

A RENEWAL OF MARRIAGE for a renewal of the Church

When John XXIII announced to the world the great news of the convening of a Council, almost everywhere in the Church this question was posed: What can one hope for from this second Vatican Council?

What can one expect in the domain of marriage, I asked myself. And so I drafted, for my personal use, a kind of memorandum – in the light of my experiences and my thinking in the course of twenty-five years of ministry with couples. It is a kind of survey of the state of Christian marriage in Catholicism today, and of the initiatives which seem to me to be needed if one wants to see marriage conform more closely to the ideal which Christ has designed for it.

When the question arose of having preparatory commissions for the Council, I hoped, as did many others, that there would be a commission for marriage and the family. I will not conceal the fact that I conceived the idea of sending it my memorandum should the opportunity present itself. But such a commission was never set up.

I did at least submit my work to some of the future Fathers of the Council whose confidence I enjoyed. Some of them insisted that I should have it printed. It seemed to me, however, that if the memorandum, which was so sketchy, was to be published, it would have to be revised and developed, and I did not have the time to do this as I had in the meantime been appointed a Consultant of the Commission for the Apostolate of the Laity. The question of publication again arose in the context of the present special number. I hesitated: such a note, even supposing it is of interest, is it not rather to the clergy that it is of concern? I gave it to some couples to read, in order to have their opinion. The response of one of them made up my mind for me: “Does not the far-reaching effort for a renewal of Christian marriage in the world, which you are advocating, require the intelligent and effective co-operation of all Christian couples? Why then should you not put the problem, in all its breadth and urgency, to the readers of ‘l’Anneau d’Or’? Here then is the text: I am fully conscious that, being just a memorandum, it does not make as attractive reading as an article, but at least it has the merit of being, as it were, the synthesis of the research which, as readers and editors, we have been pursuing for seventeen years.

This note, needless to say, is not an exhaustive study of the state of Christian marriage, nor of the problems which arise, nor of the solutions to be considered. Its sole aim is to set out a kind of outline of what is involved.

It is interesting to note the similarity between the comments and initiatives suggested by this note, and the remarks and hopes which emerge from the fourteen inquiries of which this number presents the results. So this note, at the beginning of this number, even though composed before the result of the inquiries was known, has the appearance of being a synthesis of their conclusions.

I would like every reader of this note to put this question to themselves while reading it: in what way can I effectively co-operate in this vast undertaking, the promotion of Christian marriage in the world?

The Council, said the Holy Father, will be for the Church the source of new strength for its divine mission, the mainspring of its internal renewal. This presupposes that first of all it will put questions to itself in regard to its teaching, its institutions, its activities...

Just as it will concern itself with the situation of the clergy, and of the religious life throughout the world, it should also question itself about that other "state of life," which is marriage, about the quality of life, the moral health and the spiritual vitality of all the Christian couples whose union is founded on the sacrament of marriage of which the Church is the guardian.

The numerical importance of the couples in the Church is very great: amongst 480 million Catholics, there are approximately 120 million couples (240 million married Christians) and 180 million children under 21 years of age.

Their moral and religious importance is of the same order. The Christian vitality of these 120 million couples energises not only the Christian life of 420 million individuals, which they comprise, but also the vitality and future of the Church.

Accordingly, the Church cannot be content to thinking of the laity as if they were all celibates living on their own; it must also – and, in one sense, first of all – question itself about Christian couples, and about how Christian marriage is understood and lived in the Catholicity of today.

1. THE STATE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

1. A RENEWAL - A small elite of couples has, for the last thirty years, manifested a very great interest in the doctrinal teaching of the Church on the greatness of Christian marriage and has striven to live from the rich resources of the sacrament of marriage. This phenomenon is not confined to a few couples in one particular country, but it is to be seen everywhere. It is something original that has had no equivalent in previous centuries and which deserves a close study. It would be important to identify the reasons for and the significance of this renewal, as well as the means to promote its spread.

2. A DECLINE - Much more general; in almost every country, the degrading of the institution of the family, as seen both in the thinking about it and at the practical level. The errors and influences which are creeping into Christian couples and undermining them should be investigated and also the failings in the pastoral ministry which explains their vulnerability. No action to protect and renew the Christian couple will be really effective unless it is based on a precise study of what it is that needs to be rectified in the thinking and behaviour of Christian couples.
3. THE CONSEQUENCES - The urgency of taking the necessary measures is seen more clearly if one thinks of the consequences for the Church of this degrading of marriage: the growing scarcity of vocations to the priesthood, to the religious life, and to taking part in Catholic Action, deficiencies in children's education, etc. If one of the vital sources of the Church becomes tainted, the whole Church feels the effects.

11. A PASTORAL EFFORT IS IMPERATIVE.

It appears to be necessary that the Church should look at its current pastoral work in the domain of marriage and the results being obtained, that it studies, in the context of the conditions created by modern life, the reforms to be made and the initiatives to be taken. Only a bold initiative, far-reaching in extent, vigorously pursued, will succeed in protecting the institution of the family and, better still, will permit it to bear all the fruits of holiness which one should expect of it.

The current pastoral policy frequently betrays a lack of knowledge of the couple, its needs and its resources. Not to give to the family the attention and help it needs – the family which is the institution founded by God, surpassing all others in importance, the only community founded on a sacrament – would have very serious consequences. We must react, the current circumstances are crying out for it.

1. LONG-TERM PREPARATION.

The frailty of couples is often due to there having been no period of preparation for the marriage. It is true that a person's general education is indirectly a preparation for marriage but this does not make it any less necessary that educators, and especially parents, get children to reflect on the two paths that are open to them: a life consecrated to God, and marriage. It is necessary that the young should be capable of discerning their particular vocation and responding to it, fully aware of what is involved; that they be helped in procuring sound ideas about marriage, its nature, its purpose, its characteristics – without this there is a great risk of a mistake being made in the choice of a partner and the union being doomed from the start. It would be appropriate to ask how the Church could get educators to provide this formation, and how it could help them. Should the Catechism not already alert children about these questions?

2. THE ENGAGEMENT.

The couple involved, their families, the clergy, seem to see the engagement as a phase of human life having no great significance. As against this, psychological studies and people's experience lead to a conviction that this period is of an importance that is vital and irreplaceable: it lays the foundation of the couple. If this is the case, is it not essential that the Church should wait no longer but intervene? Could one not encourage a "catechumenate of marriage" being inaugurated? It might be argued that this would risk prejudicing the absolute freedom with which the fiancées should approach their marriage, but such an objection would have no weight. Taking the tonsure or making preliminary vows does not compromise the liberty of the seminarian or novice as regards making the final decision.

3. THE CLOSE-UP PREPARATION.

For all the other sacraments, the Church demands a serious preparation: first communion, confirmation, holy orders, adult baptism; why not require it for marriage? Is it not one of the most important decisions that is being taken? When one thinks of the seriousness and irrevocable nature of the commitment in marriage, of the obligations which the spouses undertake, of the demands of conjugal morality, it is frightening to see so many couples having a religious wedding without having been prepared for it, having no knowledge of the essence of the teaching of the Church. This lack of preparation is the cause of innumerable matrimonial tragedies.

The preparation for marriage, at the same time as revealing the greatness and the demands of Christian marriage, the duties it imposes and the graces in which it abounds, would enable an adult religion to be discovered by Catholics who, for the most part, have learnt nothing since the catechism before their first communion. Certain Bishops have made this preparation obligatory and are very pleased to have done so. It would be worth making a close study of the methods used and the results. But one must be wary of a cheap formula. Should this preparation not extend over three months? Not one of its least advantages would be avoiding so many slap-dash marriages but, needless to say, with the possibility of a dispensation in certain cases.

One might think that a decision of the Council in this domain could make a powerful contribution to the renewal of Christian marriage just as the decisions of the Council of Trent in regard to the preparation for the reception of Holy orders contributed to the renewal of the clergy.

4. CANONICAL INQUIRY.

We should examine thoroughly the results produced by these Inquiries. It is possible that their form, and how they work in practice, needs correcting. If they were part of the framework of an obligatory preparation, they would have a much greater weight and significance.

5. THE RIGHT TO BE MARRIED.

Must the sacrament of marriage be made available to all baptised couples who ask for it irrespective of what their disposition may be? A question connected to the preceding ones. An embarrassing question which will remain insoluble at the local level for as long as the Church does not make some universal ruling. The question deserves a close study.

6. THE RITUAL OF MARRIAGE.

A ritual giving more prominence to the religious character of the sacrament would contribute to a renewal of esteem and respect for Christian marriage. The current Roman ritual is poor. Would it not be fitting to present to Christianity a new ritual comprising, as in certain other countries, richer ceremonies, more liturgical, a more expressive exchange of the couple's promises, an invitation to the community present to pray and take charge of the new couple? Such a ritual would have the advantage of emphasising the sacramental character of marriage and also its ecclesial importance. The ceremony would acquire the value of a witness for the spouses and those around them. And why should communion under the two species not be given to the two spouses during their nuptial Mass?

7. PASTORAL CARE FOR MARRIED CHRISTIANS.

Once the home has been founded, the clergy should concern itself with supporting and guiding the couple, with finding ways of doing this and putting them into effect with great ardour.

Preaching - Any inquiry would beyond doubt reach the conclusion that preaching is even more deficient in this domain than in any other. Experience proves that couples, throughout the whole of their lives, need to learn to discover, always better, God's thinking on all the realities of marriage: its sacramental character, its greatness, its laws: about love, fatherhood, motherhood, sexuality, procreation, education; about special moments in the life of the couple: birth, sickness, marriage, death, etc. The silence of preaching on these great themes of conjugal and family life anchor couples in their conviction that marriage and family life are one thing and religion another.

The sacrament of penance – This sacrament could play a big role in helping the married Christian not only to keep away from sin but also to discover the religious greatness of their vocation, and the means of sanctifying themselves in and through conjugal life. It seems that there is no other domain in which so many priests feel so unfitted to fulfil their mission of spiritual educators. Many are those who dread to hear the confession of people who are married. And as for others, some relax principles, others apply them in such a simplistic way that they are the cause of conjugal catastrophes. Contradictory advices are the cause of great uneasiness for the faithful. How many amongst the best, often active, members of Catholic Action, have abandoned the practice of the sacraments because of never having found a priest capable of giving spiritual guidance.

Spiritual exercises for couples - Over the last thirty years enclosed retreats for couples have greatly increased in numbers in many countries. It seems to be one of the initiatives which is the most beneficial in helping couples in their Christian life. Once again, in this domain, we must beware of adopting cheap solutions.

Publications - Religious literature for the spiritual formation of married Christians is, on the whole, very poor, even though very plentiful in recent years. It is to be hoped that there will be a great advance in this sector.

8. MARRIAGE AND CHRISTIAN PERFECTION.

Married Christians are, for the most part, convinced that Christian perfection is not for them. This, once again, is the view of too many priests. That error is fatal: the person who is not aiming at perfection soon slides into mediocrity, into sin. One has here one of the explanations for the current decline of Christian marriage. As against this, what an impetus would one not create if one brought to the notice of couples Christ's call to perfection, if one taught them that the essence of this perfection is to be found in Love, and not in the vows of the religious life, and that in itself marriage not only is not an obstacle but is a means of arriving at the perfecting of that Love.

They must be offered an ascetic guide for family life. Furthermore, it is very desirable to favour the spread of couple Movements which offer to their members a spirituality which has been designed for their way of life, a rule, a framework, a formation, spiritual counsellors. When one sees the extraordinary success of what is being done already, one is led to think that there is here a powerful means of making a very effective contribution to the renewal of Christian marriage and, through it, of society.

9 . WIDOWHOOD.

In our modern world, because of wars, accidents, illnesses, very many are the couples which are prematurely terminated. One can ask oneself why widows, who for centuries were specially honoured in the Church, as the Scriptures enjoined, are now so ignored. For these women, having the responsibility of children, burdened with heavy tasks, can bring to the Church a witness of great importance, that of the faithfulness of love beyond death. And the whole history of the Church is there to demonstrate the sanctity that flourished amongst them.

But pastoral work with widows would first of all need a doctrine of widowhood – the foundations for which were laid by Pius XI's address of the 16th September 1957. Furthermore it would seem to be desirable that on the lines of the ancient "Ordo Viduarum", which held sway for eleven centuries, Institutes should be encouraged to support those who are called to perfection in the state of widowhood. Even more bereft of help and doctrine is the widowhood of men.

10. DIVORCEES NOT REMARRIED.

A very numerous category of Christians in certain countries, it is also one of the most ignored and so among the most vulnerable. But often these men, or these women, deserve great praise: victims of a cruel trial, they have to bring up their children on their own, and to live with dignity in spite of being dangerously isolated. Does the pastoral outreach of the Church display sufficient concern for them?

11. DIVORCEES REMARRIED.

Some amongst these cannot leave their new partner, having had with him children whose education has to be looked after. And there are some who, discovering or rediscovering the Christian faith, have aspirations for a religious life, even though knowing that they are forbidden access to the sacraments. Would it not be right to take into consideration, more than is generally the case, their delicate situation?

111. THERE MUST BE A DOCTRINAL DEEPENING.

The great pastoral effort which is needed demands a deepening and a clarification of the traditional data which will furnish it with doctrinal bases and so will ensure its effectiveness. In effect, if it were not a communication to the faithful of the divine thinking on marriage and on all the realities comprised in marriage, this pastoral effort would be doomed to failure from the start.

1. The Philosophy of the Couple.

Theological and pastoral thinking on marriage is often disappointing and ineffectual. This is because of the basic lack of a philosophy of the couple. Too frequently it is limited to a perception of the individual, married, and fails to consider the “conjugal relationship.” A unique relationship, of an order different from other human relationships. A philosophical analysis which deepened the “ontology of the couple” would beyond doubt make a powerful contribution to the progress of the Christian doctrine on marriage.

2. Dogmatic Theology.

The theology of marriage is inadequate. Is this not because it has not kept up with the progress of ecclesiology and the theology of the sacraments? It is necessary to have a clearer idea of the sacramentality of marriage, not to confine one’s thinking to the moral conception of the union of the spouses, but to focus on its mystical aspect, that is to say, its connection with the mystery of Christ, so as to have a clearer idea also of the nature, the aims, the properties, “the permanence” of the sacrament, the place of the Christian couple in the Church. So many perceptions on which the pastoral theology of marriage requires more ample clarification.

3. Moral Theology.

The moral theology taught to the faithful is often no more than a thesis on sexual relations. There will never be a renewal of Christian marriage until married Christians are offered a morality based on spiritual progress in and through that state in life, sanctified and sanctifying, which is marriage. Nevertheless, certain points need special attention: all the problems arising from the sexual life of the spouses (conjugal chastity, birth control, legitimate practices and illegitimate practices...)

4. Spiritual Theology.

It is not sufficient to remind married Christians that marriage is not an “imperfect state”, one must go further and offer them an ascetic and mystical doctrine which will be based not on the monastic life but on their own state of life, its demands, its difficulties, its graces – and this should be done with their cooperation. There are few domains which so urgently need special attention: the research carried out by a number of priests and couples over the last thirty years provides a good starting point.

5. The Formation of the Clergy.

So that all the necessary theological reflection of which we have just spoken may prompt, inspire and animate the huge pastoral work which is needed, it is necessary that seminarians and priests receive a solid formation in this domain. What can be done?

1V. A RENEWAL OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE FOR A RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH.

The Christian couple should not be looked upon as being simply an entity receiving and benefiting from the pastoral action of the Church, it must also be seen as an active party which must cooperate with the whole Church in building up and spreading the Mystical Body of Christ.

To carry out research into the vocation and ecclesial mission of the laity flowing from the demands of their Baptism and Confirmation is one thing, but it is another to define clearly the vocation and mission of the Christian couple flowing from a theology of the sacrament of marriage. This sacrament does not dispense the spouses from their obligations flowing from Baptism and Confirmation, but gives the couple, as such, an irreplaceable “officium” in the Church. The Fathers of the Church generally referred to marriage in these terms: officium, gradus, professio, ordo, so many expressions which underline forcefully the place and function of the couple and the family in the Church.

1. The Christian couple – Cell of the Church.

Cell of the Church not only in the social sense of the expression, but also in the mystical sense: the Christian couple participates in the mystery of the Church, in it the life and the mystery of the whole body is realised in a rudimentary way. This is what caused Pius XI to write in *Casti Connubii*: “For as long as the spouses live, their community is the sacrament of Christ and the Church.” Sacrament, the sign of the union of Christ and the Church, source of grace for the spouses, radiating grace for those around them. Being a cell of the Church, the Christian couple therefore participates in all the great functions of the Church.

2. Procreation.

A special place apart must be made for this unique and irreplaceable function of the couples in the Mystical Body of Christ, by which it provides the Body with its members. This function has a religious character by reason of being assumed by a couple consecrated by the sacrament of marriage and exercised with the intention of procuring for God “worshippers in spirit and in truth.”

3. The Christian Couple participates in the Kingly Function of the Church.

The Christian couple is the place where occurs what Pius XI called “the consecration of the world.” Temporal things and activities, work, daily tasks, the

physical union of the spouses, take from it a religious quality and purpose, and participate in that consecrated life of the couple founded on the sacrament of marriage. The Christian couple is a tiny part of the universe which has become the Kingdom of God. The parents are pastors for their children having the mission to guide them “by straight paths” to “the sources of life” and to promote Christian order and charity in this ecclesiastica of which they have charge; which led Saint Augustine to say to fathers that in some way they are performing an Episcopal mission.

4. The Christian Couple participates in the Worship of the Church.

Just the same as everything else sacred in the Church, and more so by reason of being founded on a sacrament, the couple is enabled and deputed to worship God. Procreation and education in particular are intended as an offering to God as well as formation of children who, in their turn, will worship in spirit and in truth. In the family home the children discover the Church at prayer and already participate in its worship, even before being able to take part in the Mass or in the life of the parish.

5. The Christian Couple takes part in the Prophetic Function of the Church.

Fathers and mothers have an inalienable ecclesiastical mission, which is to announce to their children the good news of salvation and the divine plan and to educate them so that their thinking, their will and their life may conform to the divine message. This prophetic duty of married Christians does not concern only the children, but also all who live in the family home or close to it. To all these the couple has to communicate Christ’s message. There are certain aspects of this message which the couple is particularly fitted to pass on: it is to the couple that falls the duty to reveal to everyone, by the example of their life, that human love was redeemed by Christ, and “to illustrate and put within everyone’s reach”, to borrow the words of John XXIII, the Christian doctrine of marriage: again it is for the couple to be seen as proclaiming the union of Christ and the Church which it must reflect and the grace of which it has to radiate.

6. The Christian Couple participates in the Apostolic Office of the Church.

The apostolic action of the couple operates both externally and internally. Externally: the couple, as such, works with the apostolate of the hierarchy through Catholic Action, it carries out the apostolate of the laity in its various forms. Even when the two spouses are not working together, they remain a unit; it is still the couple which, through each of its members, is witnessing to its faith. The couple is the grace-filled place to which each spouse, and each child also, comes to recharge their batteries before returning to the service of the Church.

But no doubt it is the apostolate carried on internally which is the most distinctive, the most specific. The couple is a “cell of the Church,” a “nursery” of the faith; it is there that non-believers have their first contact with the Church, that sinners can discover its mercy, that the poor, the abandoned, discover it is a mother. The Christian couple, an outpost of the Church community.

It is noticeable today that in a great number of homes not only are supernatural values endangered but also natural values. By contrast, wherever the sacrament of marriage produces its fruits of holiness, the natural values are by this very fact restored. What this means is that civil society would be the first to benefit from Christian marriage being renewed. And the Church, in a body stronger and healthier, could pursue more effectively its work of sanctification.

But obviously the Church would be the principal beneficiary of a renewal of Christian marriage. From the Christian couples she would receive new members and amongst them she would find vocations to the priesthood and the religious life of which she has such an urgent need. For we know from experience that conjugal love, faithful to its vocation, is a “fountain of virginity”, just as, inversely, virginity is an invitation to the holiness of the couple. Equally it is in the Christian couple that the Church will find vocations for Catholic Action which are so necessary.

Should Christian marriage experience a renewal, it is the whole Church which will be renewed.

Wherever persecution is rife, the mission of Christian couples is even more important. They are, as it were, the final fortress where the church takes refuge. In these families, tested but faithful, Christ works at a new springtime for his Church. Again it is necessary that these couples, whenever it is possible, should have been prepared for their heroic mission.

V. TO PRESENT TO THE MODERN WORLD THE TRUE FACE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE.

It is sad to realise that the only thing the modern world knows about the Christian doctrine of marriage is its prohibitions. It does not suspect that Christ came to save human love and to promote it in a wonderful manner in the sacrament of marriage. There is an altogether positive and uplifting aspect of marriage which one would like to see being made known to our world. Given that in our time, just as in every other era, the human heart remains inhabited by the irrepressible hope of achieving perfect love in marriage, the content of this doctrine, in all its richness and beauty would have a good chance of finding an echo with our contemporaries who are undoubtedly less susceptible to other aspects of Christianity. Without being the only measure which might be tried, an encyclical, less focused on the errors to be condemned than on the riches to be proclaimed, could it seems play a major role.

If the Church were to undertake, on both the doctrinal and pastoral levels, the far-reaching effort advocated by this note to convince married Christians of the greatness of their vocation (approximately 120 million) and their apostolic mission, to prepare them for it and to help them to fulfil it, the author of these pages is absolutely convinced that one would see something without precedent: an impressive assembly of couples coming

to put at the disposition of the Church the powerful human and supernatural energy of conjugal love and of the sacrament of marriage, and all this with an extraordinary enthusiasm, having discovered that they are not just at the receiving end, benefiting from the apostolate of the Church, but also active participants.

At a time that the population of the globe is increasing at a breathtaking rate, that the clergy in almost every part of the world is seriously lacking in numbers, that in numerous countries the work of the priest is being hampered by persecution, an uprising en masse by all Christian couples, answering the call of the Church, would lead to the influence of the Gospel penetrating in a prodigious way a world which materialism is threatening to submerge.

This call addressed to couples would be in line with the great calls of the recent Popes to the apostolate of the laity: it would, as it were, be their continuation, their logical outcome and their crowning.

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