

# TWO IN ONE FLESH

By EILEEN and PETER WALSH

WE RECEIVED the invitation to write a joint article on marriage with two hollow groans, cast the letter away, and hoped to forget about it. When the gentle reminder inevitably came, we realized that it was too late to say no. In our more harmonious moments we boast that we complement each other – which is a kinder way of saying that we have learnt never to paint the bathroom together. To write an article on marriage together was a prospect even more fearsome. E. is active in the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, exploring the subject of marriage and *au fait* with most of the recent christian literature on the subject; P. is an academic, maintaining with characteristic modesty that writing demands professional techniques. We agreed that E. would do a first draft and P. would tidy it up. But the draft seemed to P. much too dominianic (a genial insult to an old friend); if people want that kind of approach, he said justly, they will turn to Jack Dominian's *Christian Marriage*, *The Marriage Relationship Today*, and *Marital Breakdown*. So P. tried his own approach, incorporating some of the first draft. 'It reads like a fireside chat', said E. As our brief was to witness to growth through reconciliation, and (perhaps more important) as the ball was back in her court, she suggested that we should ask the editor to put the article at the back of the issue, pabulum for the tired reader.

We've been married for twenty-two years now, with four boys and a girl to show for it (unpopular at the moment with Population Countdown, but waiting for our medals as heroes of the United Kingdom in 1984). We are bastions of the middle class – car in the garage, deep-freeze in the kitchen, children at fee-paying schools, covenant to Oxfam. We applaud at a safe distance the english couple who auctioned their furniture to help the starving in Bangladesh. We mirror the speaker from Farm Street (desirable area, central heating) who came to suggest what we might give up for the third world. Insulated from the more heroic battle-grounds, we parade our commitment in less demanding ways.

Growth through reconciliation to witness to Christ's work of redemption? We have had it so easy by comparison with most.

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P. with a decently-paid and satisfying job, so no acute financial worries and an avenue of retreat at most times. E. with a congenial part-time job, teaching mixed-up adolescents, allowing her to get off her own children's backs. No children unwanted, though the last greeted with initial dismay when conceived in the languors of a long Toronto winter; he has turned out the most angelic-natured. No insurmountable sexual frustrations, only occasional anxieties in the round of Vatican roulette so memorably described in the only catholic novel we know, David Lodge's *The British Museum is falling down*. Neither of us a bored alcoholic. The children likely to survive the educational chaos presided over by a politician and mounted by his professional educationists. No drugs on the horizon so far. Few if any of these blessings have come from growth by reconciliation; Aristotle would have called them the gifts of fortune, and we settle for the christian equivalent with our fingers firmly crossed.

We suppose we owe at least ninety per cent of any marital growth visible to our respective families. Both of us hail from second- or third-generation irish immigrant stock, with its huge strength of family solidarity and tribal cohesion. Within the ranks of our relatives and close family connections we witnessed examples of astonishing vagaries of marital situation; by contrast we witnessed also the faith and self-sacrifice of our own parents in daunting material circumstances. We saw not only the stresses but also the techniques with which to cope with them. (Father's conspiratorial whisper, with the exhausted mother in the kitchen spoiling for a fight: 'Watch out, she's trailing her coat'. Or Mamma's greeting to a dishevelled husband arriving home a week before Christmas a drink or two to the bad: 'I see that the festive season has begun'.) In these close-knit unions, quitting under any circumstances was unthinkable. The message was clear that marriage was a life-long thing, that we had better find a partner with the same vision, and that pulling out would be unthinkable.

What have we contributed? The likely area of possible growth together is obviously the mundane world of shared parenthood; a childless couple would have to reach out beyond themselves in another direction. Sickness and physical discomfort in pregnancy. The testing experience of shared sleeplessness – the baby bawling for food at 4 a.m., the three-year-old having the usual dream of Indians or crocodiles under the bed, the child with croup inhaling the healing fumes of Friar's balsam. The youngest no sooner out of the critical years than the teenagers taking over, never closing a door that they

can slam, or returning home so late that you sleeplessly long for the comfort of the slammed door. Learning to relegate your own activities to give priority to the run, to the music-lesson or the game of dominoes. Learning equally to let go, to stop trying to mould your child to your own image and likeness.

But this is a one-sided growth. We learned in due course that it isn't necessary to have both parents around all the time. The proper priority owed to children can be sustained over short periods by one parent. We both have interests which take us away for short periods. In these days when as many wives have professional qualifications and specialized abilities as have their husbands, it is a nonsense that the mother's place should be always in the home; there is no reason why she too should not have the occasional sabbatical period to exploit abilities and interests. There is frequently a bonus on both sides – the mother coming back after a few days enlivened and more loving, the father obtaining deeper insights into the trials of the daily domestic round. Though the partners may be devoting themselves to subjects quite outside the other's competence, the domestic support offered by the one guarantees a share in the spiritual and intellectual growth experienced by the other. The degree to which the marriage then becomes a mutual admiration society depends on the degree of irony purposefully adduced. One who teaches mixed-up teenagers is never short of ammunition to direct at the ivory tower. And one whose chief experience of the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council is of a succession of clerics all claiming a connection with the Council as they arrive for bed and board need not go short of the appropriate epigram.

Such growth through reconciliation we hope will rub off on to our children, so that in this family atmosphere the seeds of their own christian commitment may begin to sprout. The kind of growth we have had to experience here has been a shattering of our complacency. In common with dozens of catholic acquaintances whose life is dominated by a generous christian practice, we are learning to live with the undergraduate offspring who seems totally bored and apparently untouched by the cornerstone of our own lives. It is all too easy to look back and to blame a virtually pagan catholic school or a lifeless parish. It is salutary to realize that our cosy role as self-declared witnesses to Christ has made no impression, that one cannot produce christians on a production-line. The realization that man proposes but God disposes may even help us to stop breathing oppressively down the necks of the others.

Sex. The parents to whom we owe so much gave us not the slightest inkling of its importance in their marriages. We knew where we stood; the final consolation permissible only in marriage. We accepted that our loving was to be open to begetting children, and piously hoped that there wouldn't be too many. But we didn't need the assurance from the kindly old priest in confession who urged us not to hold back from communion because of previous frolics in bed. It was only later that the counselling role spotlighted the importance of this advice; so many of the case-histories concern wives who tolerate sexual intercourse only to have children (and contrary to what may be expected, so few turn up with contraception difficulties).

Our marriage has lived through dramatic developments in the Church's attitudes towards love and marriage. We began under the cloud of *Casti Connubii* and its forbidding insistence that the safe period, the only licit means of birth-control, should be a last resort for pressing medical or social reasons only. To suggest that it was widely disregarded would be if anything an understatement. It was said that the commonest purchases in catholic repositories were the daily missal and Halliday Sutherland's *Laws of Life* with its charts of the fertile period in the menstrual cycle. (I wish I knew if the story is true that a gremlin or the spirit of St Jerome monkeyed with the dates and caused the best-laid schemes to gang agley.) In *Humanae Vitae* the emphasis has changed totally, and the importance of a healthy sexual relationship, within the frame of the welfare and reciprocated affection of the married couple, is universally accepted.

*Humanae Vitae* did of course turn its thumbs down towards the pill and urged greater research into the rhythm method. We have continued to use the second not because we can see a clear logic in the argument against the pill but because we follow the rules of the club. Naturally enough, many clergy have only the haziest of ideas about the rigours of the rhythm method, and cannot imagine what the problems are. But quite apart from the daily calculations with thermometer and graph-paper, those who wish to exclude all risks find themselves confined to a few S-days per month. It is a nice question whether this combination of partial restraint and feverish activity does much to foster spiritual growth. On the one hand, any such rudimentary asceticism may be accepted as a form of christian discipline, which in the pauline formulation may help us renounce the earthly and aspire to the heavenly. On the other side, recent advances in the theology of marriage stress that the self-giving of each

partner should be physical as well as spiritual, and the basic criticism of the rhythm method is that there is so little rhythm about it – the french horn, so to say, which comes in only twice in the symphony. It has been said that just as we encounter Christ in the confessional in the sacrament of penance, so in matrimony we encounter him in the double bed as well as in the kitchen. To which it must be replied that the washing-up encounters offer the greater scope under the present dispensation.

Our own worm's eye view hopes that it witnesses a record of tortoise-like growth during these twenty-two years. We think that the influence of our shared life has made us both less neurotic, more humane to each other and to other people, more caring of our children, and certainly more assured of the value of the sacraments and of prayer on the course of our marriage. We both admit to feeling freer to be the persons we are – *sumus quod sumus* – and also readier to accept the actuality of the other rather than some alternative model. Our failures, frustrations, joys, fulfilments we accept as part of the mysterious growth through each other towards Christ. In our marriage-vows we were exhorted to love each other as Christ loves the Church. It's hard not to recall the joke of the old irish lady who sat through a theological disquisition on marriage, and as she came out of church was heard to say: 'I wish I knew as little about marriage as that fella'. Do we love each other as Christ loves his Church? One suspects that the equation has little practical meaning for many of us; the pauline allegory is not our idiom. It is hard for us to envisage our marriage in such apparently abstract terms. It is easier to envisage ourselves as the limbs of the body, drawing together and sustaining each other with Christ as our head.

## II

So we're all right, Jack. If we can do it (so far at any rate), why can't you? Of course, life-long marriage is the norm. But the range of crippling obstacles is so immense. The advantages we enjoy – the grounding we had in our families, our will from the start to work at it together, the easy communication between us, absence of financial worries, happy sexual relationship, freedom from physical and mental illness – make us all the more aware of the possible pitfalls. It seems to us pretty remarkable that in Scotland the number of current divorces is still only a quarter of the number of marriages. This is refreshing evidence that in the huge majority of cases here the

implicit intention at the outset is to make the marriage last. The frivolity of attitudes manifested to marriage in, say, California, is no sane basis for the model of a norm in marriage.

But in any community, in any christian community, irretrievable breakdown both exists and is seen to exist. In many of these cases there has been a real marriage. If we are serious in our protestations that the victims of such a situation can seek consolation in the compassion of Christ, it follows that they have a right to expect support from the christian community in which they live. Some need such help to continue living within their situation. For others this may be wholly impossible, in that their whole integrity may be threatened or destroyed. They may have chosen partners who fail to respond to their most basic needs. They may be battered and bitter, their loving faculties blunted. They see the damage being dealt to their children, and may decide to break away. All too often the price of healing is intolerable loneliness; and, maturer from their unhappy experiences, they choose another partner in or outside civil marriage.

There are obviously numerous cases where no ecclesiastical court could hope to pronounce the first marriage invalid. So there are few problems to which it is more important to devote a pastoral solution. Happily more and more moral theologians are stressing that such individuals caught up in a canonically irregular union may be admitted to the sacraments, provided that they are striving to live as christians and provided that scandal can be avoided. The difficulty as always is the gap between the theory and the practice; although responsible Vatican officials press the importance of such pastoral solutions, there are all too many clerics at the local level who feel that they must maintain the hard line, and who need the encouragement of the Ordinary and his canonical advisers to put this compassionate christianity into effect.

It is likewise heartening to note the great recognition within the Church since Vatican II of the fact that many 'marriages' have not been marriages at all. The new grounds for granting a decree of nullity, notably 'lack of due discretion', point the way to a solution of the most intransigent problems faced by the matrimonial courts of the Church. 'Lack of due discretion' means the inherent inability of one or both partners to establish and sustain a normal marriage. The onus naturally rests on the applicant to prove that such a deficiency existed from the beginning; but a partner's behaviour during the marriage will constitute the main proof of its prior existence. There should be no insuperable difficulty in obtaining nullity de-

crees in cases of homosexuality, severe psychopathy, or serious obsessional illness. But there is a range of problems centring on inadequate personality and personal immaturity, where difficult decisions remain. Is a shot-gun wedding, to which the couple agree solely because a baby is on the way, a proper marriage? If a couple run away from school at 16 to be married without any instruction and with a hazy notion of life-long commitment, is that a proper marriage?

Marriage as life-long commitment is the linchpin of the life of the Church. If only we could harness our anti-energies to the more constructive task of ensuring that every couple married in church has the real support of the christian community, and the realization that the Church mirrors for them the understanding and caring Christ.