

A STATE OF PERFECTION

THE EDITOR

THE most universal 'state' of the Christian life is that of marriage, made a permanent source of grace through the sacrament. Because of its stability this manner of life shares in some way with the permanency of religious vows and of sacerdotal ordination in the state of perfection. Pius XI in *Casti Connubii* pointed this out when he said that every Christian must strive 'to reach the summit of perfection' and that husbands and wives by means of the sacrament and the charity which informs it must have 'a persevering endeavour to bring each other to the state of perfection'. It would, therefore, be a mistake to omit this sacrament from a list of the principal means of sanctification in the spiritual life. It is so easy for the present individualism of Christian devotion to pervade married life, so that husband, wife and children each pursues his or her own personal Christian life without reference to the other members of the family. They regard their efforts towards perfection as entirely a matter of their individual souls and forget that the sacrament has given them power to rise together to the heights of perfection, which is Christian love. This applies in some way not only to husband and wife, but also to the children; the mutual dependence of all the members of the family one upon the other is strengthened by sacramental grace.

The life of the spirit, then, for so many Christians is a life thus shared in Christ. Here in a special manner is the Incarnation realized. The Word became flesh and the two who are one flesh and one spirit in Christ continue together to realize his life on earth. The spiritual life can be seen as not merely spirit without matter but developing and prospering precisely because linked so intimately and sacramentally with matter. This may be seen too in the way the natural institution of marriage is perfected by this sacramental grace. Nature is not destroyed; feeling, passions, sex, these are not eliminated by grace but purified and perfected, held together under the supreme rule of love. The good things that God has given for the continuation of the human race and social

life of man are raised to a higher level and introduced into the life of God. The Word in becoming man sanctified all human powers and subjected them all through the sacrificial work of redemption to the rule of the life of the Blessed Trinity.

Family prayers and all the other practices that have been introduced to help to sanctify married life and protect it against the devastating inroads of the contemporary abuse of this divinely appointed institution must be seen in relation to this fundamental graciousness of the sacrament, or they will fail to effect any lasting results. So much of our present defence of marriage depends on the *merely* natural elements, supported by arguments from reason alone; and the religious and Christian side is added on almost as an afterthought, or at least as something entirely different. But the purpose of our Lord's coming was to show that the natural cannot stand on its own and to give it permanence and perfection by permeating it through and through with his saving grace.

This form of the state of perfection, then, must be encouraged and supported by the whole sacramental life of the Church which our Lord has given us to overcome all obstacles and to raise us to the heights of union. Pius XI concluded his Encyclical with this in mind: 'May the Almighty Father "of whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named", who gives strength to the weak and courage to the timid and faint-hearted; may Christ our Lord and Redeemer "who instituted and perfected the venerable Sacraments" and willed to make matrimony an image of his ineffable union with the Church; may the Holy Spirit, God who is love, the light of hearts and the strength of the mind, grant that our teaching in this Encyclical on the holy Sacrament of matrimony . . . be understood by all . . . be put into practice so that the marriages of Christians may exhibit a renewed and vigorous life of fertility consecrated to God, of untarnished fidelity and of unfailing stability, and be hallowed by that holiness and fulness of grace which is the fruit of the Sacrament.'