

PERFECT CHASTITY¹

MOST men and women choose marriage as their road in life. They can and ought to sanctify themselves in their love and through it, by using their rights as they would use any other holy thing and faithfully fulfilling the duties of their married state out of love. For Christians, marriage is a sacrament, a sensible and effective sign of the grace conferred for the needs of the baptised couple. Their union is sacramental.

One of the principal tasks for Christian schools and Catholic Action to do is to make the splendour and sanctity of marriage intelligible to everybody, to prepare and help people to live the married life of holiness. . . . Nevertheless, obstacles to sanctity, or at any rate hindrances to the easy and prompt exercise of the love of God, abound in this state of life. I am not speaking of the abuses and sins properly so-called to which married people succumb when they are unfaithful to the graces of their sacrament, when they despise the laws of human nature and the commandments of God. These sins turn men completely away from God and of themselves lead to eternal death, unless repentance intervenes. What I am speaking of is a married life that respects the rights of God. Husband and wife—and precisely those most in love with each other—run the risk of taking too much natural pleasure in each other, of monopolising each other and not thinking of God as much as they ought if they are to sanctify themselves and advance together in the love of God. In the state of innocence there would have been no such danger; since the fall it has been an eventuality to be feared. And the redemption did not heal all our wounds straight away. ‘He that is with a wife’, says the Apostle, ‘is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife: and he is divided . . .’ And ‘She that is married thinketh on the things of the world, how she may please her husband.’ (1 Cor. 7, 25-38.) Confessors and spiritual directors know only too well from the confidences of Christians living in the married state what hindrances are to be found in marriage to the constant drive towards God, especially in those cases, now perhaps more frequent than ever, in which husband and wife have not the same regard for the will of God, are ill-matched from the religious point of view, spiritually disunited. But even when both are Christians and co-operate with the graces offered them, they have great difficulties to overcome if they are to make progress in union with God. The possession of each other’s bodies, the lack of

¹ A chapter of a book entitled *L’Idée de la Vie Religieuse* (Paris; 1939).

privacy, the absorbing cares of family life, the education and placing of children in the world, work for the daily bread, for the preservation and increase of temporal goods—none of these things makes it easier to contemplate God's mysteries; yet it is by such contemplation that love is fostered. Unquestionably, Christians can and should consider 'marriage as a life of consecration', because the marriage union is sacramental. The married state is good and holy, the only one that is good for those who have entered upon it, and it is not advisable for them to separate, even in order to go and lead the religious life. At any rate, they ought to submit their attraction for the religious life to a thorough testing before they follow it. And widowers or widows, if they have children to bring up, ought to stay in the world as long as their children need them. Cases like that of St Jane de Chantal, who, moreover, took her daughters with her, and the Ursuline, Mary of the Incarnation, who left her little son Claud to the care of an aunt, are altogether exceptional. When God gives such extraordinary vocations he accompanies them with unmistakable signs that it is his will to over-ride the rules of human prudence. In ordinary cases the making, or at any rate the irreparable consummation of acts of generosity prompted by imprudence or illusion is generally prevented by the law of the Church or the prudence of superiors.

Bearing these points in mind, let us look at the complementary truth:

The married state is not the best one for obtaining intimate union with God by love and making progress therein. Besides, marriage is not imposed by anyone in particular. All men and women have a natural (though not compulsive) bent, by which they are urged (without being forced) to seek a human being complementary to themselves, to make themselves a home and to found a family. But it is a bent that need not be followed. To renounce the great goods the marriage union stands for, not in order to be rid of a burden, but to secure greater freedom for seeking God without division of heart, seems eminently reasonable in the present state of things for those to whom God suggests it, although it would not have had the same justification in the state of integrity and innocence, for then the reason governed the senses without any effort. God suggests this renunciation by means of a general counsel, and grace, an infinitely delicate grace, gains a hearing for it in the hearts of those whom he has chosen.

Having proclaimed the Christian law of marriage and recognised that it is impossible for some to marry, Jesus suggested renunciation of marriage to those attracted by the idea and brave enough to carry

it out. He advised them to renounce . . . earthly fatherhood and motherhood, for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. '*Et sunt eunuchi qui seipsos castraverunt propter regnum coelorum. Qui potest capere capiat.*' (Mat. 19, 10-12) These mysterious words, scarcely understood by those who heard them, lay the second foundation-stone of religious perfection. St Paul, knowing that he possessed the spirit of the Lord and wanting to spare other people the cares and tribulations that prevent or restrain the movement of the heart towards God, explains the counsel in this way: 'He that is without a wife, is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God. . . . And the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord: that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. . . . He that giveth his virgin in marriage, doth well: and he that giveth her not, doth better.' (1 Cor. 7, 32-38.) The Church had the counsel in mind when, first against Jovinian and then against the Lutheran heresy, she proclaimed the superiority of virginity embraced for Christ's sake, in order to 'think on the things of the Lord' and be 'holy both in body and in spirit'. The Council of Trent anathematised 'all who teach that the state of marriage is preferable to the state of virginity or celibacy, and that it is not better or more blessed to remain in virginity or celibacy' [for the service of Christ] 'than to contract marriage'. (Denzinger. *Enchiridion*.)

From the beginning of Christianity whole legions of young men and women, inwardly enlightened and gently stirred by the delicate inspirations of the Holy Ghost, have realised that those words of Jesus were addressed to them. Their desire has been the excellent one of forming part of the retinue of the Lamb that St John saw in the heavenly Jerusalem: 'And I beheld, and lo a Lamb stood upon Mount Sion, and with him an hundred and forty-four thousand having his name, and the name of his Father written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice . . . as the noise of many waters. . . . And they sang as it were a new canticle . . . and no man could say the canticle, but those hundred and forty-four thousand, who were purchased from the earth. . . . They are virgins. These follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were purchased from among men, the first fruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth there was found no lie: for they are without spot. . . .' (*Apoc. 14, 1-5*.)

Thus, in the course of the centuries, throngs of generous souls have renounced human hopes and loves for the sake of the kingdom of God. Their example is every day followed by others in large numbers. It will always be so in the Church of Christ. Even apart from any prospect or practical possibility of religious life and official

or canonical consecration, the resolution to keep perfect and perpetual chastity or virginity is suggested to many, especially young women, by an infinite variety of circumstances. They may want to live in this way in order to help old or ailing parents, bring up nephews or younger brothers and sisters in place of a mother prematurely dead, or apply themselves to works of Catholic action requiring complete freedom, works which the obligation of the married life would not allow them to undertake or to do so well.

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(translated by Walter Mitchell).

OBITER

THE APOSTOLATE, FRANCE AND DR BUCHMAN

Maxence van der Meersch, the author of *Fishers of Men*, a novel about the J.O.C. and author, too, of a controversial study of St Thérèse of Lisieux, was interviewed recently by a French Catholic review. 'The Church', said M. van der Meersch, 'is primarily responsible for the apostasy of the masses. Her message is too much mixed up with wealth, too little adapted to those it should be reaching. Preachers are content to expound dogma; they stuff their flocks with doctrine instead of teaching them how to live'. We are scarcely surprised that he goes on to praise the work of 'Moral Rearmament', with its 'absolute love, absolute purity, absolute honesty, absolute disinterestedness. "Begin by putting your own lives in order", says Moral Rearmament, "and then you can start talking about God".'

There is no more familiar phrase in French Catholic writing at the moment than '*prise de conscience*', unless indeed it be '*témoignage*'. M. van der Meersch's confusion of means and ends is, one supposes, exceptional, but his impatience, his despair of traditional methods and his undoubtedly generous impulses are reflected in much 'Catholic Action' propaganda. There is a real danger that the success of the vocational movements, such as J.O.C. and J.A.C., can lead to a class-consciousness and a separation from the common life of the faithful that are wholly disastrous. One is told of Catholic workers who avoid their parish churches on the grounds that they are *bourgeois*, and increasingly the specialised organisations find their inspiration away from the primary unity of family and parish. The papal emphasis on the function of the workers as the apostles of their own environment can be twisted into a sectarianism which is completely