

# AS CHRIST LOVED THE CHURCH

By THOMAS BURKE

THE beginning of the book of Genesis has about it a deceptive simplicity. The story of the creation of the universe is sung in a litany of transparent phrases; 'God said, Let light begin . . . Let a solid vault rise amid the waters . . . Let dry land appear', and so on; each with its doxology, 'And God saw that it was good'.<sup>1</sup> But before man is called to the scene, there is a pause, a deliberation as it were: 'Then God said, Let us make man to our own image and likeness'. And to the simple statement, 'God created man in his own image', is added something more complex and mysterious, 'Male and female he created them'.<sup>2</sup> It would seem that the inspired author wished to imply that in this twofold creation, in all that is man and woman, in the power to love and to perfect love in creation, there is a profound image of the God who is love and whose love is perfected in his creation.

If men of today are conditioned to view sex with shame and confusion, Adam, in the garden of delight, saw in it the splendour of a divine masterpiece and greeted it with an enthusiasm which the holy writer's words seem to echo: 'And God brought her to the man and he cried out, This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'.<sup>3</sup> He saw not only an image of himself, but also of God, in whose image male and female are created.

How far Adam's sin was an abuse of the image we can only surmise. 'A sufficient number of statues and plaques have survived to permit the statement that the serpent was a sexual symbol . . . Should we not say the same thing of a literary context? When the serpent is introduced immediately after the conclusion of an account of the origins of sex, it is difficult to see how this symbolism would not have entered the mind of the Hebrew readers . . . Yet we cannot suppose that the storyteller meant to characterise the sexual appetite itself as the serpent in the garden. He meant the sexual appetite unbridled'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 1, 1-25

<sup>2</sup> Gen 1, 26-27.

<sup>3</sup> Gen 2, 22-23.

<sup>4</sup> McKenzie, J. L., S. J., *The Two-Edged Sword* (Milwaukee 1956), pp. 97-98.

What is certain is that one of the consequences of the first sin was to deface the image of sex. Adam's enthusiasm was changed to accusation: 'She it was who gave me the fruit and I did eat'; and the innocence of sex perished; 'I was naked and ashamed'. It would be interesting to trace the history of the image. Primitive peoples, though recognising it as something holy, were ignorant of its meaning. They attributed to their deities not only love and creation, but also human bodies, making of them male and female gods who united and copulated with an animal grossness, and betraying all the passions of human frailty. There appears to be little difference between these ancient idolatries and that modern confusion which is unable to read the image at all, for the pagan of today sees in sex no more than an instinct which man shares with the animals; the only difference is that he is intelligent enough to vitiate its purpose when it suits him.

It is clear that divine inspiration is needed if man is to recognize the image in which he is made. It is ironical that one of the first in sacred history who was led to recognize it was one for whom the portrait had been destroyed. For the prophet Osee (Hosea) marriage had collapsed; he was left with a heartbroken love for a wife who was unfaithful and wanton. 'Then', he says, 'the Lord's word came to me: To the wife that has lovers to pursue her, show yourself a lover still. The Lord is still Israel's lover, she who has eye but for alien gods'.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Osee had the heart to take back the faithless Gomer; certainly he had the inspiration to speak of God's love for his people in terms of marriage: a marriage in which Israel, the bride, had been unfaithful and God, the spouse, had been constant and merciful. 'I would run, she has said, to those who are my lovers, those gods who give me my food and drink, my wool and flax, my oil and wine. And she does not know that it is I who gave the bread and wine and oil'.<sup>2</sup> It is to Israel the bride, that God, the bridegroom, says:

I will espouse you to myself for ever.  
I will espouse you in justice and rightness,  
in tenderness and love,  
I will espouse you to myself in fidelity  
And you will be faithful to your God.<sup>3</sup>

It is a theme which recurs often in the prophets. Ezechiel's sorrow for Israel's captivity is paralleled by the unmourned death of his

<sup>1</sup> Hos 3, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Hos 2, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Hos 2, 19-20.

wife.<sup>1</sup> Whilst Jeremiah's message of hope to those in exile employs the same image:

I recall the tender days of your youth,  
the love of your engagement day,

And you, for so long have broken your yoke,  
and said, 'I will serve no longer'.

Come home, rebel Israel, and I will show  
anger no longer for I am merciful.<sup>2</sup>

And God's overwhelming and eternal love for his people, seems to find its perfect expression in terms of marital fidelity:

Your Maker shall be a husband to you,  
his name the Lord of Hosts,  
The Lord calls you back, a woman desolate and bereft,  
God says, 'How can anyone repudiate  
the wife of his youth?'

As a young man espouses his bride,  
your Creator espouses you  
And as a husband rejoices in his wife  
your God will rejoice in you.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, the inspired teaching of the prophets progressively revealed to man that the mystery which he possessed, the instinct which caused him to leave father and mother and to cleave to a woman in fidelity, is a privileged participation in the holiness and fidelity of God, a true image of God's own love: his special love for his chosen people.

In speaking of God's marriage to the human race, we must regard the Old Testament more properly as a time of courtship. It remained for the incarnation to bring about the consummation: for it is in the incarnation, in the person of Jesus Christ, that God and man are united, two in one flesh. 'Today', we sing in a christmastide antiphon, 'the Church is united to her heavenly Spouse and the Magi have brought their gifts to the Royal Nuptials'.

This parallel between God's union with humanity and the human device of matrimony is no coincidence nor accident, but rather a part of God's eternal plan. Just as there is one essential man, Jesus Christ, of whom Adam was the prototype and all other men are a

<sup>1</sup> Ezek 24.

<sup>2</sup> Jer 2, 1; 2, 20; 6, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Isai 54, 5-6; 62, 5.

variety of copies, so too there is one essential marriage, that of Christ and his Church, and in the divine plan all other marriages are envisaged as copies of it. It was such knowledge of the Old Testament tradition, coupled with the teaching of our Lord, that led St. Paul to say to the Ephesians: 'Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church'.<sup>1</sup> In the theology of St. Paul, christian marriage has this vocation and this dignity: it is to be modelled on the union of Christ and the Church.

Every christian, by his baptism, is both re-created according to the image and likeness of Christ, and is incorporated into his mystical body; hence it follows that the likeness of Christ and of his Church is represented in both partners of a christian marriage. But matrimony, like every sacrament, constitutes its own particular involvement with Christ. It is the sacrament which commits those who receive it to the Christ who loves the Church. No matter how unconscious they may be of it or how unaware of their dignity, when christians marry, a union is completed which is a model of the great union, the great marriage, between Christ and his Church, and a twofold demand is laid on husband and wife. First of all each must learn to recognise and then to honour in the other partner an image of Christ and the Church; and secondly each must strive to conform his own person to that image, and together with the partner perfect the image of that union.

Further, in the relationship of marriage, man and wife are each called to a particular vocation: the husband is called to an imitation of Christ, and the wife to that of the Church. For in the great marriage of God and the human race it is Christ who is the bridegroom and the Church who is the bride.

¶ What, we may ask, is it that first attracts any particular man to the girl for whom he will leave his home and parents and give the best of himself to win her? What is it that causes a girl to dream, to hope and desire, to seek in one person her joy and her life? Is it not that the would-be lover, consciously or unconsciously, has formed an ideal and seeks someone, or suddenly finds someone, whom he esteems to measure up to that ideal? Alas, too often in our day this ideal is created from many false notions engendered by films, television and popular literature. A much more positive theology of marriage must be taught before young people can be prepared for their true vocation. Young men and women must be so educated that they will spontaneously put to themselves this first question:

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<sup>1</sup> Eph 5, 25.

'Is this the person I can come to know, to respect and to love as Christ or to honour as the Church?'

This recognition, of course, in no way destroys the character nor the personality of the chosen one. Lovers will still see in their partners all their worth, all their natural accomplishments and traits of character, and all those shortcomings which make them individuals distinct from all others. But they must learn to look beyond all these things and seek a dignity to which they can give honour and respect. This recognition is to be sought not only at the beginning of union; it is to be developed as the union increases and intimacy reveals alike the goodness and the weaknesses. Vision must enable each partner to transcend the frailty of a human person, and to give that honour, reverence and love due to one who, in a special way, represents God.

Such vision demands effort; it is so easy to sit down and be content with externals. It also demands honesty; for there is frequently a danger that a man projects an image of his own making and pretends to himself that his partner conforms to it; or, worse still, he tries to force his partner into the mould which he has prefabricated. The man who does that loves no one but himself.

Sometimes there will be unions where the drama of Osee is repeated. Here it will require not the idealism of a vision, but supernatural faith for a woman to see a faithless partner as Christ, to honour in Christ's name one unworthy of honour and to obey one unfit to rule. Many a husband, too, will be reminded that his love will have conformity to the love of Christ in so far as it is to be given to one who represents the Church as it portrayed in the parables: a wheatfield producing weeds and a net bringing to the shore worthless fish. In these circumstances love that is truly founded on the love of God will sustain, perhaps even convert; but even when separation is prudently judged to be a better course than a union which is humanly speaking intolerable, there still remains a supernatural bond and a responsibility for the soul of another.

Marriage is more than an idealism and love more than a vision. To see one's partner as he or she really is, that is, in his supernatural context, is only the beginning. The mystery of christian marriage also demands a labour and a co-operation with grace sought in prayer and the sacraments, so that man and wife bring themselves to conform to that which they are called to represent.

Let us first speak of the role of the husband, who is to make himself 'as Christ' to his wife. There are, of course, many ways of being 'as Christ': the hermit, the missionary, the martyr all imitate Christ;

but the man who is married must be to his wife 'as Christ to the Church'. That is, he must be her head as king and prophet, and he must give himself up for her as priest and victim.

There is an element of contradiction in the phrase 'sex-equality', for the word 'sex' implies difference. Paradoxically, it is only in the spiritual sense and in the spiritual world that the sexes can be equal with that equality which every soul has before Almighty God. A proper appreciation of this equality, the only true and possible equality of the sexes, will serve as a corrective to two dangers: that of attempting to erect a sex equality without proper foundation (the modern heresy), or that of maintaining a male domination which denies just rights to the female partner.

Admittedly, the male is usually capable of the dominant role by the very fact of his physical powers; but to dominate only because of them would be to reduce marriage from a vocation to a biological union. Rather a man's possession of a physical superiority must be an embarrassment, since marriage makes him custodian of something fragile and tender. Particularly in the act of union must the husband be on his guard lest his ability to dominate is presented as something gross and consequently expressive of selfishness rather than of generous love.

Christ is the king of the Church, first of all, because he created it and brought it into being. St. Augustine, drawing a parallel from Eve born from the side of Adam, says the Church was born from the side of Christ hanging on the cross. The husband, following his vocation to imitate Christ, presents a third parallel; for he too 'creates' his wife, his family and his home. A man's creation of his wife is not, of course, the work of the greek Pygmalion and his enlivened model but a more subtle creation: the assistance he must give her in that spiritual metamorphosis which transforms a girl into a woman. Here is a slow and gentle work of enrichment and perfection. The young husband must be prepared to give himself, his wisdom, his counsel and his knowledge; and yet at the same time he must be aware that he is not to impose himself or to dominate in such a way as to destroy the personality of his spouse. As Christ sent his Spirit to the Church 'to teach and to bring to mind all things'<sup>1</sup> so a husband's love must be a similar Pentecost and a new creation in the mind and heart of his wife.

The kingdom of marriage is more than a union of two people; it is

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 14, 25.

a home and a family. Here too, the husband is the king-creator. It is the natural instinct of every young man who thinks of marriage to attempt to possess a home of his own, which will be the context of his life and love. It is as natural as the bird carrying a twig for the nest; but for the christian husband it is a true imitation of Christ. It is the foundation of a church, since the christian family is the fundamental unit of the Church, and itself a church in miniature. Thus a task as prosaic as visiting a building society or papering a room or fitting a cupboard, because of its purpose, shares in the dignity of building a cathedral or a shrine.

The family, it is true, comes into being from the body of the mother; but the parallel still holds. She gives her children life, her blood nourishes them and she gives them birth; but her ability to do all this depends on the power given to her by her husband. Without him she is capable of nothing; for it is he who enlivens her body and makes it fruitful. The Easter vigil liturgy forcibly draws the simile of Christ's work in the Church's womb, the baptismal font. With an unmistakable clarity of symbolism the Christ-candle is plunged into the font: 'May the power of the Holy Spirit come down into this filled font; and may it fertilize all the substance of this water with the power of effecting new birth'.

The little community of marriage looks to the husband not only as its founder but also as its permanent head. He it is who represents the family to the world, gives it his name and accepts responsibility for it. Many of his obligations will appear to be so prosaic, for certainly no one expects to be praised for paying the gas bill; and yet the sacramental nature of marriage calls a man to see a dignity in such things and to accept in them a burden of responsibility which is an imitation of Christ.

The head of the family not only represents it before the world; he is its ruler and law-maker. How far the wife is subject to her husband's authority we will discuss when we consider her role in the family. Here let us no more than remark that the family as a whole must be subject to the father's discipline. 'Just you wait until your father comes home', may have an air of *victoriana* about it; but it is a crystallization of a standard more wholesome than its modern counterpart, where an urge for the free development of personality has driven discipline into disgrace, and an ignorance of the effects of original sin has allowed an excessive liberty which is both disastrous and unfounded. On the other hand, we should not forget that the husband who is striving to imitate Christ must learn to moderate his

discipline with mercy, and his zeal for justice with charity.

Christ is prophet as well as king; therefore the head of the family in his imitation of Christ must also be a prophet: that is, a teacher. Much has been said of the school of mother's knee, and rightly so; but not enough is said of the father's role. It is a mistake to imagine that even the best of schools is an all-sufficient instrument of education, or to believe that school is adequately supplemented by the educative programmes of television or other popular media. The head of the family should also be the source of practical knowledge and wisdom for wife and children. It is for him to give stability where the female character may be prey to emotion and promptings of the heart, to counsel moderation and to regularise the impetuosities and unbridled enthusiasm of youth.

Those ancient civilisations which recognised the patriarchs as leaders and teachers of their communities often gave them another role: that of priest. In this they followed a natural instinct; for if the father is to represent the family before men, he is also to represent it before God, to offer its prayers and sacrifices and to seek God's blessings on it. By the sacrament of baptism every christian is incorporated into Christ and therefore is a sharer in Christ's priesthood; but it is the office of the head of the family to intercede for his family, to seek God's blessings on it and to offer sacrifice for it. There is something touching about a mother assisting her children to lisp their night prayers; but family prayer led by the father of the household has an unsurpassing dignity.

A priest is more than a prayer-leader: he is called upon to offer sacrifice. The priest-head of the family, in his imitation of Christ, is to prove himself a Christ-like priest and victim, offering himself for his church. A man's offering is first of all of himself; and marriage means a constant subordination of the claims of self to the claims of the family. Anyone who marries 'for himself', from any egoistic or sensuous motive, finds only disappointment and frustration; rather he must constantly sacrifice his self-will, self-expression and self-exaltation for the sake of the whole family. For the majority of men there is another form of sacrifice; the long hours and hard physical labour necessary to provide a home, security and education for the family. There are some men who undertake such a labour from ambition; and these are occasionally disappointed when their children fail them. Others labour for generous motives of love; but for the truly christian man this labour is an act of heroic virtue. He sees in it an imitation of the Good Shepherd, giving up his life for his sheep.



If the husband is the Christ of a marriage, his wife is called on to be an imitation of the Church. It is now time to consider what this involves and how she must characterise the Church in its relationship to Christ.

Much of what is involved for the wife follows logically from what we have said about the role of the husband. If he is the leader she is the led; he the teacher, she the taught. All this is summarised in one word, 'docility', which may be defined as 'being easy to teach and willing to obey'.

There are some who regard the marriage promise to obey as an anachronism; but such people have a tendency to regard any obedience whatsoever as an anachronism and incompatible with human dignity. Equality, of course, exists between man and woman, the equality of human dignity and personality before God; but that equality in no way destroys the reality of the difference with which God has endowed woman nor the superiorities with which he has enhanced her, superiorities of beauty, graciousness, intuition and patience, to name but a few. Her body, her intellect and her emotions all speak of a difference, a difference of purpose which does not outrival the male accomplishments but completes them.

If her role of obedience springs from the very nature of her being, then its accomplishment finds its source in love. Just as all men's obedience to God is a work of love, for not only are we commanded to love but, by love, we freely obey; so too the wife's obedience has a two-fold source in love: in the love for the person of her husband and in the love for what he represents. As long as his commands are just, her obedience will be easy when it is referred to its origin. The christian wife will, of course, beware of a weak and excessive docility which is no more than the vice of sloth. She will never persuade herself and those around her that her health, her nerves or any imagined privilege exempt her from her role.

Harmony within the relationship between man and wife will however be more often and more safely achieved as a result of counsel given and taken rather than as the result of negation: even the loving negation of obedience. It is in the ability to give as well as to accept counsel, to become sharers in each other's mind, that the role of the wife reaches its greatest dignity. It was in a domestic situation that a woman said, 'They have no wine'; and she who is honoured for the obedience of her *fiat* is also venerated as a counsellor and a queen. It is beyond the scope of this article to consider the variety of other ways in which a wife in the home is called on to fol-

low Mary, either in Nazareth or at the foot of the cross, or as Mary the type and symbol of the Church. It is sufficient to say that every woman has her honour and dignity in a christian home because, consciously or unconsciously, she is accepted there as another Mary.

The Church is not only the obedient spouse of Christ; she also glories in her fruitfulness. She gives him his children from generation to generation, until the number of the elect will be complete. She is the mother of those children who are born in the womb of her font, and whose education Christ entrusts to her. In this also a wife is called to be an imitation and a representation of the Church. It would seem that we are now moving into the era of the planned family, a time when parents will be able to choose freely for themselves the number of their children and at the same time will be able to use their marriage with little more restriction than that imposed by Friday abstinence or the Sunday Mass obligation. It will be a blessing if such knowledge removes from marital relations the desire to have recourse to sinful means; there is however the danger that the fruitfulness intended by God will be deliberately avoided for selfish or hedonistic motives. The reasons which permit husband and wife to limit their fruitfulness are summarized by Pope Pius XII in his celebrated allocution to midwives under four heads – eugenic, economic, medical and social. The problem for the future will be in the application of these criteria to individual cases: an honest solution to it will be possible only for those families who have a fundamental desire for supernaturally motivated fruitfulness and see the excusing causes as impediments to their aspirations rather than excuses from fulfilling their obligations. Such a desire for fruitfulness will run against the current of public opinion. It will frequently mean mockery and derision, it will often cause suffering and labour; it but is also brings its rewards both in this world and on that day when generation after generation will proclaim their parents and enter with them into the Kingdom.

Having spoken of the role of husband and of wife in their imitation of Christ and of the Church there remains a word to be said on their mutual love: that too must be a replica of the love which unites Christ and the Church. As we have already seen, christian marriage transforms the poles from and to which the current of love flows, since each husband is called on to be Christ and love as Christ and each wife to be the Church and love as the Church; therefore love itself takes on a supernatural character and becomes, in all reality, charity.

Love, so transformed, has its special characteristics. First of all there is reverence and tenderness: a respect not only for the other person in herself or himself, but also for what she or he represents. Secondly there is strength: because when one loves beyond and above the humanity of the partner, one has a reason for loving which transcends weakness, imperfection, temperament or weariness. Thirdly, such love brings to physical union a purity which both elevates it and at the same time protects it from the debasement of grossness or prudery.

Like Christ's own charity, marital love must be sacrificial. The husband, as priest-victim, must consume his life for his family; the wife and mother, in her obedience and in the burdens involved in her fruitfulness, is also committed to a life of sacrifice. For either of them, such a life can be no more than a burden unless it is inspired by a charity which gives meaning to sacrifice, and seeks in the work of sacrifice a religious act offered to God and intended to bring his blessings on the family.

Finally, Christ loves the Church with an eternal love; so too the love of marriage must have about it the quality of eternity and endurance. It goes without saying that it is destined to endure throughout the life-time of the partners; but St. Paul, in his advice to widows<sup>1</sup> and the Church, in her refusal to repeat the nuptial blessing, would seem to stretch it into eternity. Hence if we began this consideration by seeing marriage as a replica of God's love brought out of Eden, we can also see it as a foretaste of the supreme love which every man is destined to enjoy in the great marriage of Christ and the Church, to be consummated in the eternal court of heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 7,40.