

A DEVELOPING THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

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DOES christianity have any special insight into the meaning of marriage? Many disciplines today – psychology, sociology, genetics, anthropology – have much light to throw on marriage. In our day does christian teaching really have anything special to say about marriage which other voices are not already saying, perhaps more effectively? A good many catholics feel that the main thing the Church adds to the discussion is a series of precepts which deal in a narrow manner with sexuality rather than with the larger marital relationship: a marriage is presumed to be sacramental once it is sexually consummated; sex outside marriage is immoral; within marriage sex is moral so long as it is oriented toward conception. Such things have in fact been the preoccupation of much official church teaching in modern times, and the reason for this is not difficult to understand. The society of our day, its literature, its advertising and its attitudes have tended to absolutize sex and the sexual relationship.

Over against this we hear the Church's teaching which, perhaps naturally, is going to sound just as preoccupied with sex as the mentality it is trying to correct.

In recent years theologians have been attempting to provide a larger context for discussion of the religious implications of the marital union. Emphasis has shifted from marriage as contract to marriage as covenant relationship. In the following pages I shall explore a few aspects of this new emphasis, with particular attention to some basic presuppositions that need examination before we can develop a theology of marriage which will be viable for the Church of the future.

One factor which makes it difficult to get at the religious meaning of marriage is sociological. In our day the role of the family has changed in such a way as to affect many of our preconceptions about what marriage is. The typical family today has evolved into what is called a 'nuclear' family, consisting simply of a father, a mother, and their children. This nucleus used to be surrounded by

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grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins and in-laws who, if they did not live in the same house, were at least nearby. Today the nuclear family is usually located miles away from the home of the nearest relative. The effect of this isolation is considerable. Psychologists point out how all sorts of roles now have to be played by the husband and wife *alone*, in the absence of the kind of help, psychological support, financial advice and the like once provided by the extended family. Today, therefore, there is increased psychological pressure on the husband and wife. The family used to exist for many practical purposes beyond love; the family performed educational, economic, recreational and social roles which have been handed over in varying degrees to other agencies. But several roles have been left relatively untouched – namely, reproduction, child care and affection. What this does is to leave the family and marriage itself heavily based on love alone, while in the past the whole concept of marriage included many other roles. Sociologists point out that to base the family so exclusively on love is to weaken its stability, a weakening which is easily observable in the high rate of divorce.

As the theologian observes such data and tries to interpret traditional christian ideas in the light of a very shifting sociological scene, he is faced with a problem: that of distinguishing abiding *religious* values from the *social* values of a particular era. It would be a grave theological mistake to take marriage and the family as it is understood in one era, absolutize that understanding, and impose it on every era as *the* christian understanding.

To see the difference between social and religious values, one need only consider the famous story of David and Bathsheba. David got Bathsheba pregnant, and then sent her husband into the front lines where he was sure to be killed. David eventually repented, the story tells us. But what happened to Bathsheba? She was taken into David's harem. In other words, the polygamy which was acceptable at that time provided a solution for the problem of Bathsheba's welfare and that of her child. Even if society today permitted this solution from a social viewpoint, it is obvious that christianity would have difficulty with the religious dimensions of that solution. Or take the morals of the home as they are discussed in the letter to the Ephesians. 'Wives, obey your husbands; children, obey your parents; slaves, obey your masters'.¹ If today we say that the last bit is a culturally conditioned precept, why aren't the first

¹ Eph 5, 22 – 6,5.

two ideas also culturally conditioned? What *religious* reason is there why wives should obey their husbands, or children obey their parents? Thus if we are to go to scripture to find out what the judeo-christian tradition affirms about marriage, we have to be careful how we read the texts. Once again, some of the things which we have assumed to be religious values may only be the social values of a particular age.

This problem becomes particularly pressing when we look at the data brought forward by contemporary biology and genetics, which challenge many of our assumptions about marriage. In our time, much christian teaching on marriage has had to do with insistence on the connection between love, sex and reproduction. The question is how much longer theology can presume these connections.

As effective means of birth control became more and more a reality, theologians were worried because they saw the possibility of a loss of integrity in marriage. Sex could easily be used in a selfish way, frustrating the whole idea of the family. Theologians argued in terms of the nature of the sexual act, saying that artificial birth control frustrates a process that 'naturally' terminates in conception. In recent years, however, many theologians have insisted that one must look not at the nature of the *act* but at the nature of *marriage*. Marriage does include children, and marital partners must seriously consider children as part of their whole commitment to each other; but not every sexual act need take place in such a way that conception may result. Paul VI implicitly recognized this point of view – though he did not agree with it – when he accepted the statements of various national hierarchies in reaction to his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, especially the canadian, french and belgian statements. These maintained that even though childbearing is an integral part of family life, still, in a given marriage, a couple can be morally sincere in judging that not all of their sexual acts need be open to reproduction. Fortunately, it did not take too long for the *Humanae Vitae* debate to cool down, because now genetics presents us with even more shattering data on the relationship between sex and reproduction.

For example, some ten thousand babies are born each year as a result of artificial insemination. Two people love each other, but their sexual activity cannot give them the children they want; so science enters to make the children possible. In other words, love issues in reproduction – but without the mediation of the sexual act. Now we face the further possibility of the fertilization of the ovum

outside the womb. The pure test-tube baby still seems a long way off, because carrying through this process involves an intricately detailed knowledge of the needs of the organism every step of the way, and exactly what is supplied by the placenta at each moment. But scientists are not far from being able to fertilize an ovum outside the womb and preserve it long enough to transplant it into a surrogate womb. Thus a woman who cannot go through a pregnancy for medical reasons could still have a child, and indeed by her own husband; but she would not bear the child in her own womb. Again, we have the possibility of marital love terminating in reproduction, but without the mediation of the normal sexual process.

What all this indicates is that the connection between love, sex and reproduction is much more intricate than anyone would have thought even a generation ago. Sex does terminate naturally in conception, but not intrinsically; for conception can be accomplished by other means than through sex. One might not like this, and one might want to insist for moral reasons that the normal and ordinary connections should be maintained. But if christian theology is to take this stand, we have to be very careful how we argue: one cannot have one's cake and eat it too. If we are to insist on a necessary connection between sex and reproduction, we must at the same time cope with the fact that science is able to help people who want their love to issue in reproduction, but whose sexual activity is unable to accomplish this end. And if we accept this possibility, we must face the fact that the normal and 'natural' connections between sex and reproduction may no longer be a sound basis for a moral argument. Many of theology's traditional arguments may be outmoded – not for the morally inadequate reason that they do not fit the temper of the times, but for the coercive reason that they have become scientifically untenable and theologically indefensible.

These are some of the presuppositions to be dealt with as we develop a theology of marriage for the Church of the future. Now against this background, can we point to any abiding christian insight into marriage, a religious insight which will provide a foundation for theological discussion of marriage in a world where the sexual and social 'mechanics' of marriage are so subject to change? The answer to this question will have to do with the christian notion of love. But what insights does the judeo-christian tradition have with regard to *marital* love?

Ancient mythology gives us the background against which our religious tradition originates; so let us look briefly at what the

ancient myths say about the marital relationship. First of all, the myths deal with fecundity. Over and over again we find figures of a god-father and a goddess-mother. The goddess-mother personifies the earth which produces vegetation; it is the god-father who makes her fertile, just as rain provides the fertilizing 'sperm' that makes plants grow in the 'womb' of the earth. All earthly motherhood and fatherhood are derived from the god-father and goddess-mother. The ancient myths also deal with passionate love. There is invariably a goddess-lover, a Venus or Aphrodite, who epitomizes the sexual attraction which woman uses to seduce man. What is interesting is that the goddess-lover is not the same person as the goddess-mother. In the ancient world, passionate love is not integrated with the institution of marriage; and the sexuality of marriage itself is indistinct from the fecundity of nature.

In the biblical myths, however, we note a remarkable contrast in viewpoint. In the hebrew view of things, there is no longer any goddess-mother, goddess-spouse or goddess-lover. Of all the previous sexual archetypes, the religious imagery of the hebrews retains only one: that of the god-father. He has no relationship to a goddess-mother, and so he is divested of any sexuality properly speaking. The only archetypal relationship which remains is that between Yahweh and Israel, between the god-father and his adopted child, his people.²

By no means did this lofty view of God's love develop overnight. The God who is thought of as punishing his wayward child is centuries of religious growth removed from the father who welcomes the prodigal son for no other reason than that he loves his child. The image of 'father' can mean many things, and this fact is well illustrated in the biblical writings themselves. Still, at the heart of the judeo-christian tradition lies the idea of God as one who transcends sexual categories. This idea is becoming more and more important today as our culture reacts against male chauvinism and the many excesses of paternalism. It is a good thing for christians to recall that God is 'father' because of the love and fidelity of which this relational image speaks, not because God is a 'he'. Perhaps in our day the father image needs to be soft-pedalled in favour of God as spirit, as a loving person above a 'he' or a 'she' who is revealed to us in the temple of our hearts.

² For a development of this idea, see Pierre Grelot, *Man and Wife in Scripture* (London, 1964), chap. 1.

If sexual categories are built into our everyday language, even to the point where they can interfere with our ideas of God, this merely illustrates the primacy that sex can acquire in any of our thinking. One does not have to buy the advertising world's banal emphasis on sex in order to absolutize the sexual in more subtle ways. For instance, the model of love in many people's thinking is an ideal (sexual) relationship between a man and a woman. Religious can fall into this way of thinking as easily as lay people. How many clerics and religious are there who conceive of their celibacy largely as a matter of 'giving up' the fulfilment of an ideal sexual love?

In judeo-christian thought, the model of love is not a man-woman relationship but rather God's love for his people. This relationship is conceived of as the love of a father for his child, or as the kind of covenant that exists between man and wife. The letter to the Ephesians picks up this line of thought, speaking of marriage itself as an image of the union between Christ and his Church. This analogy goes hand in hand with the way the New Testament writers interpret the vocation of Jesus. Just as Yahweh has been faithful to his people, so Jesus, he in whom God is decisively revealed to humankind, is faithful to his friends even unto death. He is raised from the dead because the Father is faithful to him, and that resurrection is a pledge of God's continuing fidelity to us. The biblical notion of love, as it is decisively personalized in Jesus, becomes unintelligible apart from fidelity. The concept of fidelity is the primary component of any committed and covenanted love, and all else is subordinate to this.

The vocation of any christian, then, can be conceived of as a pursuit of fidelity in all of one's relationships. As for marriage, this vocation involves the pursuit of fidelity in an exclusive relationship with another person; it is a commitment to something that is more a process than a 'state'. This, I would suggest, is the primary religious insight which christianity has to offer with regard to the meaning of marriage. Its insight is to enshrine an ideal. It is to say that a married couple is called to pursue, in the marital and family context, the kind of faithfulness that God has shown his people and that Jesus's own life exemplifies.

The principle of fidelity raises a challenge to traditional catholic and canonical teaching regarding sexuality and marriage in at least three large areas.

First, if fidelity is the distinguishing mark of christian love – in any of its forms, celibate, premarital or marital, sexuality becomes,

certainly not unimportant, but *secondary* and *relative to a higher principle*. That is, christians are freed from sex as a controlling principle, freed from a principle which was primary in the ancient world and which is primary for a great many people today. This means it is much too simplistic to say 'No sex outside marriage' or 'Inside marriage sex is moral' and call this the christian morality of sexual love. A strong case can indeed be made for traditional morality regarding pre-marital sex; it can be argued that sex is an expression not just of deep love, but of the exclusive love that characterizes marriage. But however one argues, sex must be subordinated to fidelity and interpreted in relation to fidelity.

I would argue that this is what many young couples who live together in a 'trial marriage' are often trying to get at. In their own families they have seen many broken marriages; or they have been deeply affected by the unbroken but unsuccessful marriages of their own parents or others close to them, marriages which they see as travesties. They do not want to subject their own future children to this; they do not want to proclaim their union in front of a christian community, and they want no children until they are sure their union has some chance of lasting. The principle of fidelity in no sense endorses promiscuity, nor does it say that a trial marriage is the ideal way of going about the search for fidelity. But in many cases in today's society, such liaisons can be seen as a sincerely moral groping toward fidelity, when traditional structures have provided these persons only with experiences of infidelity.

Secondly, the principle of fidelity will help the Church of the future to find its way through the confusion raised by all the new genetic data that confronts us. Much of our difficulty comes from seeing sex as related primarily to reproduction. Biblical revelation *assumes* this connection, but in no sense could the biblical writers absolutize what they did not understand. Indeed, when the first chapters of Genesis or the letter to the Ephesians talk about the sexual union, they do no more and no less than give the *religious* meaning of a *human* union.

Thirdly, the idea of indissolubility must be subordinated to the principle of fidelity. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder; husband and wife are to become one. But what if they don't become one? What if there is nothing to put asunder because nothing was really joined together in the first place, as can easily happen when people get married on the basis of little more than sexual attraction? What if their union does not grow into an image

of God's love for us, or of Jesus's faithful pursuit of his own call? Different ages have answered this question in different ways. As everyone knows, the catholic practice for a long time has been to enforce the indissolubility of marriage, thus not only proclaiming the ideal but also legalizing it, saying in effect that in the case of failure it is immoral to try again. This has not always been the case. There is evidence to show that in the early Church some bishops allowed the remarriage of divorced persons (as does eastern orthodoxy to this day), not by any means as the ideal, but as a humane answer to individual cases where the relationship has grown to become destructive of any ideal. Even the council of Trent, in its affirmation of the indissolubility of marriage, carefully avoided condemning the pastoral practice of the east; the council was aware that the christian tradition has not always and everywhere legalized the ideal.

The gospel certainly preaches the ideal. In the sermon on the mount we hear Jesus saying that the law of Moses is not enough. His insistence on no divorce goes hand in hand with his insistence that anger is as bad as murder. This proclamation of the ideal is a proclamation which the Church of the future can never abandon if it is to remain faithful to the gospel. But this says nothing about what one is to do in the case of marital failure. It is not a new thought that the law of indissolubility, in its effort to protect the family as the fundamental social and religious unit, has favoured communal values over personal values. But we should also face the fact that this approach has often blindly overlooked the basic christian doctrine of the forgiveness of sin. One could easily argue that the effort to legalize the pursuit of fidelity has finally become so counter-productive in our time that it is difficult for a great many people to recognize the Church for what it is meant to be: a community of reconciliation, in which penitent people are welcomed in the name of a faithful Lord, no matter what their past has been.