

# THE FUTURE OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

By J. DOMINIAN

THE CHRISTIAN community spends a great deal of its energy preoccupied with the challenge of the crisis in faith. An eminent catholic theologian, Fr B. Lonergan, speaks of the challenge not as a crisis of faith but of culture, and refers to the breakdown of classical culture. In my own writings, I have written repeatedly about man's changing consciousness of himself, which is best understood through the framework provided by the behavioural sciences of psychology, psychiatry and sociology. Certainly, part of the breakdown of the classical culture is the replacement of philosophy by the behavioural sciences as an essential foundation and principal assistant of theology. In other words, there can be no renewal of faith until man's relationship to God is placed in a christian setting which recognizes and confirms the profound changes in man's experience of himself in the family and in society. Such a vast change is necessarily accompanied by an equivalent degree of anxiety; and, in the face of anxiety, it is understandable that human beings should wish to retain the familiar and avoid the challenge of the new. As far as the family is concerned, such an avoidance is no longer possible; for within the family are occurring some of the most dramatic alterations in human behaviour and experience. So Lonergan asserts that, for a while,

There is bound to be formed a solid right that is determined to live in a world that no longer exists. There is bound to be formed a scattered left, captivated by now this, now that new development, exploring now this and now that new possibility. But what will count is a perhaps not numerous centre, big enough to be at home in both the old and the new, painstaking enough to work out, one by one, the transitions to be made, strong enough to refuse half-measures and insist on complete solutions, even though it has to wait.<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to try and do this for the future of the christian family.

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<sup>1</sup> Lonergan, *Collection* (ed. E. Crowe, London, 1967).

*Extreme positions*

The extreme positions of the 'right' are expressed in all christian circles by profound distrust of sexuality, repeated accusations of sexual immorality and decadence in modern behaviour, as shown by divorce, sexual deviation, promiscuity and pornography, the breakdown of authority and discipline at home and school, and the irresponsibility of the young. The equivalent positions of the 'left' are not usually located in christian circles, although they find pockets of support in some quarters. In general the 'left' attacks the authoritarianism of the past, particularly of the power of men over women, seeks the emancipation of women, favours greater sexual freedom, is tolerant and sympathetic to sexual deviations – now called normal variations. 'The left', while regretting divorce and abortion, considers them essential supports in a changing world that gives priority of value to personal freedom. Some of these concepts, which include indirectly the encouragement of fornication, adultery, infidelity, spouse-swapping, sexual experimentation and communal living, horrify the christian conscience. Thus the task of the christian is to find the centre, which, while respecting traditional values, nevertheless examines the inescapable changes in human behaviour and integrates these into christian living. This task must be based on data which reflect accurately human events in western societies.

Let us now examine the following elements, namely sexuality, children, the relationship of the spouses and the traditional goals of marriage, in the light of these aims.

*Sexuality*

The familiar teaching on human sexuality in the christian tradition stems undoubtedly from St Augustine, although there were eminent predecessors who favoured his austere view.<sup>2</sup> Central to this view, which has been brilliantly described by Noonan,<sup>3</sup> is the obsession with sexual pleasure and its dangers, and the intimate link between sexuality and procreation, which is only permitted in the context of marriage. In my view, of these three central ideas, namely, the intimate link between sexuality and children, the significance of sexual pleasure as a danger and the structure of the permanency of marriage, only the last one will carry the same significance in the future.

<sup>2</sup> Dominian, J.: *Christian Marriage* (London, 1968), chap. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Noonan, J. T.: *Contraception* (New York, 1967).

We can begin by examining the factors relating sexuality to procreation. Starting with medical facts, no one can dispute that in advanced societies there has been a notable break-through in achieving safety for the pregnant mother, the foetus and the new born infant.<sup>4</sup> In Great Britain, the death of a mother during pregnancy, childbirth or abortion contributed to 0.03% of the total mortality of deaths for the year 1970; and the figure for infant mortality (death under one year), which in 1911 was 129.4 per 1000 live births, had become by 1969 no more than 18; and similarly stillbirths, which were 41 per 1000 births in 1931, had also dropped to a figure of 13 in the same year.<sup>5</sup>

This vast improvement has undoubtedly created a new situation in many parts of the world: the challenge of overpopulation. The world is now no longer threatened by underpopulation, but by an imbalance between resources and numbers. In addition to this precarious balance, man is making rapid advances in his understanding of the physiology of reproduction. In the last three hundred years, but particularly in the last fifty, virtually all the essential components of the process and timing of fertilization have been understood in principle. It will not be long before a couple can achieve the desired number of children in as many sexual acts, granted that they have healthy normally functioning bodies, and set out to use the available knowledge about ovulation and the life of the sperm.

Given such enormous control over fertilization, aided and abetted by birth regulation, a totally new situation is occurring, in which the emphasis placed on sexual pleasure as a reward for procreation is totally irrelevant. Indeed, perhaps the single most important advance for the future of the christian family must be a reassessment of the significance and meaning of the sexual act, now no longer primarily related to procreation. The significance of this fact is so staggering that there is as yet no reference to it in official pronouncements except in tentative forms;<sup>6</sup> though Vatican II made a significant break through on marriage and the family as a community of love.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Social Trends* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1972, table 58).

<sup>5</sup> *Registrar General's Statistical Review* (1969), Part II, p 11.

<sup>6</sup> One of these came in 1958 from the anglican church in its Lambeth Conference (1958) and was further considered in an expansion of the theology of marriage in the document on marriage, divorce and the Church. Cf *The Family in Contemporary Society* (Lambeth Conference, London, 1958); and *Marriage, Divorce and the Church* (S.P.C.K. London, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 47-52.

The anxiety that is inevitably felt by the christian community, and expressed in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, is clearly that, if the intimate link between sexual intercourse and life is rent apart, what is there to stop the isolation of the physical sensual expression of sex and opening the floodgates of promiscuous behaviour, backed by birth control and abortion on demand? Is this not precisely what some are advocating? The isolation of physical sexuality, and the pursuit of pleasure as an end in itself, is not a new phenomenon or a discovery of the twentieth century. What has happened in over a century is that the age-long protection invested in the link between sexuality and procreation has been greatly reduced: indeed, through birth control and other factors, theoretically terminated. This, however, should not cause any undue anxiety to the christian community properly informed about its own roots. For 'what is most distinctively human about married love is the formation of a personal bond which in the christian tradition is monogamous, exclusive and life-long'.<sup>8</sup> At the heart of the Old and the New Testaments lies the description of marriage as a relationship in which the human encounter between husband and wife is used as the analogy for the relationship between Yahweh and his people, Christ and the Church. Central to marriage is the bond between the spouses, and the sexual act is meant primarily to serve and strengthen this: in other words, to foster their life, whilst also serving the unique expression of new life in the child, whose well-being depends utterly on the presence of a stable and loving relationship of the parents. Thus, sexuality torn apart from procreation does not necessarily lead to the chaos of promiscuity; it continues to do what it has always done, that is, to foster the bond between spouses which now needs a far more penetrating understanding.

### *Marriage and relationship*

In a traditional treatment of the subject of marriage and the family, there would follow at this point a discussion on the subject of children, which would be the natural sequence to the topic of sexuality. This natural sequence is deliberately avoided, not because children are not uniquely important, but because the proper place of sexuality in the future of the christian family will not be primarily its biological contribution to new life, important as this is, but the capacity of sexuality to serve and foster the bond between

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<sup>8</sup> Dominian, J.: 'Birth Control and Married Love', in *The Month* (March, 1973).

husband and wife. This in turn means that marriage must be seen primarily as a relationship and not as a contract.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the essence of marriage lies in initiating and sustaining relationships of love. This view has received total support from my experience with marital breakdown,<sup>10</sup> which is the ultimate expression of the failure of two people, a husband and wife, to fulfil their minimum relationship needs socially, emotionally or physically. The key question then becomes: 'what are the principal components of the relationship of husband and wife which advance or retard the stability of the bond they are trying to foster?' In the course of my work with marriage and religious community life,<sup>11</sup> I have come to the conclusion that three characteristics define the needs of an intimate relationship of an enduring nature. *I consider these to be sustaining, healing and growth: universal characteristics, finding differential expression according to the social and cultural exigencies of a particular society, and forming the spearhead of western society's expectations.*

#### *Sustaining*

The first characteristic which defines an enduring, personal relationship in marriage and religious life is the capacity of the partners to sustain each other, materially and emotionally. Without a basic provision of these characteristics, life cannot be sustained, and it perishes. Here, of course, are still to be found the main priorities in large parts of the world, where poverty, famine and disease still cast their ghastly shadow over the inhabitants. In developed countries, however, provided selfishness, greed, the stupid squandering of primary resources or pollution do not destroy the standards attained, then these material needs are available.

Each family in turn expects these minimum needs to be fulfilled. Traditionally, it is for the husband to provide the economic support for this; increasingly, however, the wife is also contributing: a fact which must affect basically the roles and relationship between the couple. Certainly, when the husband is unable to be a provider and therefore cannot sustain his family through what is considered to be his own fault, then the wife often considers that her basic minimum expectations are not met; such a situation furnishes the basis of one contribution to the case of cruelty in divorce proceedings. In the

<sup>9</sup> Dominian, *Christian Marriage*, pp 243-4; *Catholic Marriage Advisory Council Bulletin* 9, (London 1969), n 4 'Marriage: An Inter-personal relationship'.

<sup>10</sup> *The Nature of Marriage in the Future of Christian Marriage* (London, 1969).

<sup>11</sup> *Marital Breakdown* (London, 1968).

past, the basic sustaining needs would have been confined to food, shelter and material provisions. As these are increasingly available, expectations increase and the fundamental sustaining needs are now extending to the capacity to fulfil sexual and emotional needs. Here is one of the imperceptible but fundamental changes in expectations which the christian community has been extremely slow to appreciate.

In terms of sexual needs, the extreme 'left' view would emphasize the unimpeded availability of sex, independently of personal bonds. The christian, indeed the humanist, answer (there can be no principles which are not based on human integrity) must be that what is needed is not indiscriminate pleasure-seeking. The pleasure of sex is indeed a most powerful one; but its fulness and vitality is only realized when it is conjoined with an on-going relationship of love. There is no space to deal with this in detail; but the case can be argued most forcibly that indiscriminate sexual relationships are detrimental to human integrity. What is needed instead is to improve the quality of sexual experience within marriage; and here there is still a monumental amount of work to be done at the technical, physiological and psychological level, and a revolution of approach by christianity which will have to adopt an entirely new direction of embracing sexuality as something precious and positive.

In terms of emotional needs, two are primary: security and self-esteem. The single most crippling psychological characteristic in human experience is anxiety, stemming from two sources: the excess of the in-built tendency in the individual towards anxiety, which expresses itself in a variety of fears; and, far more subtle, the basic anxiety experienced when the identity of the individual is threatened through intra- or inter-personal happenings. Hence there is a constant need to reinforce the self-esteem of the individual; and for this both society and christianity have to examine afresh the place of affirmation in human relationships.<sup>12</sup>

### *Healing*

Granted an acceptable minimum of physically and psychologically sustaining experience, spouses have conscious and unconscious expectations in another dimension of their life; their desire for personal healing. The christian community is familiar with the idea of healing in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation between God and

<sup>12</sup> Dominian, J.: 'The Cycle of Human Affirmation', in *Catholic Marriage Advisory Council Bulletin* 53, n 14 (London, 1974).

man, which, in the catholic tradition, is largely mediated through the sacraments. Here is to be found one of the rich sources of catholic theology which must be explored with renewed vigour. Marriage has been defined as a sacrament; and now that the legal fog surrounding it is beginning to lift, we can see that this sacrament – one of whose essential characteristics is the relationship of the spouses – has the capacity to heal, provided we can understand more clearly what this healing actually involves. Vatican II refers to the love of spouses as having the potential of healing and perfecting:<sup>13</sup> a statement which in fact was anticipated by Pius XI when he referred to the end of marriage as a mutual interior formation of the partners.<sup>14</sup> These two words, healing and perfecting, are precise descriptions of what couples expect from each other. Now healing has a social, physical but, above all, a psychological component. Social healing refers to the ability of spouses to offer to each other an opportunity to redress social injustices whether they emanate from class, sex or colour discrimination. It is the husband who can support his wife's rights as a woman; it is either spouse who can redress and support each other's rights independently of colour or social-class background; and the family as a whole can make their contribution to social justice.

Physical healing is a far more frequent event in the life of the family, where disease and pain may attack suddenly. However, contemporary medicine has made such advances that human suffering is considerably diminished. Nevertheless, when disease strikes, it is to those in the family – and particularly our spouse – to whom we turn for comfort and support. Sometimes these needs are temporary, but occasionally, with the more chronic illness, prolonged. Here in fact the healing element of personal love is inestimable.

But the area where healing is needed in the most pronounced form, and one which to date is least comprehended, is in the psychological areas (where great strides of understanding and expansion can be expected in the next few decades and well into the future). Spouses encounter each other in marriage with two sets of wounds received in the course of the previous two decades. These wounds are the result of two separate but interacting factors. The first one is the inheritance of the individual, the second the experience of the

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<sup>13</sup> Cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Cf The encyclical *Casti Connubii* (Catholic Truth Society, Do 113, London, 1951), pp 13-14.

environment in the course of upbringing, principally at the hands of parents and other important figures of authority. The first contributing factor, largely determined by inheritance, the experience of the foetus and later of the child in terms of health, leaves certain individuals subject to excessive mood-swings, anxiety with all the phobias this produces, aggressive or sexual impulsiveness, or the opposite lack of energy, drive or capacity for sustained activity. All these aspects of human behaviour have scarcely been understood up to now; so that they have been subjected to global, non-specific moral interpretations in which individuals have been described as lazy, selfish, greedy, lustful, etc., and their behaviour restrained by the guilt and fear generated in society, with the consequent personal disapproval or punishment incurred when standards have been violated. While such a policy of containing a problem was the only possible one, the damage done to individuals who felt condemned for behaviour largely beyond their control was considerable. As we begin to comprehend these conditions, far more spouses can understand, be compassionate and helpful to a much greater degree, slowly reversing the ravages of the past.

The second contributing factor is the end-result of the experiences we received from our parents, relatives, teachers, and other adults playing a significant role in our younger lives. A number of wounds can be inflicted by all these agents, leaving us with a lack of security, a lack of feeling that we belong, that we are wanted or appreciated, with a markedly poor sense of our personal worth and a highly exaggerated sense of our own worthlessness, highly vulnerable to criticism, easily frightened, and so convinced of our own meaninglessness that we dare not get too close to anyone, in case they discover only too quickly our insufficiency and reject us. Here is an aspect of healing which, for several reasons, must become central in the future of christian marriage. The first is that, as material needs are met, the couple will have more time to examine the next layer of their being, which is that of feelings and emotions.

Vatican II has marked the end of an era when the Church of love sat uncomfortably with the world of feelings and emotions in personal relationships, conceptualized primarily in intellectual, abstract and legal terms. Not only will feelings and emotions have more prominence, but the reduction of the formal roles of spouses and the more open, intimate and emotional dialogue between husband and wife will bring about a therapeutic encounter common

in psychotherapy or psychoanalysis. In these treatment-situations, the therapist, acting in a non-judgmental capacity (initiated by all processes of counselling), allows the patient to experience afresh his fears, anxieties and doubts, and to receive an experience of trust and unconditional acceptance, which provides a new learning model, and offers a second opportunity to receive these experiences of closeness, trust, acceptance, affirmation and self-esteem which should have come from the parents. In marriage, spouses can act in precisely this fashion, each accepting the other unconditionally and becoming therapists, providing as far as is possible in a complementary fashion the missing components of their needs. The detailed description of this process would involve extensive psychological treatment, but all the details are already known in other forms of therapy and can be implemented in marriage.

### *Growth*

Finally, to sustaining and healing must be added the experience of growth. If the process of healing is poorly understood, that of growth is probably comprehended even less. Nevertheless, it is formally recognized in both major statements of the catholic Church, in *Casti Connubii* and in the declarations of Vatican II. Here as elsewhere is a vast area of development, whose roots are to be found in tradition which now looks to the behavioural sciences to provide the detailed ingredients. Growth is mostly understood in the physical and intellectual areas, which reach their peak in the early twenties, with gradual deterioration thereafter. As far as the intellect is concerned, recent work is beginning to show that new learning can take place later on in life, even though it can never replicate that of the early years. Even more important, however, is the most effective use of available resources, rather than absolute growth. At the same time, whether or not intellectual growth involves new learning, new insights about hidden talents or the greater utilization of existing potential, the realization of all such potential is something which depends on existing opportunities, and the type of atmosphere provided by the spouses for each other. In the presence of a facilitating environment, that is, one in which both partners are aware of each other's gifts and seek to enlarge them, their reaction to each other will be, not a negative, impeding, competing, envious one, but one of fostering each other's talents. This means providing time and making sacrifices for each other's further educational needs, friendly encouragement and affirmation, rejoicing at each other's progress

on a journey of mutual endeavour and personal growth which does not cease until death.

This gradual enlargement of self will be seen particularly in the field of feelings and emotions, where we never cease to learn how to improve our interpretation of the signals we receive from each other, improving communication and understanding, and therefore reducing misunderstanding, unnecessary hurts and criticism, together with a readiness for a much greater ability to forgive and be reconciled. Such an enlargement in the depths of toleration, compassion and understanding are the marks of growth in love, and an increasing challenge for the goal of man created in the image of God, who, as St John reminds us, is love. The opposite of sustaining, healing and growth is the gradual disillusionment and final decision of a couple that there does not exist a minimum social, physical or emotional relationship to sustain them in their needs. This is what marital breakdown has always been; and contemporary society, with its higher aspirations, is prepared to compromise less and less about the minimum standards it expects from marriage. Unlike contraception, divorce is an issue which has direct scriptural implications for the christian community; and the author has repeatedly emphasized that the vital challenge in contemporary society is to understand and respond to the changing nature of marriage.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Permanence, reliability and predictability*

The traditional cry of the 'right' is simply to point at divorce and other features, such as sexual deviations, promiscuity, abortion, and pornography, pool them together and use them as the evidence of the deteriorating standards of a pleasure-seeking society. Such an approach is, in fact, next to useless: first of all, because each category of behaviour needs to be examined in its own right and to be properly understood; and secondly, because all such behaviour is symptomatic of many other determining elements which have to be patiently analysed and understood. As already stated, divorce is symptomatic of rising expectations, a changing woman-man relationship, and the gradual ability of the single woman to survive without the aid of a husband. But this does not mean that the extreme 'left' are correct in minimizing the damage which marital breakdown causes to spouses and children, which is in fact exten-

<sup>15</sup> Cf my various articles on the general subject of marital breakdown in *The Ampleforth Journal*, 73 (1968), pp 3-13; *Concilium*, vol 7, n. 9 (1973); *The Clergy Review* 58, n 12 (1973).

sive.<sup>16</sup> Nor does it justify the assumption that looser, impermanent relationships are needed for the future, in which traditional marriage will have no place. Since, in fact, it is the 'left' that is crying out for the changes in the personal relationships of spouses which lead to greater healing and growth in more fulfilling social, physical and emotional experiences, it has to appreciate that these very desirable goals cannot be obtained unless a couple have a relationship in which they create the conditions of mutual knowledge, trust, effective communication, security, openness and intimacy. These need time, patience and understanding, which can only prevail if the relationship is committed to permanency, in which the spouses can act as reliable and predictable agents to each other. Nothing has occurred in contemporary marriage which makes obsolete the traditional characteristics of marriage – permanence and exclusiveness.

### *Children*

The main purpose of sexual intercourse in the future will be to act as the unifying, restoring, renewing, confirming and affirming source for the couple. It will revert to its proper meaning in the scriptures, which describes the act as one of knowing. It is through the exquisite physical sensitivity of the body that the couple have the possibility of showing to each other, on each occasion, that they are the most important person in the world, declaring their feelings of acknowledgment and acceptance, affirming each other's sexual identity as man or woman, and completing the sustaining, healing and growth which occurs continuously. Thus the body, the physical, becomes the vehicle of transmitting the fulness of love. The Incarnation is the model of the utter significance of this reality.

Nevertheless, part of this loving reality is the procreation of new life. If numbers are no longer the principal aim, if man will have such control over biology as to make the number of sexual acts directed towards procreation very few indeed, parenthood will remain uniquely important: not only because the world will still need to be populated, not only because man and woman are in a special way creative, but far, far more important, because they have the opportunity of educating their child. The emphasis in the future will undoubtedly shift from quantity, from sheer numbers, to the quality of upbringing. This will also mean an education of sus-

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<sup>16</sup> Cf 'Marital Pathology: a review', in *The Postgraduate Medical Journal*, vol 48, n 563, p 517 (1972).

taining, growth and such healing as is necessary; but the accent will certainly be on the realization of the child's potential. Growth in childhood is not difficult to see in physical terms; but it is less easy to determine in terms of the intellect and most difficult to grasp in social and psychological terms.

It is this last that will occupy us increasingly with the emphasis on promoting the child's maturity, and ensuring that it receives as few emotional wounds of deprivation, insecurity and lack of self-esteem as possible. Here, there can be no doubt that the presence of stable, contented and fulfilled parents will provide the best safeguard for the mature development of the child; so that, once again, the focus of attention will be fixed on the quality of the parental relationship. The task of the future will be to avoid cycles of human deprivation, in which the wounds of the children become scars influencing adversely their own capacity as parents. Instead, the object will be to provide cycles of human affirmation in which mature, fulfilled children become mature, fulfilling parents.

### *Summary*

In the past the christian family, nurtured on the augustinian principles of children, fidelity and sacrament, saw the need for sacrifice in terms of expenditure of energy to ensure that life was fostered abundantly, fidelity was preserved by a negative curbing of impulsive and emotional needs, and indissolubility was maintained at any price, even the active damage of the personality of the members of the family. Despite these constraints, much was achieved which was truly magnificent and expressed as fully as possible the understanding of love. Today different conditions obtain. Children, fidelity and indissolubility remain christian objectives; but these can now only be ensured if the energy, spent in the past in accepting negative and restrictive goals, is used to help people to achieve the much more desirable goals of fulfilment and realization of their potential. In order to achieve this, there has to be a radical reappraisal of the understanding of the sacrament in terms of personal relationships, and a programme of education and support for the family at home, in school and parish, which will promote a greater understanding for the new goals of the christian family.