

MARRIAGE AND VIRGINITY

HAS CHRISTIANITY DEVALUED MARRIAGE?

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FOR A VARIETY of reasons, christians of our era have reflected more attentively on the values of matrimony: the theology of marriage, conjugal morality, the spiritual life of husband and wife, the pastoral necessity of preparation for marriage, or help for couples in difficulties, and such like questions. This change in attitude is due to changes in the social structure which have softened the rigidity of the traditional family structure; to advances in medicine which have, for example, made the question of birth control more acute; and to the erotic atmosphere created by the communications mass-media. But the change is also due to a more explicit philosophy of the person and personal relationships; to a profounder physiological and psychological understanding of the place in the life and nature of man of what nowadays is called sexuality. This word sexuality has existed for little more than a century, and its acceptance into the realms of human science is principally due to freudianism. We must keep in mind the recent vintage of the word when we venture to reproach earlier writers for their lack of understanding of this dimension which today appears essential to any anthropology. This sort of criticism is often enough levelled at the theologians and moralists of past centuries; but, to be fair, one should first compare them to other writers of their own period, to see whether to some extent they reflect the culture of their times, or whether it is christianity as such which is responsible for their derogatory attitude towards sex.

The second hypothesis is far from unlikely, since the high regard for virginity and celibacy 'for the sake of the kingdom of God' is one of the more novel aspects of Christ's teaching, and it is easy to understand how it could lead to a pessimistic outlook with regard to sexual realities. And as the theologians and moralists have for centuries been celibates, it is hardly surprising that despite their pastoral activities they have lacked understanding of the state which is that of most christians. Today we could be witnessing a reversal

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of this attitude. A deeper awareness of the value of sexuality and marriage calls into question the ideal of absolute continence preached in the gospel; there are signs of it in the recent debates over priestly celibacy, and the difficulty experienced by christians both lay and clerical in grasping its significance.

It is certainly quite unnecessary to depreciate one state of life in order to give full value to the other, and such an approach suggests a certain narrowness and one-sidedness. And yet, has not this attitude in fact been part of the christian tradition? We shall try to answer this difficult question without losing sight of the reservations we expressed above. Christian writers were not content merely to repeat the gospel; they integrated it into the culture of their times. That culture in turn had its effect on them, and any attempt to explain their thinking must take this into account.

Virginity and marriage in the Bible

Marriage is the normal state under the old covenant, and celibacy ranks with sterility as an anti-value. From the ancient scriptures it is possible to extract a theology of marriage¹ in which the God-given end is fecundity,² mutual aid and shared life,³ a love which sin can imperil by debasing it into lust.⁴ Numerous episodes underline the dangers which threaten conjugal union: polygamy, the inferiority of the woman, adultery etc.; though at the same time human love has sufficient grandeur to symbolize, after Hosea, the union of Yahweh with his people. This theme may be inspired by the 'hierogamies', the divine marriages, of neighbouring religions, but it is distinguished from these in so far as it is not the expression of an exclusively divine history, but the history of the hebrew people in their relationship with Yahweh. The cantic of canticles is concerned with this, at least in the interpretation put on it first by judaism and then by christianity.⁵

Two passages, however, seem to report instances of cultic continence, a notion to which this article will frequently return. Moses orders the people to abstain from sexual relations three days before the theophany of Sinai.⁶ Before handing over to David and his companions the bread which has been taken from the altar, the

¹ Grelot, P. *Le couple humain dans l'Écriture, Lectio divina* 31 (Paris, 1962).

² Gen 1, 28.

³ Gen 2, 18-24.

⁴ Gen 3, 16.

⁵ There is no agreement among the exegetes on the origin of this book - a poem about human love or a symbolic expression of divine love.

⁶ Exod 19, 14-15.

priest Ahimelech asks if they have refrained from contact with women; and David replies that such abstinence is usual in time of war, since war has its own ritual background¹.

Legrand² does not think this amounts to an affirmation of defilement affecting sexual relations as such, a defilement which would render a man unfit for cultic acts: this is the only reference of its kind in the Bible. It probably meant no more than a temporary cessation of all profane, or rather commonplace, occupations in order to preserve oneself for the meeting with God. The same sense can be ascribed to Joel 2, 16, and to the isolation of priests from their houses seven days before the time of their investiture.³

The Old Testament offers one noteworthy case of celibacy, that of Jeremiah whom Yahweh forbade to have wife or children⁴ so that he might be a prophecy of future catastrophes, of the destruction of the world because of its infidelity to Yahweh. This aspect is rediscovered in the pauline motivations for virginity.⁵ Do we see the foreshadowing of the allegorical sense of 'celibate' (as given by Jesus himself in Mt 19, 12), in the 'eunuch' whose future happiness and spiritual fecundity are affirmed by the third Isaiah⁶ and the Book of Wisdom?⁷ There is some evidence for this.⁸

At the time of Christ, celibacy found no favour with the rabbinate. A culpable exception was the case of Rabbi Ben Azzai, who said: 'My soul belongs utterly to the Torah, I have no time left over for marriage. Let others ensure the continuation of the world'.⁹ It was not so with the Essenes. According to Philo,¹⁰ they banned marriage and practised continence out of misogyny, and in order to make community life possible. This latter motive is also noted by Flavius Josephus.¹¹ The alexandrian ascetics, described by Philo¹² under the name of Therapeutes, were celibates of both sexes, or men who had abandoned their wives. Among the texts of Qûmran, the *Document of Damas* and *The Rule of the Congregation* do not forbid the members of the sect to live in a monogamous marriage, although they decree certain precepts concerning continence. But the *Rule of the Community*, which perhaps belongs to a later date than those mentioned, makes

¹ 1 Sam 21, 2-7.

² *La virginité dans la Bible*, (Paris, 1964), pp 66-72.

³ Lev 8, 33.

⁴ Jer 16, 1-4.

⁵ Legrand, *op. cit.*, pp 21-25.

⁶ Isai 56, 3-5.

⁷ Wis 3, 13-15.

⁸ Daniel, C. 'Esséniens et Eunuques', in *Revue de Qûmran*, 6, (1967), pp 358-360.

⁹ Schneider, J. Εὐνοῖκος, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 11, p 765.

¹⁰ *Apology for the Jews*, 14-18.

¹¹ *Jewish Antiquities*, XVIII, 1, 5, no 21.

¹² *On the contemplative life*, 18-68.

no further mention of women in Essene circles.¹ According to the *Book of War*, continence was imposed on the full members of the community before assemblies and communal meals with a ritual signification. 'For the man who spent his life in community, sharing its deliberations and celebrations, marriage was out of the question'.²

The ideal of virginity and celibacy is presented in the New Testament with greater force, and with motivations linking it to the essential message of Jesus. The dominant perspective is eschatological – an eschatology which at least to some extent is initiated by the preaching of Christ, for even if the kingdom of God is often shown as belonging to the future, it has nonetheless already begun with the coming of the Lord. This is the sense given to it by Paul: 'because of present necessity',³ the end of this world and the beginning of the new. That is the reason behind his phrase 'let those who have wives behave as if they had none',⁴ and why some men remain celibate 'for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven'.⁵ Virginity is one of the signs of the Lord's coming; for when the kingdom has finally been established there will be no more marriage:⁶ the Apocalypse represents around the throne of the Lamb the 144,000 who are virgin.⁷ For the sake of the kingdom which is to come and which is already here, those who wish to follow Jesus more closely sacrifice everything, even the possibility of having a wife,⁸ so as to be more completely consecrated to the Lord. The freedom which celibacy brings is above all the freedom to 'please' him, to give oneself more completely to the looked-for kingdom by suppressing everything that would bind one to a world still marked by sin.⁹ *Agape* alone, charity, must be the inspiration of a state which permits a further realization of the marriage of Christ with his Church:¹⁰ virginity favours spiritual union with the Lord. It is from this point of view that one must consider the celibacy of Jesus and his virginal birth: first-born of the new kingdom, his advent on earth is the work of the holy Spirit, a gift from God alone. The Virgin Mary offered her human poverty, her 'lowliness',¹¹ the abnegation of self which her virginity represented. The action of the Spirit rendered her fertile, removing from her the stigma of sterility; in this she is the prototype

¹ Daniel, *art. cit.*, pp 375–376.

² Jaubert, Annie: *La notion d'alliance dans le judaïsme aux abords de l'ère chrétienne*, *Patristica Sorbonensia*, 6 (Paris, 1963), pp 164–165.

³ 1 Cor 7, 26.

⁴ 1 Cor 7, 29.

⁵ Mt 19, 12.

⁶ Mt 22, 30.

⁷ Apoc 14, 1–5.

⁸ Lk 14, 26; 18–29.

⁹ 1 Cor 7, 32–34.

¹⁰ 2 Cor 11, 2.

¹¹ Lk 1, 48.

of the Church.¹

In face of the high valuation placed on virginity and celibacy as the state most fitted to the arrival of the kingdom, where then does marriage stand? In a certain sense the ideal which it represents was also exalted by Christ when he linked it with the original divine intention and its underlying idea of a community of persons;² when he urged its indissolubility to the point when even the apostles protested;³ when he condemned adultery even in the mind⁴ – while at the same time showing a mercy towards sinners that was unknown to the old law.⁵ Nothing in the behaviour of Jesus with regard to women, children or marriage betrays a repulsion of any kind.⁶ Paul's doctrine is often difficult to synthesize. In granting to men and women equal rights over each other's bodies,⁷ this doctrine was truly revolutionary compared to the juridical usage of the time. In Jewish law as in Roman, the idea of adultery is not applied equally to both sexes: the married woman is an adulteress if she has relations with a man other than her own; the husband, on the contrary, is no adulterer if he allows himself adventures with an unmarried girl; for the husband's right over his wife is not reciprocal. But with the Pauline verse it becomes so, and the synoptic logion on repudiation in its various versions⁸ treats as an adulterer the husband who rejects his wife and marries another. There is also a place for marriage in the new world of the redemption and the kingdom, since it is the image of the union of Christ with his Church,⁹ because it has a share in this mystery, and because the model of the love of a husband for his wife is that of Christ for his Church as it is manifested in his passion: 'as Christ loved the Church and delivered himself up for it'.¹⁰ This theme of the conjugal union of Christ and the Church is the replica of that between Yahweh and Israel: marriage is granted sufficient dignity to enable it to symbolize the mystery.

At the same time, if Paul does not disapprove of the married state, but on the contrary defends it from adultery¹¹ and investigates its problems, he is unable to hide his preference for celibacy as being better adapted to the already eschatological state which is ours. Virginity allows freedom to turn more completely towards

¹ Legrand, *op. cit.*

² Gen 2, 18–24, cited in Mt 19, 3–9.

³ Mt 19, 10.

⁴ Mt 5, 27–29.

⁵ Jn 8, 3–9; Lk 7, 36–50; Mt 21, 31–32.

⁶ E.g. the marriage at Cana, Jn 2, 1–11.

⁸ Mt 19, 9; Mk 10, 11–12; Lk 16, 18.

¹⁰ Eph 5, 25.

⁷ 1 Cor 7, 4.

⁹ Eph 5, 22–33.

¹¹ 1 Cor 6, 13–20.

God; whereas marriage, even though transfigured by the redemption and the arrival of the kingdom, creates a tension¹ between the present and the future. There is no undue depreciation of marriage in these purely spiritual considerations, such as that the body or sexual union are unclean. It would be somewhat paradoxical to make such an inference by applying to marriage what Paul had to say about union with a prostitute!² Marriage is sometimes considered as a remedy for concupiscence,³ 'to avoid the danger of fornication let every man keep his own wife and every woman her own husband'. And when he is speaking to the 'unmarried and to widows' he says: 'if they have not the gift of continence let them marry; better to marry than to feel the heat of passion'.⁴ But these verses have to be understood in relation to the question which the corinthians had raised for the apostle. In this church there had emerged a great taste for total continence, for reasons which perhaps owed as much to greek thought as to christianity, with resulting harm to those who were incapable of it and who through over-estimating their strength, had ended up in fornication. Paul's sentiments seem to be little more than an appeal to prudence.

The same question is raised in the statement which later tradition was to interpret in various ways: 'Do not starve one another, unless perhaps you do so for a time, by mutual consent, to have more freedom for prayer'.⁵ Here it is abstention from the conjugal act which is meant. The second part of the sentence reflects the same preoccupation with prudence as the two verses we have just mentioned. What, then, are we to make of this temporary continence arrived at by mutual agreement, for the sake of prayer? Must we trace it back to a precept of ritual chastity which presupposes that the sexual act involves some defilement incompatible with divine worship? There is no justification for saying this, and the following verse, 'I say this by way of concession: I am not imposing a rule on you', if it refers to verse 5 and not the whole paragraph (the exegetes do not agree on this), seems opposed to such an interpretation: if the relations between the spouses involved some defilement, abstention would then be obligatory. Should we, then, interpret this counsel of the apostle as a matter of ascetics, seeing in it a mortification which

¹ 1 Cor 7, 32-34.

² 1 Cor 6, 13-20. Cf Dellling. J.: *Paulus' Stellung zu Frau und Ehe* (Stuttgart, 1931), pp 62 ff.

³ E.g. 1 Cor 7, 2.

⁴ 1 Cor 7, 9.

⁵ 1 Cor 7, 5.

would aid prayer? The best explanation seems to us to be most in harmony with the teaching of the two testaments. Earlier on we have noted the explanation of the few cases of continence linked with worship under the Old Covenant: the meeting with God is facilitated by separation of oneself from everything in ordinary everyday life. Paul's teaching on celibacy, which avoids the tension between the Lord and the contemporary world,¹ sheds light on this verse: by this temporary abstinence for the sake of prayer the married man shares in the benefits of virginity.

Let us conclude by quoting this statement of the disciple of Paul who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews: 'Marriage in every way must be held in honour, and the marriage bed kept free from stain; over fornication and adultery God will call us to account'.² One text, however, does seem to imply an impurity in the relations between the married, that concerning the 144,000 in the Apocalypse: 'These have kept their virginity undefiled by the touch of woman'.³ Their virginity shows that the stain from which they are free is not that of adultery or fornication but of all sexual union.⁴ It is the only text in the New Testament which seems to imply something more than the superiority of celibacy over marriage, for the sake of the kingdom. It appears to contain a depreciation of sexuality itself.

Cultural environment

This evangelical and pauline doctrine was to be absorbed by christians whose culture was greek. One can expect to find in their writings some trace of ideas which were current in their own society. One therefore has to examine how the religious outlook of the period viewed the relation between the cultic and the sexual, and what were the current philosophical ideas on sexuality, marriage and woman.

In the minds of the majority there co-existed contradictory religious attitudes towards sexuality. On the one hand, the mythical hierogamies – the union of a god with a goddess, a god with a mortal woman, or a mortal man with a goddess – found their expression in sacred prostitution. On the other hand, both the men and the women who participated in worship were often forced to practise total or, more frequently, temporary continence. These precepts

¹ 1 Cor 7, 32–34.

² Heb 13, 4.

³ Apoc 14, 4.

⁴ Certain exegetes interpret this passage according to the identification made by the prophets between adultery and idolatry: it probably does not concern celibates, but christians who in spite of tortures did not compromise with idols. But this interpretation does not solve the difficulty.

existed among the peoples of the middle east who were the hebrews' neighbours; they are found in hinduism, buddhism, and in many other civilisations. The reasons given for this practice differ from culture to culture.

There is no lack of information about the greeks and romans.¹ Frequently in greek mythology, the women who had intercourse with a god had no further commerce with a man. Sexual commerce is unclean, says Porphyry, and already Hesiod was calling the sexual organs by a term still in use, 'the shameful parts'. Chastity imposed in such a way belongs more to the realm of magic than morality, acting as a kind of defence against the attacks of evil spirits. The virgin has a role in magic, divination and oracles. Continence, like fasting and abstaining from certain foods, prepares the way for the encounter with the divinity. Virginity is therefore obligatory for certain categories of priestesses, and so is a temporary continence, in varying circumstances, for both priests and priestesses consecrated to any of the greek or roman divinities, and in the mystery religions. It is even extended to those who serve in the temples and sometimes to the laymen who took part in worship. The greek pantheon included virgin goddesses like Athene or Artemis.

The most famous virgin priestesses of antiquity were the Vestals of Rome. They were considered to be the incarnation of Vesta and thus the spouses of her divine partner, Mars.² They were selected about the age of ten and introduced into the temple of the goddess, dressed as brides, after a simulated rape by the Pontifex Maximus, representing the god. For thirty years they were subjected to a strict celibacy, violation of which was punished by their being buried alive. They would then return to ordinary life and get married, or remain in the Temple as virgin priestesses. They were accorded great veneration, and if they happened to meet any man who had been condemned to death, he was pardoned. Their chastity was often praised in inscriptions, on account of the mystic union binding them to the divinity.

In *De Legibus* Cicero raises this ritual continence onto the moral and spiritual plane. He explains to his brother Quintus and his friend Atticus a precept from the *Law of the Twelve Tables*: 'divine beings should be approached in a state of purity'. He comments

¹ Fehrle, Eugen: *Die kultische Keuschheit im Altertum. Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten*, VI (Giessen, 1910).

² *Ibid.*, pp 206 ff.

thus: 'The law ordains that the gods be approached with purity. Evidently this means purity of spirit since all things reside in the spirit. That does not mean that the body need not be pure, but – given that the spirit is superior to the body and that one needs to take pains to keep the body physically pure – it is easily understandable how it is first and foremost in the spirit that this attitude has to be fostered'.¹

The greek philosophers and their latin disciples often show a hostility to marriage or, when they accept it, place its sole justification in procreation. In the literature of the great athenian era, a certain contempt for women (misogyny) weakened the affective element in marriage, without excluding extra-marital adventures on the part of the man. But the most typical aspect of 'greek love' during this epoch was masculine homosexuality. Neither Socrates nor Plato condemned it, but they did have a tendency to spiritualize it. The former does not accept that it is a carnal passion, disturbing both freedom and reason. It is the point of departure of the platonic dialectic of *The Symposium* which proceeds from there to the desire for spiritual beauty. Plato, true to his conception of the body, is at once too indulgent towards sex – if one considers his starting point – and too contemptuous. Sexual union is a bestial rather than a spiritual starting point and is best put behind one. In the trichotomy of the soul, sexuality belongs to the *epithumia*, lust, which tends constantly to harrass man. There is no link between sexuality and spiritual friendship: the dialectic of the *Symposium* does not culminate in personal love but in the impersonal contemplation of beauty. Aristotelian analysis of friendship will discover elements of what was later to be christian charity – seeking out the other for his own good and happiness: but this sentiment is not linked with sexuality.²

The secular authors of the first centuries of christianity are of particular interest in that they are the contemporaries of the first christian writers. For many of the old philosophers, and even those of a later date, the wise man should not marry because marriage would distract him from the life of philosophy, and he would have insufficient time and insufficient calm for contemplation: such, according to Clement and Jerome, was the opinion of Theophrastes

¹ *De Legibus*, 11, 8 (19) and 10 (26).

² Flacelière, R.: *L'amour en Grèce*, (Paris, 1960); Le Blond, J. M.: 'Monde grec et sexualité', in *Sexualité humaine* (Centre d'études Laënnec), Paris, 1966; Nelli R.: 'L'amour courtois', *Ibid.*, pp 105–138.

and Democritus. Hierocles, a stoic contemporary of Hadrian, praises marriage but thinks that celibacy is more suited to a philosopher, a man called on to teach and to preach. For the same reason Epictetus approves the celibacy of the cynics.

But if the stoics are not all hostile to marriage – far from it! – they were certainly hostile to all that belongs to the sphere of passion and pleasure: the irrational must be plucked out of the soul so that man may be dominated by reason. Pleasure has no place in morality. The later stoics were more rigoristic on this point than the older ones, Chrysippus or Cleanthus. This is why procreation alone can justify marriage, which has an essentially biological origin and a social purpose, that of assuring the permanence of the city. Such was the opinion of Philo, Seneca and Hierocles. For the jewish theologian of Alexandria, a man who married a woman known to be sterile did so for pleasure alone, and by this animal behaviour became an enemy of God and of nature. Although the roman Musonius Rufus speaks felicitously of conjugal love and life in common, he insists that the sole aim of procreation is the accomplishment of a duty towards the city. All sexual relationships are illicit when generation is impossible. Pleasure is justifiable only if it assists generation; and the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake is unjust and illicit even in marriage. His disciple Epictetus speaks in the same vein: but he censures the epicureans for dispensing with marriage and procreation because of the difficulties involved in them; their policy would mean the end of the State. This rigoristic attitude, which centres marriage on generation and civic duty, is no stranger to rabbinical literature. It may already be discerned in the Plato of the *Laws* and the *Republic*. The ancients seemed unable to appreciate that even though the pursuit of egoistic pleasure in conjugal union is blameworthy – such is the sense of the Book of Tobias, chapter 8 – it can be justified by the search for a shared pleasure which expresses and strengthens mutual love, even when procreation is not possible.

The same ideas re-appear in the writings of the pythagoreans and platonists of the first centuries of our era: for example, Ocellus Lucanus in the second century. In these there is additionally a dualist perspective; the body must be mortified by ascetic discipline so that the soul may become capable of soaring to the contemplation of the divinity. Sexual continence involves a liberation from the distractions of the world, it eliminates passion and the search for physical pleasure. Porphyry remained celibate for most of his life. When he decided, belatedly, to marry Marcella, it was

out of pity for the widow of one of his friends who was in ill-health and burdened with children; and he made a point of explaining himself in the writing which he dedicated to her. He had no intention of having marital relations, did not desire children nor the experience of pleasure; the more one rejected physical love, the closer could one approach to God. According to the *Life of Pythagoras* by Iamblicus, children, by virtue of their physical chastity, have a greater power of intercession with the gods and are permitted to live within the temples. Beneath the idea of ritual purity lurks an orphic-pythagorean concept: that the body contaminates the soul which it imprisons, and that the pleasures of love stain its purity.

These opinions can be found in another pythagorean work, perhaps touched up by a christian, the *Sentences* of Sextus. Continence is the basis of piety and it is esteemed so highly that castration is recommended where a chaste life is not possible. Nothing should be done for the sake of pleasure: the sole aim of marriage is procreation. But total abstinence is necessary before approaching God. Religious rites demand continence, since sexual commerce is unclean.¹

Christian authors of the first centuries

It is scarcely surprising that these ideas which dominated the two principal philosophical schools of the time, neo-stoicism and neo-platonism – to which neo-pythagorism more or less conforms – should have had their effect on their christian contemporaries. It would surely have been impossible for a religion which attached such value to celibacy pursued for religious motives to remain unaffected by the importance accorded to continence by these pagans. The early Fathers founded christian theology by rationally developing revealed truths with the assistance of the great philosophical doctrines of the day, taking from them those elements which they judged to be compatible with their faith. To use a famous image often repeated from Irenaeus to Origen and Augustine, they, like the hebrews of the Exodus, built the Tabernacle of God with the

¹ Tibiletti, Carlo: 'Verginità e matrimonio in antichi scrittori cristiani', in *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia della Università di Macerata* II (1969), pp 27–44; Greeven, Heinrich: *Das Hauptproblem der Sozialethik in der neueren Stoa und im Urchristentum, Neutestamentliche Forschungen* III/4 (Gütersloh, 1935), pp 118 ff; Oepke A.: 'Ehe I', *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* IV, 650–666; Chadwick, Henry: 'Enkrateia', *Ibid.* V, 346–365; Stelzenberger, Johannes: *Die Beziehungen der frühchristlichen Sittenlehre zur Ethik der Stoa* (München, 1933), pp 403–438.

help of 'spoils taken from the Egyptians'. They tended to envisage evangelical and pauline teaching on virginity in the light of concepts current in their own time; and frequently their understanding of scriptural texts owes a great deal to philosophical schemes of thought which they regarded as being self-evident.

There were certain tendencies in primitive christianity which pushed sexual rigorism to the extreme of forbidding marriage. But such tendencies ran too counter to Scripture for them ever to be accepted as orthodox. So they were the preserve of the heretics, the gnostic Carpocrates, Marcion and his strict dualism which prefigured in the second century that of Mani in the third, encratism, which could be traced back to Tatian, and in the fourth century the preaching of Eustathius of Sebaste, who for a time had been the friend of Basil. Tendencies of this kind are not rare in the popular literature of the apocryphal writings. But the Fathers were opposed to these excesses, affirming the essential goodness of marriage; and the Council of Gangres condemned the propaganda of the disciples of Eustathius.

We shall not, therefore, be concerned here with these deviations but rather with the attitudes of orthodox writers towards virginity and marriage. In patristic literature there is no lack of fine texts celebrating the grandeur of marriage,¹ but the theme of the difficulties of the conjugal state, current in greek philosophy, was also developed, sometimes with a certain complacency, particularly when the young were exhorted to embrace the monastic state or widows to renounce a second marriage.² There is no question of examining all these authors within the limits of this article, or even of laying bare the essential elements of their doctrine, which develops the great scriptural themes. We can merely try to see how the influence of current philosophical ideas edged them towards a certain depreciation of marriage. They saw no conflict between their own thoughts on the subject and the mentality of the New Testament: they believed that their attitudes were upheld by scriptural texts, because they read these texts in the light of current conceptions. First we shall examine the idea of cultic continence, the introduction of the idea that conjugal relations defile a man and

¹ *Le Mariage dans l'Eglise ancienne*, Textes choisis et présentés par France Quéré-Jaumes, *Lettres chrétiennes* (Paris, 1969). Cf also John Chrysostom, 20th Homily on Ephesians (PG 62, 135-150).

² As for example the treatises on virginity by Gregory of Nyssa or John Chrysostom, or the frequent exhortations of Jerome to widows.

render him unfit to worship God; and secondly, the conviction that procreation was the sole aim of such relations, so that, when there was no possibility of generation, they could never be justified.

Origen is one of the christian authors who developed the idea of an impurity inherent in sexual relationships, often in a cultic context, with thoroughness, theological coherence and influence. At first this coherence is not apparent: we often read in his writings against the marcionites that nothing created by God is impure in itself, and that nothing can be defiled except by the evil thoughts and intentions of man. And yet everything that has any connection with generation stands in need of purification. The child is impure at birth – as is proved by the necessity of baptism. Original sin, as understood by Origen, is transmitted by the ordinary way of human generation, being linked to the sexual union of the parents with all the passion and concupiscence which accompany it. For this reason the divine Word could take flesh only within the body of a virgin. For his human soul, absorbed into the Word, just as iron plunged into fire becomes fire, was necessarily free of all tendency to sin. Within Jesus, a triangular relationship united his divinity, his virgin birth, and the absence of concupiscence. Origen draws his interpretation of the defilement of sexual relations from passages and rites in the Old Testament which in fact do not support such a construction. The impurity of the woman who has given birth refers to the flow of blood, not to the sexual relationships which took place nine months previously, since she was not impure during that period of time.¹ In his 12th homily on Leviticus – we shall shortly see another explanation – Origen attributes this defilement to the act of the parents and affirms that Mary and Jesus were free from it.

Pauline teaching² is interpreted within this perspective: abstinence from conjugal relations for the sake of prayer is understood as an obligation, and the 'concession' is taken to refer not to verse 5 but to the main subject of the passage, marriage. Origen, however, pays much more attention to the temporary character of such an abstinence (stressed by the Apostle) than do certain of his successors. In several texts he refuses to accept, in the name of that charity which should be the fundamental virtue of conjugal love, the opinion which Basil, for example, was to hold: that one of the spouses can definitively leave the other with his or her full agreement, so as to lead a life of complete continence. Moses' command to the hebrews to

¹ Lev 12, 2-7.

² 1 Cor 7, 5-6.

keep away from their wives for three days before the theophany on Sinai,¹ and the episode of David receiving the loaves of proposition² from the priest Ahimelech, are invoked with the same purpose in mind; this latter passage allows the idea of preparatory abstinence to be extended to the reception of the eucharist.

Elsewhere, Origen declares that the conjugal bedroom is not a suitable place for prayer, because 'those who indulge in the pleasures of love are to some extent defiled and impure'. Note the extenuating expressions. It is not the defilement of sin which is meant, but another kind of impurity, only analogous to the former. Sin adheres to the soul not only when it is committed but for as long as it has not been expiated. Now it is possible for married people to offer their bodies as 'a living and holy sacrifice, pleasing to God';³ but they cannot present a 'perpetual sacrifice', since their sexual relations prevent this. This impurity, therefore, is essentially linked to the act.

These concepts are astonishing and may seem to derive more from an irrational taboo than from morality or spirituality. Is there in fact any reasonable basis for requiring continence in such a way? We shall pose this question at the end of the article. In the case of Origen at any rate, these demands fit into the total pattern of his theological and spiritual vision, against a background of platonism. The impurity inherent in the exercise of sexuality is no more than an intensification of an even more profound uncleanness, that of the bodily condition. That condition neither Mary nor Jesus escaped. Origen makes this point in his 14th homily on Luke, to explain why they had to be subjected to the Purification forty days after the birth of the child. He also sees Jesus in the man who has the task of driving away the scapegoat in the desert and who, before returning to camp, has to wash his clothes: in his passion, Christ is purified of the defilements of the carnal nature assumed for our redemption. For us he was 'made sin'. To say that the flesh is impure, that sexuality is impure, does not mean for Origen that they are evil in themselves, but that for those inclined to selfish enjoyment they are sources of temptation. In the last analysis evil exists nowhere but in the mind of man. The 'sense-world' was created by God to reveal to the soul the path of the 'true' realities, and the mysteries in which it shares. The beauty of the soul must awaken the desire for supernatural goods, of which it is itself the reflection. But because of man's weakness and egoism, it too often happens that the symbol takes the place of the

¹ Exod 19, 15.

² 1 Sam 21, 4.

³ Rom 12, 1.

reality: the world of the senses becomes the final object of the adoration which is proper to the truth that it represents; and thus the impetus which should carry it forward to the divine is impeded.

This is how Origen fundamentally conceives of sin, in his symbolic and platonizing view of the world. The flesh is impure because for selfish man it is ambiguous and dangerous, leading him into temptation. This ambiguity stems from the subject, man, rather than from the object, his 'flesh'. Jesus assumed the impure carnal condition, but for him it could not be a source of sin, because of the total union joining his soul to the Word in a substantial and inconvertible manner, and enfolding it in the divine fire of charity. The saints, however, who draw a little warmth from this hearth cannot escape this ambiguity completely; even their greatest victories over sin are not entirely free from stain. Many texts express the grief of this truly great spiritual man when confronted by the congenital imperfection of every human act, even the best. For in fact charity cannot destroy all self-interest, or all egoistic covetousness.

For Origen, then, the defilement of sexual relations is merely an intensification of the impurity of the carnal condition. It can be overcome to a certain extent if the love of the spouses imitates that of Christ for his Church, eschews all selfish passion, and achieves that harmony and agreement in the couple which for Origen represent the ideal of marriage. The spouses are no longer merely one body, but one spirit. But his ascetical and mystical turn of mind makes him very much aware of the danger of an idolatrous enjoyment implicit in the sexual instinct.¹

This idea of an inherent impurity in conjugal relations, rendering them incompatible with cultic acts, was to have a profound influence on christian ideas and customs. Certainly John Chrysostom, who belonged to the school of Antioch which rivalled that at Alexandria, notes that for the apostle carnal union is no impediment to fasting and prayer; but that if abstinence is observed, religious acts may be accomplished with greater fervour and attention to God.² So it cannot be said that this concept was generally accepted from the beginning. But many later authors reproduce Origen's ideas without fitting them into the kind of theological synthesis

¹ Crouzel, Henri: *Virginité et Mariage selon Origène*, *Museum Lessianum*, section théologique no 58 (Paris-Bruges, 1963), pp 49-66.

² Fragment on 1 Cor 7, 5, in Cramer, J. A.: *Catenae graecorum Patrum in Novum Testamentum* V (Oxford, 1844), p 125.

which gives them a certain justification. And they sometimes do this without distinguishing as carefully as he does this impurity from sin.

Origen's influence can be found in ecclesiastical law both in the east and west. Canonical texts of the oriental churches prescribe continence before celebration of the eucharist and liturgical fasts: as for example canon 13 of the council in *Trullo* or *Quinisextus*.¹ Certain greek authors of the fourth century record attempts to persuade bishops, priests and deacons, married before their election, to live in perpetual continence: and in the west Popes Damasus and Siricius brought in legislation to this effect. This, already outlined by the council of Elvira, was to be the beginning of ecclesiastical celibacy. The idea of cultic chastity played an important role in the reasons given for this legislation. It was both a consequence and an extension of the evangelical and pauline doctrine of celibacy which the monastic state incarnated. Even if he were married at the time when his duties were laid on him, should not the priest, charged with preaching the gospel and announcing the kingdom, accept to live as a witness of the new times? 'Let those who have wives live as if they had none'.²

The patristic theology of marriage borrowed fairly heavily from the stoics: the natural end of the conjugal act is procreation; it is therefore determined only by its biological function. For these philosophers the desire for union and the pleasure it brings are irrational sentiments, bestial rather than human, and therefore to be regretted: they may be excused only when they accompany the act which is going to result in generation. There should, of course, be friendship between the spouses, friendship of a spiritual kind, linked with the community of life. This was extolled by Musonius Rufus among others. But the procreative act has no connection with love; a dualism characterizes this conception of marriage. The insistence of the sages of the Portico on the need to people the earthly city met with less enthusiasm from the Fathers. The society which counted most for them was the Church, and her growth was facilitated more by the spiritual fecundity of virginity than by marriage.

The majority of theologians in the first five centuries who spoke

¹ PG 137, 559-564, with the commentaries of the byzantine canonists, Balsamon, Zonaras and Aristenos.

² 1 Cor 7, 29. On the importance of cultic continence in the origins of ecclesiastical celibacy, see Gryson, Roger: *Les origines du célibat ecclésiastique, Recherches et Synthèses*, (Gembloux, 1970).

about marriage shared in varying degrees this common attitude, which seemed to them quite natural and inevitable. Augustine frequently enumerated the benefits of marriage: *proles*, offspring, *fides*, fidelity, *sacramentum*. This third good comprises revelation: marriage shares in the mystery which effects the union of Christ and the Church, of which it is the image; and it is indissoluble according to the primitive law of creation.¹ We shall concern ourselves only with the first two benefits.

The distinction between the sexes is biological, for the purpose of procreation. Augustine read Genesis 2, 18 from this viewpoint: God gave woman to man as a 'help like to himself'. Far from leading the theologian to interpret this collaboration within the context of a shared life, woman's place was restricted to procreation, which is the sole justification of the complementary character of the sexual differences. Generation is therefore the only valid motive for the conjugal act, the only one that accords with the natural law. This conviction leads even Augustine to warp the sense of certain scriptural texts. Marriage, according to Paul, is a 'remedy for concupiscence';² but this aim is only permissible if procreation is possible, since procreation alone makes amends for this incontinence and renders admissible a desire which would otherwise be evil. The right of each spouse to the body of the other, recognized by Paul,³ must not bypass this condition: the partner who demands conjugal relations without observing it commits a (venial) sin. But Paul seems to be referring to the kind of relations which go further than the demands of generation would require. Augustine admits this but, taking his cue from Jerome, maintains that verse 6, which unlike Origen he connects with verse 5, explicitly describes the relation as a case of venial sin. In fact, if the original text said: 'I tell you this by way of concession (*suggnomen*), not as a command', the translation used by Augustine turns this greek word into *veniam*, pardon – which presupposes that there is a venial fault to be pardoned.

If Augustine understands these verses in this way, it is because the stoic concepts which underlie his interpretations are for him, as for his predecessors, an obvious philosophical fact: in sexual matters, natural law is indistinguishable from the biological nature common to man and the animals. The judgement of the Portico on the passions was strengthened further by the augustinian doctrine of original sin. The theologian is here battling with two kinds of adver-

Gen 2, 24.

² 1 Cor 7, 2.

³ 1 Cor 7, 3-4.

sary. The manichaeans forbade members of the sect to marry but allowed sympathisers to do so, at the same time advising them to avoid procreation since matter is evil, and to bring children into the world is to imprison souls in material bodies. According to Augustine, therefore, manichaean 'hearers' only married so as to assuage their passion. For the pelagians, on the other hand, sexual desire and sexual pleasure were natural and therefore good, and belonged to the benefits of marriage. Augustine replied that this would perhaps be true if man were in his original state of holiness. But such is not the case, as Paul attests in his Letters to the Romans and Galatians. Concupiscence obeys neither reason nor will and tends to take possession of the whole man, robbing him of his essential personal dignity. Nothing but the free will to procreate can provide sexual desire with sufficient excuse.

The second benefit is *fides*, the faithful love which creates between the spouses a community of love and charity. It is not necessarily linked with the exercise of sexuality, and may exist without it. This communion is not impaired when the couple live in a state of complete continence. On the contrary, it becomes more perfect in proportion as the demands of desire and pleasure diminish, and the attraction of the flesh grows less acute.

Leaving out of account the *sacramentum*, there are therefore two aspects of marriage which seem to have little connection with each other: a physical or biological aspect, sexuality, of which procreation is the aim and the sole justification of a sexual attraction which original sin has rendered diseased; and a social aspect, the communion of two people in a spiritual love. Now the augustinian theology of marriage will largely dominate the official teaching of the Church until the twentieth century. Beginning with the fifteenth century, a more accurate interpretation of pauline teaching¹ makes its appearance, but it will take time to achieve recognition: conjugal relations are permissible even when procreation is not possible, if they are motivated by the desire to preserve or encourage the mutual love of the spouses. It is the first sign of a link between sexuality and *fides*, which will do away with a long-standing dualism.²

Conclusion

It is true that in the earliest teaching on marriage and in the writ-

¹ 1 Cor 7, 5.

² See Janssens, Louis: *Mariage et Fécondité, Réponses Chrétiennes*, (Gembloux-Paris, 1967).

ings of the later tradition we find judgements which are excessively pessimistic: the idea of a defilement affecting conjugal relations and requiring continence before cultic acts, and the idea that procreation alone justifies sexual desire. It is, however, necessary to emphasize that these do not arise out of the New Testament but from the cultural context and the scientific knowledge of that time. Today the cultural context is quite different, and the state of scientific knowledge too. But it may be equally true that we are exposed to the opposite excess in the current evaluation of sexuality, and that the opinions set out above, even though exaggerated, may contain a basis of truth which it would be dangerous to despise.

Certainly, sexual relations have a role in the development of mutual love between the spouses. We can no longer make a strict dichotomy between the exercise of sexuality whose sole aim is procreation, and the affection of the spouses for each other. Body and spirit are not juxtaposed. The human person is unique and its spiritual and corporal aspects are strictly interdependent. For some time now we have left dualism behind, and have recognized conjugal love as one of the benefits of sexuality. But perhaps the hierarchy which was long maintained between procreation as the first aim, and mutual love as the second, has constituted an artificial extension of this earlier dualism. Is not the child the fruit of this mutual love, not only in his physical origin but in the acknowledgement of him as a person? This opening out to the child should be recognized as an essential dimension of the affection of the spouses for each other, which cannot be reduced to an *égoïsme à deux*. When married people conscientiously decide to limit their offspring, they cannot fail to take into account the interests of the existing children, or the unfavourable conditions into which potential children might be born. The good of the children is at the very heart of the love of husband and wife for each other.

Though stoic pessimism with regard to sexual desire and pleasure is obviously excessive, this does not mean that it should be replaced by complacent optimism. Subject to certain conditions, pleasure has its place in morality. It is a sign that an inclination has been satisfied; and therefore it is a proof of both physical and moral well-being. But if it goes beyond this, it runs the risk of hedonism and egoism. At the same time, one cannot eliminate desire. Human love always contains the two components, *eros* and *agapè*. It would be ruinous to deny the 'erotic' dimension of love; yet to do away with *agapè* would destroy love at its very roots, by juxtaposing two egoisms

between which no lasting accord can exist. Moreover, this danger certainly threatens the sexuality of man, who always has a leaning towards sin either by seeking satisfaction in an egoism that is false or in a passion that is idolatrous. Hence, the building of conjugal community and of the love which cements it demands a continual moral effort, a discipline imposed on desire in order that it may be accommodated to the other. Chastity in marriage is not merely a question of fidelity and of avoiding abuses. It also involves concern for the other's needs, even in the day-to-day fulfilment of conjugal relations. Grace alone makes possible this kind of chastity, as it does every other. But grace does make it possible, even for man marked by original sin.

Up to this point, many of our readers will go along with us. But this may not be the case if we try to find some justification for the precepts of cultic continence whose importance we have seen in the early history and legislation of the Church. Might it not be better to consign to the limbo of oblivion this unreasonable taboo, incompatible with the sanctity of christian marriage proclaimed by the Apostle? I would not wish to be misunderstood. There is no question of resuscitating worn-out concepts. At the present time, ecclesiastical celibacy is motivated by reasons which are more in harmony with the scriptures. But perhaps we ought still to ask whether behind all the myth and magic, and in spite of the exaggeration which labels even the normal use of sexuality as impure, there does not lie a profound insight into man's attitude to God.

'The celibacy of the priest is one of the oldest requirements and one of the most deeply rooted in the history of humanity', wrote Henry Chadwick,¹ 'Continence' might be more apposite than 'celibacy' because of the temporary precept of continence often imposed on married people. So universal a custom cannot be completely contrary to reason; it must make some kind of sense. A comparative study of the different justifications offered by different religions and civilisations would be instructive. We have seen the meaning of continence within christianity, according to Origen's theology. This could be linked with an attitude to sex which lies deep in human nature: shame. Max Scheler represents it as a defensive reaction to protect a potentially human and personal love

¹ 'Der Zölibat des Priesters ist eine der ältesten und tief eingewurzelten Forderungen der Menschheit': 'Enkrateia', *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* V, col. 347.

against the blind force of the sexual instinct.¹ In a way it is a dyke or flood-gate canalizing this torrent and making possible a use of it which is willed and controlled by the personality. The sexual instinct is frequently experienced as a mysterious force which can escape the control of intelligence and free will, and drag them along in its wake. It robs man of his personal dignity and of his will to love as a person. The ancients saw in sexual commerce the work of spirits who dominate man,² and they felt that in the course of it man risked becoming the plaything of a power outside his control, rather than a person in control of his own actions.

All this could be applied to man's relations with God. Man's self-offering to God demands a consecration of the human person with his intelligence, his free will, and his capacity to love. It also demands before the great moments of prayer and worship the elimination of all that might distract the spirit. The sexual instinct is one such distracting element; it cannot be completely disciplined even in the most perfect conjugal love. It draws along in its train a whole host of impressions and desires which can hinder prayer and take away from the perfect purity of the gift.

Can we reconcile what we have just said with the characteristics proper to the spirituality of marriage and the prayer of the married christian? It is together, each through the other, united in their common task – which is primarily their devotion to their children – that married people go towards God. How can the feeling which unites them, a conjugal love inspired by charity, be thought to take them away from God, to 'divide' them?³ Temporary continence, mutually agreed upon, so as to allow concentration on prayer, such as Paul recommends,⁴ could, however, help them to purify that love of the self-seeking which so easily accompanies sexual activity. It allows them to reach God more completely, not independently of each other, not each one for himself, but through their love and their union. If this pauline verse does not express a *precept* of cultic continence, in any strict sense, it does correspond to man's experience in his relationship with God. It must not however, be raised to the level of a commandment, nor must it be allowed to disparage the use of sexuality.

¹ *La Pudeur*, traduction M. Dupuy, *Philosophie de l'Esprit* (Paris, 1952).

² Fehrle, *op. cit.*, pp 25 ff.

³ 1 Cor 7, 32-34.

⁴ 1 Cor 7, 5.