

THE MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP IN THE LIFE OF PRAYER

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IN WRITING of marriage and prayer I am writing of normal, happy marriage. In a marriage which is unhappy for physical, mental, or spiritual reasons, through the fault of either partner, or both, or neither, there may be great holiness, but this holiness will not be according to the pattern of sanctity which God designs for marriage. It is of the life of prayer within the pattern that I want to write, using the word 'prayer' in its widest sense of the whole relationship of the dedicated soul with God.

It is a pity that the saints are so little help in this matter. Most married saints either lost their partners early, or struggled towards sanctity through the suffering caused by an unhappy marriage. There are exceptions: St Margaret of Scotland and St Elizabeth of Hungary are great examples, but we know so little of their private lives that for practical purposes they are not much help. St Thomas More's first marriage seems to have been happy, but his young wife died early, and his second wife was never more than a well-loved house-keeper, whom he seems to have found on occasion rather irritating. The important thing is that his life of prayer, intense as it was, seems to have been entirely unrelated to his relationship with his wife.

This seems to me to be the crux of the matter. In the life of prayer, do I come to God as a unit which happens to be attached to another for practical purposes, or do I pray so that the marriage relationship is part of the fabric of my relationship with God?

Immediately a fundamental problem appears, one that bothers most thoughtful people, though they may not know what it is that is worrying them. However much two people love each other, they will never cease to be two people. They can never enter into each other's thoughts, share each other's emotions, never be one. Phrases such as these are often used of people in love, as if they could come to be true in an exact sense, but it is not so. 'United souls are not satisfied with embraces, but desire

to be truly each other; which being impossible, their desires are infinite, and proceed without a possibility of satisfaction.' Affection and experience may teach them to guess each other's thoughts very accurately, to react very strongly in sympathy with each other's feelings; physical union may bring them to the very edge of personality; but that frontier may never be crossed, and the acceptance of this agonizing fact is one of the conditions of a serene marriage relationship.

The impossibility of achieving absolute unity extends to the life of prayer. There can be no complete sharing in this either. Sir Thomas Browne, who was responsible for the depressing quotation just given, provides some sort of answer himself. 'Now, if we can bring our affections to look beyond the body, and cast an eye upon the soul, we have found the true object, not only of friendship, but charity; and the greatest happiness we can bequeath the soul, is that wherein we all do place our last felicity, salvation; which though it be not in our power to bestow, it is in our charity, and pious invocations to desire, if not procure and further.' But we have in marriage a God-given means to 'procure and further' our salvation; and in order to make full use of this special grace, salvation must be sought in common. There can be no complete unity in prayer, but there can be an increasing unity of purpose, and a greater and greater degree of co-operation and help in achieving that purpose. To acquire this unity a deliberate and conscious effort is very little use and may do great harm. A frankness forced by some preconception about honesty in marriage may well lead to disaster; and for a long time it will probably be unwise if not impossible to discuss each other's life of prayer at all openly: the awkwardness of talking about it will leave an unpleasant feeling which may be carried over into the prayer itself and create an awkwardness in the relationship with God. A marriage begins on the wedding day, but it is not complete until death, and to expect a relationship which is acknowledged to be immensely complicated in other spheres to become perfectly simple and straightforward in the life of prayer is a little unrealistic. Simplicity is very desirable, and with God's grace it will come, and with it the unity of purpose whose pursuit I have suggested as an ideal; but it takes a long time to achieve it, a great deal of patience, a faithful and humble waiting on God, and a refusal to be discouraged by apparent lack of

understanding. Nor is it any use dragging this lack of understanding into the open and insisting on discussing it before the right time comes, for any matter of real importance which is actually put into words between married people becomes a part of their relationship; they have to live with it, and if it appears too soon it may be very uncomfortable. A new-born baby would be uncomfortable if it suddenly got all its teeth; they would be no use, and would get in the way. Later on, though, teeth are very useful. So there comes a moment when it is desirable that aspects of the spiritual life of each partner should be openly discussed, and common principles stated. The occasion will present itself without any forcing if both partners have done their best to co-operate with the work of the Holy Spirit in their own souls, peacefully and without rigidity or any attempt to force God's work into what they consider to be the correct shape. From that moment, the common principles stated in this way will be a support and a source of strength to both partners in their individual relationship with God. This process of individual development followed by discussion and explicit statement may well be repeated many times until such a degree of unity is achieved that discussion will cease to be a necessary stage in the spiritual growth of the two people, though of course talking about spiritual things will continue to be a natural and helpful part of their life together. When I speak of 'unity' in the spiritual life, I do not at all mean 'sameness'. It is, on the contrary, precisely the purpose of this sharing of the results of experience to give greater strength to each partner in his own particular approach to God. They become, not more alike, but more completely themselves as they try to become more like Christ.

Such a development of unity in the spiritual life necessarily involves a very close and deep sympathy between the partners at every level, for two people who were not completely happy and at ease in each other's company could never achieve a sufficient degree of delicacy in reaction to one another. Perhaps the most common obstacle to sympathy and co-operation in the spiritual life lies in a wrong attitude to the marriage act, the act ordained by God to be the complete expression of human love. I am not here talking of marriages where there is real repugnance on one side or the other, or any kind of misuse, whether deliberate or due merely to ignorance or lack of self-control. For my

purposes, such cases are abnormal, and outside the scope of this article. It is a question of marriages where the partners are suited to each other and find satisfaction in physical union, but where the physical act of love is kept in a separate mental and emotional compartment from the rest of married life, and where, most of all, it is utterly separated from the life of prayer. To isolate it in this way is to make the marriage act scarcely more than animal. Man is not complete on the purely human level and to exclude the supernatural from any human action is to make it something less than fully human. In the case of an act so essential and so intimate, the results of this lowering cannot but be serious.

The feeling that physical union in marriage is something merely permitted by God because of human weakness is unfortunately very widespread, even among pious and deeply prayerful people. It is a wrong feeling, but its roots are very deep, and it has been most carefully watered and tended by the Devil. God does not *permit* this union, he *wills* it. He does not *allow* two people to be joined together, he *joins* them together. He joins them in this particular manner and in no other, he approves their union, he wants it. In the face of his manifest will, how dare we suggest that the marriage act is something degrading, to be pushed out of mind as soon as it is over, and never, never, brought before him in prayer? Are we afraid he will be shocked?

Such an attitude is not always due to prudery. The lovely and necessary virtue of modesty, if it is not completed by enlightened teaching on the sacrament of marriage, may lead to a certain fear of physical union which, even in a happy marriage, results in an unwillingness to think about it, and if it is not thought about, it will not be prayed about. There is another and deeper fear which comes to many thoughtful and self-conscious people, the fear of the inevitable loss of conscious control of the mind which is part of the union in love of two people. They are afraid to let go, afraid to trust, and a conflict like this is bound to make a peaceful and prayerful married life almost impossible. The trouble here is that the fear is a well-founded one. If we lose control of our minds, to what influences are we laying ourselves open? The lovers go down into deep waters; for the moment they have lost touch with the familiar, everyday things, with the processes of reason that sort out the puzzles and argue away the fears. They are down at the roots of the world, the naked soul is exposed

to the elemental things over which it has no control. The answer is, surely, that if we can easily expose ourselves to something evil in this unknown territory, we can also find God there if he is what we are looking for. It is then all the more necessary to approach the matter soberly and prayerfully, but with joy and confidence in God, who did not give us this gift for ill but for good. Then, when we go down into the depths, we fall into the hand of God.

The Nuptial Mass refers to this blessing 'which alone was not taken away either by the punishment for the first sin or by the sentence of the flood'. We might sometimes remember to thank God for it. By this God-ordained union the partners in marriage give themselves to him who joins them, in the same act by which they give themselves to each other. They offer to God an act of worship which he has made worthy of his acceptance. A refusal to make this offering may spring from the cowardly feeling that the gift is unworthy, or from a clinging to the pleasure of the flesh as if we thought that by offering it to God we risked losing some selfish gratification. We want to keep it ourselves, and it is the exaggeration of this attitude which has led to the attempt to put sex in the place of God, with all the hideous distortion and degradation of something holy to which this has led. The refusal of the offering brings with it inevitably the disgust, the dissatisfaction and uneasiness that so many people feel. If they are sensitive, disgust produces a sense of guilt which intensifies the tendency to separate sexual love from the spiritual life, so that the complete development of the personality becomes impossible. But, on the contrary, the total self-offering of two people to God in the union which he has blessed, can lead to a liberation of the spirit, a joyful freedom of love that consummates perfectly the marriage in which, as has been said, there are not two partners, but three—husband, and wife, and God. It is not, in practice, a simple matter. All sorts of conscious and unconscious prejudices and emotions are bound up in it, which may make a simple and reverent approach to the marriage act very difficult. It may take years to make the delicate, scarcely definable, adjustments in the relationship which lead to complete sympathy, and to that wordless satisfaction with each other which is the mark of a really happy marriage. But the long effort which, made with God's help constantly sought in prayer, will be a

means of reaching that unity of purpose in his service which I proposed as an ideal.

I have discussed at some length the sexual side of marriage in its relation to God, not because I give it first place, but because it is too often neglected altogether. In practice the whole married life lived in God's service will assume a rhythm, different in different couples, in which every part will find its proper place and proportion, and each will contribute to the harmony of the whole. Not that complete harmony can be achieved in this life. There will always be the war between the spirit and the flesh, the clear flame of love will be dimmed by uncontrolled passion, the body will fret against the restraints that the soul imposes, the proud soul may despise the body. We shall be tempted to impatience with each other, to contempt for each other's failings, to smugness at our own apparent progress, to disgust at a momentary weakness of the flesh, even to jealousy of the other's spiritual good. We shall lose sight of the goal and long to find a release from boredom in selfish lust or in feverish activity, shutting out both God and our partner in marriage, except as vehicles for 'self-expression'. So we go on, clinging together and clinging to God, though we sometimes cannot imagine why. We cannot suddenly begin to behave as if we were not married, and expect everything to be the same as it was before. However useless it sometimes seems, we *do* cling on, and perhaps in this way we may find the way to Heaven, not in spite of marriage, or apart from marriage, but in and through it.



NOTE: Père Dubois's paper on Adaptations for Religious Sisters in France will be continued in the February issue.—*Editor.*