

The Holiness Of Married Life

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It is generally known that Pope Pius XI introduced the custom of receiving in special audience newly-married couples who came from all parts of Italy and the world to spend part at least of their honeymoon in Rome. The Holy Father made it quite clear that their presence was a joy to his heart, and he encouraged the custom to the extent of hiring special cars to take them out to Castel Gandolfo to be received in audience, even during the hot summer months.

The Vicar of Christ was wont to give beautiful addresses to these couples on such occasions, and there was a continued insistence on the beauty of married love as an image of the love between Christ and His Spouse the Church, a fruitful love blessed by numerous offspring in the order of grace, that is to say, in the Church, or in the order of nature, as in the family.

Thinking of these gatherings in the Pontifical Palace at Castel Gandolfo, hard by the Alban Lake, one is forcibly reminded of the sermons of Our Lord by the lakeside and of His presence in the town of Cana at the marriage-feast, where He not only hallowed the union by His presence, but came to the aid of the host by making good, miraculously, the shortage of wine. Truly it is good to think that these newly-founded families, as the Pope often called them, fragrant with the grace of the Sacrament of Matrimony, come and stand before the Vicar of Christ on earth to receive from him words of advice and to have his blessing on the homes which they are about to establish. We are reminded of the words of St Peter: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

From him who stands in the place of Christ, the husband and wife come to receive their first admonition and kneel beneath his hand raised in blessing over them and the Christian household over which they will preside.

Pius XI was wont to remind them that the offspring whom God in His goodness would give them would be sacred charges for which they should give thanks remembering always their responsibility for the Christian education of these little ones to the greater glory of God. It is to be observed that the Pope always insisted on the primary purpose of the creation of the souls of the children, and brought home to the future parents the dignity that was to be theirs in preparing the material bodies which those souls were to inhabit, and which they would use to fulfil the sublime purpose of human life. God and the parents working together as principal cause and as instruments, divinely chosen and suitably endowed, bring into being a new person, the child fashioned to the likeness of the ever-blessed Trinity. Any idea of the fruitfulness of race in order that numerous progeny may serve primarily to swell the ranks of big battalions, an idea so acceptable to the military-minded, is, of course, foreign to Catholic theology, and Pius XI was at pains, from time to time, to emphasize the fact that when he spoke of large families he had in mind the glory of God and considered that glory the first thing to which everything else was secondary and subservient.

It is quite Catholic to regard the child as one who may lawfully be called to take up arms on behalf of his country, or indeed in any good cause, but the Popes deplore the misguided exhortations of those who would glorify the fruitfulness of the race as a means primarily to multiply the ranks of army, navy, or air force.

The Popes in their letters and addresses do not hesitate to remind us of what the Holy Spirit says through the mouth of the psalmist:

“Scatter the nations that wish for war.”

No! Fruitful families are fruitful primarily unto God, and the purposes of marriage must not be twisted to serve the baser ends of ambition and unbridled national aggrandizement.

God, is a God of peace, and the psalmist prays that “your children may be as olive plants round about your table.” The olive signifies peace. The words placed on the lips of the priest by the Church, as he enters a home in order to bless it, are: “Peace be to this house.” Primarily is meant the peace of soul, but, again, God tells us to pray that there may be “peace in our strength and plenty within our towers”. He bestows peace on both families and nations. He is the “Author and Lover of peace.”

THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST.

Much is said and written in these days about the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. It is a subject that needs careful handling lest the analogy be pushed too far. But, briefly, the doctrine is this: The Church is living a life which is, in a sense, the continued life of Christ on earth. That is why Our Lord was able to rebuke Saul of Tarsus, afterwards the great St Paul, in these striking words:

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?”

Saul’s efforts against the Christians were an attack on Christ, on that Body which Christ Jesus had founded to preach His doctrines, and which He had promised would have a continued life-giving stream of strength or grace flowing out from Himself in the same way as the vine sends out its sap from the centre to all the branches.

“Saul, Saul, why persecute you Me?”

The Apostles Peter and Paul gave us other illustrations of this doctrine. Paul likened us to members of the Body of Christ. Just as the eye or the hand has its particular function in our bodily life, so we, each of us, have a particular function with regard to the life of the whole Church, the Body of Christ.

Peter tells us we are stones in the building, and that the corner-stone of the building is Christ Jesus. Now let us apply this teaching to Christian marriage. The Apostle Paul in a well-known passage in the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians explains that the union between man and wife in the Christian dispensation is a likeness of the union between Christ and His Church. Husbands are thus admonished:

“Love your wives, as Christ also loved the Church and delivered himself up for it, that he might sanctify it, cleansing it by the laver of water in the word of life... So also ought men to love their wives as their own bodies... For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave

to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh. This is a great mystery (a great Sacrament), but I speak in Christ and in the Church.” — EPH. 5:25-32.

The union between Christ and the Church, therefore, considered both in its nature and in its purpose is placed before us as a model according to which Christian wedlock should be shaped.

Let us think a little about this union of Our Lord with His Church.

The three purposes of matrimony are the bringing of children into the world, the education of those children, and the mutual help and companionship of husband and wife.

Now in the first place the union between Our Lord and the Church His Bride is certainly a fruitful union. Children are continually being born in the order of grace in the Church. Their birth is that of which the divine Bridegroom spoke to Nicodemus, who was puzzled when our Saviour told him that he must be born again. Our Lord instructed him, and he was given to understand that the birth of which He spoke was a birth of water and the Holy Ghost, that is to say, the birth given to a child when the waters of Baptism flow over its head and the minister of God pronounces words placed on his lips by the Church of God; words by which he declares that the child is cleansed in the name of the three divine Persons. A new life is given to the child, and this is intended to perfect the life which the parents have been instrumental in giving to it in the process of human generation.

The Church is a fruitful mother through the union with the divine Bridegroom, and so, likewise, is the wife through union with her husband in the Sacrament of Matrimony. Just as it is sinful to oppose the work of the Church by preventing her from preaching the gospel and baptizing, so also would it be sinful to interfere with those divinely appointed processes whereby the union of man and woman is intended to bring forth children unto God in the order of nature. God commanded that the first man and woman should “increase and multiply and fill the earth”: and Jesus Christ bade His apostles to go everywhere among the nations and beget children in the order of grace in the Sacrament of Baptism. This twofold fruitfulness is essential for the fulfilment of the divine behest.

Then, in the second place, it is a fact open and evident to all that the Church through her union with Christ is able to educate those children when they have been born again in the waters of Baptism. Her system of education is known and admired far and wide. Missionaries arriving in a new territory at once build schools wherein those newly born in the faith of Christ may receive that instruction which they need for the development of their Christian life.

Thus, in this also, the Church and her Bridegroom are a model for the union in Christian wedlock of husband and wife.

The Church through her authoritative divine commission, and guided by Christ in the moral code and creed which she teaches, builds up the characters of her children and makes them strong unto Christ. Similarly father and mother, in the order of nature, must take care to build up both body and soul of the child and place it in such conditions that the maternal hand of the Church may complete what they have begun.

Thirdly, in the union between Christ and His Church there is constantly mutual companionship and interchange of gifts. The Church co-operating with Our Lord enjoys His continual help promised to her in the words:

“Behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world.”

She has His abiding presence, so full of solace and support, in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar. The stability of the Church is the effect of her being rooted in Christ and upheld by Him. His divine gifts are always at the disposal of His Bride the Church. His Vicar on earth, the Holy Father, is ever guiding the flock of Christ, and leading it along the narrow way which is the way of salvation. It is the knowledge of this fact which has led his children to describe the Pope as the “gentle Christ on earth,” a description which calls attention to the eminently Christ-like work which he is given to do for the Church.

This union of Christ the Bridegroom and of the Church His Bride is one that remains forever. It is a union whose bond will never be broken. Similarly, the union of man and woman in the great Sacrament of the New Law is, according to the teaching of the Church, one which no merely human power can break. Thus, husband and wife living together all the days of their lives “until death do them part”, are loving each other “as Christ loved the Church”; and such a faithful and uninterrupted sharing of common life is an image of the union of Our Lord with His Bride the Church. It is, so to say, the after-glow of the splendour of the life of the divine Bridegroom with His Bride the Catholic Church.

There is, moreover, the love of Christ for His Church which no storm nor shock can ever weaken or destroy. Our Lord has pledged Himself to His Bride the Church “for better or for worse, in sickness and in health“. Times certainly can be better or worse for the Church, as the pages of history make manifest. Storm after storm has broken over her. Men have risen whose object was to crush her. She has reeled under blow after blow. She has been driven from the light of day to burrow underground and set up altars in hidden places. She has been sick and wounded, and sick unto death, as her enemies imagined. Yet she has survived, and her sickness has been, as was that of Lazarus, for the glory of God. The Bridegroom, Christ Jesus, was always at hand to call her forth from the hidden places, to loose the bonds that bound her, and to bid her continue her work. It will always be so. The divine promise upholds her. The gates of hell shall not prevail.

GRACE TO OVERCOME DIFFICULTIES.

Husband and wife in Christian wedlock should be reminded of this fidelity of Our Lord to His Church, and should face the difficulties of their married life strong in the trust that the Lord Jesus will not allow even the worst troubles to weaken the bond of love which they fashioned at the foot of the altar. Under the influence of the strengthening grace of a Sacrament which Jesus Christ made precisely for that end, husband and wife are able to surmount all the trials and difficulties of their holy state. Let them remember in the darkest days that the Lord is nigh. The storm broke over the lake of Galilee and threatened to engulf the disciples, but the Lord Jesus was not unmindful of their peril, and, at the moment chosen by Himself He rose and quelled the raging winds and silenced the roaring sea. He is with husband and wife, likewise, to strengthen and to comfort, provided that they do not neglect the grace that was given them when they placed hand in hand at the foot of Christ’s altar. His part in the sacramental contract never fails. Let the married couple remember what Catholic theology teaches, namely, that sacramental grace is given them, beyond any doubt, containing all the virtue necessary for every phase and every joy and sorrow of their married life. Their part must be played by union with Christ Jesus and by the observance of His commandments and by constant prayer.

THE NUPTIAL MASS.

The important truth which we have considered, namely, that the union of the man and woman in wedlock is holy because it is a likeness of the union between Christ and His Church, leads us on to say that a wedding which takes place with a Nuptial Mass is clearly the most fitting way to begin so holy a state of life.

The Holy Mass is Christ's oblation of self for the world. What more fitting, therefore, than that whilst He makes His oblation of self at the altar, the husband and wife should make their united oblation, first of themselves to God, and then of the one to the other, pledging themselves in union with the oblation of Christ, and under its powerful, hallowing and strengthening influence.

Thus the Church, in the Nuptial Mass, bids her priest turn to the bride and bridegroom after the Lord's prayer and admonish them that marriage is an institution for the increase of mankind, which is made by God; that He it is whose authority has joined these two persons together, and that he, the priest, prays, in the name of the Church, that what God's authority has joined together may be kept by God's help.

Beautiful indeed is the prayer which follows. It should be read and pondered by all persons on the eve of marriage, and particularly by those who receive the sacrament in the sublime setting of a Nuptial Mass. It begins by recalling that God, after setting in order the elements of the universe, made man to God's image, and afterwards made the body of the woman from the body of the man, appointing the woman to be man's inseparable helpmate. There follows the invoking of God in these words: [The words used are from the Liturgy of Saint Pius V. The Revised Liturgy of Pope Paul VI contains the same sentiments expressed in a slightly different manner.]

"O God who has hallowed wedlock by a mystery so great that in the marriage bond You did foreshadow the union of Christ with the Church; O God by whom woman is joined to man, and that union which You did ordain from the beginning is endowed with a blessing which alone was not taken away, either by the punishment for original sin, or by the sentence of the flood; look in Your mercy on this Your handmaid, who is to be joined in wedlock and entreats protection and strength from You. May the yoke of love and of peace be upon her. True and chaste may she wed in Christ; and may she ever follow the pattern of the holy women; and may she be dear to her husband like Rachel; wise like Rebecca; long-lived and faithful like Sara. May the author of deceit work none of his evil deeds within her. May she be ever knit to the faith and to the commandments. May she fortify her weakness by strong discipline. May she be grave in demeanour and honoured for her modesty. May she be well taught in heavenly lore. May she be fruitful in offspring. May her life be good and sinless. May she win the rest of the blessed and the kingdom of heaven."

Noteworthy in that prayer addressed to the benefit of the bride are the words "may she wed in Christ", which express, in brief, the thoughts which we have put before the reader regarding the union of Christ and His Church and its reflected likeness in the union of bridegroom and bride. At this part of the Nuptial Mass, the Church prays for the bride, and tells her all that God wishes for her and from her in this state of wedlock hallowed by Jesus Christ now in the holy Sacrifice of the Mass. We may consider, too, that the divine Bridegroom prays without ceasing in similar terms for His Bride the Catholic Church.

"True and chaste may she wed in Christ." The grace of purity and chastity is bestowed abundantly on those who enter the state of wedlock with the resolution, humbly made and loyally preserved, to live chastely in Christ. All that pertains to the purposes of wedlock, namely, the processes of generation of offspring, the upbringing thereof, and the mutual helpful companionship of husband

and wife in the surrendering of themselves one to the other, is an expression of the divine plan, and is therefore most beautiful and holy. The right attitude on the part of husband and wife to the duties and obligations of their state, therefore, will enable them with the grace of God to “wed chastely in Christ”. All is chaste where all is done according to the divine plan. Attempts to frustrate God’s designs by using the married state for the purpose of self-gratification, with the consequent subordination of the primary God-given purpose to purposes planned by man’s sensual appetites, make of wedlock an ugly unchaste thing, wherein the husband and wife are certainly not living as “wed in Christ.”

Husband and wife, instruments in the hands of the Most High for the realization of His plan that the human race should increase and multiply, are given the privilege of co-operating with the heavenly Father in the generation of His children. Life is sacred to God. Neither at its sacred end nor at its sacred source can human authority usurp a power that belongs to the Maker alone.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to say anything more on this particular subject. Suffice it to say to the perplexed, or to those whose ideas on chastity in the married state are assailed by specious argument, that the true idea of Christian marriage may be found in the teaching of Holy Church, in her theology, tradition, and liturgy, all summed up so clearly and convincingly in the Encyclical on “Chaste Wedlock” given to us by Pius XI. {Casti Connubi was proclaimed on December 31, 1930.}

I have said enough, I think, to show that the man and woman who are about to enter upon the holy state of wedlock should endeavour to understand how great is the dignity of such a state, and what precisely is meant by being “wed in Christ”

On their practical understanding of this will depend essentially their future happiness. The union of Our Lord and His Church, its fruitfulness, its admirable care of its children, its beautiful companionship resting on the strengthening influence of the Bridegroom and the loving co-operation of the Bride with mutual interchange of activity — all this will be to husband and wife a pattern and inspiration.

[For completeness sake, here is the English text of the most commonly used Nuptial Blessing of the Liturgy of Paul VI.

Father, by your power you have made everything out of nothing.
In the beginning you created the universe
and made mankind in your own likeness.
You gave man the constant help of woman
so that man and woman should no longer be two, but one flesh,
and you teach us that what you have united
may never be divided.

Father, you have made the union of man and wife so holy a mystery
that it symbolizes the marriage of Christ and his Church.

Father, by your plan man and woman are united,
and married life has been established
as the one blessing that was not forfeited by original sin
or washed away in the flood.
Look with love upon this woman, your daughter,
now joined to her husband in marriage.

She asks your blessing.
Give her the grace of love and peace.
May she always follow the example of the holy women
whose praises are sung in the scriptures.

May her husband put his trust in her
and recognize that she is his equal
and the heir with him to the life of grace.
May he always honor her and love her
as Christ loves his bride, the Church.

Father, keep them always true to your commandments.

Keep them faithful in marriage
and let them be living examples of Christian life.

Give them the strength which comes from the gospel
so that they may be witnesses of Christ to others.

(Bless them with children
and help them to be good parents.

May they live to see their children's children.)

And, after a happy old age,
grant them fullness of life with the saints
in the kingdom of heaven.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Response: Amen.]

ENTHRONEMENT OF THE SACRED HEART.

Now, however, I would like to add that both Pope Pius XI and his successor, Pius XII, themselves personally urged upon the newly-married their duty of making their homes holy by living therein a truly Christian life. It is not without a special disposition of Providence and the guidance of the Holy Ghost that, in these days, there has been placed before us a concrete way of making Our Lord reign in our homes. I refer to the work which is known as the Enthronement of the Sacred Heart in the home. It will be admitted quite readily that the setting up of an image or picture of the Sacred Heart in our houses is quite a secondary thing compared with the essential, namely, the practical recognition of Our Lord's sovereignty in our family life. Nevertheless, we are creatures of sense, and it is because of this that the Church, wise and experienced mother that she is, has always encouraged her children to make use of concrete representations of holy things. That is the whole explanation of the Catholic teaching regarding statues and images, just as it is the explanation of statues and monuments set up by the State to remind its citizens of great men or deeds of national glory.

What, in effect, the Enthronement of Christ in the home does for us is to remind us of Christ in our midst. A little sanctuary is made where the image of Our Lord is placed. Perhaps a lamp may burn before it always, or on certain feast-days, but this is of course a matter of secondary importance, and to be decided by the head of the family.

The main thing is to make Our Lord the centre of all the life in the home. The children must be taught to recognize that their lives are in the hands of God, and that Jesus is King and centre of all

hearts. The parents should form the habit of taking them in front of the little sanctuary in the home where they can see the image of Our Lord and remind themselves of God made man, Christ Our Lord and Saviour. They may be taught, too, to say a little prayer before they set out for school in the morning and to give thanks when they return. These are little acts of love of God, and will leave a lasting impression on the little ones which the passing years will not efface.

The father and mother will teach first by their example, and then by their words of advice and encouragement, and it should be quite an ordinary occurrence in the family life that Our Lord's name is mentioned, and that His words and deeds are spoken of as the pattern on which the life of all should be modelled. This will make each home another Bethany, where Our Lord is considered as an ever-welcome guest in the family circle and at the family table. With Jesus Christ the day will begin and with Him it will close, as the family gathers round the little shrine, however humble it may be, and having thanked the King and Lord for all that has happened during the day, whether joyful or sorrowful, commends its repose to Him, and goes to rest.

In a family such as this, where Our Lord truly reigns, and where His love abounds, all the experiences of family life will have His blessing. We must remember the words of the bridegroom which he spoke at the foot of the altar when he "plighted his troth," saying that he took his wife "for better and for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part." There will be times when all goes smoothly, and when joyful laughter is heard in the family circle. Yet we all know that there is no family to whom sickness and sorrow do not come, and such trials as these are expected by the Christian, because "the servant is not above the Master," and the Master, Himself a cross-bearer, goes before us carrying His cross. Inspired by His example, we follow bravely after Him.

In times of joy and good news the family that has chosen Christ for its King goes to its shrine and thanks Him for the graces and gifts that have fallen to it from the hands of God. This spirit of gratitude will give joy to the heart of Our Lord and lead Him to bestow more and more of His benefits.

There comes, inevitably, the time of bereavement, when loved ones are taken from the family circle. Then, too, it will be the practice of the Christian household to say its prayer of resignation and to look bravely into the face of the Master and say His own prayer, "yet not my will but Yours be done."

THE BLESSINGS OF THE RITUAL.

It will be well to observe here that as the state of wedlock is a likeness of the union between Our Lord and His Church, we may expect the Church, guided by the divine Bridegroom, to show her care for, and interest in, the various circumstances of family life. I would like to call attention to the blessings in the Ritual for which every family should be grateful, and which it should be glad to use. These are the blessing of the mother before childbirth, and the blessing of the sick child, the blessing of infants, the blessing of boys and girls by the priest, in the church, or in the home, and the blessing and sprinkling of the house with holy water at Eastertide. The family whose life is "in Christ" will set great store by such blessings given to it with all the weighty authority of Holy Church, and will not fail to ask the priest to bestow them when occasion offers. It will be noticed how the Church constantly reminds us of the dignity and beauty of parenthood. For example, in the prayer over the mother with child we are reminded how Our Lord gave joy to St John the Baptist when he was still in the womb of his mother, and how Our Lady's motherhood was given to her through the cooperation of the Holy Spirit. Then the Church bids us remember that whatever human

skill may be employed in bringing about a safe delivery, it is the hand of the divine mercy which lifts the child from his mother's womb to the light of day. Full of comfort, too, is the prayer which, in the same ceremony, calls upon God's angels to encompass the mother about and protect her and her offspring so that the Almighty God may lead them both, in the time to come, to everlasting light.

These blessings, taken in conjunction with the prayers of the marriage ceremony and of the Nuptial Mass, are the voice of Holy Church, and it will be realized on reading the Encyclical Christian Marriage (*Casti Connubi*) of Pius XI, together with that of Leo XIII on the Christian family, (*Arcanum*, of 10 February, 1880), that the voice of the Church is always the same. The dignity of Christian wedlock is constantly proclaimed, its sacred character is eloquently defended, and its holy purposes are explained and extolled. The legislative authority of the secular arm has been so accommodating to the passions and caprices of mankind that, wittingly or unwittingly, it has entered into partnership with the enemies of Christ, to undermine a divine institution which, if it be venerated according to the law of God, is the very bulwark of right order in the Christian State. It has been said by many in recent years that the world suffers because of its flouting of the divine law. Has not the world abandoned in great part the reverence for the marriage bond so venerated by our forefathers in this land?

Divorce has separated father and mother and children. Unnatural practices have restricted the population and incurred the wrath of the Most High. Now He has allowed the world to be ravaged by war. During the course of the Second World War I often had occasion to make remarks like the following:

Families are divided in a way which is none of their own choosing, and the population of the world is being reduced by violent and bloody means. In a word, may we say the tables are turned, and the vicious practices of man have reaped their own reward. It is only by our return to the law of Christ Jesus that God will be moved to have pity upon us. There can be no rebuilding of Europe worthy of the name unless it be done according to the laws of Christ, obedience to which has given to Europe in the past all that makes its history noble and good.

Statesmen would be well advised to concentrate their attention on the well-being of the Christian family, and to safeguard the bond that binds man to woman in Christian marriage at the foot of the altar of the Lord. There is such a thing as Christian democracy and freedom, terms which are so much vaunted in these days. But freedom is not licence, nor does "government by the people and for the people" mean that the vicious tendencies of human nature may bring such pressure to bear on rulers that the bonds with which Christ bound the State should be untied and passion allowed to quicken its hurried pace along the broad road that leads to damnation. Christ told us that the narrow way led to salvation. The truly broad-minded man is one who takes a comprehensive view of human obligations in the light of the teaching of Jesus Christ. Hence the narrow way is trod by broad-minded people. It is on the broad way that there run hither and thither the many whose view of the universe leaves out of consideration the law of God as revealed by Jesus Christ. That broad way is trod by a narrow-minded crowd jostling each other in a mad search for a pleasure that does not satisfy and that depraves the nature which God has given us.

Right views concerning the Christian family will save the State from disaster. The Popes have commended most warmly the practice of consecrating families to Christ in the way which I have tried to explain in this booklet.

A PERSONAL NOTE.

Now may I conclude on a personal note? Knowing as I did the wish of Pope Pius XI, and having read his beautiful addresses to the newly-married, I tried, when I came as Apostolic Delegate to Great Britain, to encourage the devotion of the Enthronement of Christ in the home. This devotion has the approval of at least four Popes, and it has attached to it the magnificent promises made to the saint of the Sacred Heart, Margaret Mary Alacoque. I most warmly commend it. Those who set up the shrine of Our Lord in the home and make Him the King of their family will receive a most bountiful outpouring of graces and gifts. They will receive the graces necessary for them in all the changing circumstances of family life. Beneath their roof, be it ever so lowly, Christ will reign; and the powerful and kindly influence of His presence will fill the hearts of parents and children. I commend this devotion, therefore, most warmly, and if the reader of these words has not yet invited the priest to enthrone Jesus Christ in his home, let him not delay. "Behold I stand at the gate and knock." Open therefore to Jesus Christ, and as He crosses the threshold, with Him will enter His blessed Mother and His foster-father to fill the household with the grace that will make it the living image of that home wherein Jesus Himself dwelt during the time of His sojourn amongst men.
