

SANCTITY IN MARRIAGE

BY

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NE might suspect a distrust towards marriage in the words of a recent statement in a publisher's blurb advertising a book upon saints who were married. The blurb declares it the purpose of the book to show that 'marriage is compatible with sanctity'. The force of the 'compatible' needs exact appreciation, and may be more easily gauged if one reads it as 'a sacrament instituted by God (e.g., marriage, ordination, etc.) is *compatible* with sanctity'.

Yet the misconception lurking in the sentence does not so much arise from a false view of marriage as from a false view of sanctity; clearly it is referring to canonised sanctity and not to being a saint; one hopes that there are more saints than the canonised. And, indeed, the many attempts which have been made in the last few years to rescue the married from the limbo of half-hearted Christianity nearly all labour under the same misconception. In the many Continental reviews which have dealt with the subject one hears an appeal for the canonisation of more married saints. Married Catholics discussing the question have demanded, for instance, that the Litany of the Saints should include some invocation of 'all holy fathers and mothers'—an excellent suggestion. Less convincing are the demands for more married people to be canonised, since the way the request is made sounds like pronouncing a judgment which ultimately rests with God; and canonisation in such circumstances might even confirm people in their false notions as to why people are raised to the altars of the Church. Without attempting to answer this question here it might be pointed out that saintly nuns seem to be canonised more easily than saintly housewives. What inferences can we draw from such a statement? Some have inferred that human factors enter into the process considerably, geographical factors, financial factors, and loyalty to one's own religious order. Other inferences, however, may be made with complete certainty. Since Canonisation does not increase the sanctity of a saint, it is meant for the benefit of the faithful; its purpose is social. Does this mean that an order such as the Carmelites, which has seen so many of its members canonised recently, can assume that it offers a surer way to sanctity than the Carthusian Order, which has lately numbered so few? Or do we infer rather that Carmelites need more encouragement than Carthusians? And do

we assume that the rarity of canonised married people means that few married people are saints? (i.e., go to heaven and not to hell—the only alternative for a baptised person). God forbid. Let married people assume that our Lady and St Joseph afford such perfect models for family life that Christian families need hardly any other encouragement.

But this identification of sanctity with canonisation must be even more rigorously rejected if married people are to be set in the way of holiness. The 'temptation to sanctity' (analysed by Ida Görres in her life of St Teresa) represents a very grave temptation for all Christians (and particularly the young) who take their religion to heart. Having read the lives of many canonised saints, we then set about modelling ourselves on the ideal which the reading has fixed in our minds; all too often the characteristics which we develop under the influences of the ideal are bad habits, such as not washing regularly, or being so 'recollected' that we have no time to smile at the milkman. We forget that saints are saints simply because they love God, whereas we are so busy trying to become 'saints' that we have no time to love God. Always with one eye fixed on our ideal and the other measuring the gap between the ideal and ourselves we can only look squint-eyed at God; and, even when the gap closes, what have we achieved? We have modelled ourselves according to an ideal, which in many cases *we* have constructed for ourselves.

It would be foolish to under-estimate the inspiration which we can receive from reading saintly lives. But if we find *ourselves* in the saints, instead of finding God, then we are wasting our time. In order to be a saint one forgets oneself and simply looks at God all the time; looking at God, the source of all goodness and beauty, means loving God; to love God is to be a saint. The way is not easy, but it is *simple*—not complicated by constantly looking at oneself and assessing the degree of heroic virtue one has attained.

Such a simple view of what is implied by sanctity corresponds to the needs of married people whose lives are already complicated enough. By becoming simple, and being indifferent to all the detailed problems raised by canonisation, one may overcome the first current misconception about sanctity which hinders a correct view of marriage. The second great obstacle to a sane attitude arises from the feeling among some people that it is the function of monks and nuns to achieve sanctity whereas Catholics in the world must be content with decent mediocrity. The 'world' signifying the unredeemed, the cloister enclosing the perfect—we are never rid of the Manichaean heresy, and it has to be driven out anew in

every age. Its insidiousness has been laid bare by historians of nineteenth-century spirituality who for instance have analysed the process whereby French Catholics became '*émigrés de l'intérieur*': they abandoned the 'world' to its damnation and shut themselves up in comfortable security behind the high walls of their bourgeois mansions—outside the walls the 'world' starved in misery, the 'world's' scientists discovered evolution and X-rays, the 'world' made love. Unmoved by all this the '*émigrés de l'intérieur*', for decency's sake, draped the legs of their heavy drawing-room tables, played at being angels, and drew interest from safe investments in the sweat of the 'world'. From the ranks of these *émigrés*, it may be objected, came St Teresa of Lisieux; but not every Catholic mansion was called 'Les Buissonets', and it is an indication, perhaps, of what she thought of the whole set-up that she has taken the '*Mission de France*' under her patronage to bring Christ to the 'world' of the abandoned proletariat. She is spending her heaven doing good on earth.

Nor can we assume that this Manichaean heresy has been driven out simply because the hierarchy has issued so many instructions on the essential function of the laity. Ingrained habits of mind are not so easily eradicated, and it does not need a deep psychologist to see that the much-publicised and unfortunate Monica Baldwin was a victim of such habits. A powerful and harmful influence is still exercised by the assumption that there stretches an unbridgeable gulf between the world and the saints. Within the last few years courageous efforts have been made to bridge the gulf; under the protection of *Provida Mater* there have sprung up Carmelite Secular Institutes; in France the Dominican nuns of the Incarnate Word carry the fruits of their contemplation into offices, factories and prisons; the Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, has left the Society of Jesus to devote himself to the same work. Yet the initiative for all these experiments comes from the religious orders and they are inevitably stamped with the mark of those orders.

As far as the world is concerned, in fact, the gulf has scarcely been bridged. And it would seem as though one reason for the failure lies in the unreadiness of the laity to begin building from their own side. The urgent need, in other words, is for lay spirituality written by lay men and women. At present lay persons wishing to intensify their spiritual life by reading have little choice but to read works written by religious, and dealing specifically with the problems of life in an Order. Helpful as such reading always proves, the effect of transferring its applications to the difficulties facing, say, grocers and shop-stewards, inevitably produces a sense

of unreality; the reader either feels that he is out of place in the world and should be in the cloister, or else he decides that such teachings are meant for monks and nuns, not for grocers and shop-stewards.¹ A lay spirituality needs to be worked out also by lay folk, for it is not easy for others to gauge their problems; in particular it could be worked out by married people, those who are committed to the world through their children, their work, their wages, and through having to pay the rent. Probably the best way to do this would be by way of co-operation; lay people could write about the obstacles they encounter in living as Christians in a post-Christian world and describe how they have succeeded or failed to overcome them; their experiences could be considered by a group consisting of a theologian, married lay folk, a psychologist, a lady doctor, and a writer (preferably from the working classes). The writer among them could then present their advice to all manner of men in a way that the simplest could understand.

In default of this plan the following brief paragraphs attempt to indicate the lines upon which such a co-operative work might be based.

There is little hope of seeing the path to sanctity through marriage and family life unless one frankly acknowledges at the beginning that the 'happy marriage' and 'happy family' beloved of preachers is rare. Moreover, the attractive pictures of such happy families which are sometimes set before us in sermons are more calculated to depress than to inspire the hearers; the congregation goes away in the spirit of the old mother who remarked, after one such occasion: 'It was a fine sermon he was after preaching; I only wish I knew as little about married life as he does!' More realistic, and ultimately more optimistic, was the observation of a married man, a historian of the Middle Ages: 'The trials and aridity which the medieval monk encountered in his monastery are given to modern men in their marriages'. This historian's conception of family life is more optimistic because it is based upon experience, and the experience provides a bracing challenge to live through the aridity into holiness; the pious picture exists scarcely anywhere except in a glowing imagination, where it is of little use to anyone.

Many reasons could be suggested for this deep disharmony in so many marriages. One reason undoubtedly is the Manichaeian attitude towards sex so often inculcated into children, which remains with them all their lives. Yet the intimate relation between sexuality and spirituality has been convincingly shown, to take one

¹ The essential conditions for developing a lay spirituality are to be found in *Christliche Weltverantwortung*, by Robert Scherer (Herder Verlag).

instance, in the biography of Blessed Marie of the Incarnation written by Père Bruno.² Previous biographers of Blessed Marie had spoken of her marriage as though it had been a reluctant one, from which she was gladly delivered by her husband's death allowing her to enter Carmel. Père Bruno shows that this version of her life has no foundation; she was happily married, the glad mother of five children, and became sanctified through her marriage to a very ordinary husband.

But here we wish only to make general observations about the present position of the family in relation to sanctity. In the first place, the family is the fundamental unit of both religious and social life in the sense that the human father and the human mother normally act as the channels by which children learn to know God their Father and God their Mother. It is almost useless, in other words, to start telling children about God their Father if the word 'father' is associated in their minds with the quarrelsome creature who sleeps at home but spends the rest of his free time in the pub; being analogical by nature, children will conclude that the less they have to do with God the better for all concerned. Without good fathers and mothers the outlook for religion is bleak indeed.³

At the same time the family is a social unit not to be dealt with apart from its relationship to society in general. And like every other natural unit it falls subject to the universal law of death and rebirth; if the family is to be reborn as a source of supernatural life for others it must die, like the grain of wheat falling to the earth. The family must die to itself and place itself at the service of the community if it is to have abundant life. The family must be ready to sacrifice itself, turned outwards towards society, always looking towards the needs of others. If the members of the family are turned in upon each other they will become a nest of vipers, each squirm by one member producing a squirm in the others until they become restless and tired of the unending and vain efforts at adjustment. If the members of the family are turned outwards they are looking at Christ in their brethren; and just as any two people trying to see the same object from the same angle will automatically be brought shoulder to shoulder, without any conscious effort, so the members of such a family will be brought together by love for Christ in their brethren. No vivid imagination is necessary

² *La Belle Acarie*, by Père Bruno, O.D.C. (Desclée de Brouwer.)

³ On account of this, the gravest threat to religion at the present moment in Britain is the absence of the conditions necessary for family life, i.e., insufficient houses. The virtue of religion is part of justice; probably the provision of houses at the moment is the first call upon our justice and religion.

to see how many tasks await the Christian family which is turned outwards—the poor, the widows, the orphans, they are Christ's legacy to us, and we have them with us always. If one has bread it can be shared with the starving; if one has a fire it is the right of those shivering with cold; if one owns a carpet it belongs to the beggar who has no roof for the night; and if one has none of these things then our hearts are there for the taking by those who are mourning. The family is a social unit, and within the limits suggested by prudence for protecting its privacy, it has to live without walls.

Retracing the argument on sanctity in marriage so far: firstly we distinguished between sanctity and canonised sanctity; secondly we spoke of the need for an uncloistered spirituality; then we spoke of the general aims which must inspire marriage and family life. It only remains to point out how simply the counsels of poverty, purity and obedience can be applied to married life. In one sense, it seems, these counsels demand to be heard by the laity much more closely than by religious, for the religious has chosen not to choose, whereas the lay person's life is set in circumstances which force him to choose at almost every minute.

The poverty exercised by a married person must obviously express itself in a non-Franciscan mode. A father would be guilty of improvidence who stripped himself in the market-place when he should be swinging a crane into position on the dock-side. But the beauty of poverty is many-sided, shining in Joe Binns no less than in St Francis. The Binns house may be simply furnished, without carpets and radios, and with the minimum of books; Joe Binns may give up smoking cigarettes, and his wife may stop wearing nylons. If they save money in consequence they can always give it away when they have more than a few hundred pounds—more than this is probably hoarding.

There are more drastic ways of exercising poverty open to married people. A young married man refuses to own anything whatsoever and has the intention of living at rent or in rooms all his life as a means of identifying himself with the millions of homeless people in every continent throughout the world. Such a course is exceptional, demanding heroic sanctity of the wife; but the times are scarcely normal, and demand heroic remedies.

The second counsel has been taken to refer to purity. In a very positive sense, however, married people are called upon to exercise purity. It is the married virtue *par excellence*, since husband and wife have to achieve a condition of purity in a state of life which can so easily lead to impurity. Just as patience has to be more

rigorously *exercised* when one has a splitting headache than when one feels that God's in his heaven and all's right with the world, similarly the *exercise* of purity has to be more strenuous when external protections against impurity are lacking. Of course, to scorn such external protections would be imprudent, a sign of pride; to give in because they are absent would constitute despair. Purity in marriage presents difficulties, but not impossibilities.

One scarcely needs to illustrate how the third virtue, that of obedience, may be brought to perfection by those living in the world and rearing a family; its applications are so obvious. One obeys God directly in the circumstances of one's daily life, listening to the small talk of visitors, changing one's plans every few hours to suit the changing needs of the household or the neighbourhood. Inevitably one often fails to hear the call to obedience which comes through circumstances; one might even wish that the call could be given in the unmistakable tones of a person such as a superior. But a layman's vocation is otherwise, and he has to choose even to listen before beginning to obey—his obedience so profound that he only hears the order to be obeyed when he has already been obedient enough to listen to the order. A married person need not feel that his life offers little scope for the practice of obedience; God calls him at each turning of his daily round.

If these brief illustrations of how the family provides a fertile soil in which to root poverty, purity, and obedience are to serve as pointers to a spirituality of married life, they need to be referred once more to what was said at the beginning of this article. Amidst all the complications, difficult decisions and tense situations of life in this world one needs only to keep looking at God in an act of loving attention. And if God wants us to attend to him by our mending a child's cricket-bat or blowing bubbles at a Christmas party, then why not do so? God wants to make us saints; all that we have to do is to let him.