

Marriage

ROSEMARY SHEED

In the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them: Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and subdue it . . .

And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man. Therefore shall a man leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. (Gen. I. 27-8; 2. 23-5).

This was what daily life was to be for man, unfallen and unredeemed. Then man rebelled, trying to make himself independent of God, and succeeded only in making himself subject to his own weakness and dependent on the rest of creation. The first thing he did was to cover his nakedness, to feel shame at it, and God's first word to the woman was that now childbirth would be painful and lust a slavery. The man was told that his subduing of the earth would be unending toil until the day he returned to the dust out of which he was made.

This, then, was what life was to be for fallen man, and even when God began to prepare the people that was to give birth to Christ, there was nothing to make the immediate situation any better. Indeed, it was underlined by the Law which decreed that sexual activity made people unclean (not only intercourse but childbirth, menstruation, and so on); with all its ritual of purifications, the Law made it clear—if it was not already abundantly so—that the flesh was accursed. Even eating was hedged round with legislation of cleansings and purifications. Divorce was allowed, and concubinage ('by reason of the hardness of your heart . . . but from the beginning it was not so'); and though a woman was unclean after childbirth, yet if she were barren this was a curse from God. The whole picture of life was one in which man must look only to God, and yet could only be pleasing to him by making all his natural activities subject to the Law and its regulations.

Despite all this, it was clear that it was to be through physical generation that salvation was to come—'In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed'. The eating of the paschal lamb became the

central religious act of the Jews' year, but just as this act was no mere cooking of the first lamb that came to hand, so the generation was special too: only Sara's son, born by God's intervention, was heir to the promise, not Agar's; only Jacob, not Esau; and only the circumcised could belong to God's people who were to give birth to the Saviour. Though Israel was Christ's mother according to the flesh, a man was not an Israelite merely because of his natural birth. There must be an election by God, faith to respond, and the circumcision prescribed by the Law.

With Christ's coming there is a change. The original law that marriage is indissoluble is restored by our Lord with an explicit reference to Genesis. By the fact of changing water into wine at a marriage feast, Christ (who, as John the Baptist tells us, is the true Bridegroom) did something of tremendous significance which is not fully explained until later. It is from St Paul that we learn what it meant (Eph. 5.21 ff.): he does not, as one would expect, explain Christ's relationship to his Church—which was, after all, something completely new and needed a lot of explaining—by saying that it is like marriage. He explains marriage by saying that it is like Christ's relationship with his Church. In other words, this too is something new, and can only be explained in terms of the whole new dispensation.

Christ has died to the flesh and its slavery, and risen in the Spirit; in baptism we die and rise with him, and to the extent that we let Christ live in us, we too are in the Spirit and no longer live according to the flesh. Yet it is in Christ's *body* that we are saved: by eating that body we become Christ, and by our physical union of two-in-one-flesh in marriage we are a living witness to the fact that Christ and his Church are one body—not according to the flesh, but the Spirit. And it is not too much to say, since a sacrament effects what it signifies, that every Christian marriage helps the Church as a whole to attain to the full stature of Christ, as well as creating and blessing the bond that reflects that relationship.

Not only does Christianity fulfil the promise and prophecy given to Israel, but it responds also to that instinct whereby man had tried, in so many pagan cults, to reach unity with his divinities through eating, or through sex—that profound instinct which recognized the unity of man as body and soul, and the necessity of his being male and female.

If the world today, with its emphasis on fulfilment through sex, is the new paganism (though lacking the reverence and discipline of most of the older paganisms), can it not also be said that we Catholics react by

a return to the Old Testament, with its condemnation of so many bodily activities as unclean, as redeemable only by external works of purification? Many of us have a train of thought that runs something like this: sex is most fully exercised in promiscuity; of course the ideal is to try to suppress it altogether by being celibate; but if one really can't manage that, at least one must have only one sexual relationship, and this will be blessed, rather reluctantly, by the Church in marriage. In other words, marriage is necessary for the continuation of the race, but the best people are called to virginity. As a priest once commented to me, in this view marriage is needed merely to keep the supply of virgins constant—apart, of course, from preventing worse excesses.

There is a tendency to 'spiritualize' the other sacraments too, because of this fear of the body. Children are taught far more about baptism as a washing, a cleansing from the stain of sin (just like mummy washing your clothes?), than as birth; in the eucharist we think of 'receiving' Christ to commune with him in wordless adoration, rather than of feeding upon Christ's body in order to become one body with him and with each other; the Oil of the Sick is pictured as helping our soul to wing its way to its creator, not as a strengthening to heal our bodies. As for the mystical body itself, the first word becomes so rarified and spiritual that it almost cancels out the second in most people's minds. (Well, it's like saying the army is a fine body of men—not *literally* a body, of course.) Marriage suffers worst of all in this terrible cloudy piety. Our spiritual life is seen as somehow running parallel to our ordinary life, with each sacrament corresponding to some natural event, and the sacrament of marriage becomes some kind of spiritual relationship that runs parallel to ordinary marriage, and is somehow effected almost in spite of 'the physical side'.

This is certainly an exaggeration in terms of what most Catholics would *say*, but I honestly do not think it is at all a false picture of what a great many feel. The idea that there is an opposition between body and soul has bitten so deep as to bring about a kind of religious schizophrenia. We think of the grace of the sacrament as standing by us when we have to get up in the night to soothe a teething baby, or give up a holiday scheme because one of our offspring is ill: we do not think the grace of marriage has much to do with our enjoyment of love-making, or the pleasure we might feel as a couple on holiday or at a party. We canonize the exhausted young mother weakly embracing her baby for the first time, but feel less certain about the healthy young wife passionately embracing her husband. Yet the couple who give

themselves totally to each other with joy are an image of Christ giving himself totally to his Church in the triumph of his glorification.

We see the grace of the sacrament as existing to get us over the humps (which, of course, it will, and indeed it must, or we should not get over them at all), but we do not realize that it also makes us happy and loving at every level of the marriage relationship. The sacrament effects what it signifies; and what it signifies is no vague and generalized Christian charity, no lofty 'spiritual' relationship, but a concrete, human, physical union whose perfect expression is sexual intercourse. (The scriptural word for this, we may recall, is 'knowledge'—and it is a direct knowledge which is a shadow of the direct knowledge we shall have of God in heaven.) Even if a couple never succeed in having any children to sacrifice themselves for (*and* enjoy), simply by loving each other they are living the sacrament that mirrors Christ's union with his Church. In our constant stress on the value of suffering to our sanctification (which perhaps reflects the way in which Calvary has supplanted the Resurrection as the central mystery in our doctrine of the redemption), we do not effectively realize that in Christ's triumph *all* things have been made new. Activities that in the old dispensation made people unclean are now the very means Christ has chosen to act in us sacramentally. No elaborate purifications surround the eucharist—only mortal sin prevents us from receiving it. And sex in marriage, which is sex at its richest and fullest, does not make us unclean, but sanctifies us.

All this does not mean that the human race has recovered from the Fall. All things are made new in the risen Christ, but outside him they are still what they became after Adam's sin turned the world upside down. Sex is still a powerful and sometimes overpowering urge; it has its dangers—not only for non-Christians, but for us all in as much as we do not yet live wholly in Christ. But its very power makes it more fitted to mirror God's power to create and his unity in Trinity, as marriage before the Fall was intended to, as well as Christ's gift of himself to us which it now represents too. And to harp endlessly on the dangers, without fully realising the glory, is not merely negative and unsatisfying, but a failure to realize the difference Christ's coming has made. It also makes life far more confusing and disintegrated for Christians: it is bad enough trying to live a Christian life in a de-Christianized world, without in addition having to try to resolve non-existent conflicts between a 'spiritual' life and an ordinary one.

When the Editor asked me to write this article, he gave as a reason

that not enough is written about marriage by people who are actually married; and one theologian has told me that he does not want to write about marriage, because it is dangerous to write of something one has not experienced. Emboldened by two such remarks from priests, I would go on to suggest that part of the trouble about our ideas of marriage is that our teaching on the subject comes largely from celibates. A friend of mine actually heard the phrase, 'Marriage—or worse' at her convent school; and there is often lack of vitality in the teaching that insists rather monotonously that 'marriage is, of course, a glorious vocation'. Cheer up, even if *you* get no higher, perhaps one of your (fifteen) children may be a saint!

What is so extraordinary about all this is that sexuality is part of human nature; we are man and woman right down to the cells of our skin, whatever our vocation may be. By refusing to marry, far from turning one's back on sex, one is facing a battle that can only be won with God's help. Virginitv is not higher than marriage because it denies sexuality any outlet. To dedicate oneself to virginitv will be to trust that God will make the fullest use of all one's powers, perhaps in a way one does not understand, precisely because one renounces the ordinary human fulfilment of them for his sake. It calls for a faith like the faith Abraham showed when he was prepared to sacrifice his only son, even though he could see no possible hope of God's promise being fulfilled if he did. God has promised that what we give up for his sake we shall receive a hundredfold—not that we shall be given some other kind of reward instead.

The real importance of virginitv in the Church is that whereas marriage represents the union of Christ and the Church now, virginitv represents that union as it will be in heaven, when there will be no need for an organized Church, when all will live wholly in Christ. That is why it is necessary; that is why it is magnificent. But this is no reason for married people to feel that their way of life comes a poor second. While it is true that virginitv is objectively better, it is also true that for each of us what we are called to is best *for us*, and all our talents are needed to build up the body of Christ. And it may be well to remember that mere physical virginitv is not an end in itself, but a means to the end of total dedication to God, an end for which we should all be striving. This end may be better attained by some married people than by priests or religious who are choked by the riches and cares of this world.

When one considers that the purpose of all life is to enter into the

joy of the Lord in heaven, then I think marriage has a special value which we do not sufficiently advert to. For Christ described the Judgment in terms of feeding and clothing him in our neighbour—'As long as ye did it to the least of these my little ones, ye did it to me', and a family provides us with others whom it is our delight, as well as our duty, to feed and clothe, to shelter and cherish, in whom we can readily recognize Christ. This is a very good beginning. What is tragic is for charity not only to begin at home but to end there too. And in this, too, the family is like the Church: it is tragic when Christians turn their charity in upon themselves, when they seek to bring others into their narrow circle and to impose its ways of thought upon them, instead of going out and recognizing Christ in others, and bringing the Christ they bear more fully to them, to build up the body to the fulness of the stature of Christ.

Indeed, there is a vast amount to be said of this likeness between marriage and the Church—as with all scriptural ideas, a mere statement of it barely scratches the surface of its meaning—and of the fact that the family is the Church in small, just as every individual Christian is. It would be beyond the scope of this article, and in any case I am not competent to say it. Nor have I touched on the tremendously fruitful idea that human sexuality reflects the nature of God, an idea which I think will grow richer as psychology discovers more of the ramifications of the effects sex has in every area of our lives. But I earnestly hope that more thinking will be done along these lines, so that for Catholic married people the conflict between 'the spiritual life' and ordinary life may cease to be a problem, and the full magnificence of their vocation may become a realized joy.