MARRIAGE AND VIRGINITY IN VATICAN II

By DOROTHY BERRIDGE and MARY TUCK

By way of introduction

THIS article is a highly personal account, necessarily compressed, arising out of a series of discussions between two catholic women, one married, the other a religious. We knew before we began, an awareness that deepened in the course of our discussion, that we were each happily committed in our chosen way of life. As friends since our student days at Oxford University, we were able to share ideas and experiences in an open and trusting way that added to the value of our discussion at the personal level. Finally, we had each recently specialized as research psychologists, Sister Berridge in psychology of religion and education, Mrs Tuck in attitude research. But in the present account we have deliberately steered clear of references and footnotes, preferring to assess both the theological principles of the documents, and those of our own special discipline, in the light of our personal experience of marriage or religious life. While welcoming the emphasis given in the present *Supplement* to theological and historical comments and interpretations, we felt that our own most useful contribution lay in the insights arising out of our own personal lived experience.

As a starting point, we both rejoiced in the predominantly positive approach of the documents to the contemporary world in which we were professionally involved. We found this to be particularly true of *Gaudium et Spes*, a document which, while presenting traditional catholic teaching familiar to us since childhood, used a language that would not have been completely alien to certain of our professional colleagues. Particularly relevant was the emphasis on self-transcendence at the heart of man: we thought of those modern scientists and students of behaviour who are beginning to re-discover the central role of some kind of integrating factor in human life, and who have moved beyond the 'atomistic' phase in their understanding of man. They too would accept the document's emphasis on man as a creature aware of his own limitations, boundless in his desires, and by his interior qualities more than the sum of his individual make-up. On the whole, the document showed an awareness and an appreciation of the values of the contemporary social sciences and what they are contributing to our understanding of man and of his needs and of the factors that shape his behaviour. We were particularly interested in the attention given to the interaction between the individual and society: this was a theme echoed in *Perfectae Caritatis*, the document which deals specifically with religious life, as well as in the teaching related to the human family in the context of christian marriage as given in *Gaudium et Spes*. This point became focal in our discussions.

The individual and community

The role of the family is splendidly stated as the foundation of society, a group in which individuals help each other to grow to maturity and to integrate their own personal rights with other demands made by life outside the family. This, we felt, needed affirming in a time when certain psychologists, such as Laing, are attacking the family as an institution, seeing it as a negative and destructive force, taking over and suppressing the individuality of its members, conditioning and even deforming its children. We accepted, however, that there were families in our midst quite inadequate for the exacting task that was expected of them, with dire consequences for their members and for society as a whole. But we felt that this could be countered more by supportive help and by social reform, rather than by abolishing or radically transforming the role of the family as we have come to know it in western society. Whether this concept of marriage and family life reflected in the documents is sufficiently universal in an age when the Church is beginning to adapt itself to more local cultural norms is a question we did not have time sufficiently to pursue, but was one we felt needed to be faced more squarely.

As far as religious life was concerned, we recognized a parallel between the charges made on the 'nuclear' family by Laing and those levelled in recent years against certain types of religious communities, with their repressive and over-institutionalized patterns of interaction and behaviour. But here, as with the family, we accepted the positive emphasis given by the documents to the role of the community of the family, or the family of the community, in helping its members to grow to individual maturity while harmonizing with the needs of others. Within the context of *Perfectae Caritatis* as with those documents dealing with priestly life and formation, the supportive role of community, in enabling the individual to face the difficulties of a life of celibacy or consecrated virginity, was especially marked, but this led us on to further discussions. Was there not a tendency for 'community' as such to play too large a role in the life of the present-day religious? Today's stress on community means that religious are spending more time in informal and even domestic interaction with their own communities; group discussions are becoming the norm as more decision-making is left to be settled at the local level, as apostolic and governmental policies have become decentralized, and time together has to be allowed for this. This is being paralleled by a move to develop smaller, more closely-knit communities in which more face-to-face relationships can be built up, allowing for more genuine liturgical interaction as well as for the development of supportive personal relationships. Individual religious may welcome these moves, but it does raise the further question, what then is the purpose, functionally, of the life of consecrated virginity, if one substitutes the love of the community for the love of husband and children?

Traditionally, and still central to the present documents, consecrated life in virginity has been defended, or recommended, as liberating the human

heart in a unique way, freeing the individual more for 'the things of the Lord'. Yet we also accept that every human being needs others in order to love Christ in them. The life of a religious may liberate from the need to love and serve a family. But we now seem to be substituting the love, and service, of a community. Why should one way of life be any more 'liberating' than the other? When we examined our lives as professional psychologists, for example, we found that each way of life consumed just as much *time*. For the mother of four children, there were not simply domestic tasks of planning food, cooking and washing dishes, seeing that the washing machine was mended, putting the baby to bed; there were the more important tasks of helping with homework, listening to worries about personal relationships, noticing that one member of the family seemed less happy this month and wondering why, finding time to talk to everyone. No matter how much of the routine activity can be delegated – and it is possible to do much of this – at least three to four hours a day can be swallowed up, so that there is less time for following one's special vocation to do research. As a married woman, there is less time to be a good psychologist than one would be without family responsibilities. Chastity ought to bring with it certain freedoms from such ties, allowing for more single-minded concentration on affairs outside the family. If, then, we find that for the religious, community is beginning to absorb as much *time* as for the married woman, there must be something being said about the *nature* of the love involved. Is it being suggested (possibly in a disguised, non-overt way) that sexual love as such makes it more difficult to love God, while non-sexual love for one's community really 'liberates the heart'? This is not what either of us would accept, especially as the documents themselves specifically admit that the love of a spouse can be an instrument of sanctity. Was there an inconsistency here?

For the religious, however, such arguments about *time* available for professional involvement are only secondary. Even for a member of an apostolic congregation, apostolic work is only one aspect of being committed to 'the things of the Lord', just as child-bearing and rearing is one aspect of the vocation of marriage. It is more in terms of an inter-personal relationship, in the case of the religious directly with Christ, that the vocation must be seen, a relationship expressed in and arising out of personal prayer as much as in service of one's fellow men, at whatever professional level. Consecration to Christ in virginity is one essential aspect of this, one that is accepted and lived rather than justified, precisely because this is where one belongs and knows, despite the many difficulties arising, that the Lord wants one. This for many religious must be the sole motive for following and persevering in this special vocation. Virginity for the religious is primarily an existential state; it is not justifiable simply for the sake of greater apostolic availability, even though this may sometimes be a consequence. And if the greater call to community enables us to deepen this realization, then it is right, even at the expense of *time* for the job in hand. And even here one could maintain that what was being lost in quantity was being offset by increase in quality,

if it were really possible to argue in this way.

All this seemed to be a new problem for both married women and religious arising to a certain extent out of sociological factors. A generation ago, it was quite clear that chastity did give more time for the service of the Lord; it had a purely practical value that was quite obvious and made it less necessary to ponder too deeply on its other values. Each of us found we had an aunt who had become a nun, one in a teaching, the other in a nursing order; for them it was quite clear that they would be able to give more time to wider apostolic work than our own mothers who became married. They were prepared to sacrifice the satisfactions of married life to serve God in this way, just as our mothers were able to concentrate on the full-time role of bringing up a family. But this was less clear for each of us today. We both had to combine our apostolic and personal vocations with our secondary commitments. As a married woman, Mary can give more time to her professional vocation than would have been possible in the thirties; Dorothy, as a religious, has possibly less time for purely apostolic work than would have been possible in a previous generation, when religious communities were run in a more hierarchical way, with a ready supply of domestic help, within and without the community. But the growing together of the two roles has made it necessary for us each to understand the specific virtue of chastity as such, as well as the obvious enrichment of each of our lives that such changed sociological factors have also introduced.

Marriage and virginity as sign

If then, we no longer see consecrated virginity as freeing the religious for greater availability in terms of *time*, there still remains the question of the *quality* of love involved. It is possible to read into the documents the feeling that sexual love of man and wife, even within the context of christian marriage, is somehow less good, less pure, than the state of chastity. We are aware, as psychologists, of the unconscious factors at this level that may well have led religious of the past to choose a life of celibacy out of such a sense, or out of feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. But the documents themselves also allow for this, in their recommendation of the screening of candidates for the priestly and religious life, and admit that such motivation is not what we are really looking for. The demands of this way of life are such that an equal, if not a higher, standard of personal integration is required as for the married state: celibacy can no longer be seen as a means of escape. The emphasis given to the theology of marriage and sexuality in recent years has been such that chastity is seen as the sacrifice of something essentially good, rather than as an alternative to something less good; while the documents continue to talk of 'dangers' and 'threats' against which the celibate or consecrated religious has to guard, there is a more positive line evident. As within marriage, most of the dangers and threats come from the human limitations of the individuals concerned, from their own inadequate personalities and lack of fulfilment rather than being inherent in their chosen

state. It may well be that the work now being developed in marriage counselling, and the factors emerging as responsible for marital breakdown, will illuminate many of the problems faced at various stages of their life-history by celibates and religious; in the same way as it is being proposed that we need some measure of screening of inadequate personalities for marriage as well as for religious life.

In many ways, the problems of the religious and the married offer a striking parallel; each has its sacrificial element, as must the life of any christian, and this should not dismay us. But the sacrificial element of the consecrated virgin is essentially a public one, one that still offers a stumbling block to those not called to it, even within the membership of the Church itself. It must always be a Christo-centric choice, linked with and reflecting Christ's own sacrifice, and incidentally his own celibacy, as well as drawing its own special grace from him. It is a public statement of the possibility of living a sacrificial life which is fruitful because centred on Christ and drawing its value from him, perhaps all the more necessary when both psychology and theology are putting before us the rightness and goodness of human fulfilment through sexual relationships at their deepest level.

This is one possible value that chastity can bring to the debate on contraceptives, which appears to many to be expressed in negative and prohibitive terms, in *Gaudium et Spes* as well as in the subsequent papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Many married couples and religious alike registered at least grief and doubt at the dismissal of the practice of birth-control as an expression of self-love, the worship of pleasure and illicit practices against human generation, rather than as a serious decision taken for loving, unselfish and social reasons. But many religious and celibates have also been forced to re-evaluate the reality of the sacrifice in their own state of life, if such high standards of sacrificial self-control were still being put before married couples as the ideal expected of them by the Church. The present reaction against priestly celibacy can possibly be seen as one reflection of the same awareness among both laity and clergy of the need for greater personal responsibility for oneself and others with whom one is involved. In so far as these arise out of a deeper theological insight into human sexuality and the wider implications of personal fulfilment, both are not only good and necessary but also inevitable consequences of the world we live in. But there is also a counter-reaction that these are seen as goods and ends in themselves, against which the chosen state of consecrated virginity will stand out even more clearly as a sign, a stumbling block and even a glory, possibly the one remaining prophetic element of the traditional three vows. It is certainly the vow that is put in first place, together with poverty and obedience, in the documents, as evidence of the centrality of virginity to the religious state as we understand it today. But there is also a possible danger that chastity itself could become a 'countersign'. In so far as the life of the chaste religious is seen as a sign that the Church (and Christ in her) evaluates sexual and parental love as an *impediment* to the love of God, then real harm could continue to be done as it may have been in the past.

Marriage and virginity as vocation

In the final analysis, we were agreed that each of us was being fulfilled in her own way of life, simply because this was her vocation; our particular professional orientation as psychologists was a highly valued part of this vocation, but not as either the primary or secondary element of our lives. We had become more aware of the value and the rivalling claims of community in our lives; we could discuss with each other the personal sacrifices that we had never really thought to be absent from the other's life, no matter how desirable her choice may have appeared to each of us at various times. We also accepted that many of the difficulties that we had encountered arose out of our own personal make-up, and the human failings of the other members of our immediate circle with whom we had to interact, rather than from the state of marriage or virginity as such. We valued our insights as psychologists into human personality, its needs and stages of development, as helping us to accept the necessary limitations imposed upon us by the way of life we had each chosen; we were also encouraged to feel that people in all walks of life could be helped by the professional counsellors to face up to the consequences of a serious decision made earlier in life, no matter how hard it might be for some individuals most of the time, and for most individuals some of the time, to live with unforeseen developments most of all within themselves.

We ended by speculating on possible forms of community structures for religious of the future, if, as we were convinced, both marriage and virginity were meaningful and viable vocations within the wider christian community. We were both only too aware of the problems that must arise out of a life lived in a small, single-sex community of celibates, no matter how sacrificial and committed apostolically. Was there not a case for developing something more contemporaty on the lines of the Third Orders of old where the 'core' of people with a full 'religious' vocation could interact with a wider, more supportive group of christians of either sex, married or unmarried, as members of an apostolic community? Perhaps our existing religious communities could seek for new ways of embedding themselves in a larger christian community, rather than continuing the search, which could itself become obsessive, for essentially 'communal' values within the religious community itself. Such communities could provide some sort of 'dining in' arrangements such as exist within an Oxford college, as one way of regular interaction; communal liturgies, retreats and study conferences would be included, providing a rich spiritual-apostolic background for the non-consecrated members, while liberating the 'core' members from the kind of suffering, inbred isolation one occasionally sees in small communities of religious today. Such communities would be a contemporary version of the medieval monastic centres, reflecting and influencing the local environment at a more realistic level, and entirely, we feel, within the spirit of the documents of Vatican II.