

GROWTH, TENSION AND THE SACRAMENTAL LIFE

By MONIKA K. HELLWIG

IN THE traditions of Israel as they were explicitly translated into christian experience in the teachings of St Paul, marriage itself (the whole length and breadth of it in the span of years and the extensions of family experience) is sacramental (Gen 2,24; Eph 5,32). Since the twelfth century, however, when we attempted to tidy up our understanding of sacraments, we seem gradually to have placed the sacramentality in the ritual of solemnizing a marriage rather than the living of the married life and the raising of a family. The theology, and particularly the ecclesiology, of Vatican II challenges us rather urgently and abruptly to reconsider our understanding, our attitudes and our expectations in this respect.

In the very order of creation, marriage is designed to reveal God and communicate God's loving care. In the complementarity of the sexes, each person discovers in ever-increasing depth both the other and the self. Undreamed of depths of beauty, courage, trust, tenderness and exigence unfold in the intimacy of the relationship, from courtship, even through to the mature years of quiet togetherness and gradual surrender of the world. The discovery is in the sexual encounter itself and also in every casual embrace. It is in the peace of being together and also in the struggle for a living and a family.

Yet, as we look about us, we realize that this is not the whole story of marriage. In the order of creation, marriage is designed to reveal God and communicate God's loving care. But we do not live simply in the order of creation, but rather in the disorder of sin constantly being gathered up into the new order of redemption which, however, is never quite achieved. In the disorder of sin not all things spontaneously speak God's presence and love to us. It is in the disorder of sin that we stand in need of the sacramental in the stricter sense of the word. That is, we stand in need of the sacred moment, the place of communion, the special encounter, that mediates the divine because it is set aside from the ordinariness of life.

In the traditions of Israel, it seems that the command of God to

marry and beget children, set within the total observance of the Mosaic Law within the peoplehood of God's chosen, is intended to create such a sacrament. In the best traditions of Israel, the Law was not an imposition or a burden but a precious gift of divine guidance and aid, transforming spoilt situations and broken relationships with its healing force. Paul, in the New Testament, points out that the Law in his experience had never really been able to do this. The best it could do was to convict of sin by clarifying the situation which still left people helpless to change it. Yet the Law is a tutor and by observing it one learns to discern God's way with the world (Rom 4-7).

Paul points us to the true healing force of God in the person of Jesus encountered in the community of the Risen Christ. That is where we find the true sacrament, the great mystery of redemption. The new commandment of love is set within the new law which is Christ, and within the new peoplehood of God's chosen which is the union of Christ with his Church, creating divine bonds among them. It is in that context that marriage and familial relationships are transformed and healed, so that they are no longer patterns of bullying and manipulation of others for one's own benefit or convenience, but true community of life (Eph 5,21-6,9).

Here the sacramentality of marriage evidently includes the whole pattern of family relationships and is grounded in the insertion of the people and the relationships within the mystery of Christ in his Church. But for Paul the mystery of Christ and his Church is always extremely concrete. The Church is Christ's body and we are its living parts (Eph 5,30). A christian marriage is sacramental because it is inserted into the mystery of Christ and we as community of Christians are the living parts of that mystery in the present. In other words, it is the environment and support of the whole church community actively supporting each family that constitute the family's insertion into the mystery of Christ. It is in that context that christian marriage and family are sacramental and mediate the healing grace of Christ into the problems and difficulties of the human situation.

It is a matter of common observation that our contemporary western society and culture place great strains on family life. The economy and the employment patterns tend to break up the extended family thereby depriving younger couples and parents of the steady support of older members of the family. This isolation is not only a hardship in practical ways, as when there is a need for

emergency childcare or other help. It is a hardship and deprivation in even more important ways. There is a loss of context, of standards of comparison, of exchange of experiences, of counsel and encouragement in difficulties. In more stable, traditional societies the extended family supplies most of these needs. Among Christians it has always been the task of the Church to be a community of common endeavour, encouragement and support. In the present cultural setting the task becomes more urgent. The setting which makes the marriage and family a sacrament in Christ is not simply that of the wedding ceremony but that of the interaction of the local church community.

Changing cultural patterns also place their own strains on the family and on marriage itself. The subtle but pervasive changes in the respective roles played by women and by men in the larger society have an explosive impact on expectations, roles, and relationships within the family. For some time it was customary for Christians to respond to this challenge simply by an exhortation that women's place is in the home. It is quite clear now that for good or for ill, the modern world is increasingly making this solution impossible. For women of the poorer families it has always been impossible. Many marriages break down over this issue, many more are tense and unhappy and, in a very large proportion of families, relationships between parents and children are fraught with resentment and misunderstanding due to the insecurities of the shifting roles. Advertising, films and other fictional representations exacerbate the situation by depicting as normal a life in which people enjoy an unreal freedom from responsibilities, work and hardships. A christian family life, and indeed any healthy human family life, depends on a vigorous and shared opposition to the values and expectations constantly being projected as reality.

In such a context, a large and impersonal parish is not enough to make a marriage and family a sacrament in Christ. Some families begin to build a domestic church by the joint efforts of the parents to meditate the gospel and implement it together, sharing the whole truth of their lives together in charity and praying with each other and with their children. Some also join forces with other families in doing this, meeting in one another's houses, offering help and encouragement in time of need and taking some measure of common responsibility for one another's children. In many parts of the world today, such little domestic churches have grown out of prayer or bible study groups. Some have deliberately set out to be *comunidades*

de base, that is, basic ecclesial communities. Some have incorporated themselves into the larger network of the revived jesuit Sodalities, now named Christian Life Communities, or into the movement of the Focolarini, or some similar organizational structure. Some are part of a local charismatic movement. Many more are very loosely structured and not affiliated with any large organization.

As so often happened in the history of the Church, such groups and initiatives frequently come under official suspicion because they are lay enterprises which seem to exhibit more vitality and inspiration than the established hierarchic institutional structures. There need not, of course, be any opposition or hostility between the two. Such lay initiatives are a rediscovery of the sacramental principle in christian life. They are a rediscovery of the fact that the grace of God is mediated to us through creation and that we are called to cooperate in building up the occasions that mediate an encounter with God's grace. We construct these encounters out of memories and stories of shared experiences.

Sacraments and sacramentals are not, of course, magic. They do not bring us into communion with God without our own involvement and transformation. A pervasive personal and interpersonal transformation is involved, and that means a change of outlook, expectations, sense of identity, interpretation of memories and attitudes to one another.

The bible gives us some very revealing examples of this. There is, for instance the story of Jacob in the desert, setting up the stone to mark the place of a great revelation that transformed him, and naming the place Bethel, the house of God (Gen 28,10-22).

What is important here is that Jacob's dream-vision arose out of his own experience and his own questions about the meaning of life, and that it issued in a designated sacred place which became a family heritage, a repository of memories, hopes, experiences that bound the family together. All the descendants of Jacob had a vested interest in that place which was bound up with their own sense of their identity and their calling. But the memories and the sacred moments in time and space and relationships do not cease with the founding family. They continue through the ages shaping and holding together the great tradition of the people as a whole. They also continue within the families and the tribes, because each family has its significant experiences and memories and questions, which become part of the identity of its members. These cannot simply be captured once and for all by public ceremony and ritual of the

greater tradition of the whole community. Yet they offer hope and meaning and communion with God to the extent that they are truly seen as integrated into the great covenant of God with his people which manifests the divine fidelity through the ages.

Jewish culture effects the integration between the immediate family heritage, whose symbols and ceremonies express what the family members themselves experience, remember and seek, and the great tradition of the people, which is necessarily expressed in classic and ancient forms. Israel achieves this integration mainly in the celebration of the Passover *Seder*. Particularly remarkable about the Passover *Seder* is that it is celebrated in the family, in households, although all Israel celebrates at the same time and on the same general pattern of ceremonial. The ceremony contains permanent obligatory elements, including readings, chants, objects and actions, but it also offers space for improvisation. It offers special ways to include children, even the youngest, and ways to make it a time of family memories, reconciliation, festivity and establishment of identity within the covenant of God's love for his people. It is prayer but it is at the same time fun.

The role which the Passover *Seder* plays in Jewish life, the eucharist is supposed to play for Christians. As we experience the celebration of eucharist today, it does not usually fill that role for most Christians. In the Catholic community, Sunday Mass has not yet recovered from the heavy emphasis on fulfilling the 'Sunday obligation'. In Catholic experience, for the most part, eucharist is something clerically constituted, quite outside the life of families and their everyday lives at home and at work. Behaviour in Church is still expected to be mainly passive attendance. Children in church still see mainly the backs of other worshippers. Pews are alien furniture. Family members usually do not look at one another during the eucharist; they all face in the same direction in the uncomfortable alien furniture, listening to something that does not arise out of their own experience and does not express their questions and attitudes or deal with any of their problems. Adults are often under the impression that the purpose of Sunday Mass has to do with the saving of one's soul after death and the maintenance of the parish in history and society. Moreover, this maintenance of the parish can be onerous and irksome because for many people the parish is little more than a grace-dispensing station promising *post mortem* accrual of benefits. Meanwhile it seems to add to the strains on family life in terms of money, time and energy.

This may appear to be a very pessimistic picture of catholic experience of the eucharist, yet except for the privileged people who have a deep understanding and commitment as Christians, this is the experience of catholic people. Those who have a deeper and more integrating experience of the meaning of the eucharist have often derived it from situations where the celebration of eucharist truly arose out of the community, as in home masses, retreat celebrations, monasteries, and so forth. These celebrations are closer to the eucharist as practised in the very earliest ages of the Church.

If many Catholics today feel that the sacramental life has little to say to family hopes, fears and questions, but runs on a separate and not too relevant track, this is probably due to a gradual process of distancing of the liturgy from the laity through the centuries of christian history. The distinction between clergy and laity was by no means always as sharp as it is today. We have lived through a long period of language distance in the celebration, which has only partly been overcome. We have been through centuries of estrangement from the symbols and imagery that constitute the sacramental actions. From being full participants in the liturgy as our own action in Christ, expressing a reality of our lives, we became spectators only, or even anonymous attenders at an invisible ceremony so that bells had to be rung to inform us what was happening.

The awareness of all this has overwhelmed us in this century. Vatican II endorsed a very thorough new look at what we are as Church and what that means for the way we should worship. The task of re-examining our church life in the light of scripture and tradition and in the context of the societies in which we now live is one that is still largely ahead of us twenty years after Vatican II.

What seems to be coming to the fore in our present experience of crisis and renewal in the Church is a certain self-assertion of the laity as laity, the laity as families, the laity in terms of complex patterns of relationship that are the very stuff of the redemption, because they are the situations in which the world and its history are being structured either as the city of God which is charity and true community or as the city of self which is bullying, manipulation and destruction. In our present world it is clear that the ordinary and continuing sacrament of salvation must be the family.

In the early ages of the Church, Christians did not list their sacraments as seven and make a very sharp distinction between what is effected by those seven and what happens in the rest of life.

They appear to have lived in a more sacramental context. That is to say, by their immersion in the life of the Risen Christ in his community of followers, the ordinary activities of Christians were seen and felt as speaking of God and mediating the covenant of God's healing power in the world. When, therefore, Christians came together to celebrate it was because from their ordinary lives they brought something to celebrate. Their eucharist was indeed an expression of what was happening in their lives, constituting their identity and their community.

What Christians today are rediscovering with excitement and joy in ever great numbers is that God is present to them in the ordinary circumstances of their lives. They feel the urge to put up stones in the desert as markers of the memory, the hope, the new vision and sense of identity and of community. This is not a flight from the Church but a new pilgrimage into the Church. The many lay initiatives growing out of family experiences are a new effort to reintegrate the totality of human experience within the fidelity of God's covenant in Christ. One can but hope and pray that they will be recognized as such and not seen as a threat to the sacramental system. If there is to be life, there must be spontaneity. If there is to be community, there must be the possibility of integrating spontaneity with the classic tradition. If there is to be Church, there must be the redemptive love of Jesus Christ which entails mutual respect and acceptance.