

MARRIAGE AND THE NUPTIAL MASS¹

DOMINIC SIRE, O.P.

BY the liturgy we understand not only the official prayer of the Church expressing her spiritual life, but a prayer which expresses her doctrine. In this way the liturgy is part of the apostolic mission of the Church. Thus it is not only the way the faithful may express themselves in prayer but is their birth-right by reason of their baptism. The liturgy expresses the vitality of the Church and is an implementation of her mission to go and teach all nations. It has doctrinal value not only for the faithful but also for those who may be looking on from afar. It is a matter of urgency, therefore, that this educative value should be kept vital and inspiring; that its symbolism should always teach and not become a piece of mere play-acting, still less a soulless repetition by heart of some dead formula. This calls for the careful explanation by priests of the acts they perform and the making of these acts available to all the faithful, not in the guise of some luxury bought at a high price, but as their right and privilege. It imposes on the pastors of souls the sacred duty of a careful, thoughtful and convinced performance of their sacred ministry. The sacraments and all their liturgical beauty and significance must never be thrown to the faithful as one might toss a bone to a dog. They must be offered with dignity for the solid edification of all present and with a consciousness of their teaching value and that they are the principal means of grace. But the liturgy extends beyond the sacraments to the divine office and above all to the mass. It is not in a spirit of domination, still less mere fussiness, that the Church lays down in very considerable detail the rubrics for the celebration of this great mystery. It is *the* common act of the whole Church; *the* supreme and only self-sufficient act of worship available to the faithful. Because it belongs to the faithful collectively and individually, its performance is prescribed in every detail, and is thus unified by the supreme authority of the Church. Only so can any Catholic in any land easily follow, through the symbolic actions, the unfolding of this great mystery. Even the deaf can follow with their eyes or the blind with their ears. No room is left for personal eccentricities if the rules are

¹ A paper read to a conference of headmistresses at Spode House in January 1959.

observed, nor is there any danger that this great sacrifice might degenerate into some form of private devotion. Indeed, no priest may celebrate mass entirely alone without special permission. It is not a private affair but the common heritage of the whole Church and each one of her members.

On special occasions the Church provides a special mass. This is not a concession or a special favour. It is done because the occasion is linked with the very idea of the mass as a sacrifice and an act of worship. A notable example of this is provided in the case of the sacrament of marriage. Even at the purely human level we have in marriage the perfection of human love at its highest. And even at this same level love demands sacrifice if it is to be perfect. In keeping with the pattern of all his teaching, our Lord raises this human thing beyond the material world into the realm of the supernatural. It is a sacrament telling us that it is God who joins the partners together and that no man may now put them asunder. St Paul drives this home further in his letter to the Ephesians. The Church deliberately takes this very passage and makes it part of the nuptial mass, in that part of the mass which we know as the instructional section. Further, the Church quotes our Lord's own words from the gospel to instruct all present in the indissolubility of marriage. The self-sacrifice demanded by love, now raised to the supernatural stature of a sacrament, is fittingly and properly consecrated and sealed in *the* sacrifice. Love and sacrifice, it must be remembered, are complementary to one another. By love—the love of friendship—we understand that act of the will whereby we wish the good of another. It demands giving which means sacrifice, and yet the more we give the more we receive. This is the strange paradox of love, that the more we give in love the richer we become. How true this is of the human love between husband and wife! When the one gives himself to the other, he receives a reciprocal and equal gift of self. Sacrifice must not be thought of in narrow terms of suffering and pain. The word first of all means to make sacred and consecrate. In marriage the bodies of husband and wife are made sacred to each other. The gift is mutual, and if in the future it entails forgoing legitimate pastimes and other occupations, it nevertheless brings with it a gift not only to the partners but to the human race at large. We can none of us do two things at the same time: we must always sacrifice one in the face of the other. This mutual and

fruitful gift of self to each other by the couple being married is typified by God's gift of his body and blood which they offer and receive in the first united act they make together. They sacrifice this body and blood to the eternal Father in the mass and it is returned to them in holy communion. The sacrifice they offer brings its own reward. But how little today the spirit of sacrifice is understood and practised! For this very reason the nuptial mass is necessary as an antidote to teach selflessness from the very beginning. It is a lesson to be taken from the infinite generosity of God. Generosity has always, and will always, demand sacrifices, and generosity is the key to happy married life. Where better could it be learnt than in the generosity of Calvary? It is Calvary overshadowing their union, marking it out as a sacred thing, sacred in the blood of the Lamb. This is the way the Church would have it. The nuptial mass has at its very heart the blessing bestowed on the bride for the fulfilment of her future duties in the sacrifices that will be demanded from her as a faithful wife and devoted mother. This is no extravagance. The nuptial mass is part of the liturgy, and as such is the right of all the faithful, granted of course the proper conditions. It should therefore be offered freely to all as an integral part of every christian marriage, never grudgingly permitted at a high price. It is Calvary over again where Mary was made our mother and the model of all mothers past, present and future. It is *the* sacrifice to supernaturalize all sacrifice; *the* act of love to be mirrored in all acts of love; *the* death which brings new life with God and in God. Since the primary purpose of marriage is to beget new life—and surely a life in and with God—how fitting it is that this sacrament should be linked inseparably with the source of all life! Marriage is the co-operation with God in his plan of creation, and therefore it is fittingly placed in liturgical conjunction with the recreative act of God's love. Husband and wife now joined in the sacrament of marriage are most fittingly initiating their union by being united together to Christ in holy communion. Is it not significant that the rubrics of the nuptial mass direct that the hosts to be received in communion by bride and groom should be placed along with the priest's host on the pattern and consecrated at that mass itself? It further underlines the close union of their sacrifice in human love, now made sacramental, with the eternal sacrifice of the Son of Man for the human race. This is no wild dream, but what the

Church in her liturgy is teaching in fulfilment of her apostolic mission. Is not apostolicity one of the marks by which men shall know that she is the true Church? If the Church has seen fit to institute this nuptial mass and make it part of her liturgy, does it not thereby become the right of all her children? She offers the very essence of her teaching in the words of St Paul and of the gospel. She invites bride and groom into the very sanctuary to share as closely as possible in the sacrifice of the mass and there consecrate their human love. She calls both to the very altar to share the body and blood of Christ together and to receive the blessing that the Church calls down upon the bride in her future duties. How close they are to incarnate charity which is the bond of union! Could the Church more forcefully or concisely impress her teaching, her doctrine of marriage, love and sacrifice? The answer is obvious and the consequences impelling if we will but see the lesson of the liturgy. Bride and groom having ministered the sacrament of marriage to one another, come immediately into God's sanctuary to seal their union and consecrate themselves with the priest in *their* mass. According to the Dominican usage at high mass the deacon, in presenting the chalice and paten with the host to the celebrant for the offertory, says in the words of the psalmist, 'Offer to God the sacrifice of praise: and pay thy vows to the Most High'. How well these words fit the occasion of a nuptial mass, especially when we consider that the Hebrew word *todah*, translated 'praise', is a technical word here meaning that particular kind of peace offering sacrificed both in praise and thanksgiving which must be eaten on the very day the sacrifice is made. It is a word distinct from that used for sin offerings. The significance is clear: the body and blood of Christ offered in sacrifice must be taken on the very day the sacrifice entailed by human love is made. It is the seal of their union for which God must be both praised and thanked in sacrifice.

Can we conclude otherwise than by seeing the significant and the almost essential place of this liturgical act in the sacrament of marriage? Does it not become part of marriage and not in any sense a mere appendage? Is it not the duty of every true pastor of souls to inculcate this lesson and encourage every pair contemplating marriage to avail themselves whenever possible of the invitation to start their married life in the sanctuary? *Deus qui incepit ipse perficiat!*