

BONDING OR BONDAGE? COMMITMENT AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN MARRIAGE

By RINA HOWARD

‘**L**O, I AM WITH YOU always, even unto the end of the world.’ This is commitment, which is perfect love. This is how God loves us and to become capable of loving like this is the ultimate spiritual growth. It is what we were created for, but loving is something that has to be learnt from human beings and human beings are faulty and subject to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Each one of us must try to get as near to this ideal as we can but the possibilities for us vary enormously. There is a very fine line between the outermost limit of spiritual growth and the beginnings of spiritual aridity.

Spiritual growth must surely be the continuing growth of our capacity to love. Every year that we live, we should be able to love better than we did the year before, or it is a wasted year. For the Christian this includes the capacity to love God, and St John makes it very clear how our love for God grows. He asks: ‘He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?’ In fact, it can be very difficult to love some of our sisters and brothers who behave in exceedingly unattractive ways. It is much easier to love a God whom we can visualize as perfect. It is easier, but it is not real. It produces false spiritual growth. To love God truly we have to be able to love him when he also seems to behave unattractively, when he does not answer our prayers, lets us suffer, lets our loved ones die. We have to be able to go on loving him without pretending to ourselves that this is all really part of some secret, gracious plan designed for our benefit. We have to be able to love him when he seems unloving, just as we go on loving our loved ones—our brothers and sisters—when they seem unloving. We have to be able to accept the imperfect response from God just as we accept it from

human beings. We learn this first by accepting imperfect but 'good-enough' parents without ceasing to trust them and their love for us, and we continue to learn it by practising daily on each other.

Loving God is not different from loving human beings. There are not two kinds of love—spiritual and human, the one superior and the other inferior. Our love for human beings can be contaminated by all sorts of self-seeking considerations but so also can our love for God. It will become introverted and divorced from reality unless its quality is continually tested against the way in which we relate in our everyday lives. If we could manage to love each other perfectly we would achieve perfection in spirituality.

In order to develop as loving persons it is important that we embrace the state of life which is best suited to our temperament and our gifts and our capacity for relationship. For some it is the priestly life, for others the religious life, for most of us, life in the world. Some will marry and have children perhaps, others will not have particular partners but will fulfil themselves in loving friendships. Not everybody chooses freely, even if they think they do. We are all influenced by a multitude of unconscious factors and our choice is always subject to chance and circumstance. If we marry, our choice of partner is also subject to the same influences. But the quality of the relationships we make is the touchstone of our spiritual growth.

We commit ourselves to a particular way of life and to particular persons, feeling that this is what best answers our needs at the moment of choice. Perhaps we are lucky and our choice really does facilitate our spiritual growth. That depends on how accurately we are able to anticipate what our future needs will be and that depends on how firmly our characters are already formed. If they are still very fluid and we have a lot of growing up to do, we may make a grave mistake. As we mature, we may find that our state of life, or, if we are married, our choice of partner, far from helping us to grow spiritually, actively prevents us from doing so. In practice we shall have committed ourselves to a way of life or a person to which, or whom, we are not committed in spirit.

We need to look at the nature of commitment. We cannot speak of love without at the same time speaking of commitment. To love somebody is to be committed to them in our hearts. Love is constant. It may sometimes be overlaid by transitory feelings of disappointment or anger but, unless it receives a death blow, it

goes on. It does not exist by fits and starts. It is a permanent state of mind. It is not willed. It arises of its own accord and it maintains itself of its own accord. It goes with the grain of our nature. Commitments like this are not made. They make themselves and we recognize them.

But there is another kind of commitment that *is* made and we can certainly speak of commitment in this sense without speaking of love. It is intellectual, deliberate and voluntary. It is a formal pledge, a promise to undertake certain specific obligations. Now, why should I need to bind myself formally to carry on doing what I have begun doing spontaneously out of love? It is because there is always the possibility that my feelings and needs could change and therefore I am guaranteeing that I shall not fail to perform out of obligation what I now do out of love, *no matter what the circumstances may be*. This is the nature of the priestly, the religious and the marriage vows. In the case of a married person they do not simply apply to a state of life. They are made to another person who can be damaged if we fail to keep them. They are beautiful words but they are grim. What is the small print that lies behind 'for better, for worse' which trips so glibly off the tongue? What I am saying to you is that even if you become a drunk, if you are violent, abuse me or deprive me sexually and emotionally, gamble and starve me and our children, leave me for someone else, I will still go on loving and honouring you and remain faithful to you until death—yours or mine—releases me. Do I really hear what I am saying? The truth is that I do not believe for a single moment that any of this will happen so I do not really pay attention to it. None of us in our right minds would ever say it if we did. What I think I am saying is that I will stick by you if you get ill or lose your job or something with which I can sympathize. It is certainly not meant to cover your indifference or cruelty.

This is an extreme case but there are others, less extreme, that I cannot imagine either. I cannot imagine that the needs we satisfy so well for each other now may change and actually conflict. The growth of one of us may threaten the stability of the other. As my basic needs get satisfied by you, another need may become free to emerge which you cannot satisfy because it directly threatens one of your own needs. It depends on how flexible you are and what resources you have. This is unknown territory for both of us. All we can realistically guarantee is that we will carry out our promises

as far as we have the strength to do so. If we try to push ourselves beyond that strength the bond we have between us becomes bondage. This is the very reverse of what God intended marriage to be and what it actually is for many people. For them it is a source of strength and joy.

The commitment they have undertaken is not hard to keep. They treasure it because it is nourished by the ability they have to fulfil each other's needs. We need to appreciate how much of this is due to luck rather than to virtue. Those who are not so blessed have an uphill struggle.

How am I, for example, who marry you, perhaps in my early twenties, only just out of adolescence, how am I going to continue to develop as a loving person, if you starve me of the nourishment that should help heal my wounds left over from childhood, bring joy to my life and help me to grow as a person through bearing the trials and burdens that life brings? To be able to give myself without reservation is the ultimate in spiritual growth. It is what Christ did and we are promising to be Christ to one another. But he promised it as the person he was and we promise it as the persons we are. We are all damaged, some of us gravely so, by the shortcomings in the human relationships we have grown up with. Theoretically, all God's strength is available to us to bolster up our own. Actually, our ability to avail ourselves of it is limited by our capacity to relate to him, which has also been damaged by the same human experience. There are limits—different for all of us—beyond which we cannot push ourselves without damaging ourselves still further, and extinguishing the joyful spark of the spiritual life within us. Life ceases to be lived. It is merely endured. If I endure, simply out of obedience, a rule which makes no sense to me in my particular circumstances and which seems to me to be without charity and mercy, then, whether I am right or wrong in my judgment, I shall feel that God, my Father, who is the perfect model of love, does not love me even as well as perhaps my earthly father does. What then happens to my love for him?

If, on the other hand, the principle of eternal faithfulness does make inner sense to me, and I choose freely to uphold it, then I shall endure an unhappy marriage out of a proper love for myself, because that is the sort of person I feel myself to be and want to be. I shall have peace within me and a sort of happiness. I shall still be going with the grain of my nature and I shall feel sustained by the love and support of God, my Father, and because of that I

shall grow spiritually. Whether I shall, in fact, be able to sustain it to the end depends on whether it is simply an idealistic notion or whether it is firmly founded on my own human experience of love and commitment.

We do not come into the world as ready-made loving beings. We are born with the instinct to attach ourselves—to cling—because our basic need is for someone to look after us. We also have the ability to learn to love, from whomever we have attached ourselves to. We learn what love is by being loved. We learn not simply by what is done for us but by how it is done, by the experience of feelings of warmth and devotion that are communicated to us consistently and predictably by someone who is committed to us, someone we can learn to trust and rely on. Loving is a learnt response to being loved. Until about the age of three months most babies will go happily to any mothering person. But they have gradually been learning to distinguish the one who is the most committed to them and thereafter they commit themselves in return. Nobody can take that person's place. This is the process known as 'bonding'. As we get older and continue to enjoy the gift of faithful love from our parents, our own capacity for faithful love is strengthened. This is what *ought* to happen. It never happens perfectly because no parent is perfect—parents have all been children too and bear their own scars—and however good and loving they may be, circumstances such as illness, accident, anxiety, grief, unavoidable separations can spoil the continuity and consistency of the relationship. If our experience of commitment is patchy, our ability to develop our own capacity for commitment will also be patchy. Some of us are born with a much more robust temperament than others and can make do with far less good experience. Others of us need every bit we can get to enable us to prosper.

Marriage is for adults, yet many of us marry when we are little more than children. We have not yet acquired any mature understanding of ourselves, of our partners, or of the forces that are propelling us into marriage. It is seen as a solution for personal problems: loneliness, insecurity, lack of self-esteem, lack of identity even. The same is true for priests and religious but, if we marry, then we make our problems doubly serious because we involve another person for whose happiness we have assumed considerable responsibility. If we have children we increase our obligations and involvement. What we want of our partners is that they should

supply all the leftover unmet needs from our babyhood and childhood, as well as the new ones that have arisen as the result of having to take on the frightening responsibility of adult life. We cannot face trying to go it alone. For most of us the basic need is to 'belong', the need to be rooted. We like to move freely within a certain radius—the length varies from person to person—but we need a central point to refer ourselves back to. When we commit ourselves to a person or a state of life we find that central point: our emotional focus. When we make our marriage vows we are not just offering love to each other. We have done that long before. We are offering each other security, the certainty of not being alone, unsupported, unappreciated. Someone has chosen us. Our parents did not choose us. They loved us perhaps in spite of what we were. Our partner has chosen us because of what we are. How safe that makes us feel! And that feeling of safety enables our spirit to expand, it emboldens us to reveal further needs, to ask for more. We are all Oliver Twists.

If I need to be mothered and you are not able to mother me because you need to be mothered yourself, and I am not able to mother you, we have a problem. Our needs are legitimate, we need help to grow out of them but we cannot help each other. We are stuck humanly and spiritually. If, on the contrary, mothering is what you enjoy, we have no problem; at least, not until the help you give me enables me to grow up a bit and need more independence. Then I shall resist taking what you want to give, and you will feel rejected and frightened of losing me. Or perhaps you will grow out of your need to have someone to mother and will try to make our relationship more equal, and I shall feel abandoned and frightened. We shall pull in opposite directions until we give up, exhausted, or the rope that linked us breaks. We cannot grow in our relationship. Suppose I need lots of warmth and closeness, but your experience is that close, warm relationships lead to disappointment and pain? You cannot respond to my need without putting yourself at great risk. I shall be hurt and un-nourished, you will be frightened and we shall both be angry. We shall stop growing in love. These are just a few of the many ways in which, through no fault of our own, we can thwart each other's growth. We would not be in this mess if we had experienced love and commitment fully enough in our previous experience. Our present situation merely compounds our bad experience instead of repairing it. How are we to find now what we so badly need? We

may, because we are more frightened of loneliness than of anything else, opt to stay together but this is not commitment. It is 'clinging'. It is a no-growth situation.

The terrible dilemma which faces us all is that we are obliged to make the most important decisions of our lives before we are mature enough, psychologically, to do so, and the social structures which decreed that as we made our bed, so must we lie in it, and which helped us to do this, have broken down. The needs of the individual are now given a much higher priority and the options for personal fulfilment have increased, but physical maturing and the total span of life have remained much the same. Nature and culture are badly out of step. We cannot give ourselves responsibly until we know and own ourselves. And yet the old arguments for faithfulness and stability are overwhelming, both from the point of view of the individual, and much more even for the family. Children are not equipped to cope with experiments in parenthood.

True commitment is the *fruit* of the spirit. Only if we already have the human and spiritual resources to accept our bondage in a positive spirit can we grow still further spiritually as a result. Many people lack those resources. We cannot expect them to behave as if they do have them, nor will they profit by trying too hard to do so. It is foolish and dangerous to assume that if we behave as if we were saints, we shall become saintly. Outward actions do not necessarily produce inner change. They can, in fact, produce such a disabling inner conflict that we become ill physically or emotionally, or both.

There is no clear answer to our dilemma. Faithfulness unto death will always remain the ultimate in spiritual growth and it is to be striven for. But such a lot of our ability to persevere in this depends on luck: being lucky with our parents, lucky with our partners, lucky with our friends, lucky with the circumstances of our lives. Sometimes the luck runs out and that is where virtue begins. There is nothing more beautiful than the continuing, selfless devotion of couples in the face of difficulties that seem overwhelming. They are a light that shines for us all in the darkness, and we thank God for them. They are a challenge and an inspiration, but we cannot all be like them. We have not all got their strength. We have to weigh the good of each individual involved with the utmost care and compassion. No-one but they can judge truly what is possible for themselves. All compromises are bound to be unsatisfactory, but the primary commitment that

we have is to ourselves, to grow as loving persons; and the carrying out of that commitment is the fruit of the spirit and not the seed from which the spirit takes its life.