

# THE CALL TO PERFECT CHARITY

By JEAN BEYER

**C**HRISTIAN CHASTITY IS the virtue which directs our affective life, our human instincts and our sexual activity towards God. It is this chastity which makes possible that 'marriage of true minds' and hearts as well as physical harmony between those who love each other, in their every expression of love. It thus assures a self-mastery in loving, one which emanates from love of God and respect for the nobility of his creation. It puts human love at the service of creation and the transmission of life. This is how one might describe the life-work of a husband and wife in love with each other: they give themselves mutually, consecrate themselves to bringing up their children. It is for this task precisely that christians whose vocation is marriage prepare themselves. Marriage is the sacrament and sign through which God unites husband and wife so that in union with him they may be a source of life and love.

## 1. *Christian Marriage and Virginity*

Every christian, whether celibate or married, is called by the grace of God to express a perfect christian chastity in his life. This perfection flows from the love which unites a person to God and to his fellow-men in Jesus Christ. It is in the charity of God that husband and wife come together, love each other and share God's creative work in giving their love to each other. Their love is truly christian only if all its various expressions are enclosed within the divine love: in the love that they reveal to each other by loving their children, and in the love that they offer to all who turn to them for comfort and support. The christian household should be a home of charity.

Married chastity in its most perfect form is therefore the sanctification of human love through God's love; and this involves the gifts of the Spirit which are cardinal christian virtues – wisdom and understanding, fortitude and fear of the Lord. Chastity is at the service of the mutual self-giving of husband and wife when they

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love each other body and soul, in accordance with the laws of human life and of the Gospel. The dignity and worth of this chaste union is shown at its best when it truly symbolizes the love which unites God with his people, and Christ with his Church. Only the one who loves in a fully human way can love God with his whole being. Christian marriage is both the training ground and the verification of this kind of love.

However, the gift of self is only complete when it is wholly accepted. God alone can receive our love so completely; the human person is incapable of receiving this total and definitive gift of love. When a human being is offered such a love, he cannot guarantee in himself the fidelity that this gift requires; nor can he make a full response to the love he receives. The deeper love becomes, the more it desires to give itself to God. It is far from impossible that the married couple who, in the course of their love for each other, have learned by degrees the real generosity of charity, should be called on to give themselves personally to God. They often re-discover each other in the God who is love by a renunciation of more limited mutual joy that is often crucifying. The process by which a christian marriage develops into union with God is a purifying experience; but, as far as this life is concerned, it stands as the perfection of conjugal love. God may call them to give themselves to him directly, and yet leave them firmly united to each other.

Certain christians have a *special vocation*. By means of grace, they may be able to make this direct and total gift of themselves to God. In this case they give up the joys of conjugal love so as to offer themselves to God once and for all. Their love is directed towards God, the sole object of any total and definitive gift. In him it finds an answer and a tranquillity which purely human love fails to provide. This gift to God is a virginal gift; it knows the unity and the vital energy of a love which is predominantly spiritual. The loving faith behind this offering is the earthly prelude to the heavenly contemplation of God. This virginal gift to God provides the ultimate perspective of christian conjugal love; for the married couple it is the symbol of their love and the guarantee of their fidelity. Thus, these two states of life, marriage and consecrated celibacy, are an example and support to each other. The married couple is a sign of the virginal love which unites God and those consecrated solely to him; virgins are a sign, here on earth, of the goal which the married couple who love each other in a truly christian way are striving to reach.

Consecrated chastity, the chastity of the virgin, has been called 'perfect chastity' because the human person here and now is entirely concentrated on God, the source of all love. By their love of God those who are consecrated live out the most perfect expression of the gift of charity, a love given over entirely to God, so as to make an ever more generous response to his everlasting love. This gift of love goes so deep that body and soul are brought into a complete and loving harmony by a union which is unique, steadfast, infinite and eternal. The very exclusiveness of this love of God permits human love to be both unique and universal in Jesus Christ.

The *gift of consecrated love* which constitutes perfect chastity needs on this earth to be continually deepened and purified. A creature who loves God can never ultimately achieve in his own heart that divine charity which is absolute and everlasting. It is true that it will go on expanding in response to the divine love which 'graces' a man; but no matter how much divine grace penetrates and expands the human affection, this grace is still unable to make the human heart an adequate receptacle for the infinite love of God. This continual ascent in love is the basic law of consecrated chastity. Yet love for God through Jesus Christ is love for men in Jesus Christ. Whoever consecrates himself to the kingdom of God or gives himself to the Father through Jesus Christ must be united in Christ to all those whom Christ came to save. The consecrated person must love every created being, at least in desire; but this universal, almost superhuman, aspect of his love must find a direct and practical means of expressing its universality. This perfect chastity must continue to develop through devotion and consecration to all those whom Christ loves. Formation to perfect chastity requires that one's devotion to and affection for others finds ever new depths and heights. It demands a prayer which is ever more apostolic, and a love of God which grows in purity, vigour and intensity.

We must distinguish here between perfect chastity and *consecrated virginity*. Virginity is a complete gift to God. To be total, love for God must be pure, unconditional and free of all worldly attachment. This total detachment, which is like martyrdom, the gift given to God when a man dies for him in a spirit of perfect charity, is symbolized, accepted, promised and already begun by the commitment to practise the three evangelical counsels. To live this counsel of consecrated virginity without practising an equal detachment in a poverty which is at least spiritual, and in perfect obedience, means a failure to live up to one's gift to God perfectly, a failure to make him

the gift of one's whole self. The purity of consecrated chastity can only be appreciated in the light of the other counsels of poverty and obedience, which signify the same kind of spiritual gift to God and abandonment to his love. A consecrated celibacy lived out in a spirit of avarice or disobedience to God is a celibacy contradicted by one's life. Within it there are two violent and conflicting tendencies: the one a total giving, the other a possessive and arrogant egoism. The authenticity of consecrated chastity depends then on the quality, wholeness and perfection of love, practised and publicly manifested in the Church by the profession of the three counsels.

## 2. *Consecrated life and christian marriage*

The members of Institutes of the consecrated life are obliged to dedicate their lives to God by renouncing marriage and making profession of a 'perfect' life within the Church. Hence it may seem strange, when we are trying to construct a theology of this consecrated state, that we should lay such stress on the relationship between this life and the state of matrimony. Yet on reflection, christian marriage, which members of this state renounce, is and always will be a value for those who renounce it. Renunciation motivated by feelings of superiority, anxiety or fear of responsibility, or of reluctance to undertake the obligations of conjugal life, would be absurd. Without a true comprehension of the wonder of marriage there can be no real understanding of the meaning of the consecrated life.

Perhaps the secular Institute provides the clearest example of what we are trying to say. If it genuinely wishes to be an institution which penetrates society, it must allow its members to be completely in touch with the life which goes on around it; it must have contact with married people, their homes and families. Its influence should extend to family life, and be felt at the very centre of the home – in the persons of husband and wife. It should influence both christians and non-believers alike.

Undoubtedly the presence of secular Institutes in the world does make such an impact. It is their own proper charism to sanctify their milieu from within, like the leaven in the lump. We should not be surprised, then, to see certain Institutes take in members on a broader basis: husbands and wives who promise to live in the same spirit as themselves, the spirit of the evangelical counsels. And this raises the question how the counsels can be lived in a state which

seems in its very essence to require the exclusion of married couples.

If we are to give a satisfactory answer to this question, we must first know exactly what christian marriage is. When a young married couple show their love for each other, and promise each other fidelity in the common task they have received from God, by a simple *Yes* they are united for ever, body and soul, to establish a united household of love, and to be a sign of God in the Church and in the world. Thus they enter into the great mystery in which St Paul saw the union of Christ and his Church.

Marriage is the union of man and woman in a fruitful love. God who created them, created man and woman in his own image, is the author of this union. He commanded the first man and woman to continue his creative work and to increase and multiply. Marriage is a divine institution dating from the dawn of the world. Proceeding from the hands of God, the first human couple were invited by their creator to give life, together with him and according to his designs. This fruitful union never fails to be a sign of love, a clear reflection of that divine love which is the very life of the Trinity. It is significant that mankind has attempted to understand God through the union expressed within marriage and through the fruitfulness which makes the home a radiant and life-giving force. God himself drew attention to this bond of love whenever he wished to make his people understand his fidelity, patience, mercy, longanimity and forgiveness. As a husband loves his wife, so does God love his people. He gave them this most priceless possession, his love. Down the long centuries of sacred history Yahweh gave proof of this preferential love. He gave the Promised Land to his people, he led them towards a rich and fertile country. He protected them from their enemies. He preserved them from danger. He gave them unity through their faith in the true God. It was to them that he promised happiness, and proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. He led them to hope for the joys of heaven; and the image he used was the bliss of eternal nuptials. The faithful of Yahweh, the *anawim* of Israel, hoped for no happiness other than that of being united to God for ever.

Conjugal fidelity and the fertility of Israel's families were for the people of God the sign and the symbol of divine love. And by purifying this conjugal love and stabilizing it ever more in unity and love, the grace of God increased its power to become a witness to the life of God himself. The holier married life is, the more truly it expresses the glory of divine love. A married life in which love is faithful and fruitful is a mystery in which God reveals himself within

the very life of mankind. There man finds God's image, his creative power, his fidelity: in a word, his love.

It is by this constant reference to the indissoluble union of husband and wife in a single love that St Paul helps us to understand the love which unites Christ to his Church. Under the new dispensation marriage takes on this totally new significance; it becomes for us christians the great sacrament, the sign of God, a mystery. 'Truly', says St Paul, 'this is a great mystery; I see in it the union of Christ with his Church'. This revelation of God's intentions, this introduction to the divine mystery of love, has elevated marriage to a higher plane and sanctified it. Marriage has become the symbol of God's love for the christian people; it is designed to reveal to us what love between christians ought to be like. It is the love of the whole Church for Christ. The husband is the symbol of Christ who loves his Church, his mystical body; the wife is the image of the Church who loves her head and partner, Christ.

The truth is that in this human love God implants in us his eternal love, and that in the divine love man perceives the authentic structures of human love: a love that is total, mutual, unique and indissoluble, the gift of life in one single creative work.

So Christ has exalted the state of the married couple and reminded them of the unity of their love: 'For this reason a man will leave his parents to attach himself to his wife; they are no longer two but one flesh. What God has joined together let no man put asunder'. We must recall here that the union of Christ with his Church was consummated on the cross. It was by the gift of his life, by his supreme offering of self, that he sanctified marriage, which now remains to exemplify the redemption, which makes man one with God, and the sacrifice which draws men into the divine unity. So we see that marriage receives its true dignity only in the glory of the resurrection. The defects and limitations of human love are summarized in sin and death. In the resurrection Christ purified human love of sin, and freed it from death. If human love is to overcome the difficulties and limitations endemic to conjugal life and to express its steadfast hope of final union with God, it must be united with the love which the risen Christ expresses. It is his will that the power of his resurrection should strengthen the conjugal bond by the sacrament of marriage, thus giving unity to the human institution and sanctifying it by the triumphant charity of his royal majesty. It is in the presence of God and his ministers that husband and wife irrevocably give themselves to each other. A simple *Yes* unites them to

Christ and, through him, makes them one in a single love. The promises that the married couple make when they consecrate themselves in this mutual gift of charity and grace impose on them the basic laws of love as they were ordained by God. Marriage is not a free contract; it is an institution whose structures must be accepted. These structures are the laws of divine love; they are as immutable as the love of God itself.

The full burgeoning and joy of a fruitful union is found in the family which the married couple brings into being. The family puts them at the service of human society on its journey towards the kingdom of God. United in their love, husband and wife sanctify each other by being faithful and generous in living out their conjugal dedication to each other, and in bringing up their children, the living witnesses to their gift of love. Love will allow them to overcome the difficulties of their common state and to accept the monotony of the daily family round. It will aid them through joy and sorrow alike and in the difficult task of constantly expressing genuine love with all the refinements that this requires.

It is within the framework of their union that their children will grow to holiness. When they see their father to be good, strong, generous and true, they will think of God as the eternal Father, strong, merciful and true, author of all good and all giving. In the gentleness of their mother, they will observe how they ought to love God their Father, faithfully, joyfully, without reserve: with the vital strength of a love which generously receives affection and faithfully returns it.

Christian couples must not confine their love to the home. They are to shed around them the radiance of the divine life which they are living, in a world which will thus be drawn to seek, in the unity of family life, the image of God and the joy of living by his love. Unconsciously, in its search for God, humanity desires to penetrate the mystery of God's life through the impact he makes on christian couples and the family circle. Revelation, even if it has not brought us to full understanding of the divine life, has allowed us at least to know something of its richness, and to draw our human life closer to it through charity.

St John has given us the wonderful words, 'God is love'. This phrase explains the divine life of the Trinity. Love is never solitary. Love is not love if it is one-sided; there must be two for there to be love. The father engenders his only Son in his own likeness so that he may be, as scripture says, the full expression of the Father's

being and the radiance of his splendour. This only Son, in whom the everlasting Father has revealed himself in an eternal act, is his Word and his Promise, his goodness incarnate. The Son loves his Father, and brings back to him the gift which is himself; he has received everything from the Father, and he gives everything back to the Father. Giving and renunciation are the basic law of this love. Love is also the inspiration of the gift and its acceptance of the renunciation and the return to the Father. It is the bond and vital force of divine charity, the love of the Father and the Son, which is their Spirit.

From this blessed Trinity there streams forth that light and power and goodness by which we live, and which will be one day the object of our eternal contemplation. Man has a share in God's nature through the very fact that he exists, and much more wonderfully, through the grace which unites him to the holy Trinity. Whether on the natural or the supernatural level, man lives only by remaining faithful to the laws of love which are the laws of divine life. For this reason a man will love his wife, and she will return his love by giving him her own. And the fruit of their union will be this single-minded love.

This love will in time find a new expression in the various gifts and different talents of the children, in their qualities, their will-power, their affections, their sensitivity, their physical stature and appearance, their gestures and their voices. As husband and wife renew their love in growing fidelity and more generous giving, they strive for the perfection which God expressed for all eternity in the unique and infinite act which is his Son. And their children will bear witness to this perfect love.

It is by meditating on the mystery of the divine life that Christians will come to understand their own life. And in the light of God's beauty, they will find the necessary strength to love each other while remaining true to the laws of life. We cannot repeat it often enough; marriage is a great mystery; the more one understands it, the better one is capable of living it. It is important for the Church that marriage should be lived as God wished: as a focus of love, the sign of God's union with his chosen people, and a symbol of the love of Christ for his Church.

It is not surprising then, that the mystery of Christian marriage, when seen in all its beauty, can raise doubts about the value of consecrated virginity. But the truth is that the married couple, in their love for each other, prefigure a union which virgins make a



reality here on this earth: the union with Christ and the gift of self to the Father in union with Christ.

### 3. *Marriage and virginity: complementary vocations*

It was God's will that man should be the intelligent and loving heart of the world; that he should consecrate his work and so bring it to fulfilment. This consecration must be an act of love. After the first sin, the unity of the world had to be re-created so that it might be brought back in its entirety to God, and accept the divine will in a total submission to the all-powerful love of the Creator. This return to God required a mediator, a priest and an offering – the oblation of the whole of creation. This mediation was to be pleasing to God, this priesthood recognised by him, this intercession acceptable. To be acceptable to him, this priesthood had to be willed and instituted by him. Only the incarnate Word could be at once this mediator, this priest and this offering. He alone could save the world, by virtue of being the very gift of God which man must receive in order to belong to God.

The christian priesthood is the love of the Father for the world and the love of the Son for the Father and his entire creation. This priesthood is also the active love of God which is the holy Spirit. Sent by God to carry out his work of love, Jesus Christ, in loving his Father, loved the world. In uniting men to himself through the incarnation he brought them back to the Father, giving them a new life in the life of God. His heart became the heart of the world. In the love of his heart he consecrates the world to God, a consecration which is the fruit of his love. Christian marriage is especially dear to the heart of Christ, because by a special title it sanctifies the work of God by sanctifying the love of men. It infuses into human love the life which God's love for men creates. In this way it reveals the loving union of Christ with the Church. It is for the sake of this ecclesial mission, this witness to the divine fidelity, that conjugal love, transfigured by the grace of union, symbolizes the gift of Christ to his Church.

We can never ponder sufficiently the sign-value of christian marriage. Its beauty should awaken men to the sense of God, and help them to understand the fidelity of Christ. Yet it is within a quite different vocation that God has seen fit to portray the aim of marriage and to realise on this earth the love which it symbolizes. It is his will that christian virginity, too, should be a sign of the love of the Son for the Father and the earthly pre-figuring of the eternal

destiny of his holy Church. Virginité reveals what God expects of the man to whom he has given himself; it allows him to hope that one day he may be able to give himself unreservedly to God.

Christian virginité is therefore itself a sign: it signifies a new kind of love in accepting the love which it must show forth. It is not itself the symbol of this love; it is not a human love which is simply the sign of a superior gift. Rather it is the very love of Christ for his Father and the love of those whom he loves. This is the reason why virginité, considered in itself, can be called a higher vocation. It is not a sacrament of the Church, because it represents here on earth the real beginning of the eternity of the kingdom.

This state of virginité which Christ lived was accepted by his Mother. Here Mary was led by her Son. In him she loved the Father; through him, hers was a total gift. Christ was entirely given up to God and to his Father's business. His Person, his human life, his mission, are all ways of welcoming God by the abandonment of self to his infinite goodness. The only way in which Christ can accept the Father's love – the source of his own life – is by a perfect response to that love. So christian virginité is above all else the virginité of Christ; it is the direct, total and absolute love of God. Man can live out this mystery only in Christ. A vocation to christian virginité is therefore a union with Christ which allows a more perfect gift and a more complete consecration to God. It locates life firmly within the life of God himself. Its justification lies in the reassuring hope that one day man will belong entirely to him.

This virginité is a form of consecrated life which, in the love of Christ, accepts his priesthood in order to anticipate the final union between God and all his chosen. Virginité is the love of God above all else, which passes beyond the whole of his creation. It is the magnanimous effort in christian charity through which man gives himself to God entirely, body and soul, because God has taken hold of him so that he may be in God completely. Such is the ideal of consecrated virginité. It can be lived out only through the eucharistic sacrifice of Christ. Since the eucharistic sacrament is the sacrament of total giving, it is also the sacrament of virginité. Every christian, in taking part in it, gives himself to God and unites himself with the vital force of the incarnate Word's eternal love. Those who are consecrated should unite themselves even more closely in their response to this special call in accord with the divine plan.

The unity between virginal love and that of Christ for his Father demands an exclusive gift to God. But the gift to God which is

christian virginity entails a giving to others. Loving God involves giving oneself to all those whom God loves, and by means of this love leading them back to him. This virginal love is essentially fruitful as all love must be; but it embraces the whole universe precisely so as to unite it to the life of God. It is also the most stable kind of love. It loves everything *in* God and *for* God, since it loves all things in God through the very love of God himself enshrined in the incarnate Word, who, when he offers himself, unites with his Father all his brethren in the one offering. Virginity is the most powerful expression of this spiritual priesthood.

The *raison d'être* of consecrated virginity has always been to stabilize this definitive gift by promising fidelity to the one who alone can accept it, God. It has always devoted itself to others for the sake of being truly christian. As it is a priesthood, it is also an apostolate. It unites gift and offering, action and contemplation, the love of God and the love of men.

Every man is called to this perfect love. Every christian must be perfect as his Father is perfect. He must give himself entirely to God and to men so as to respond to the love of God and bear witness to it. Virginity fits into this fundamental demand by the nature of its response, which is a more direct gift to the drawing power of God which initially inspires it.

If marriage makes us understand the grandeur and fruitfulness of love, it is virginity which makes explicit its meaning and final purpose: the sanctification of the world in the single-minded love of the Lord. Virginity may not be the vocation of all, but every christian in his ultimate encounter with God will find that it is the essence of his gift.

Those couples who have been profoundly affected by the evangelical life within the Church may sometimes ask themselves why they too are not required to live this mystery. Is virginity possible or desirable within christian marriage? Such a question deserves a reply.

#### 4. *Marriage as a totally consecrated life*

Like all christians, married people aim at perfect charity. For some, marriage is accepted as a path to holiness. It gives them the grace to sanctify each other in their total fidelity to each other, in their parental obligations and professional tasks. To live up to this ideal they meet together in family groups; they bind themselves to live according to the evangelical counsels. Sometimes they become

members, in a wider sense, of secular Institutes and similar associations. For these the problem arises of their personal vocation and the proper means of arriving at the fulness of christian holiness.

Human love sanctified by the sacraments is a bond uniting two human beings in a mutual love which is as complete as possible. When husband and wife love each other like christians, they also love God above all else in such a way as to attain the highest degree of charity. Does this mean, then, that the practice of the evangelical counsels is not necessary for the achievement of this end, since, at least at first glance, their state excludes that consecrated celibacy and perfect chastity which virginity pre-supposes?

If marriage *taken by itself* is inferior to virginity, this cannot be in terms of a *state of life*, but only as regards the *means* to the fulness of christian holiness. The best *means* to holiness are the evangelical counsels, effectively lived in a life consecrated to God. Does not a life so consecrated presuppose a special call, even a 'privileged' vocation? Would such a special vocation be practicable within marriage? The facts seem to suggest that it is. There exist members of secular Institutes and other married couples who wish to live in accordance with the spirit of the counsels; and some of them have found the way effectively to express this spirit in their married lives.

For married couples, as for all christians, the spirit of the counsels is extremely exacting. It invites them to live soberly, to give generously to the poor, to give up all unnecessary luxuries, to exclude completely the embarrassment of accumulated wealth, to withdraw from financial preoccupations, preoccupation with future plans, from all desire of gain and from the need constantly to increase one's economic resources. The same must be said of conjugal chastity fully observed within marriage. The union of husband and wife must be accepted as testifying to a love which is constantly growing in intensity and consideration for the wishes of the other, one which rejects the pressures of egoism, every purely instinctive drive, everything that smacks of self-seeking.

Again, does not married life *encourage* mutual submission to each other? Is it not possible for husband and wife to express in their lives, in a way which is constantly deepening, that state of obedience which is the foundation of every evangelical life, by renouncing one's own proper will, all selfish desire, all individualistic expression which prevents authentic sharing and joyful self-giving? Surely true charity must necessarily bring the couple to a greater love of each other and unite them in their love of God. If their

married love is truly inspired and sustained by charity, it will lead them to love each other as they grow in love of the Lord, the creator of their union and the focus of their life. And is it not likely that this human love lived on the level of charity may one day make an even higher demand?

To say that conjugal love is an obstacle to loving God is clearly false. And yet it is a love which recognizes its own need to be mutual and total. Hence at times it causes a tension, a 'division' in the human heart which is called to love God unreservedly. A married man must concern himself with pleasing his wife; he cannot concern himself entirely with the work of the Lord. In their love for each other, a married couple inevitably concentrate on their own union, so that they can easily forget God. The love which ought in fact to make them understand the demands of a total self-giving to the Lord, seems instead to retard their progress in this kind of giving. St Paul stresses this difficulty. Yet it is not in itself an obstacle to holiness.

Holiness is indeed the fruit of charity. The more one is united to God through his grace, the more one loves him and the holier one becomes. This sanctification separates us from everything else, so that we may be entirely his. So in every act of charity this basic choice operates, in which God draws us freely to himself so that we may draw all our satisfaction from him. This growth of charity, as we are drawn closer to God, allows every man to come closer to divine love and to make an increasingly faithful response to it. At the end of the road, charity will at last find its expression in that total abandon in which man finally frees himself from all created things in order to love God alone and to receive his beatific presence. In God, man re-discovers all that his choice of God apparently required him to sacrifice and renounce.

It is this final choice of the holy life that some married people may be called upon to make on this earth during the course of their journey together. God may call them, and his call seems to challenge the promises they made to each other before God and his Church when they married. This call causes a crisis. It is like a 'dark night of the soul', in which God seems to have withdrawn himself, but is present nonetheless and sustains those whom he approaches and purifies. At certain times this crisis may seem fatal to human love in a successful marriage. When this happens, can anything be done?

If we listen to those who have suffered by receiving this grace, it would certainly seem that God demands first place. As God, he will

require everything. This insistence is a sword; it demands a total spiritual renunciation. Each spouse will tread his own path, accept whatever grace comes to him, and be faithful to God. In prayer and the intimacy of their life together these couples feel that God is demanding that they draw apart from each other, to seek a kind of solitude which his might and majesty lays upon them. Accepting this spiritual separation, accepting by degrees his demands on their life, they free themselves from everything that might stand in the way of their total gift to the Lord. Yet God gives them the grace to remain faithful to their marriage, their commitments, and their educative love for their children. His presence is interior, his grace at once exacting and comforting, his love a certainty.

For such couples this period of trial may last a long time. Many of them have had to endure the fear that they would never find each other again, never recover their earlier closeness, never again love each other. But when the testing time has passed, they find God more profoundly and more truly than before. They love him for his own sake, but they love him together in a new communion of life centred on God. It is in God that they love each other; it is for him, and through his will, that their mutual love endures. But this love is now a transformed love, one such as God himself is bound to sustain, since he has based it on a permanent gift and an indissoluble bond. This love transformed will extend to the children; they will be re-discovered in the love of God, loved as God loves them, and for themselves, as they are. Nor is this love confined to the narrow and restricting limits of the family: it is love of God and love of one's brothers; it is apostolic zeal and an openness to every man who seeks and suffers, prays, hopes and loves. This love becomes as universal as God's own love.

Virginity in marriage has always been a rare gift. It would be rash to turn it into an ideal for christian marriage. Obviously it presupposes a special vocation, requires a spiritual preparation and an inner maturity which enables husband and wife to accept the Lord's invitation. This ideal of the consecrated life will be founded first and foremost on fidelity to God and on that grace which gives light and strength, faithfulness, peace and joy in fulfilling the divine will.

This rare vocation implies great discernment and a calm and constant love of God. It cannot be the vocation of the unsuccessfully married, pseudo-mystics or religious fanatics, or those who are temperamentally unstable or inclined to 'try anything once'. On the

contrary, this gift, like every other gift from God, is received in the humility of self-abandon, in the obedience of faith, in the joy of hope, in prayer and in faithfulness to God.

Faced with such a prescription for life, we instinctively ask: 'But what about the children?' Are they called to this evangelical life simply because their parents are living it? And are the parents remaining true to their first commitment when they involve their family in such a hazardous adventure which means renouncing wealth, social advancement, or those economic and 'class' advantages which would help and support their children in their individual and social progress? They may give themselves to God, but have they the right to neglect their first duty which is to their children? To this question these parents themselves provide the answer: what greater good could they give their children than that of a christian and evangelical education, together with a deepening of their love for God and men? Is there any better preparation for life and for the Church than this – when education takes place in the perspective of eternal happiness? Not all children, of course, will be able to live up to their parents' ideal; but all of them should benefit from a christian environment. It is up to the parents to discern what God requires of each child and the various ways in which each can be faithful to divine grace.

Even if this ideal involves a temporal sacrifice, a real poverty, and greater sobriety of life, what christian worthy of the Gospel would refuse such an invitation? Besides, such families do not remain in isolation. They get to know each other, combine to help each other, stand together in good times and bad. Theirs is a community ideal, which attempts to integrate itself into the life of the world in a practical way, and thus to bear greater witness to the presence of God.

God's ways are strange, and they are not ours. We see this ideal of life gaining ground in the world at the very moment when humanity is growing more conscious of its unity, its strength and spirit. Should we not accept that the deepest and most harmonious expression of this ideal is likely to be found within the school of love that is marriage? All forms of high holiness are rare – and it may be that the one we have been describing is rarer than most. Yet one cannot doubt that such a gift will be given. There is no obstacle outside human frailty and limitation to this more profound interiorisation of christian marriage, in the grace of a virginity which is properly understood and ever more faithfully embraced. This vocation will of course require help from the Church: highly-skilled

direction, a framework of life specially designed for it, an atmosphere of brotherhood, and a spirit which provides energy and inspiration. The founding of secular Institutes, their opening up on to the world, the presence among them of married couples as members in a broader sense, practical experience in the living of an evangelical life in the most variegated circumstances: all these are signs of a new ecclesial life in which the vocation to christian marriage and to consecrated celibacy, far from rivalling each other or depreciating one another's worth, sustain, complement and enrich one another; and at the last, in the fulness of Christ's love, they mirror one another, as the Church mirrors Christ, and as the Son reflects perfectly the radiance of the Father's splendour.