

HUSBANDS AND WIVES¹

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IF we look at contemporary society, we are struck immediately by its obsession with sex, with sexual desire and its results. Marriage, divorce and sexual aberration are always news. The politician, the police, the social planner, the psychologist, the moralist, are concerned with population figures, juvenile delinquency, family planning, unmarried mothers, and sexual neurosis, resulting sometimes in complete inhibition, sometimes in complete promiscuity. They are all concerned with the family, and with what is happening at the root of the family, with the relationship between husband and wife. If we look at Christianity we find at its centre a doctrine of love, a sacramental doctrine which has its common realization in marriage; we find the sacrament of the family with its root in the relationship between husband and wife.

The most publicized aspect of the relationship between husband and wife today is the control of the number of children born to them. Various methods are used to prevent conception ensuing from intercourse. The most frequently heard aspect of the relationship from the Catholic point of view concerns the same subject. Catholics either have as many children as may be born regardless of possible economic difficulties, or they control the number born by using the infertile period in the wife for intercourse, or by complete abstinence. These matters are the frequent subject of conversation between husbands and wives, between different couples, between fathers and mothers, of all beliefs.

How, then, can we define the family as seen by a cross-section of people in England today? It is considered to be a convenient and seemingly fairly natural social grouping. Marriage is looked on as a permanent or semi-permanent social arrangement in which sexual relationships are recognized as right, and in which it is usual to allow some children to be born.

¹ An extract from *We are Men* by John M. Todd, to be published in the spring by Sheed and Ward. The editor wishes to thank the author and publishers for their kind permission to publish this chapter in advance.

Here we are then, straightaway, up against the point at which the Catholic makes his most stunning impact on society. His refusal to accept contraception is a grave scandal to many of his fellow-citizens. Yet here, for many Catholics, is the sole point at which they impinge noticeably on society. The layman is faced here with the need for an apostolate of the most urgent and demanding kind. His refusal to accept contraception as part of his day-to-day morality is looked on at best as obedience to the authority he accepts or as a rejection of a practice which does in fact still raise instinctive doubts in many minds; at worst it is seen as stubborn bigotry or outright hypocrisy. In general the attitude is incomprehensible to non-Catholics. Even when they have some respect for the obedience to authority, or for the rejection of a practice that they themselves do not like, they seldom have a chance to see what the obedience is based on, what the rejection is about.

Somehow or other, then, the Catholic husband and wife are faced with the need to preach marriage at a deeper level than that at which it appears as an institution in which contraception is not permitted. However well this question itself may be argued, it will still be completely inadequate as an explanation of Christian marriage, and it will not be deeply convincing.

Behind my bald description of the popular idea of marriage lies of course a great variety of judgments as to the permanency or semi-permanency of marriage, at many different levels of seriousness. In all these judgments it is true to say that marriage is regarded as an expression of love. And here is the point of entry for the Christian.

The Christian belief is that marriage is permanent. Christians accept this as the law of God. Generally, they accept it on faith, strongly mixed with the common sense which declares that if the words 'for better, for worse . . . until death do us part' mean anything, they mean permanency. There are many obvious reasons for the permanency of marriage: children need their father and mother until they are grown up, and subsequently mother and father need their children. But the apostolic nature of marriage, and the essential reason for its permanency, lies in its nature as a relationship of love. The Catholic is liable to sheer away from any deep thought here. But it is just here that deep thought and deep feeling are needed. The non-Christian acceptance

of marriage as a relationship of love either tends to become sentimentalized and romanticized out of reality, or it is withered by cynicism. There is lacking precisely that root in the love of God which the Christian can show forth. Here is the valid reason for permanency and here the means of maintaining it.

What is love? For the Christian it is something at the heart of the universe. We say God is love, and we say that his own life is a life of love in which God the Father gives himself completely to God the Son, and God the Son returns this gift, so that a substantial love proceeds from them in the Third Person, the Holy Ghost. And we say that God so loved man that he himself became man. The supreme practical example of love for the Christian is that God united himself with man, and in doing so suffered death at man's hands. Love involves union. The ordinary experience of men confirms this. Love leads to unity, not to an unreasonable surrendering of differences, but to a union of them. A family united by love is a number of notably different people held together by a deep unifying bond.

It is this unity through love which Christianity declares to be crystallized in marriage, having its ground in the sexual union of the husband and wife. It is a sacrament of love mirroring the love which caused God to become man, to found the Church and unite himself with it. St Paul declares marriage to be a sacrament of the union between Christ and the Church—'a great sacrament'. And his primary command in this respect is: 'Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loves the Church'. The primary fact about marriage then is that it is a loving union.

Here is the primary entrance point of a lived theology, a theology of the laity. Christianity, is above all, about love. So is the Christian family; and the love of husband and wife is the standard and the starting point from which they are able to preach the Christian teaching about life. Here, too, is the easiest and most satisfactory point of application of their duty to understand their faith, to penetrate it and be penetrated by it, and to communicate it to others. Christian marriage is a mystery of love. An understanding of this mystery in faith will be at the root of the defence of the family. This defence will have to be linked not only to a formal submission to, or abstract understanding of, the underlying principles; it will be linked to an active individual personal study and penetration of them, a study shared with

friends and neighbours, with Christians and non-Christians. This is a subject we return to in a few pages.

The results of love are obvious enough. The result of Christ's love of the Church is the sanctity of many souls, the birth, we may say, of many souls in God. The result of love between human beings in marriage is the birth of children. These are the plainest facts. The union of man and woman on the sexual plane involves essentially the implanting of the male seed into the woman's vagina; it is 'ordered' to children, as scholastic theologians say. Children are the result usually, though not always. But if this were all, we should only be involved in a biological act, an excellent thing, but still merely biological. The sacramental point about the act is that it achieves a union of love, potentially fruitful, using the strongest bonds of emotion, and the sexual instinct common to all men; it thus demonstrates unity in the most central of human acts; it is a symbol of that unity which is primary in truth, in God, in the created world; it is a symbol of God's union with mankind.

It is here that the Christian should be able to see why marriage is indissoluble. His physical union is a symbol of all unity. If man and wife are to part later, their act of union is a lie, or is merely a fortuitous coupling with no reference to the system of unity which is God's plan of love. This perhaps is the real reason for the peculiar horror in which sexual union outside marriage has always been held by Christians. Such unions simply act a lie. And the horror of them extends, in some degree, to all men. Sexual taboo is the strongest of all conventions. Every sexual union is potentially the union of marriage, and its true nature is only realized in it. Every time such an act is performed those who take part in it know a joy which is inexplicable by the mere sensory experience. The satisfaction is profoundly moving to the whole person, soul and body. Man is made for giving; he is made for love, to love and be loved, to be joined with other human beings, with God. The sexual act is always a promise or a shadow of this destiny, even when it is not the true symbol of it as in marriage. The extreme revulsion which can follow the act, out of its proper place, or even in that place in marriage where there is no deep understanding of it, is then a reaction to a failure to realize it as the sacrament of loving union. In this truth about the sacrament lies the most immediate apostolate for the Catholic

husband and wife; and it is an apostolate which they can exercise towards their fellow-Catholics as well as to non-Catholics. The family is the basic unit of society, and of the Church, alike. It is the basic unit for the apostolate, for the spread of the gospel. It goes without saying that it cannot function properly if it is not firmly established in the sacrament which gives it its spiritual roots.

The sacrament has application to the entire lives of married people, to every aspect of their life together. But all of this will tend to suffer if the basic physical relationship is unharmonious for men and women are flesh and blood. It is on this basic sexual question that attention is focussed today. We must admit that many Christians have little or no realization of the sacrament in their own lives. And this is often connected with the fact that their sexual relations are largely confined to instinctive uncontrolled actions. And this again is often due to lack of Christian teaching. A sacrament uses human things, and human things are subject to reason and to all the faculties of man's soul. The sexual act, then, is not something to be performed by the mere glimmering light of unreflecting instinct. On the contrary it is an act which can be progressively improved and perfected in the light of all man's spiritual faculties, so that it becomes steadily more and more worthy to be the vehicle of grace. For this is what the sacramental doctrine teaches: that the sexual instinct can be a channel of spiritual grace. But as in all the other sacraments the activity of grace can be almost entirely dammed up by inhuman attitudes. This happens when we forget that grace uses nature, builds on nature, that the divine life takes root in the natural life. If the natural life is not functioning properly there is no good ground for the divine life to root itself in.

This is not the place in which to go into great detail. But marriage is the sacrament of the laity, and in this sense it has much to do with the lay apostolate. It seems likely that much will be added to what has already been written to develop the Christian teaching about marriage. Some contemporary Christian thought about marriage still seems sometimes to contain the dregs of the Manichean doctrine that there is something irredeemable, something low, something outside the sphere in which grace works, in the sexual act. It gives the impression that the sexual act itself is simply an animal action, confined within its

own instinctive physical motivation, something which, because its action is so violent and so thrilling to the senses, is not subject to control. This is simply a denial of human experience, and a denial of man's rational nature. The whole point of man as a rational being is that he can use his reason to dispose of his whole nature in the light of perfection. This is the point of the psychologist's use of the subconscious in various ways. The sexual act in men and women is then a human act; to speak of it as an animal act is to beg a question and to falsify the situation. It is a human act, and for Christians the occasion of a sacramental grace.

The Bible, in both New and Old Testaments, sums up the relationship in the words 'two in one flesh'. And in the Bible we can see something of the fresh and frank acceptance of marriage as an essentially sexual affair properly integrated into the rest of life. With this proper integration, sex receives a more courteous treatment, publicly and privately; the approach to it is gentle and human and intelligent. For men and women it is a human not an 'animal' activity. Today it is bedevilled by a sort of paralytic concentration on the sexual organs themselves and on the achievement of the orgasm in the relationship itself. But the whole body is involved in reality. Just as the whole person is involved in any deliberate act of the body, so the whole body is involved in the activity of any of its members, and particularly so in this primary activity. For the Christian husband and wife it can become always a more perfect sacrament of their loving union, always a more perfect incarnation of their spiritual love, always a more perfect sharing in God's life.

Without going into detail it is worth stressing one point of orientation. The true nature of control needs to be understood. Control is only satisfactory if it is an inner thing, self-control in the deepest sense. Abstention has obviously to be imposed from outside in various circumstances. But within marriage, control is properly achieved from an attitude of freedom to the sexual act; it cannot develop from an attitude of inhibition. A balanced control proceeds, generally, from much practice, from a frequently achieved union, not from an infrequently achieved union. Control comes from mutual enjoyment and mutual agreement between husband and wife.

We may interject here: What has all this to do with the apostolate? Everything. The apostolate of the Catholic family

is just to *be*, to be a united loving family. But this does not just happen through the power of grace, imposing itself. Husband and wife are responsible for their actions which will help or hinder that grace. The encyclical *Casti Connubii* provides principles; they have to be translated into the actual lives of families. It is the purpose of this chapter to indicate some of the basic needs, and to refer to some of the difficulties most often met with.

Much of the difficulty today comes from the universal obsession with sex, and from the lack of any integrated approach to it in society generally. The Englishman today has practically no traditional sexual symbolism around him in his everyday life, and lacks likewise the Christian transformation and development of this in the liturgy. Such symbolism, in art and architecture, inculcates an acceptance, a natural filling out of the sexual emotions. Today, for lack of a reverent sexual symbolism, we have instead the endless proliferation of sexy advertisements with their lunatic concentration on sensational pleasure; and the individual suffers from an imposed obsession with the need for sexual satisfaction.

It may surprise people to learn that the liturgy is full of reference to and comparisons with the life of husband and wife. The most obvious and elementary example of such a reference is in the use of the word 'womb' in the 'Hail Mary'. Catholics all over the world begin a prayer with these words from the Bible: 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.' Another example is in the use of words from the Song of Songs for some feasts of our Lady, to describe our Lady as the perfect soul, the bride of God. And in the Introit of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, our Lady is described in the alluring language of the lover; 'her beauty is decked out with jewels.' This is related to perhaps the most central and powerful of all these references, the quotation from the Revelations of St John, The Apocalypse: 'I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband', the text which is used for the feast of a church's dedication. The Church, like the Christian soul, is the bride of Christ, and its union with him is best described in the language of married love.

Many people are, to be frank, in a muddle, especially if they are

religiously minded, as to what they ought or ought not to look at or think about. An analysis of their attitude reveals an infantile approach which cannot be justified under the cloak of modesty. Some Christian teachers tend to imply the sinfulness and impurity of all sexual thoughts in themselves, outside marriage, so that it is difficult for their pupils to accept and use marriage happily as a Christian sacrament when they grow up. On an immediate practical level such things as the Pre-Marriage Training Courses, Cana Week-Ends, and Catholic Marriage Advice Bureaux are doing something to help. But these things are in a sense substitutes for the real thing: an apostolic understanding of the real nature of Christian marriage, coming from the family itself. These more self-conscious approaches may be a permanent necessity today and especially whilst the idea of the family is simply mother and father and one or two children, rather than the patriarchal household. But the family remains essentially the primary place where an understanding of marriage should be given to the child. Its everyday life and its religion should bring it into contact with an open-minded reverence for sex, as for all the rest of creation.

Some people might hope that religion at least would remain free from any relationship to sex, so debased has the general conception of sex become. But the truth is the opposite; to regain its natural stature sex must be embedded in religion again. On the psychological level, the liturgy, and religious art and architecture, could become again important integrating factors. An example may be taken of this in the past. The traditional Jesse window depicts a man lying on one elbow with a stem proceeding upwards from his loins to form the tree which ends in the flower of our Lady and her Son. The reference to Jesus in the Bible as coming from the seed of Jesse is thus depicted in a simple physical and quasi-biological way. . . .

A gap yawns between our traditional liturgical signs and everyday reality. Yet the need for a reverent religious sexual symbolism shouts to us from every advertisement hoarding—it is the lack of a religious approach to sex that gives power to commercial abuse of it; and it shouts even more insistently from the maladjustments and neuroses and like miseries of ourselves and our neighbours. Grace is not getting there somehow. The sacrament is not 'taking' properly.

The natural background itself is of course insufficient for Christian marriage; it is merely the proper groundwork. And a man who tries deliberately to live a purely animal life ends in becoming something less than animal; being destined to a supernatural life, the full spiritual life, if he tries to live only on the natural level, conceiving it as something animal, he soon becomes sub-natural, unnatural. He perverts natural processes in the effort to possess more and more pleasure, possibly turning eventually to the sufferings of others for his own pleasures. Sadism on a physical level may then lead to a desire to see souls under his power, to torture them and see them suffer.

Man's supernatural destiny has to be achieved by means of sacraments, outward visible signs. Both the actual way in which the sacrament brings grace, and the appropriate psychological co-operation which is needed, have to be understood. Coventry Patmore wrote in *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower*: 'Lovers are nothing else than priest and priestess to each other of the Divine Manhood and the Divine Womanhood which are in God; and as it is not necessary, in order to be an effectual minister of the sacraments, that the priest should be pure and holy or qualified otherwise than by a right intention in his act of administration, so the weakest purpose of mutual love in marriage is enough to make them effectual ministers to each other of that "great sacrament", which represents and is in little the union of Christ with the Church. This is the only thought that can make their imperfections bearable.'

Something further needs to be said about these 'imperfections'. The experience of more or less violent desire is sometimes confused with the sin of lust. But strong sexual desire in man or woman is not sinful any more than hunger for food is the sin of greed. These elemental desires need to be controlled, merely. But we are inclined to resent having this violent desire for sexual satisfaction; if immediate satisfaction is not possible, we find condemnation of the desire is easier, but this way out, this condemnation is sometimes little more than a rationalization of selfishness—a desire for independence and detachment of a sort quite opposed to Christian detachment. The Christian way, the fully human way, is to accept ourselves as we are, hungry, sexual creatures who, without God's help, fall naturally into greed and lust, but who with the use of reason and with God's help

can make of sexual relationships and of eating means of grace; who can also, incidentally, by addition rather than by subtraction, make abstinence from them into positive creative actions and means of grace.

All that we have been talking about is simply part of the need for a return to a completely sacramental outlook, in which all human actions have some kind of a ritual and real spiritual value, in which the life of the family in this case, and their meals and other activities together, are part of the sacramental life, and in which sexual intercourse is the crown of a united life, not so much something to be done, but something which is the natural conclusion of togetherness.



“THAT THE CHURCH MAY SPREAD AND INCREASE: this is the intention for which we must offer our prayers and our labours”, says Pope Pius XII in his encyclical on the Mystical Body.

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