

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MATRIMONY

(Catechism nn. 1601-1679)

Genesis 1

The sacrament of Matrimony (Catechism n. 1601-1666), like the sacrament of Holy Orders, is a consecration to Christ of people in a state of life. The Catechism begins its treatment (n.1601) by quoting the Code of Canon Law (Canon 1055§1), offering a definition of Christian marriage:

‘The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered towards the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring. This covenant between baptised persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.’

Note that priority is given to ‘the good of the spouses’. It is their mutual love that provides the ‘garden’ into which children are born and educated.

Genesis

We begin our reflections by examining an ancient myth recorded in the Book of Genesis. Its place in the Bible ensures that it continues to influence our imagination and so our thinking about marriage. The author is not interested in myth-as-such or in its cultic expression. Rather, he is interested in real people’s lives, and therefore in human behaviour and responsible action, formalised in a description of the human-being-as-such [’adam], and the various basic relationships within which human beings live their lives.

In its written form the first chapter of Genesis belongs to the Priestly writings from the period of the Exile in Babylon (sixth century BC), though it could well have had a long pre-history in the oral tradition of Israel. Genesis 1:26-28 reads:

‘God said, “Let us make humankind [Hebrew ’adam] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male [Hebrew: *zakar*] and female [Hebrew: *nekebah*] he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and make it subject to you”.’

The symbolic language of the Genesis myth tells us many profound things about what it means to be human. It tells us that humankind is created in God’s image and likeness in that human beings can experience communion with God. It tells us also that they share in God’s creative activity in two ways. Firstly, because as male and female they are God’s instruments in co-creating other human beings. Secondly, because they are to ‘rule over’ [Hebrew: *radah*] all living creatures. In Ezekiel 34:4 the king is likened to a shepherd who should ‘rule over’ the people with kindness. In ‘ruling over’ all living creatures, human beings are to continue God’s work of bringing order out of chaos. It is a shepherding role, not one of self-serving domination.

After creating human beings, Genesis 1:31 tells us that

‘God saw that everything that he had made was very good’.

Chapter Two of Genesis belongs to an older strand of writing from the pre-exile period (seventh century BC). It is best described as myth, for the profound truths that it conveys are expressed in symbolic language. The author speaks of the paradox of being human, the dust and the spirit, the sanctity and the sin, the wonder and the limitations that we all experience. He writes:

‘YHWH God formed the human being [’adam] from the dust of the ground [’*ad-amah*] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human being [’*adam*] became a living being’ (Genesis 2:7).

Human beings come from the ‘dust’ (to which they return when they die). They live because of the divine breath (‘spirit’) given to them. As the narrative develops we see that humankind is to live in dialogue with God and in dependence on God’s inspiring breath (‘word’).

The text continues:

‘YHWH God said, ‘It is not good that the human being [’*adam*] should be alone; I will make for him a helper who will face him’ ... Then the human being [’*adam*] said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman [’*ishshah*], for out of Man [’*ish*] this one was taken”’ (Genesis 2:18, 23).

In the story, male and female are both part of the original creation of humanity [’*adam*]. Man [’*ish*] does not exist before woman [’*ishshah*], nor are they created separately. God did not create humankind [’*adam*] as one, but rather as two. Each part lacks the other. Human beings are man and woman facing each other in equality and delight. They need each other in order to carry on the blessing and give life. Note that the first direct speech of a human being is a cry of delight from a husband to a wife.

The Letter to the Ephesians

Christian marriage has also been strongly influenced by the words of Paul to the Gentile Churches of the East. He cuts across what were considered ‘family values’ in contemporary culture. Christians, says Paul, including husbands and wives, are to ‘be subject to one another’. He is drawing on the teaching of Jesus who insists that among his disciples there to be no lording it over one another (Luke 22:26). We are to love one another with Jesus’ own love (John 15:12), remembering that he came among us as one who serves (Luke 22:26).

Paul begins:

‘Be filled with the Spirit ... subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’ (Ephesians 5:21).

Addressing wives, he writes:

‘Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their .husbands’ (Ephesians 5:22-24).

Paul to the Ephesians

He then speaks to husbands:

‘Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish’(Ephesians 5:25-27).

Though Paul assumes the traditional structure in which authority is vested in the husband, his accent is on how the wife is to be subject, and how the husband is to exercise his authority as head of the household. Paul is not suggesting a change in the authority structure of a Christian family, but he is introducing a reference to Christ - a revolutionary principle that must bring changes to the traditional structure.

The imagery is taken from the ritual preparation of a bride for the nuptials, and from Baptism. Paul also draws on Older Testament imagery of God as the Bridegroom and Israel as the bride. He is using the imagery of marriage to describe the loving care that Christ has for his Church. He also explores the meaning that this intimacy between Christ and the Church has for our understanding of the consecrated love of husband and wife. He continues:

‘In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’(Ephesians 5:28-31).

This last sentence is a quote from Genesis 2:24 and must be read in the light of the Genesis narrative. Incidentally, we must not forget that in that narrative male dominion is the result not of God’s intention but of sin (Genesis 3:16).

Paul reached the climax of his teaching when he writes:

‘This is a great mystery [Greek: *mysterion*; Latin: *sacramentum*], and I am applying it to Christ and the church’(Ephesians 5:33).

Marriage is a ‘sacrament’ of God’s design to draw everyone into a consecrated love communion in the Body of Christ (the Church). Paul is presenting the communion in love of husband and wife ‘in Christ’ as a special witness to the mystery of divine communion that exists between Christ and the community that lives by Christ’s Spirit. Paul concludes (5:33):

‘Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should reverence [Greek: *phobeô*] her husband.’

Paul used the same word [*phobeô*] at the beginning of this passage when he spoke of Christians being ‘subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’ (5:21). The relationship between husband and wife is to be based on a mutual sense of the sacred. The love that binds them together is God’s love. Their love will be true only to the extent that it comes from prayer and issues in prayer, for they are to each other sacraments of this love, and the love that conceives life is a sharing in God’s creative action.

In some cultures today it is no longer assumed that the husband has authority over his wife. A man and a woman commit themselves together in love and as equals to a partnership in which they attempt to reach decisions in mutual respect and love. When there is disagreement it is not at all assumed that the wife must submit to her husband's will. A way has to be found to live in unity, and compromises are found to be necessary. When consensus cannot be reached, sometimes one submits, sometimes the other.

In such a situation it is no longer satisfactory to apply the principle in the way Paul does. We have to go deeper to the fundamental principle of Christian baptism:

‘There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’
(Galatians 3:28).

It is no longer satisfactory to compare the husband to Christ and the wife to the church. The husband is Christ for the wife, and the wife is Christ for the husband, and both belong to the community that is loved by Christ and in which his Spirit dwells.

The marriage covenant: a sacrament of divine love

Paul's basic insight still applies: marriage has been transformed by the fact that the union it expresses has reached its fulfilment in Christ. In the words of the Catechism (n. 1639):

‘Authentic married love is caught up into divine love.’

Marriage is now a sacrament of this communion between Christ and the Church, and so all the relationships that exist between a husband and wife are to be transformed, enlightened and enlivened by the presence of Christ binding wife and husband together in love.

When a husband loves his wife, Christ loves her. When a wife loves her husband, Christ loves him. When a husband obeys his wife, he is obeying Christ; and when a wife obeys her husband, she is obeying Christ. When they thank each other, correct each other, or forgive each other, they are to do so ‘in Christ’. When they are ‘subject to one another’ and discern in love the best way to act together in their married life, using all the spiritual means available to make their discernment, they are doing so, not because of an assumption that the husband commands and the wife obeys, but ‘in Christ’, inspired by his love and guided by his Spirit.

Their commitment of love is a sacrament also to others, witnessing to the unconditional love of God for all, that love-unto-death which Christ revealed on the cross. The Catechism (n. 1615) reminds us:

‘The grace of Christian marriage is a fruit of Christ's cross, the source of all Christian life.’

The married couple, relying on God's grace, are making a commitment to the community to be witnesses of the fidelity of divine love. They are also an example to others of the importance of giving up one's own self-serving ego in order to be sensitive to the needs and desires of another person. In the Catechism (n. 1609) we read:

‘Marriage helps to overcome self-absorption, egoism, pursuit of one's own pleasure. It helps to open oneself to the other, to mutual aid and to the gift of self.’

Commitment

This is of special importance for any children they may have. It is their mutual, sacramental love that will provide the sacred garden in which the children are to be nurtured. It will be their children's basic experience of fidelity and of the creative self-giving of God. It is important for the Church community. It is important for the Church's mission to the world. Their consecrated love is the existential foundation for a life of generativity and creativity in their own relationship, in the overflowing of this love in the building of a family and a home, and in their growing ability to contribute to the community in building an environment of love.

Commitment to the sacrament of marriage is a commitment to love. It is a commitment to love as Jesus loves, with the communion of love that he has with the Father. The commitment of the couple to each other is sustained by the prior commitment of God to them. The risen Christ commits himself to pour out the Spirit of his love on the couple, so that they will not only experience joy, but that their 'joy may be complete' (John 16:24).

The Maronite poet, Kahlil Gibran writes:

'You were born together, and together you shall be for evermore.
You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your days.
Yes, you shall be together in the silent memory of God.
But let there be spaces in your togetherness,
and let the winds of the heavens dance between you.

Love one another, but make not a bond of love:
let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.
Fill each other's cup, but drink not from one cup.
Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.
Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone,
even as the strings of a lute are alone
though they quiver with the same music.

Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping,
for only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.
And stand together yet not too near together:
for the pillars of the temple stand apart,
and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.'

It is no small matter to enter into marriage. To promise to be there for someone for ever, and to hear that other person make the same promise meets a profound human need and longing. It puts a seal of deep trust on a love between two people who dare to set out on a life-journey together. A person who has made such a commitment knows that he or she is promising to do all that is possible to keep that promise 'through good times and bad, in sickness or in health.' They want to keep it, and their desire is supported by the image of Jesus, the faithful bridegroom of the Church, and the knowledge that the sacrament is supported by the faith-community of the Church and is a guarantee of grace. The nature of the trust placed by spouses in each other and the importance of marital fidelity to society, especially to the children born of the marriage, all highlight the importance of the spouses doing all that they can to keep this promise.

Pope John-Paul II in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981 n.20, writes:

‘Christ renews the first plan that the Creator inscribed in the hearts of man and woman, and in the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony offers a new heart. Thus the couples are not only able to overcome hardness of heart, but also and above all they are able to share the full and definitive love of Christ, the new and eternal covenant made flesh. Just as the Lord Jesus is the faithful witness, the yes of the promises of God and thus the supreme realisation of the unconditional faithfulness with which God loves his people, so Christian couples are called to participate truly in the irrevocable indissolubility that binds Christ to the Church his bride, loved by him to the end.’

The Catechism (n. 1642) states:

‘Just as of old God encountered his people with a covenant of love and fidelity, our Saviour, the Spouse of the Church, encounters Christian spouses through the sacrament of Matrimony. Christ dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another’s burdens and to love one another with supernatural, tender and fruitful love. In the joys of their love and family life he gives them here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb.’

Those of us who are unmarried do not, of course, share directly in the sacrament. However, we are surrounded by those who do, and so the grace comes to us indirectly. As the Catechism reminds us (n. 1658):

‘No one is without a family in this world. The Church is a home and family for everyone, especially for those who labour and are heavily burdened.’

Each of us has a place in the heart of Jesus, the bridegroom. Each of us has a place at the wedding banquet of the Eucharist, and each of us longs for the fullness of covenant love in the eternal mystery of heaven. The sacrament of matrimony is a symbol of this love to the Church and to the world.

