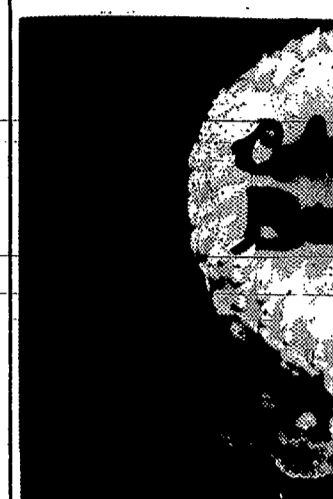


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Marriage is Never Finished

By Bernard Murchland, C.S.C.

IT IS ALWAYS SOMETHING of a shock for me to mingle with guests at a wedding reception. There are those present, of course, who gush about in the spirit of the occasion. A few, I have found, have a quiet, unspoken appreciation of the mystery and splendor of what has taken place.

But on the fringe of the crowd, I invariably encounter a wave of cynicism. It finds expression in some such remark as, "Oh, they're happy now, but it'll soon wear off." "I remember I felt that way once." "The things they don't know!" and "Life has some surprises for them."

There is obviously a good deal of flippancy in much of this. Unhappily, there is also a good deal of truth. I find myself coming away from such receptions wondering: What is it that so frequently ruins the hopes of marriage? Or, more positively, how can the flame of love be kept alive as time goes on? What practical attitudes could save off that monstrous routine, marriage's worst enemy?

One answer is: couples must never consider their marriage as if it were an accomplished fact.

There is a common attitude that sets in after the wedding: roughly it might be translated in these words: "Well, thank heavens that's over! It was a big moment, undoubtedly the biggest of our lives. But let's get on with things, with the job at the office, with raising the children, with paying off the mortgage."

Of course, marriage is situated in the broad stream of social activity and cannot be lived without concern for a good many things. But what is dangerous in such an attitude is: it turns the attention of husband and wife from what is primary to what is secondary.

Marriage is the central reality of their lives; it is the motive and the measure of all that they do. And at no point is it a finished work. It is a vocation that must constantly grow, sinking its roots deeper into those values that are essential for progressive growth. In the manner of a building, marriage is something that must be built from the opportunities that life and grace offer. It is even to use a stronger term, something that must be invented or created by the husband and wife themselves. Each marriage, in this sense, is the beginning of a new world.

This means that couples must be constantly re-thinking their vocation. Only then will they have any guarantee of the spontaneity and deep desire that ought to characterize every marriage.

"The sacrament of marriage," Father Jacques Ledereq has written, "is certainly something vastly more challenging and richer today as a result of 20 centuries of experience and reflection. In fact, we can say that only in our century have we arrived at anything like the full idea of Christian marriage."

What Father Ledereq means is that the rewards of marriage come less from living it as a kind of accepted, standardized form of life, than from being vitally aware of its temporal and eternal meaning, and accepting it as a personal challenge, a kind of unique adventure. I suppose we might express that same



thought by saying that we must keep the poetry in marriage. That is, while marriage is eternally the same, it is eternally different. And the number one responsibility of Christians today is the constant effort to discover the individuality, the special character, the *difference* in their marriage.

We must, of course, never overlook what is common to every marriage. There are four laws that form the structural framework of marriage: It is an institution, the basic cell in both society and the Church; it is *monogamous*, representing the highest form of love between man and woman; it is *permanent*, confirmed in an irrevocable act of the will; it is, finally, *fruitful*, that is, founded for the purpose of continuing the human race.

The importance of these laws cannot be overstated. Ideally, they should be taken for granted by the Christian couple, although we know that, as a matter of fact, they are not. But, at best, these laws remain, in some sense, exterior to the real depth and richness of the married state. To achieve these latter the Christian couple must penetrate beyond the juridical and social dimensions of their vocation. How? By meditating upon those values that nourish their love and foster their personal development.

What are those values? They are many. But there are three that are by nature characteristic of Christian marriage. And by reflecting upon these three truths, husbands and wives can enrich their vocation a hundred-fold. They are: intimacy, fruitfulness, and the spiritual.

INTIMACY We are all more or less influenced by the shallowness of modern life. This is a tendency to explain even the most sacred realities in profane terms, to consider life, people, humanity as mere natural facts, as they appear on the surface, without mystery or depth of meaning.

By these shallow material standards man is assessed according to his function in society, his possessions, and his ability to "make his own way in the competitive world." Intimacy, in the sense we are using the word here, directly opposes such a mentality.

inspired by the interior presence of his wife. It is even recommended at times for couples to get away from one another, to close one's eyes and remain silent in order to permit the sense of intimacy to grow strong within.

This value gives interior meaning and depth to married life; it works always in the personal interests of husband and wife. And it represents a challenge, because it is never perfectly acquired. This value of intimacy, perhaps more than any other, resembles grace, and sets in relief the splendid difference of every home.

FRUITFULNESS The birth of a child is a profoundly moving experience for parents. From their love has come an independent existence, a new liberty, another person to be loved and to love. There is a close relationship between the values of intimacy and fruitfulness. For it is in a quiet, vital and inexpressible moment of intimacy that two people as social beings with the divine power of creativeness, sharing in God's own fecundity, Parents participate joyfully and humbly in the mystery of being. They justify their love by giving life; they safeguard their love by multiplying it. In all this they reach a greater measure of intimacy, and they lay claim to the joys and rewards of an act that is, in all truth, an act of religion.

Questions of life and love are too frequently reduced to a question of mathematics. But those of the "have-as-many-children-as-possible" school are no more right than those of the "don't-have-any" school. Quantity is not exactly the point here. The number of children will depend entirely upon the depth of love which husband and wife have for one another.

When we learn that fruitfulness works in favor of intimacy, we will cease thinking that children somehow interfere with the personal lives of parents. This whole discussion has to be considered on a level above convenience and economics. We cannot ignore these, certainly, but we must have recourse to a higher set of values.

The task of shaping characters forming

ideals, and satisfying the needs of minds and souls, as well as bodies, is noble enough and complex enough to engage the parents' entire reserve of intimacy. It creates a union between them just as precious as physical union.

SPIRITUAL VALUES In the measure that intimacy and fruitfulness are developed, the family becomes an ideal environment for true spiritual experience. And husbands and wives will be carried beyond the protective *laurels* of marriage to the humanly enriching *mystery* of marriage. This is the basis of a vital spirituality in the married state.

In this perspective the first spiritual value to appear is conjugal fidelity. This is the act by which two people freely and unconditionally commit themselves to each other until death parts them.

The Christian who marries has made a choice among the different vocations of life. He has renounced the joys and responsibilities of celibacy, for example, for other joys and responsibilities. And he has dedicated his life by a sacramental vow.

It has been said that what makes man different from other creatures is his power to expose himself voluntarily to death. By doing so he bears witness to something higher than himself, and disposes of his life in favor of a more precious value.

Something similar can be said of conjugal fidelity. In binding himself to marital fidelity the Christian commits his whole life to the truth that man's destiny is not bound by the limits of time.

The full development of human personality demands some such commitment. "For every man," Charles Morgan has written, "the essential thing is to know to what he is capable of sacrificing his life." Christian marriage fulfills this ideal magnificently.

A second spiritual value of marriage is the community established by the parents and children. Philosophers teach us that we mature and grow aware of ourselves by becoming aware of others. Man is not fully a man unless he is in a community. And nowhere better than in the family can man understand

How Marriage Fared at the Vatican Council

(Continued from page 1)

ity of God, human family, one man's family.

In the "Introductory Statement" the document recognizes the "discord in the family resulting from population, economic, and social pressures, or from difficulties which arise between succeeding generations, or from new social relationships between men and women." An understanding and sympathy for those laboring under such pressures are evident in numerous passages of this document.

Under "The Dignity of the Human Person," the role of marriage is clearly stated: "God did not create man as a solitary, for from the beginning, male and female he created them." Their companionship provides the primary form of interpersonal communion. For by his nature man is a social being, and his fulfillment is found in communion with others. He is called to share in the life of the community.

In "The Community of Mankind," we read that the dignity of the human person demands "the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family." And later in the same section it is respectfully admitted that these fundamental rights are still not being universally honored—particularly in the case of women. In the long passage, "Fostering the

and experience day by day the concrete, fruitful give-and-take that by him to the full stature of a genuine human being.

It is only through the family that a child, no less than the parents, can acquire an understanding of man, a respect for people, the ideal of service to others, and a sense of the spiritual relations that unite men. Other institutions can give other values better perhaps, but only the family can give the real sense of love.

Another spiritual value of the family is the sense of unity that it inspires. Interceding with His Father, Christ implored Him that men might be one, even as the Trinity is one. Unity is the absolute perfection, the final fruit of intimacy and fruitfulness.

No state in life offers a better image of this unity than marriage. Here the fusion of the human and the divine appears most clearly. Marriage is a constant reminder to man that he must, day after day, break through the barrier of egotism by means of love and service to others. Marriage is a pilgrimage towards the liberation that will one day mark the entrance into the unity of eternal life.

The first words of the Nuptial Mass, "May the God of Israel unite you," offer to couples a program of life that is essentially directed towards the supreme ideal of unity. This program combats the disintegrating power of sin with the strength of a living "we" which gradually replaces the weakness and egotism of two "I's."

Finally, the thought of the spiritual mystery of the family helps us understand that life is a gift. It is based, in the first place, upon the couple's gift to one another. It is then strengthened by the knowledge that their part in the creation of new life is, in the final analysis, very small indeed.

Each time a child is born, it is as though our minds and hearts were being directed to an inexhaustible source beyond this world. The newborn child, plus so many other values of family life, forces us to recognize the gift of a beneficent Father. Such an attitude is invaluable in respect to the spiritual life.

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often intense desire of the couple, offspring are lacking.

As cooperators with the love of God the Creator, in beginning and educating children, parents are to fulfill this task with human and Christian responsibility, with dogmatic reverence towards God, making their decisions by common counsel and effort.

In so doing, they are to be concerned about their own welfare; and the children, those already born and those which the future may bring. The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God.

Later, in "Setting up an International Community," where the problem of population control is discussed, the document again warns: "It is essential that the parents, and not the State, should ultimately make this judgment of public authority." The parents' decision presupposes "a rightly formed conscience, and a correct and genuinely human responsibility... (respect for divine law... and consideration for the circumstances of the situation and the time."

There follows a plea for more information of "scientific advances in exploring methods whereby spouses can be helped in regulating the num-

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