

* CONJUGAL PRAYER

by Rev. Thomas J. Murphy

IN TODAY'S WORLD Christian families need to be conscious of their spiritual duties precisely as a family. The response to this need is evident in the increasing practice of family prayer, the great number of family life organizations, and the growing awareness of their need to know, love, and serve God precisely as a family.

But the basic union giving stability to the family is the bond of mutual love between husband and wife. This love must increase as the years go on, not only for the good and happiness of the spouses themselves, but also for the good of the family.

This is why so many marriage counsellors encourage husbands and wives to go off by themselves occasionally to rediscover the person to whom they have committed themselves for life. This day or two, alone and together when everything from the next Cub Scout meeting to the PTA Conference is forgotten, helps to cement and increase their mutual love. One particularly fruitful activity in this rediscovery is prayer together.

Family prayer is enjoying a vitality previously unknown in Catholic families. This is good. Family prayer manifests and accentuates the sacred character of the family; it strengthens the bonds of the family in its relationship to God. And it leaves to the children a patrimony difficult to equal in value.

However, we need to emphasize the role of conjugal prayer, the prayer of man and woman together, as husband and wife. Isn't this too fine a distinction? Isn't family prayer—the prayer of parents and children—enough?

Before and after men and women become parents, they are husband and wife to each other. Between them exists a relationship of mutual love which Christ Himself used to express His relationship to His Church. "Togetherness" is the great by-word today to draw husbands and wives closer. Why not extend it to prayer?

Conjugal prayer would embrace acts of thanksgiving for the joys of mutual love; acts of contrition for the faults they commit precisely as husband and wife; acts of adoration toward a God Who is truly their Father and Who asks them to share His love in creation; acts of petition for all the graces necessary to live their vocation of marriage.

Pius XII spoke of this conjugal prayer in one of his addresses of newlyweds when he stated: "A grand and fruitful union, dear newlyweds, is that in which you kneel side by side in order to ask God to conserve, increase, and bless the fusion of your lives. Now, where more profoundly, more strongly, more solidly will your hearts, your intellects, your wills be joined together and united into one if not in the prayer of two spouses where one and the same divine grace comes down from heaven in order to harmonize all your thoughts, your affections, and your duties?" (Feb. 12, 1941)

Married couples find occasion for conjugal prayer at various times in their lives. Some couples have the practice of regularly praying a litany of gratitude to God for the blessings of their married life. Kneeling down together they speak to God as a Father: "Thank you for Mary, my wife." "Thank you for John, my husband." "Thank you for Mary and Billy and Johnny and for the child yet to see beauty of your creation. Thank you for helping us see our way through the past week financially. Thank you for everything."

Do such expressions seem overly pious or beyond the thinking of the average married

couple? They shouldn't, for this is merely the conversation of children with their Father, children who are intimately bound to each other and to Him.

Conjugal prayer becomes very practical in the lives of those who have the practice of always kneeling down together at the end of a day which may have been disrupted by disagreement or arguments. On their knees, they ask forgiveness of each other and of their God before they begin another day. This is but living out the command of Christ of not letting the sun set on one's anger.

Such prayer will be conjugal prayer not only because it is made by husband and wife, but also because it is the lifting to God of a mind and heart this is uniquely one in the sacramental union of matrimony.

Moreover, conjugal prayer should become truly Catholic, or universal, by including in its intentions other spouses who perhaps are in desperate need of God's grace to keep their mutual love alive. In fact, conjugal prayer for other husbands and wives should know no limits, should embrace all who are truly married, from the newlywed to the couples celebrating their golden anniversaries, irrespective of race or religion.

Samples of conjugal prayer can be found in a booklet published by the Cana Conference of Chicago, *Prayers for the Family*. In this booklet, "The Litany for a Christian Home," "Parents Prayer for Patience," and "Prayers for Husband and Wife" are fine examples of

conjugal prayer. The "Litany for a Christian Home" is especially striking:

"O Father in Heaven, we thank you for our home, our food, our health, and for all who dwell here. . . . We thank you, dear Father. . . ."

"We beseech you to lead us by intercessions in ways of love and tenderness to one another. . . . We beseech you, O blessed Mary. . . . That with honesty and cheerfulness, with bravery and truth, we may be quick and ready to help each other in each day's work and cares. . . . We pray, dear Jesus. . . ."

"For the constant support of our Holy Church in all the world; for the assurance of graces given and the promise of eternal peace. . . . We thank you, O God, our Father. . . ."

One form of conjugal prayer that every husband and wife should experience at least once in their life time is a retreat. For two or three days, men and women leave the kaffe klatches, the golf game with the fellows, the bridge party with the club, the children with their problems, ranging from a first tooth to a first date, and go aside for a while to consider their vocation together before God. Marriage unites two people in such an intimate union that little is done by one which does not influence the other. On a retreat, both husband and wife become conscious of their responsibility to help each other gain an eternity of happiness together.

To reword a familiar slogan: "The couple that prays together, stays together—not only in time, but in eternity."

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BOOKSHELF

A selection of the best, newer books on married life by the editors of MARRIAGE, the Magazine of Catholic Family Living.

BED AND BOARD
Robert Farrar Capon. Simon and Schuster, \$3.95.
"Plain talk about marriage" is by an Episcopal priest, father of six. A book that will delight, amuse, fortify, and inspire anyone who takes marriage seriously—seriously enough to see, with Father Capon, the absurdity of it all. Best marriage book of the year.

THE CHRISTIAN COUPLE
Daniel Plaque. Fides, \$3.50. If marriage is your chosen vocation, this book was written for you—man or woman. In ten short but deep chapters, the author discusses: achieving happiness, loving, the great choice, engagement, marriage, chastity, the couple, parenthood, raising children, and serving God as a family.

MAN AND WIFE IN SCRIPTURE
Pierre Gredot. Herder and Herder, \$2.95. For those who have been asking for a "theology of marriage," here is a convincing first step in that direction. Using the Old and New Testaments, Fr. Gredot succeeds in establishing a scriptural foundation for understanding sexuality, marital relations, fecundity, indissolubility, and fidelity. Remarkable in its clear and graphic way in which the author shows God's relation to the family of man in fatherly, husbandly, and bridegroom unions.

MARRIAGE AND THE LOVE OF GOD
J. Gasting. Sheed and Ward, \$3.50. One of the few books—and an excellent one—by a married layman on the sexuality and spirituality of marriage. "The purpose of this book," says the author, a husband, and a father of two children, "is to offer an exposition by someone who is married of some of the ways in which married life is conducive to growth in the love of God. Marriage is not a second-best vocation, but a means of holiness by day to day living in the sacrament," says the author, and he demonstrates this effectively.

THE TREE OF LIFE
Reginald Trevett, Kennedy, \$3.95. This is subtitled "Sexuality and the Growth of Personality," and is an excellent presentation of an experienced marriage counselor, writer, and educator. He shows that the sex instinct must be realized in each individual "as a subject," not as an object; and that falling in love, being in love, and staying in love must spring from an unselfish approach that obtains in all human relations. He illustrates the self approach to love by the numerous problems of infidelity, divorce, and contraception.

There must be born
in you
and grow ever stronger
the resolute desire
to be saints,
to be saints as husbands
and wives,
in the marriage union
itself;
in the very expression
of your love

POPE PIUS XII

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Wedding Supplement

How Marriage Fared at the Vatican Council

By Raban Hathorn, O.S.B.
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The preliminary list of themes for discussion at the Council included Matrimony as one of many. And in the eventual tightening up of the schemata, it appeared in passing in outlines of three or four proposed documents. Pre-Council speculation on the treatment of marriage, appearing in numerous articles and a few books, aroused a lively interest. Much of this was concerned with morality in marriage and expressed a hopeful anticipation of liberal solutions to contemporary problems and pressures in family life.

In France and Germany questionnaires were distributed among the married to provide surveys of their needs and desires to be submitted for the Council's consideration. In Canada the bishops asked for suggestions and opinions of the laity and they received thoughtful, well-written responses.

But now speculation and hopeful suggestions are a thing of the past; Vatican II has spoken. We have the results of the Fathers' solemn deliberations in the documents of the

Council. These are the distillation of hundreds of months of actual Council debate and final consensus and proclamation. No one article could possibly condense the total doctrine of any one theme of these documents. The theme of marriage supplies enough material for extended study, analysis, and application.

The first major document of the Council, *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, mentions marriage explicitly only once: it provides for a revision of the marriage rite to enrich it in such a way that the sacramental meaning is more clearly signified and the duties of the spouses taught more effectively.

The reality to be signified is clearly expressed in *The Constitution on the Church*. In Chapter II, "On the People of God," the married faithful are given a prominent place (even though when this was promulgated, no married couple had as yet been invited as official auditors to the Council). "Sacrament spouses, in virtue of the Sacrament of Matrimony, signify and partake of the mystery of God which unites and His Church, exists between Christ and His Church,

of faithful mutual love." By persevering in this way, they "offer all men (especially their own children) the example of unwavering and generous love; they build up the brotherhood of charity; they stand as the witness and cooperators in the fruitfulness of Holy Mother Church; they are a sign and a participation in that very love with which Christ loved His Bride and for which He delivered Himself up for her."

For the longest and most thorough treatment of marriage and family life, you must read this is imperative for every husband and wife—the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, Part II, Chapter I, "Fostering the Nobility of Marriage and the Family." I will here point out basic principles stated in isolated passages and leave the obvious, explicit treatise for your careful reading.

The long Pastoral Constitution confronts the practical circumstances of modern living in an effort to apply the news of salvation to all situations of today's world. Throughout, the word "family" is used in various meanings: family of mankind, family (Continued on page 54)