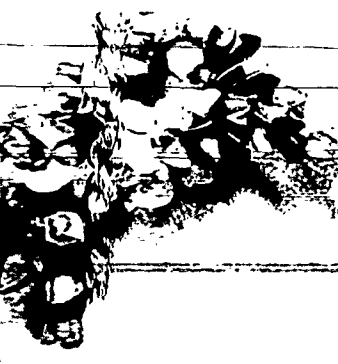




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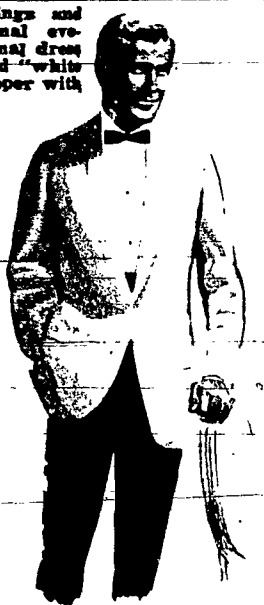
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Christian Marriage, an Echo of God's 'yes' to Mankind

By PHILIP SCHARPER

Our understanding of Christian marriage must go beyond biology and law — to the communion of persons in love with God and each other.

Anyone attempting, in these days, to write of Christian marriage runs the risk of seeming, like Polonius, long on words and short on meaning. Even a married Christian feels uncertain writing on the subject of Christian marriage — because, after two thousand years of Christianity, we have just begun to realize that we do not have a genuine theology of marriage.

If we probe the reason for that gap in our theology, we are soon brought up short by another disconcerting fact: that we lack a Christian theology of marriage because, in great part, we lack a Christian theology of sexuality. Not that Catholics, over the centuries, had not thought of and written about sex — the book shelves groan with Catholic writings on the subject. The problem is that, until our own time, most of this writing was negative, suspicious, and fearful.

In this, Catholic writers have been, for the most part, rather like the non-Catholic observers of a given time and culture. John Milton, John Locke, and John of Salisbury had equal difficulty in fitting all into their interpretation of man's meaning and destiny; and their spiritual descendants were equally shocked by Freud and

D. H. Lawrence when these two, each in his own way, refused to call a spade "a metallic blade wedged to lustrous-rod" — as a poetic contemporary of John Locke's once put it.

John Milton and John Locke are not our Catholic problem. But John of Salisbury (along with St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus) is our problem, and we must ask why these intellectual giants, on whose riches we still draw, had such difficulty in reconciling sexuality with the Christian economy of salvation. Why — to cite but one instance — did such distinguished theologians have difficulty in reconciling marital intercourse with the sacramental state of the Christian husband and wife performing the act?

The Church, in her official teaching, constantly maintained the sanctity of marriage; on this point, the Church is free of her great Doctors. But these very Doctors often influenced later generations of thinkers, preachers, and writers more than the Church's collective wisdom did.

I would like to suggest one reason why these great men, when dealing with the fact that God created male and female, acted either like clerical scolds or embarrassed schoolboys who had inadvertently opened the door into the girl's locker room.

That reason is the fact that classical Catholic theology has consistently drawn an analogy between eating and the exercise of sex. According to this analogy, both acts are rooted in instincts, and the instincts are given because they are necessary to the preservation of the individual in one case,

and the race in the other. Each act is usually accompanied by pleasure in its performance because without the incentive of such pleasure human beings, through preoccupation or laziness, might neglect either to eat or to propagate.

There is no objection to this analogy as long as we are con-

sidering the mating of birds or buffalo, or even the act of human intercourse in its exclusive biological aspects.

Marriage is Communion

The analogy breaks apart, however, when we are discussing the role of sexuality in a Catholic sacramental marriage.

In this context, we pass beyond the eating-mating level. If we wished to look for a metaphor, we might better find it by considering the relationship between sacramental marriage and the Eucharist: the resemblance of the marital act to the reception of Holy Communion.

Continued on page 17A

A Leap of Love to Fill The Gap

(Continued from page 9A)

dered over and developed in solitude. But most often it is the direct encounter with the spirit of Christ in some individual Christian that brings another to Christ. This is especially true for children, who (though there are exceptions) do not normally think out ideas divorced from persons. It is the particular challenge offered by the particular person in whom Christ works that is effective. And the challenge is both moral and theological: action for Christ and belief in him, at the same time.

There are no rules. Those who have become, through their own struggle to understand and to love, receptive to the prompting of the Spirit, will know the right moment to present a child with a challenge, little or great, but always one within his capacity. Christ never asked the impossible (physically or psychologically); nor should we.

These challenges need not be specifically linked to religion at all. If the response is that of love, of compassion, expressed in self-denial or fortitude or

the conquest of fear, greed, laziness, prejudice, it matters little if the child thinks of God or not. Sooner or later, without pushing, he will understand the connection, if his parents or teachers are themselves committed Christians.

This leap of love in response to some challenge is the thing that can bridge the gap between moral code and moral sense. In his early years a child cannot and should not be expected to grasp the psychological depth of Christian morality. As long as the thing can be made to seem reasonable, that is all that is necessary.

Meanwhile his ability to love, and therefore to overcome his own nature for the sake of love, is growing parallel with his adherence, through taken-for-granted obedience to his parents and teachers, to those limited parts of the moral code that affect him. Gradually, he comes to see how the two fit together. The aim is that by the time he is grown up he will have a flexible understanding of morality, illuminated by his own practice (formerly unrelated to any code) of the Gos-

pel precepts. At this stage (which is not decided by age in years but by spiritual maturity) he is prepared to hear the call to be not only a servant but a witness of Christ.

The moral code developed in the Jewish nation a sense of sin that made them desire a Savior. In the child, the taken-for-granted code is mediated through his parents or teachers. Then, without realizing the connection between the two, he learns to build on that foundation, practicing the law of love on which hangs "all the Law and the prophets." Eventually, if all goes well, the link is made and then a real sense of sin develops from which arises a new and altogether more mature understanding of the human predicament. The informed heart turns to Christ with longing and hope.

After that, those charged with educating Christians had better keep their hands off, because when a human soul has reached this point, to interfere is about as tactful and helpful as insisting on giving a lecture on sexual technique to a couple on their wedding night.

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