

that higher unity towards which the very love that creates freedom is ending.

But to say this is to touch on questions which are no longer St Paul's. It is time to pass on to the Synoptic Gospels.

*(To be concluded)*

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## WIDOWS OF GOD

**B**Y the 'Widows of God' I mean those people whose marriages have gone wrong and who cannot marry again because of the validity of their first marriage and the fact that the partner of it is still living. If Newman could call his celibacy widowhood the state of these people, at least of those in good will, doubly deserves the name. It suggests the desolation of their state, both men and women, and it is by an act of God, by the eternal law of one man one woman, that they are condemned, or called, to celibacy.

As Catholics marry non-Catholics who see no wrong in divorce, and as Catholics themselves adopt the standards around them, and as wars and migration increasingly interfere with marital fidelity, there is a growing percentage of Catholics in this position. It would be interesting to get the statistics of parish priests on it. But whether it is ten per cent or twenty it represents a very great pastoral problem in the Church. And one must not forget the growing number of those outside who might become Catholics were it not for this impediment, that they have a broken marriage somewhere in their history and know they could not become Catholics and remain with the partner they now have. Most priests have at one time or another come across such cases where they would be hesitant to encourage a potential convert and think 'non sunt inquietandi'.

A large number of people in this position were innocent of the family break-up that led to their present state, as far as human judgment can see. A large number are innocent at least by repentance, and now wish to redress any wrong they did and live a good Christian life. But it is very often impossible to restore the unity that has been broken. And at the same time a conspiracy of the prophets of modernism, doctors, psychologists, journalists and social scientists, assisted by most of our drama and fiction, is bent on proving the impossibility of continence, and the irresistibility of the ring of the bell known as falling in love. The latter process is shown as something independent of all ordinary human self-control, even portrayed in some 'christian' literature as if it were some

mystic process under a separate God. There is a total mental prejudice against the possibility of complete continence. The whole of birth control propaganda is built on the assumption that it is either impossible or detrimental. With all this weight of social prejudice against them Catholics in the position described more often than not give up the struggle and marry again outside the Church, often thinking, and sometimes saying, that the clergy may not understand but God will. They show a nostalgia for the sacraments by attending Mass, by sending their children to Catholic schools, by anything short of the one thing they think they cannot do.

This immense pastoral problem of the Church is found not only in so-called civilised countries but also in mission territories. In the latter it is numerically decreased from one point of view, because one is more often dealing with the unbaptised, to whom the words of St Paul about the believer being freed from the unbeliever can frequently be applied. But from another point of view it is increased, because the primitive man with whom the missions are concerned is everywhere learning the laxity of modern civilisation, and at the same time has upon him the drag of heathenism. Most forms of primitive custom and religion have some habits of what we should call sexual licence, and this sanctioned by religion itself. Divorce, polygamy, promiscuity, wife lending, are common. It is sometimes said that primitive people have strict sexual codes, and this is often true in that there are severe sanctions for their transgression. But they are not our moral code, nor, with the significant exception of the most primitive of all, are they similar to ours. Without the revelation needed to reaffirm it they have not preserved the Natural Law, at least in public affairs, but have made a compensation, sanctioning that morality which the people as a whole feel necessary and are prepared to keep. Moreover as their life is simpler so is their concentration on primordial things, and the psychological experience of sex initiation is something so intensified that, for the individual and for public opinion, the idea of continence is made doubly difficult.

In the mission field, therefore, where the primitive man inevitably picks up the froth of the western civilisation more easily and its laxity, the Church has to guard continence from the old and the new paganism, and the Catholic idea of monogamy from two real contrary philosophies of life: the old one which is a system of maintaining order and race-preservation by means that the peoples as a whole will actually agree to; the new one, spread far beyond the limits of real European jurisdiction by cheap literature and the wireless, which is a conscious reaction from Christianity. The com-

munists are everywhere among the primitive peoples now to justify every sin but 'capitalism', to malign Christianity, to encourage any restlessness that will foster the revolutionary psychology. And ·s industrialisation grows, and the migration of labour to it, the absenteeism that plays so large a part in the breaking up of European homes plays havoc with the home life of people who have only been used, to date, to the most regular and settled way of living. In their very first generation of Christianity mission converts in large numbers are having to face the situation of the Widows of God. with all their heathenism and all they are learning of the new world to tempt them.

On the whole one sees very little reference to this problem, perhaps because there are no ways and means about it. It is simply a great and inescapable trial. In a certain number of instances there is a question of nullity in the first marriage, or a case for the Pauline privilege, and the person is able to marry. But this in a way only makes it harder, for those who can not, to understand. For it is so often the less worthy who are fortunate in this worldly sense. Notably the Catholic whose first marriage, so called, was made in a Registry Office, is free, while the one married in church is not. Similarly it is often those who have been at fault in whatever has broken up the first union who can be declared free, those who have only been sinned against who cannot. Sometimes it is our best and most zealous Catholics, perhaps within a year or two, or even in cases that have come within my experience within a few months of a fully valid Catholic marriage, who are placed in this position. They drift away, and it may be in their minds a distorted virtue—rather be faithful in sin than go down into the muck—when they take another partner in the Registry Office or in some accommodating church. The very concentration on preaching the family life in our churches seems to put them more beyond the pale, since they cannot have it. And, to add the last touch to the problem, commonly those whose marriages have gone wrong cannot qualify for the established Religious Orders. There they might find the companionship and ideal and support that make celibacy a relatively light burden to the Religious. But usually the Widows of God have some impediment under the rule and customs of an Order, a husband or wife who may return to make trouble, a child dependent on them, financial obligations, which would prevent their entering. Also, being in such a state is no proof of the specialised vocation to one of the Orders, not even, for instance, to the penitential life of a Cistercian. The person may be of very fixed and formed character and habits, or aware of some real social and spiritual usefulness

in the world, which may be valid reasons for not entering the cloister.

I have dwelt at length on all this gloomy outlook because I think it is a pastoral problem of which we are largely unaware, and because the number of persons affected by it is growing to such proportions. There seems to be so little to be done. But there is something that can still be done, and something that is being forced upon us from many points of view in the present time. What is needed is a quite new preaching of Continence. Not just chastity for youth, and the Religious Life and conjugal chastity. All these are preached. What is required is a wide preaching of Virginity and Continence for laymen. If many adopt it as a counsel, because the times are bad, then those upon whom it is brought in this way will see that it is not impossible. And further we must promote any means that can make this easier. The means can be summed up in one: community life among laypeople.

Inevitably we think here of men rather than women. We are so used to the unmarried woman in the Church, and the widow who has an occupation for her affections in her children, that this problem seems less hard for the female sex. At least it is clear that they can keep their souls better in it. But ask any man to live well in such isolation and temptation, in the midst of a pagan background, without companions in his state, and it is superhumanly hard for him. But give him a brotherhood and an ideal, get him to realise that his state is a mysterious vocation, as it is if he has the good will to accept it, and all is different. The problem becomes an opportunity. The talents of many of the Widows of God, who were and are zealous, can be turned into the service of Christ and his Church. What is implied, therefore, by this problem is a new confidence in preaching continence for laymen, and some further community life based on the counsels among groups of laypeople. One has only to see how the American Catholic Worker Movement and its Houses of Hospitality have profited from the zeal of many a person who fitted into no category of this very specialised world and who was in some way or other cast out by the modern evil society, to see how the walls of Zion may be held by the lame and the blind, how a problem person may become a high-powered apostle.

To anyone who has held this conviction for some time the decree of Pope Pius XII, *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, recognising lay fraternities or institutes professing the evangelical counsels, comes as quite extraordinarily providential. The Decree appears to have had in mind chiefly an apostolic end, to provide for the full fire of the

counsels right in the milieu of work and ordinary living, to provide for their wide continuance as the new socialised states increasingly take away the occupations and the rights of religious. But it does also suggest just that medicine which is needed in the matter under discussion. The Holy Father is casting back continence among the laypeople, and providing for a real community life and support among its professors such as the Widows of God could find even where, for one reason or another, the religious life is not open to them.

Actually for the two great sex-morality problems of this age, this, the most dire of all effects of divorce, and the problem of birth control, there is no real and final solution apart from a new crusade of continence among the laypeople. The battle over birth control may yet become more of a straight fight for continence than it has to date. And certainly in the case of those who have it forced upon them by a broken marriage, there is no question of a middle way. They must live in the body, but not as in it.

The thing that can encourage them most, make them realise that what they are called to is possible, is to see it as a common choice of others not so obliged. It has often been pointed out how the counsels are the guardians of the law. Where monks flourish, remarked St Ambrose, there also conjugal chastity flourishes. Here is a matter in which only a rebaptism in the counsel can raise that public confidence in continence which is needed to give hope to the Widows of God. This decree, authorising what few would have dared to preach or advise to any extent without such sanction, i.e. the profession of the state of virginity—not just negative bachelorhood but professed celibacy—among laypeople, is preparing that rebaptism. The value of the Decree as I am dwelling upon it might be called a side-line from its main purpose. But to a growing number of people it might be the difference between spiritual life and death, could we apply the ideal and the companionship of a community, visualised in the decree as the safeguards of continence in the lay state, to the state to which they are sternly called by God's high law.

What the Holy Father is doing is, after all, only to restore something primitive, that continence among the laypeople which existed as a common asceticism before there were monasteries. Our time is becoming singularly like the first missionary age of the Church, as disestablishment and persecution grow. In that age it was less possible, and less necessary, to separate the counsels into cloisters. As it becomes less possible now, with the spreading of the laicised state, we are perhaps also nearing the condition when it was less necessary to separate the seekers of a higher life from the faithful

as a whole. For to be a Catholic will be to have real zeal, the soul of a martyr like the first believers, or fall off. Many currents coincide, and the paganism in sex matters that is creating the problem discussed here is raising up its own reply from the Church: a new proof that anyone—not only monks and nuns but people living in the thick of social and moral turmoil—'may remain a virgin to the honour of the flesh of Christ'.

FINBAR SYNNOTT, O.P.

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## THE PROPHETS' APPROACH TO GOD

EVERY nation worthy of the name produces its prophets, and by prophets I mean men who claim to speak to their fellow countrymen in the divine name and with divine authority. For that is the true essence of the prophetic character: not merely the ability to foretell future events, but the claim to speak as an ambassador of God. Miracles and predictions are chiefly the confirmatory signs of the validity of that claim. Of course there are prophets and prophets, false claimants and true, and there have been many who claimed unjustifiably to speak in God's name.

But if every nation has had its prophets, no nation has ever produced any that can compare even remotely with the prophets of Israel, of whom Dr Allen writes with so much understanding and sympathy in his *Prophet and Nation*<sup>1</sup>, a book that deserves to be classed with W. R. Smith's great *Prophets of Israel*, published half a century ago. He begins with a chapter on the distinction between those who have come down to us approved as genuine prophets and the now-forgotten throng of their fellow Israelites who belonged to the prophetic caste. Many of the latter were temple officials or hangers-on at the royal court, men who were venal and prepared, like the fortune-tellers of all ages, to adapt their utterances to their income'. The former were outstanding exceptions, few in number, always unpopular in their day, often in prison and generally dying a violent death. The Gospels are eloquent on the character and fate of such men, and their fate is the common fate of genuine prophets: 'no prophet finds acceptance in his own country'. Have we not seen it in our own day?

Dr Allen continues his little book with six excellent studies of those whom he calls Heroes of the Spirit, prophets of Israel who flourished during the two centuries (8th to 6th B.C.) which saw

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<sup>1</sup> *Prophet and Nation*. By E. L. Allen. (Nisbet; 7s. 6d.)