could, for instance, have centred on signing a register or receiving a membership card—it would now be pastorally inconvenient not to use water. This second way of arriving at the conclusion has the great advantage of allowing one to keep consciously in mind the whole point of sacramentality over and beyond the sacraments as such.

St Paul scrapped circumcision and opted for Baptism alone, because he found that *de facto* the former was more of a hindrance than a help in bringing home to the neophyte the momentousness of the step taken in entering a Christian community. But one could not only imagine but actually point to present day communities where circumcision would be far more eloquent an expression of this entry than the Roman rites for Baptism or Confirmation. We can see why in practice, one would be well advised to continue baptising with water and confirming with oil a people for whom neither are particularly significant. But we cannot see why in theory, a people who express the coming of age and the assumption of all that is sacred for their society in the rite of circum-

cision, should not be encouraged to make Christ theirs in the same symbolic way.

First things first. The important point is not to be plunged in water but to join a Christian community in a manner most calculated to make this passage meaningful. Such calculations would be more convincingly correct were they to be made with the local culture in mind. Is this not what happened in the first place? If the Judeo-Christians chose to continue with an initiation rite centred on plunging into water, was it not because their culture had conditioned them to take this for granted?

Seen from the angle illustrated in the preceding paragraphs, the problematic relationship between customary marriage and the sacrament of Matrimony appears susceptible of a radical but realistic solution. It will be found useful to distinguish between 'I' and 'II' where I corresponds to an ensemble of rites, customs and ceremonies and where II represents particular patterns of behaviour, partly realised and partly projected.¹³

The problem of customary marriage and Christian marriage lies basically at level II but arises also at level I. To what extent can the customs and ceremonies of African marriage be used in an eventually adapted sacramental ritual? For those who subscribe to a piecemeal or 'punctuated' understanding of symbols the problem is simple and straightforward. After locating what was the essential ceremony of traditional marriage one substitutes it for the exchange of rings which was the key ceremony of the sacrament. But such an approach to symbolism is as absurd and as alien to the popular understanding of ritual efficacy as the theological attempt to pin down the precise moment of transubstantiation. One denatures ritual activity by applying atomistic criteria to it.

Those who try to relate customary marriage with the sacrament of Matrimony at level I more cogently than the manner just described, are none the less confronted with an almost insurmountable dilemma. Those rites which effectively relate to a type of marriage considered incompatible with the Gospel, will obviously not be utilisable in any Africanisation of the sacramental ritual. In so far as customary marriage at level II does not explicitly exclude divorce and in so far as I massively expresses II, then only odds and ends of redundant ritual will be available for adaptation.

Such are the unavoidable ambiguities which affect attempts to reconcile customary marriage and the sacrament of Matrimony at level I.¹⁴ Fundamentally the problem lies at the level of customary marriage

¹³This distinction partly corresponds to the classical concepts of 'sacramentum tantum' and 'res sacramenti'—the sacramental ritual and the reality to be re-enacted. Lack of space means that other important issues must be left in abeyance: the relationship between ritual and social reality, whether initially, for instance, the former reflects the latter quite closely or not; how gaps can grow between the two, how at times ritual lags behind the evolution of social life and becomes no longer representative of reality; or how, alternatively, ritual can be renewed in advance of reality and effect social change, e.g., the whole matter of inter-communion.

¹⁴We are not against efforts being made at this level but their limits must be recognised. It would, e.g., be a step in the right direction if the sacrament could be given at the time and place of the socio-cultural experience of marriage. If the priest or eventually an empowered elder/catechist attended the customary marriage and

II and Christian marriage II, and specifically in the supposed superiority of the latter over the former. We have already suggested that it is difficult to continue to justify this superiority either on the grounds of Revelation or a Scholastic understanding of the natural. On the other hand no useful purpose can be served by playing down the differences between the two types. It is not by irenically turning a blind eye to these divergences nor by proclaiming that customary marriage is sacramentally recuperable because it is tending towards the theologically defined ideal, that one will discover a satisfactory way over the hurdle. Customary marriage and Christian marriage are irreconcilable at level II but they could be reconciled by referring both of them to a superior value. Imagine them as the opposite ends of a line. They can then only escape from their either/or relationship by being related to a point above the line.

This point, though the reader will be weary of the phrase by now, is to make Christ count. Only this is absolute, all the rest is relative. It is relatively easy to concede that level I can change and even radically, it is far more difficult to accept that the content of II should also be largely the result of conditioning and consequently changeable according to conditions. In this respect, the sacraments are not strictly comparable amongst themselves. Take, nonetheless, the anointing of the sick. For a long while the Church limited the sacrament to the last sickness. That she lost sight of her mission to make Christ count for the sick is unthinkable. But her understanding of who was and who was not sick enough for the sacrament has changed rather significantly.

Is it not conceivable that though the Church while wanting Christ to count for the married has over-restricted her definition of who is and who is not married? Might she not have been mistakenly but understandably led to believe that monogamy was the most natural as well as the revealed way of making Christ count? If she found that other kinship patterns happened to be as conducive or at least not significantly less conducive to realising this same goal, would she have any absolute reason for refusing to sacramentalise them too?

Ideally the missionary would come to announce the good news about Christ, not the bad news about polygamy. He would come determined to make Christ count but with an open mind as to the ways at either level I or II which would lead convincingly to Him. Whether any feature of the local I or dimension of the prevailing II is likely to inhibit the imitation of Christ would be decided by dialogue and not by a 'take it or leave it' imposition of the alien missionary's own I or II on the host culture. Built in to any such decision would be the condition of its renegotiability. The heuristic criteria governing the apostolate would be to proscribe all that is selfish and anti-social, and to prescribe all that happens to be healthily human. This could mean that if concretely conjugal monogamy is seen to be potentially more egoistic than the

inserted the sacramental rite at an opportune moment, the disastrous dichotomy now prevailing would be obviated. Marriage in the Church is paltry parallel in most parishes to the ceremonies and feasting which takes place at the bride and bridegroom's compounds. This gap could be narrowed by bringing the 'church' to the people.

extended, polygamous family, one would prefer sacramentalising the latter rather than the former.¹⁵

It was perhaps inevitable that the nineteenth century offer of Christianity to the natives took on all the appearances of a non-negotiable package deal. 'You want to be baptised a Catholic? Then you must give up your ancestor worship and all but your first wife, come to mass in the morning and benediction in the evening, learn the Lourdes hymn and pay your yearly contribution'. It is perhaps still unavoidable that one continues to act for a while as if the problem were how to bridge the gap between customary marriage and the sacrament of Matrimony. But to have realised that man made the gap is to accept that he can unmake it. All the Church has to do in fact is to catch up ritually with what happens to be the case. For where Catholics are doing their level best to make Christ count for themselves and for others, in keeping with what their culture has to offer in the way of relatively authentic kinship patterns, there *ipso facto* the 'res sacramenti' is being realised. All that remains is for the Church to ritually ratify this Christian state of affairs and the sacrament will be fulfilled.

¹⁵Though it would not be difficult to find concrete examples, their rarity is neither here nor there. The point is that the Gospel gives guidelines and does not dictate norms. These guidelines are applicable no matter what the concrete patterns. African socialists claim to bypass the impasse of nineteenth century individualism and to recuperate at a higher level the values of primitive socialism. Might it not also be the case that Africa could point the way out of the impasse of the conjugal monogamy, by re-inventing at a higher level of synthesis the values of the extended, polygamous household?