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Come Early!

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Marriage

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 apreciation of the mystery and splendor of

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 stave 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 lated in these words: "The moment undoubtedthat'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.

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 Marriage ves; it is the is the central reality of their he motive and the measure of all

something vastly more challenging and richer today as a result of 20 centuries of experience "The sacrament of Leclercq has of marriage," F

we might express that 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 gracerotes of the grant printer of the sentencing.

they have any guarantee of the spontaneity and deep desire that ought to characterize **Father** 

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 Leclercq 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

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 Christian couples today is the constant effort to discover the individuality, the special character, the difference in their marriage. Intimacy is an interior value that recognizes the individuality, freedom, and personal traits of others By it people are not measured in terms of what they do or have; nor are they considered a part of a collective herd, or estimated merely for their capacity as consumers.

When a bond of intimacy has been established. lished, we recognize in ourselves and others the true capacity of the human spirit: our loneliness, our need for love, our capacity for God. Intimacy can be realized in many forms of relationship; but it is pre-eminently re-

We must, of course, never overlook whis common to every marriage. There are follows that form the structural framework

Intimacy is realized in the presence of husband and wife in the hundreds of different

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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 contested. 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 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 This is the very warp and woof of family life. And family life is the ideal situation for creating and expressing the deepest meaning of intimacy.

It has become commonplace to speak of masculine and feminine natures completing each other because they are different: intuiized in their conversation, which may be trivial or serious, but is always important. They share intimacy in their common joys and burdens, in the concern of each for the other, in mutual trust, in their tenderest exchanges, in their gift of self to each other, in their common interests in their children, their band and wife in the hundreds of different circumstances of their daily living. It is realized in their conversation, which may be faired or serious, but is always important.

parents,

and neighbors.

acteristic 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 What are those values? They are many But there are three that are by nature char-

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.

tion and reason, sensibility and action, sense of the individual and of the universal: one furnishing what the other lacks.

But in a facile juxtaposition of the two

But in a facile juxtaposition of the two sexes lurks a danger. There can be no doubt that the various exchanges between husband and wife are mutually enriching. But the exterior presence of a man and woman, even when most intimate, is only a sign of an invisible and interior presence.

We here touch the mystery of marriage. The profoundest complement of the two sexes is a spiritual one. A husband becomes spiritually interior to his wife; she, in the imagery of the Bible, becomes the "rib" of her Adam.

It is within herself that a woman experience the strength and personality of her husband And a man, wherever he is and whatever h

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 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 associate themselves 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

lives of parents. This whole discussion be considered on a level above con and economics. We cannot ignore the tainly, but we must have recourse to his whole discussion has to a level above convenience

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

s he is in than in in a community. And nowhere n the family can man understand

When we learn that fruitfulness works in favor of intimacy, we will cease thinking that children somehow interfere with the personal

values. task of shaping characters

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.

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

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

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 laws 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

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

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 egoism 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 egoism of two "Is."

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 a beneficent Father. Such an attitude is invaluable in respect to the spiritual life.

## Fared at the often intense desire of the couple, offspring are lacking. "As cooperators with the love of God the Creator," in begetting and educating children, parents are to fulfill this task "with human and Christian responsibility, with docile reverence towards God, making their deciatican ber of their children and whose safety has been proved and whose harmony with the moral order has been deter-mined." Earlier, referring to "those who ouncil

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the "Introductory Statement" ocument recognizes the "discord

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 produces the primary form of interpersonal communion. For by his innerne document recognizes the "discord in the family resulting from population, economic, and social pressures, or from difficulties which arise between succeeding generations, or from lew social relationships between men and women." An understanding and social relationships between men and women."

Earlier, referring to "those who presume to offer dishonorable solutions" to the problem of family limitation, the document stresses: "Sons of the Church may not undertake methods of birth control which are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church in its unfolding of the divine law." The document specifies none for comment, since the Holy Father has reserved the judgment in this matter to himself, pending the investigation and report of the specially appointed

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 regretfully admitted that these fundamental rights are still not being universally honored—particularly in the case of women.

In the long passage, "Fostering the most nature a human being is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor deothers he can neither live op his potential." from sterility: "Marriage persists as a whole manner and communion of life, and maintains its value and indissolubility, even when despite the

over-quoting. As the text states, "by presenting certain key points of Church doctrine in a clearer light, this sacred synod wishes to offer guidance and support..." So, by highlighting emphases in this section, perhaps we can offer guidance in your reading of the whole chapter. There is a detailed concern with the intimate partnership of married life and love rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. The traditional emphasis is placed on the 'natural institution' of matrimony and conjugal love as 'ordained for the procreation and education of children. But a new emphasis is stressed in: 'Marriage to be sure is not instituted solely for procreation,' rather, its very nature Nobility of Marriage and the Family," the first explicit reference to marriage is "this community of love." We can't begin to quote without over-quoting. As the text states, "by presenting certain key points of persons and the welfare of the children both demand that the mutual love of the spouses be embodied in a rightly ordered manner, that it grow and ripen." And flowing from that is a consoling statement for those y of the fid so disconsolately

sions 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: "In keeping with man's inalienable right to marry and generate children, a decision concerning the number of children they will have depends on the right judgment of the parents, and it cannot in any way be left to the 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 circum-There follows a plea for more information of scientific advances in exploring methods whereby spouses can be helped in regulating the num-

Commission.

Throughout the Constitution there is constant stress on the "equality" of husband and wife: equal in dignity, in rights, in duties, in authority and responsibility for the children,

and in mutual love.

The glowing conclusion of this section paints the spouses as a living witness of the mystery of love: "Following Christ, who is the principle of life, by the sacrifices and joys of their vocation and through their faithful love, married people can become witnesses of the mystery of love which the Lord revealed to the world by His dying and His rising up to life again."