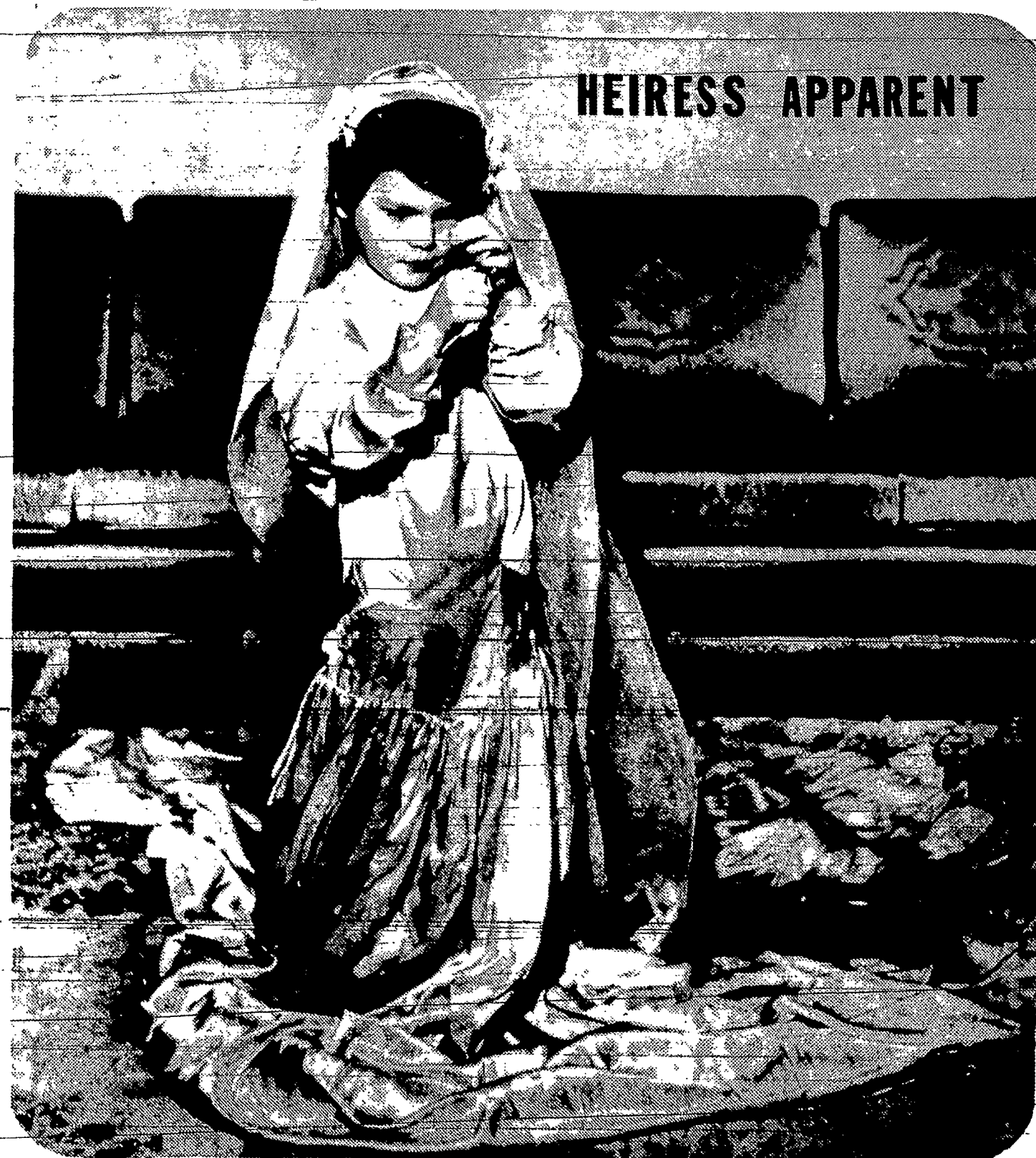


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Christian Marriage, an Echo of God's 'yes' to Mankind

(Continued from page 15A)

The obvious basis for the comparison of the Eucharist and Christian marriage is that both are sacraments and consequently show forth Christ's love for men. If we press the comparison more closely, we can recognize that the Eucharist is not only a sign of the unity of the Church, but that it actually brings about this union of those who form the people of God. The bond that holds the members of the Church together is the bond, not of law, but of love. Marriage, too, not only signifies the union of two in one flesh but brings about that union. In this union also, which is a reflection of the union of Christ and His Church effected primarily through the Eucharist, the bond linking husband and wife not only to each other but to Christ is the bond, not of law, but of love.

We have said that it is more accurate to regard the marital act within a sacramental marriage as analogous to Holy Communion rather than to the act of consuming food.

One basic reason for this assertion would be the fact that the intimacy of marital union is not the physical closeness of person to food consumed and assimilated, but the communion of person to person, even as the reception of the Eucharistic Lord is the intimate union of person to person. Further, as in the reception of Holy Communion, marital intercourse involves a free giving of oneself to the one loved. It is therefore far removed from the mating of animals or, indeed, from the loving embrace of partners in a non-sacramental union.

In the intimate union of married Christians, each seeks for

and sees in the other Christ Himself, who dwells by grace within my spouse, who amplifies his life within my spouse by the bestowal of grace—even in and through the marital act itself, which is an integral part of that union of two in one flesh which God intended and which Christ has effected.

As with any sacrament, the ultimate effect of the Eucharist is to make the Christian grow in charity, the love of God and man. I do not and cannot therefore receive the Lord in Communion—for myself—alone. To admit Him into my being is to admit the whole raggle-taggle mass of mankind with whom Christ has explicitly identified himself. The marriage act too involves just such a surrender to another, and the admission into my mind and heart of another, one to whom I have already pledged that I will share the future, be it dark or bright.

Further, in a way explicable only to those who have experienced it, the marital act, which both symbolizes and brings about my complete surrender to and acceptance of the other, also brings about an increase in charity, a dilation of my heart and mind, because it brings me, through the other, at least dimly into a contact with all mankind and with its head, the new Adam.

If, on the one hand, Catholic thinking about the physical aspects of marriage has been too biological, much of its thought on the marriage contract has been too juridical.

Love and the Law

Thus the treatment of marriage has been left largely to

canon lawyers and moral theologians, who tend to stress the importance of the virtue of justice in the marriage relationship. The exchange of vows between husband and wife, according to the traditional moralists and canonists, meant a contractual agreement which gave each a "right to the other's body," and made the consent of one to the other's request for intercourse a "rendering of that which was due" to him.

It will be noticed that this perspective says much of justice, but little of love. Indeed, most happily married couples, I suspect, would be chilled if not appalled — by this juridical view of intercourse as a "rendering of a debt" rather than an ultimate expression of love.

But if this traditional view of the moralists and canonists fails to do justice to the psychological reality of marital experience, it also fails to represent adequately the Church's theological understanding of marriage — a theology which views marriage not in the light of justice but in the light of love. For one irreplaceable pillar of the church's understanding of marriage is the comparison drawn by St. Paul which shows Christ's love for His Church as the model of the love a husband should have for his wife. In the long centuries which stretch between St. Paul and our time, married people as well as pastors and theologians have not, perhaps, thought deeply enough on this Pauline comparison.

Contemporary theologians of the calibre of Father Schillebeeckx and Father Haring have, however, begun to see in the

relationship drawn between Christ's love for His church and that of husband for bride in a sacramental marriage an inspired image which leads to a higher—and more fruitful—understanding of both the church and marriage. Thus, for example, we are brought to recall that in Christ God has said His definitive, irrevocable "yes" to mankind.

The particular relationship between God and man expressed in the fact that God created man in His own image was strengthened—and deepened—when God chose for Himself a special people and made with His chosen Israel a covenant. Yet man could still not be sure that God would not turn his face away from man and renounce, as it were, the pledge of special love which had been voiced again and again from Abraham through Moses, David, and a long succession of prophets. When, however, Christ became man, mankind could now understand that God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son; and since his Son was fully man, men could realize that, far from forsaking them, God had lifted them up into a condition of sonship.

If, in the Incarnation, God said His irrevocable "yes" to mankind, our Lord himself, through the sending of the Holy Spirit, said his irrevocable "yes" to the Church, which thus became a community of love in which the Spirit was to dwell.

The Spirit of Love

Within the Church, all its people live with the life that Christ won for them and that makes of man the dwelling place of the Trinité God. Each

of the sacraments, for example, represents a specific realization, a particular spelling out, of Christ's love for His Church and for those, who in, with, and through the Church, are grafted on to Him. Thus Baptism represents a spelling out of Christ's love whereby a human being is enabled to participate in Christ's death and resurrection, to be born again into a new and higher life.

The priesthood represents another quite obvious spelling out of Christ's love for life within His Church, for hereby a man, despite his weakness and inadequacies, is enabled to represent Christ through the stewardship of Christ's sacraments.

But we have perhaps too often forgotten that marriage, too, is a sacrament and thus represents, no less than Baptism or Holy Orders, a significant spelling out of Christ's love for His Church. Indeed, marriage is, in the phrase of St. Thomas Aquinas, the sacrament of Christ's union with His Church.

We can scarcely hope ever to see into the depths of this mysterious fact whereby the love of husband and wife in a sacramental union becomes a mirror for the "marriage" of Christ and His Church. We can, however, see in this mirror several immediate implications. Because sacramental marriage is a mirroring of Christ's love for and union with His Church, we can now see a theological ground for the indissolubility of the marital union of husband and wife. Too often Catholic apologists have rested the case for the permanence of marriage

(Continued on page 19A)

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