

To Those Getting Married

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THE CALL.

THE sun, of course, illuminates things for us, and yet, if we look upon it exclusively, the very light will visit us with a temporary blindness. And this sort of accident can very easily happen to us in matters of Faith. The Catholic Faith is far broader than our minds, and consequently we must grow in order to embrace it more fully. If we become too much absorbed with one ray of its light, then other affairs of the deepest concern to us may lie around steeped in shadow.

This has particular application to the vocations of the priesthood and of marriage. In the mind of the Catholic the priesthood rises, very august but immensely comforting, a mountain touching Heaven, yet reaching out to all the earth. He remembers the intimate training given by Christ to His Apostles and the wonderful powers that followed. He sees that same body busily engaged in all the world today, offering a Divine Sacrifice, forgiving sins and teaching. He realises that priests are men apart, called by God from the ways of other men, and yet their servants in His Name.

But what has God to say to the rest of us? Because, as I have mentioned, the Faith is broader than the minds of men, we are apt to imagine Him saying something like the following:

"For these men I have work to do — very special work. The rest of you may run away and play. Get married and enjoy yourselves — my Ministers will bless your unions. Be good, and I will see you in Heaven in due course. For the present, that suffices, as for you there is no particular vocation."

This, of course, is a mixture of truth and falsehood. It is true that the priesthood is a higher and a holier calling than marriage, but we must not allow this light to blind us to the certain fact that marriage is itself a sacred and blessed vocation, that is, a definite call from God. He calls us all in some way or another, some vocations involving greater dignity and others graver responsibility. We might consider two girl friends, one of whom becomes aware of a definite calling to life in a Religious Order, both as regards the urge and the opportunity. God does not simply accept this one, take her vows in due course, and send the other about her business. Neither of them has the right to any business not involving Him. He calls them both, although along different roads, and both roads lead to Him.

It is interesting to note that, if the second girl should marry, she alone of the two walks in a way that is in itself sacramental, that is, a means of grace. A nun who sacrifices all thought of marriage upon God's altar draws closer to Him in the offering. A girl who marries approaches Him along a road that He has Himself appointed. God can be served in a variety of ways, but for two of them He has so especial a regard that He has made them channels of His grace, and these are Holy Order and Matrimony.

Marriage, then, has this wonderful thing in common with the priesthood, and is certainly not a sort of playground to which we can retire away from the Divine Call to work. It is a way of life and in

itself a Call. In it, the parties are vowed to the service of God in a particular manner, the whole being crowned with a sanctity only dimly realised by Catholics themselves.

There is nothing fatalistic about this matter of vocations. God leaves us perfectly free to choose our way of life, and yet in that very liberty He calls us. No married man who has acted with good motives need be haunted by the fear that perhaps God really intended him to take Holy Orders, and that he has thrown his life away. Lives are not thrown away in this great Sacrament of Matrimony, for God knows all about us, and calls us in that knowledge.

We can never regard marriage, then, as some sort of substitute. It is a really holy way of life in which the service of God is not confined to Saturday's confession and Sunday's Mass, but is vitally bound up with every moment of marital life.

THE CHOICE.

How are we to make a wise choice in regard to our state of life? Mainly, of course, by means of prayer, and it is possible to strike a very encouraging note here. We often pray for things without any proper knowledge of the implications involved in the petition. And in the darkness of our half-knowledge, we can so easily ask for things that would, in fact, strike us down if God were to grant them. For this reason alone, we find a number of prayers unanswered.

But if we pray for guidance in regard to our vocation, then this doubtful element is removed. What we are asking for is prudence, that virtue of the practical intelligence, which enables us to choose the most suitable way of doing what God wills. Such a prayer is bound to please Him, and such a light will so obviously benefit us spiritually, that we can await its coming with the greatest confidence.

The next question that arises is the manner in which this guidance is likely to be given to us. There are many possible ways, some of them bound up with a man's own inner history, and peculiar to the individual. Certainly, the most important indications are to be found within us, and if we make a careful survey of our own inner natures, we should find mirrored therein our possibilities for the future. We shall be conscious of inclinations and urges within, desires and hopes which will certainly clamour for expression in some way or another. Suppose, looking at all this frankly, we ask ourselves: "What manner of life is best suited to me? How will this peculiar make-up of mine find its most suitable expression?"

We might make a rough generalisation here, and say that there are two distinct ways of living. One is the easy happy-go-lucky way of the man who always "falls on his feet" after all sorts of odd adventures. He does not plan a career, and has little idea himself of what he is doing at the moment. The term "getting on" has little meaning for him, for he does not visualise life as the climbing of a ladder, but as a sort of wandering over the countryside.

I have not a word to say against this manner of living. After all, we have Saint Francis of Assisi on our Calendar, whose life, from a business point of view, was as harum-scarum and un-provided as anything we can imagine. God may be calling us to this sort of life. He may wish us to engage in all sorts of strange adventures for Him, perhaps in many odd corners of the world, and we may find these designs indicated for us in our temperament and natural make-up. But if this is so, then I think we may safely conclude that He is not calling us to the married state. It is possible that we might meet a girl prepared to share with us a rough-and-tumble sort of life. But although possible, it is not at all likely, and even in that case we could never feel sure how long her enthusiasm for it would

last. In addition, the children yet unborn would be involved in the serious risk we had taken. It could be argued that a man's mental habits may settle down later in life, and he may feel the desire to find a harbour. Certainly, and that would be the time to consider getting married, but we should be sure that this change of mind, if it comes, should be firm and secure before we permit it to change our state of life.

The other manner of living is the way of calm, ordered progress and steady advancement, and whatever else may be said about it, it is eminently suited to married life. The head of a family has a laden vessel to steer, and he will feel far more secure on a smoothly-flowing river than on the wider and more turbulent waters of life. And this sort of existence need not be one degree less interesting than the former, although it might seem so on the surface. Turning a house into a home, adding to its comfort and beauty year by year, building up the faith and traditions of a new family — these things can wonderfully absorb the man and the girl who are called to them.

In short, the first step towards deciding our vocation is to know ourselves. For this too, we need Divine help, for, whilst man is a mystery to himself, God's knowledge of him is utter and unerring. "Lord, You have proved me and known me: You have known my sitting down, and my rising up. You have understood my thoughts afar off: my path and my line You have searched out. And You have foreseen all my ways."

Apart from this question of our suitability, God will undoubtedly speak through the changing circumstances of our lives. We may find that, after having carefully considered ourselves, and having seen the home and the family rising up before our mind's eye as things to be dearly desired, we shall have to forgo them on account of the circumstances which surround us. Those circumstances, perhaps, are not of our making, but they may flow like a sea between ourselves and what seems to be our vocation.

We should never get bitter about this sort of thing. The ebb and flow of our fortunes are as much under the Divine Hand as those desires and hopes, which He has implanted in us, and quite certainly, He does not expect us to do the impossible. Now this does not mean that, if we find ourselves quite unable to marry, those aspirations within us to build up a Christian home and family are so much waste matter. God cherishes and rewards a good desire and intention even when His purposes have something quite different in store for us.

In other words, something has been offered to God — He has accepted it, and yet called us along a different road. And there is no real happiness apart from complete submission to the Divine will.

If, on the other hand, God has given us both suitability and opportunity for the state of marriage, then we have seen a gate swing open on the road before us. These are good and sound indications, and may go far towards convincing us that we should do well to walk through life in the company of another, whose way is bound up with ours in a unity which is nothing less than sacramental.

THE RIGHT PARTNER.

Speaking from the male point of view — simply as a matter of convenience — how does a man choose the right partner? Generally speaking, I do not think that he chooses her at all, that is, in the sense of picking her out from a line of suitable candidates. What happens is very much simpler. He falls in love, and then decides whether or not to marry the subject of that love.

Cynics have sometimes suggested that no one would ever fall in love unless he or she had read all about it in novels — in other words, it is a mere passing lunacy. Now, people in love are well aware

that this is nonsense, and that love is an extraordinary and powerful experience. They know that a flood has come upon them mightily, bearing them off to a new state of happiness and wonder — and strong enough to change one's whole view and way of life.

There are some people who are so impressed with the reality of love that they take a fatalistic view of it. This sort of lover says to himself: "Here am I, caught by this flood and being rapidly borne downstream. I have no power to resist in any case — let it bear me on." He is certain that he must marry because he is in love, and, in fact, he sometimes considers himself married already.

And yet, if we think of love as a river bearing us away, we should remember that our heads can always remain above water. This is because man is not a mere bundle of feelings and emotions, but a rational being, and he can think as well as love. As a result of this, he can see where the flood is bearing him, and can act according to what he sees. He is fully able to swim to the bank and pull himself out if he sees the alternative to be disaster. The fact is that love can capture us fully, in the sense of directing all our ways, only if we fully surrender to it. Shall we do so?

This, of course, must depend upon whether the object of our love is the right fellow-workman for the really great task ahead of us. We need a three-fold vision, that is, we must know ourselves, we must know that other, and we must know the state of marriage. And our mind's eye, considering the future, must expect to see these three blend together in unity and accord. Any serious misfits in that pattern may well spell chaos to our hopes of happiness.

It requires rather an effort to see ourselves clearly when in love. For one thing, we usually have no more intention of offering our old ragged characters to the girl we love than we would think of wearing a gardening suit when taking her out. At such times, we are apt to see ourselves, not as the kind of men that we really are, but as the sort we have every intention of becoming. Unfortunately, however, such transformations are not brought about overnight, and what we are really offering to the poor girl is quite a number of drawbacks together with a few redeeming features and a mass of good intentions. Certainly, she may succeed in making something of it all, but it is important that we should read our character as it stands at present without taking advantage of dubious credit notes for the future.

Having done this in regard to ourselves, we must now carefully consider that other. Can we keep our heads even though our hearts are on fire, and see her in the cool light of reason? We may find ourselves afraid to tread this critical path, and if so, we should conclude that there really is something wrong, or at least something that calls for a searching examination. Quite obviously, the girl is wonderful, or why do we love her? But in precisely what way? Do we mean wonderful as a wife — as constant companion with whom we are to know an intimacy closer than anything we have previously approached? We all make our way through life with a certain amount of inner privacy. That is to say, we have a number of mental experiences, which we do not normally share with others, and we may need to become accustomed to the idea that there are remarkably few secrets in married life. There will be other footsteps with ours along that private path, and another pair of eyes watching with interest every turn of the way. Now if those other steps move easily and rhythmically with ours, then our road will become brighter and happier beyond comparison. But if not, we shall soon find ourselves trying to thrust our partner off the path, and the ruination of our married life will have begun.

All this means, of course, that we should make a very careful study of our prospective partner. After all, we cannot love without knowing, and deeper knowledge may very well lead to a fuller and more confident flow of love.

Thirdly, we must know the state of marriage, so far as it is possible to know it before entering it. A good marriage is a wonderful condition in which to live. All happiness is shared, and is thereby given a fascinating new quality. Every sorrow is shouldered by both, and the sting falls from it. But for this state of remarkable intimacy there is a price to be paid — and at the expense of many of our settled habits. We ought to be prepared, therefore, for some very drastic changes.

Now we can hardly hope to view these three, that is, ourselves, our partner, and the state of marriage, without noticing quite a few snags and difficulties. These may not be at all serious — perhaps mere sand castles to be flattened out by the strong tide of advancing love. On the other hand, there may be low-lying and treacherous rocks to be avoided only by remaining in the single state. To a man in love this may sound like treachery, but in point of fact, it is the opposite. In certain circumstances, a man ought to break with a girl because he loves her, and avoid her in order to save her.

And all this, of course, applies conversely. A girl should study herself, the man she loves, and the state of marriage, as three elements of a vital question. And if, when striking these three notes, she finds them quite clearly out of harmony, then she should have nothing to do with the discord.

This sort of thing takes time, but we should bear in mind that it is vitally concerned with the whole period available between the present moment and the death of one of the partners. Let us also remember the long years of training and spiritual preparation that lie between a prospective priest and the offering of his first Mass. His calling is much higher — of course it is — but the fact remains that his preparation is long because he proposes to enter a holy state and follow a sacred vocation. So do we. If he is prepared to give years, we should be ready to offer at least a few months.

In the majority of cases, the elements I have mentioned harmonise well enough, and there is every prospect of a warm and happy association. There will be some difficulties to overcome, for no two people are quite the same. For this reason, if we succeed in making a happy marriage, we shall have achieved "unity in variety", which is Saint Augustine's definition of beauty. A happy marriage really is a thing of beauty and a joy forever.

And if we really see this prospect clearly before us, then by all means let us surrender to our love and let it bear us on. Our hearts have gone where our minds can follow, so that we can love like rational beings under the shadow of that infinitely greater love which made the worlds.

THE VISION.

Solomon tells us in the Book of Proverbs that "where there is no vision the people perish." It is certainly a fact of common experience that people will not work for nothing. It is true that they sometimes work without payment, but they will not work in the absence of some vision showing the necessity or desirability of what they are doing. Now for any young married couple there is hard work to be done. This is still true if both of them should have plenty of money and there is no need to earn more, for in any case, a good marriage is something that has to be built up with great care, brick by brick, on very sure foundations. If we ourselves are going to undertake such work, then we shall need a vision, or our efforts will perish.

Whilst we are courting, we are apt to feel that we have no particular need for a vision. Here is our love, strong and beautiful, shedding light and warmth on our path, apparently eternal and all-sufficient. We may repeat with Shakespeare that:

"Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks Within his bending sickle's compass come; Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, But bears it out even to the edge of doom. If this be error, and upon me prov'd, I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd."

Is this true?

Certainly, our love for our partner can be steadfast and eternal, but not if it is starved and neglected. It must be fostered in a thousand ways. At present it is very, very young, healthy but undeveloped, and unremitting care and attention are required if it is to attain to its great destiny.

Thus, we are provided with really hard work, for which we shall need our vision.

There is, of course, the natural vision of the future union, the home and the family. But including this, and over and above all this, is the vision of the Catholic Church, which has a value beyond calculation.

In the first place, the Christian marriage is a living symbol of the union of Christ with His Church. This Divine union is due to the fact that the Church lives with the life of Christ, which flows through the Sacraments, and is thus His Body. Now the union between a body and its own life is of an intimacy so profound that no words can be found to express it. This being so, the most perfect of all Christian marriages is but a shadow of that Divine and utter intimacy with which it is connected.

This vision, of course, is an eternal one, and it floods marriage with a new and intense meaning. It becomes obvious that a Catholic does not need to take a sort of holiday from his Faith in order to love his wife and attend to her. She is there, at the very heart of it, an expression to him of the Divine love, and an assurance of God's intimacy.

But she is even more, and so is he. Both minister to each other sacramental grace. The life of Christ flows into His Church, and into all its members, through the channels He has made, among them Christian Marriage. In giving to this man and woman Divine grace, God does not ignore their union. In fact, He makes it the vehicle — the very means by which they receive it. They walk together and He is in the midst of them. They embrace each other and are drawn closer to Him.

Here, then, is the vision, and in the light of it, our marriages will not perish. We shall see clearly the hard work that needs to be done. We shall smooth over the difficulties and remove the obstacles, for it is the way of God to the soul. "Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough ways plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed."

MIXED MARRIAGES.

It is best to be frank. A Catholic man ought to marry a Catholic girl, for a mixed marriage is just something that the Church puts up with. We know this, of course, but let us glance at the reasons.

There is within us a kind of sanctuary of the soul, which is really the Catholic Faith and our own personal reactions to it. During the course of the working day, we are only able to visit it occasionally, as we are occupied with a hundred other matters. Still, it is there, and we can always retire into it. It is fundamentally ours, but this does not mean that we never open its door to another.

We open it to the priest in the confessional, and at suitable times intimate friends cross the threshold. Now one's wife should be the most intimate friend of all, and the most frequent visitor to that place. But, with the best will in the world on both sides, she can never get properly in if she is a stranger to her partner's faith. Certainly, the marriage can be reasonably happy, but it can never approach perfection whilst that little door in the mind of one of the partners stands firmly closed against the other. A Pope has told us that the devotion between a married couple must have as its chief objective the shaping and the perfecting of the interior life of husband and wife. (Christian Marriage — Encyclical *Casti Connubii* of Pope Pius XI.)

We have had it so often impressed upon us by non-Catholics that members of different religions are, in fact, "all going the same way." It is only partially true, of course. We all hope, by the mercy of God, to reach heaven but the divinely appointed way can be fully trodden only by a Catholic. Catholics and non-Catholics cannot, by reason of their religious differences, tread that path together as in matters of the supremest importance there is a line of cleavage between them which will vanish only when both are Catholics.

When it is the girl who is the Catholic, the practical difficulties are particularly assertive. She may be going off to Mass at the time he wants his breakfast cooked.

She may want to attend the Holy Week ceremonies which he will consider spoiling a long weekend. Any hope of an occasional retreat will probably die in its infancy. All these obstacles will remain just as long as the line of cleavage. It is certain that only by converting him could she hope to convince her husband that, by following his wishes in the matter of going to Mass, she would be forsaking the re-enactment of Calvary for household chores. The Catholic life is the expression of the Catholic Faith, and where there is mutual life there should be mutual faith.

SEX.

Sex, of course, we all more or less understand, but there may well be some details concerning it, which are unfamiliar to us.

After all, we cannot expect to have mastered a science, which has not directly concerned us in the past. But if we are about to marry, we should now obtain the fullest possible information concerning it, from our parents if we still have them, or from some other decent and reliable source.

A proper study of sex shows it to be unspeakably marvellous, and on this point, it is very difficult to exaggerate. If all the stories in *The Arabian Nights* were strictly true instead of glorious flights of fancy, there would still be nothing so extraordinary — nothing so full of enchantment — as the universal story of sex. Neither shall we find in any journal of marvels of science anything approaching it in its intricate and profound operations. We are faced there with something as mysterious in its activity as it is wonderful in its results, and for this reason alone, we should come to its study with reverence.

With regard to the matter of the holiness of sex, I think I will be silent for awhile and let the Pope speak:

"God's purpose in willing human beings to be born is not merely that they may exist and occupy the earth, but far more, that they may worship Him, and that they may know and love Him and finally enjoy Him forever in heaven. This destiny, by reason of man's wondrous elevation to the supernatural order, surpasses anything that eye has seen or ear heard, or the heart of man been able to conceive. Clearly, therefore, the offspring begotten by God's almighty power with the co-

operation of husband and wife is a very noble gift of His goodness and a most excellent fruit of marriage.

"Christian parents should understand, moreover, that their duty is not only to propagate and maintain the human race on earth; it is not even merely to rear worshippers of the true God. They are called to give children to the Church, to beget fellow citizens of the Saints and members of the household of God." (Christian Marriage — Encyclical *Casti Connubii* of Pope Pius XI.)

Here we have set before us the whole plan and purpose of marriage. Children are the fruit of matrimony, and we are to bear them in order that they may come to see God face to face in Heaven. Now this reflection sometimes gives pause to engaged couples. They are very much wrapped up in each other, and feel no particular desire for children at the moment. This, however, is not really a matter for concern. In some unperceived manner, the well-nigh irresistible attractiveness of children grows upon us. The day dawns when we find ourselves looking at a child with a new interest and attentiveness, and we realise that the young have become altogether lovable to us. Thus, a desire is born within us only to be satisfied by the building up of a family.

SOME DETAILS.

There is no room in a successful marriage for pettiness of any kind, and yet no vocation calls for greater attention to detail. It is a work of art, and absorbs all the attention that we can possibly give to it.

Without making any pretence whatever to understand women, we can note one or two points about them which emerge clearly enough through the mists. It is universally admitted, for example, that a girl "does not like being taken for granted," and this certainly applies in things large and small. For this reason, it is very helpful to marital happiness for a man to raise his hat to his wife, to open a door for her to pass through, and to assist her to alight from a bus. It is true that a modern girl needs no assistance, but she certainly does need the spirit in which these acts are offered. These things were all done during the period of our courting, and if there is any commandment that a girl would give to her husband, it is: "You shall not forget." It is well-known that this applies with particular force to the wedding anniversary. A girl regards courtship as the prelude to marriage, which of course, it is, and throughout her married life expects to hear the old familiar notes sounded once more. Then again, it often occurs to a girl during courtship that the various courtesies paid to her are only a temporary expedient, and she usually puts the thought aside as disloyal. We simply must justify her confidence now, or she will believe herself trapped.

We shall find that the continuance of these courtesies will go a long way towards banishing those occasional storms, which are apt to arise in married life. These storms are usually very brief disturbances, and pass off as rapidly as they appear. The passion and bitterness fade away and calmer thoughts return to their accustomed throne. On the other hand, they can be aggravated and prolonged, and to such an extent that, when some sort of peace at last returns, the couple concerned are left with a smouldering volcano liable to erupt at any time and bring about the ruination of their married life.

It is therefore of the first importance, when a storm of any kind blows up, that we should carefully refrain, by any word or act, from converting a passing annoyance into the beginnings of a tragedy. A married couple gain an extraordinary amount of power over each other's feelings — power which enables them to wound almost mortally. It is therefore an excellent idea, when in a rage, to take

mind and body right away and to give them some vigorous exercise. On no account should we allow our words and acts to be driven from us by some passing gust of fury.

And when the storm has subsided, and all is forgiven, then there is no doubt that we ought to set our minds calmly and dispassionately to the work of rooting out the occasion of evil. What started all the trouble? What was the origin of that little tempest that seemed about to make havoc of our home? It will probably prove to be some trifling thing that causes a great deal of annoyance, like a pebble in a shoe, but in any case, we shall be well rid of it.

Very often, the girl is more disturbed by these smaller irritations than her more carefree partner. And for the sake of her peace of mind, it is important that she should keep a sense of proportion. Perhaps she is always falling over his rather prominent feet, which seem to take up all the available floor space. Or it may be that his clumsiness is rapidly accounting for all the family china, and she is beginning to think desperately of enamel mugs. Or, again, she may have worked really hard all day to bring about a transformation in the house, and when he returns home he shows no sign at all of having noticed it; and then, if she herself calls attention to it, he glances around briefly and replies absently: "Oh, ah!"

These things can be infuriating, but they cannot be called tragic. It is well to bear in mind that those big feet, which are always in the way, might have wandered into the paths of infidelity and trampled on the vows made at the altar. Because of his clumsiness, he may be breaking up the household effects, but there are some husbands who break up the home: He may fail to recognise half the work that she does, but it would be a thousand times worse if he failed to recognise her as the girl he loved and married. The big view is essential in married life — as important, in fact, as attention to detail.

On the other hand, of course, there really may be trouble of a serious nature. One of the parties may have only too good cause to visualise the shadow of tragedy falling right across the union and the home. When this happens, I think that this ought to be said to the suffering partner: Do not stand alone. You are a member of an ancient Society with Divine authority and universal experience. Moral problems are strictly within its province, and its ministers are trained in all such matters. It is true that God does not suffer us to be overmuch afflicted, but He certainly expects us to draw strength from the Society that He has fashioned for us, for we are members one of another.

Many of the threats to the happiness of married life are born of that condition in which both parties go out to work. Quite often, this is forced upon them on account of the fact that the wages paid to the husband are only a contribution towards the needs of himself and his family. But there can be no doubt that we should regard this state of affairs as unnatural, and one to be remedied as early as possible. Whilst it lasts, a married couple are living in a house rather than a home, and their joint income cannot in itself effect the transformation. This can only be done when a married woman regards it as a full-time job. Whilst she is at work her thoughts will be centred on the neglected house, and an accumulation of work for attention over the week-end will prove a constant source of irritation to her. From the husband's point of view, a wife at home does not only mean a fire in the grate and a meal on the table when he returns; it means a general atmosphere of warmth and welcome — a strong impression of being loved and wanted.

Despite the difficulties, no catastrophe will ever arise in married life if both parties co-operate with the grace of God and each other. Nothing will be able to withstand the mutual love, aided by God.

For this reason, it is an excellent policy for them to carry out their religious duties as far as possible in each other's company.

As each of them is a means of grace to the other, it is profoundly fitting that they should go to the Sacraments and pray together. Let us remember that the natural love between a man and a girl is not merely something that God provides and makes use of; it is, above all, something that He perfects. Sacramental grace descends upon it like rain, nourishes it and brings it to full fruition, and to a beauty and a permanence not of this world.
