

foretold by the prophet: *The great day of the Lord is near, it is near and exceeding swift: the voice of the day of the Lord is bitter, the mighty man shall there meet with tribulation. That day is a day of wrath, a day of tribulation and distress, a day of calamity and misery, a day of darkness and obscurity, a day of clouds and whirlwinds.*¹³ A day of which the Lord also says through his prophet: *Yet one little while, and I will move the heaven and the earth.*¹⁴ We have already told you how he created disturbances in the atmosphere, and the earth shook. Who then will be able to stand firm when he makes the heavens to move? And what shall we say of these present terrors, unless we consider them as the heralds of the wrath to come? One ought to consider that these present tribulations differ from the ultimate tribulation in much the same way that the status of the herald differs from that of the judge armed with all the power of the law. Brethren, give all your attention to the thought of that day which is to come. Amend your lives, alter your ways. Overcome, by resisting, the evils that tempt you; punish with tears the evil you have done. For whensoever you shall behold the coming of the eternal judge, you will then be the more untroubled the more out of reasonable fear you now anticipate his severity. (*In Euang. I, 1.*)

¹³ Sophonias i, 14.

¹⁴ Aggeus ii, 7.



COMMENT

I—UNION WITH CHRIST

This is not an article. It does not discuss or explain or meet objections or even raise them. It leaves the obvious difficulties aside. It is simply one person's attempt to frame answers to some of the urgent questions that arise on the subject of the relation between consecrated virginity and married holiness, and the relation of both to the end and aim of Christian life: that union with Christ which has traditionally been expressed in terms of sexual love.

SACRAMENTS contain what they signify. What is signified by the sacrament of marriage? 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh. This is a great sacrament, but I

‘speak in Christ and in the church.’ The sacrament of marriage, then, signifies the union of Christ and the Church, his Body. But if a sacrament contains what is signified, in what sense is this true of marriage? Are St Paul’s words just a metaphor? Surely not. In some way it must be that Christian marriage is, or can be, a real expression of the union of Christ with his mystical Body.

The act of love in which man and woman give themselves to each other is intended to bring delight to each, yet even on the natural plane it is only in so far as they are prepared to forget themselves, to stop wanting or considering the delight that each, individually, can get, that their union approaches the completeness of love that is intended. This is true in a far greater degree when their union is sacramental. In order that the union of two human beings may in a real sense show forth the union of Christ with his Church, it is necessary that each should enter into it with entire forgetfulness of self, with a pure desire to offer all that each has to give of love to the other, knowing that this is a self-giving not merely to a human partner but, in the same action, to God in an act of worship. The desire for personal satisfaction and fulfilment has no place in such an offering. Delight will come—a completeness of delight beyond any that selfish passion can command—but only because it has not been sought. Passion is there, the deepest and strongest of human passions, the root of all human desire and action, and it is not destroyed or suppressed but transformed. The same terrible energy that can draw the soul away from God in an endless search for the satisfaction of its desires, is changed (and yet without losing any of its strength) into a force that throws the soul into the arms of God, even as the body gives itself to this other human body in the completeness of human love.

It is not always so. Many marriages between Christians are Christian marriage only in name. Such unions can only be compared to that of Christ with his Church as a metaphor, and a crude one at that. As the act of love is the most complete expression of love that is possible between human beings, so it is beset in the greatest degree by all the dangers of fearful degradation that surround every action of fallen humanity. It is because of the degradation of marriage that is seen so often that it seems to many people safer to avoid a path so full of hidden chasms, a way that runs so near the edge of the precipice. Such a motive for

renouncing marriage can only remain in one who refuses to look up and see where the road leads. For the perfection of union in married love shows forth, acts out, makes manifest the eternal union of Christ with his Church, when, and only when, each partner is truly united with Christ. In a quite real sense it can be said that each partner is married to Christ, and their union with each other is an expression of their union with him. Such a union is fruitful, not only in the children that God may send, but in the increase of divine life in both partners, the fitting medium for the growth of those children who are destined also for union with Christ.

If, then, the union of love in Christians can be so true an expression of Christ's union with the Church, can draw from the individual soul so entire a sacrifice of self, can bring it so wonderfully to its own union with Christ, why is it that consecrated virginity is a higher state? To answer this vital question it is helpful to ask what it is that makes for the perfection of the union in marriage. The willingness entirely to forget self, to leave aside all considerations of personal satisfaction and fulfilment, the total offering of oneself to God in the union with the partner in marriage. Such a complete sacrifice is rare and difficult to attain. Many never see the need for it, many who see it never reach it. There are so many possibilities of second-bests, so great a temptation to concentrate on selfish satisfaction, or to become absorbed in the marriage partner to the exclusion of God (St Paul leaves us in no doubt about that aspect of the matter). But the offering that is made by those who give their virginity to Christ is a deliberate one, the leaving of self is explicit in the offering. There is, here also, the possibility of degradation, of a narrowing down of love until it almost dies, of avidity for what God has to give in the way of consolations and personal fulfilment, or a concentration on the achievement of personal perfection as an end in itself. These dangers are present, but they are not so bewildering, so ensnaring as those which beset the married Christian. Those who are married must struggle constantly not only to achieve self-offering, but even to see the need for it. Their life is surrounded with false ideas, with contented mediocrity, with the accepted order of things. What have married people to do with perfection? Why should they strive for union with God? That is for priests and nuns. So it is. The vows that religious make to

God *demand* of them a total offering of themselves, union with Christ crucified. The response may vary, but the willingness to respond is inseparable from the very fact that they are there, making those promises.

Therefore in the virgin consecrated to God the sexual energy which might have been absorbed into God through the gift of self in married union is instead drawn up entirely and directly into union with Christ. It is (as in marriage) not destroyed, not suppressed but transformed; but in this case the exchange of love is with Christ alone. The self-offering must be made with no thought of personal delight or profit, yet (so God works always) the joy which was not desired will be given, such joy as is most often denied on earth to those whose union with Christ is through human marriage.

Both ways are ways of perfection, at least potentially. Both aim at union with Christ because that is the only thing that is worth wanting. Both demand, for their perfecting, the uttermost in self-sacrifice because only by dying to self can we be united with Christ who died for us.

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II—THE DOMINICAN CONGRESS ON PREACHING,

1957

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THE year 1957 marks the seventh centenary of the death of St Hyacinth, apostle of Poland and one of the great Dominican missionaries, in 1257. By way of special celebration a gathering was called in Rome that has no parallel in Dominican history: the first Dominican Congress, with representatives from all over the Order, held with the object of discussing various theoretical, practical and historical aspects of Dominican Preaching, the prime work of the Order. Earlier in the year Fr Theophilus Szczurecki, the Polish 'Socius' or Polish representative on the General's Council, was invited by the Master General to plan this Congress in honour of his great countryman. All the Provincials of the Order were circularized and invited to send a delegate. A series of lectures was then planned, and 'communications' or reports on particular aspects were invited from the Provinces.