

JOHN H. SNOW

**on pilgrimage:
marriage in the '70s**



THE SEABURY PRESS NEW YORK

dren got up slowly and went to their family domes, arranged their sleeping bags on the canvas floors, lay down, and slept.

SEVEN

on pilgrimage

Increasingly, today, people stagger through life, not knowing who they are, what they are like, and utterly without any image of themselves as human. The most powerful nations—the United States, Russia, China, Japan—wonder desperately who they are as they go through the motions established by goals determined years ago, goals which have already given ample warning of their untrustworthiness, even to those who push most passionately for their final realization. It was Yeats who said that we become the thing we hate, and nations laboring under different ideologies (and ideologies are no substitutes for metaphors), seeing only conflict and ultimate confrontation in their separate fates, become increasingly more like one another. Within this rising, meaningless tower of technological Babel, human language fails. Men and women stare at one another helplessly from their prisons of noncommunication; and love, which must be communicated to remain love, sours into hatred. Power blinds and deafens; and dreams of vic-

tory, triumph, success, winning, overcoming, solving, remove us from the present, the living center of reality, and corrupt the future. They corrupt the future because they are false goals, and they are false goals because every educated man and woman, as well as most people at the most primitive level of knowledge, know one thing for sure: they know that the planet Earth is a closed system ruled over by the law of entropy, which science has declared to be as immutable a law as creation admits to. There is no victory, no triumph, success, winning, overcoming, solving. The cosmos does not reflect the validity of these human goals. Everything is not going to be all right someday. In fact, someday, science tells us, the total human enterprise and life itself will be reduced to dust.

St. Paul said with complete assurance that death had no more dominion over us, and men were willing for a while to forgo power for vision, triumph for love, winning for cooperation, solving for wonder. Unafraid of death, they became vivid in the assurance with which they walked the earth. Knowing in their bones their own value to God and to their neighbor, they lived upon the earth with an authority which no emperor, no soldier, no government could withstand. The single, shared attribute of the martyrs and saints was their assurance of who they were, and their joy in seeing who they were grow into their several destinies, destinies not at all free of pain and suffering but uniquely their own, understood and agreed to by them, etched vividly on the face of existence by their willed obedience to the God of love, and consummated, not ended, in death. These lives, for a comparatively brief and ec-

static moment in history, were the shaping force of history. The power of these lives lies latent in every generation. It exists today as the single, living reality of our time, and all that keeps us from entering into it and rediscovering our humanity is the flat assertion of the world that it does not exist. The mystery, the paradox, indeed, the tragedy of our time, is that one cannot resist the world's conviction that entropy is king if one is standing outside the reality of this power.

One result of the development and growth of science has been that society today distrusts metaphor per se. In its quantified, empirical view of reality, metaphor seems to have outlived its usefulness as an instrument of knowledge and understanding. Another result has been that the traditional metaphors of Christianity seem to have lost their power to stir men's vision and move them to action. The traditional metaphors were, to be sure, human constructs, the articulations of men who had encountered God within the limits of their culture and time, and imaged their experience out of the stuff of their period. But the modern revolution in cosmology has rendered all traditional, static metaphors not so much invalid as irrelevant. The truth in them is truth still, but the earthen vessels which held this water of life have been reduced to shards. The terror of our time is that nothing holds water. We can build atomic bombs. We can build elaborate philosophico-political systems, we can store a generation's knowledge in a computer, we can talk hopefully or resignedly about genetic engineering, but we know, in our hearts, that nothing holds water. All attempts at synthesis,

all attempts at consensus, even within the diminishing realm of Christianity (or perhaps especially there) prove leaky or polluting. The clear water eludes us.

The Pauline Metaphor for Marriage

Perhaps we can best understand our present need for a single unifying image, at once biblical and relevant, by looking back first at the church's traditional metaphor of marriage taken from St. Paul, a metaphor which provided Christians with a unifying image of the Church and marriage for centuries. Here is Paul's text:

"For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church; for we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and his church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular love his wife even as himself; and the

wife see that she reverence her husband" (Eph. 5:23-33).

This metaphor of the Church as the bride of Christ is an intensely human and passionate one. It gives supreme value not only to the body (which for Paul has its own metaphorical significance) but to the flesh and to the sexual act of union. The whole relation of Christ to his church is captured in a single image involving flesh, body, and sexual union. So powerful was this metaphor that it created a consensus on the nature and importance of monogamous, lifelong marriage and made it the most distinctive single cultural institution of Western Christendom. The family, the household, were regarded in this metaphor not only as the basic social unit, but became the guiding metaphor for the organization of all society in the early church. The church itself became an extended family. Baptism was, among other things, the initiatory rite into the larger family of the church.

Yet no one today can read Paul's metaphor without emotions ranging from vague uneasiness to outrage. The male dominance of Old Testament Judaism is in its every word.

And yet it must be acknowledged that through this metaphor, Paul raised marriage to a more nobly mutual relationship than had existed in the West before. Casual divorce, the concept of woman as property, and many other of the more brutal aspects of traditional male dominance were eradicated or modified through its influence. True, the metaphor did not encourage any deepening of the understanding that man and woman live as equals before God in marriage; nor did it help husband and wife to achieve the kind of sharing that daily married life in-

volves. The glory of the metaphor was its power to reshape society around the family, to build a world more trustworthy than the world which preceded it, where, for a while, unwanted infants were not left to die in the streets, where hospitality took on new proportions for the West, and where community compensated in some degree for the extreme harshness of existence.

The Attitudes of Jesus

When we turn back to the Gospels, however, we find that Jesus speaks of marriage in quite different terms from Paul. "Jesus answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:4-6). No mention, here, of Adam's rib. It is clear which creation story Jesus accepted as valid. "God intended them to become one flesh." Indeed, the doctrine of sexual love here is closer to Plato's than to Paul's; in the pairing is seen a completion ordained from the beginning by God. The man is not presented as divine, dominant, and to be revered, not as the "better" half, but simply as one half of a unit ordained to become one with the other half.

In fact, Jesus' most radical conflict with the Judaic customs of the time may be said to have been on the matter of the treatment of women. Most revealing is the incident of the woman caught in adultery. The point of the incident is that men may not judge women in matters of sexual mo-

ality on some level different from that by which they judge themselves. It had always been assumed, as Jesus assumed in this incident, that men are naturally adulterous, and that women are, so to speak, the arbiters of men's adultery. The moral burden is on the woman. In the new order, under the New Covenant, the moral responsibility is to be shared, Jesus says. It would be hard to overemphasize what a radical departure this was from the sexual morality of Judaic or Christian culture of the first century, and also from the sexual morality of Christendom ever since.

There is an assumption of moral freedom within the New Covenant here which transcends the sexual, and uses the sexual as a metaphor for all determinism, all assumptions about human nature emerging from historical received wisdom. The basis for such a radical conception of human moral freedom is, of course, the even more radical concept of human forgiveness as a reflection of God's own nature. The assumption here is not that there will be no adultery in the New Dispensation, but that all humans, regardless of sex, are equally free to make moral choices, are equally responsible for these choices before God, and always open to forgiveness and reconciliation on the part of neighbor and God. The freedom to make moral choices is extended even to the freedom to repent, which means, simply, to choose to undergo deep inner change; but repentance, as Jesus preached it, was not the condition for forgiveness, it was the result of forgiveness. Jesus does not ask the woman if she has repented before calling off the stoning. He simply states that she is part of the fallen human lot, even as are the men who would stone her. Hav-

ing committed adultery, she is not, thereby, finally and ultimately an adulteress. She is, rather, a free person who can, under the New Dispensation, choose to commit adultery or not. She is free of cultural determination and definition. Her total identity is liberated from the "world" and free to reform itself in the image of her Creator.

There is one other observation which needs to be made about Jesus and women in the New Testament. Women are absolutely fearless in his presence. Far more than men, they stand up to him, level with him, and bring from him his most profound, explicit religious training. One has the feeling, when observing the responses to Jesus of the women in the Gospel stories, that Jesus was the first man in their experience who truly heeded them as persons, who would stop whatever he was doing to listen to them, to discuss seriously the most profound issues of life with them, and to understand that clearer vision of reality which they had as the persons assigned all the essential maintenance tasks of existence from child-rearing and feeding to closing the eyes and anointing the bodies of the dead. Only Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother could anticipate the total configuration of Jesus' life and its significance, because only they could bear the pain of this vision, as they existed in the midst of it, the pain of cosmic birth.

The Pilgrim Church

Today, as a result of the historical development we have already discussed, the church is casting about for a dynamic metaphor of its mission and work, a single, unifying image, true to its mission and helpful to all in these diffi-

cult times. Pope John XXIII brilliantly responded to this need of all Christians. He had no illusions about the appeal of Christianity to the secular world. He knew that the obsession of all branches of Christianity with their institutional needs was itself demonic, making those institutions operate more and more under the metaphor of the industrial state, the metaphor of the machine, the mindless, spiritless worship of smooth function for the sake of smooth function. He knew that questions like "How many baptisms? How many communicants? How much money coming in? How many men in seminary?" were not in themselves theological questions. He knew that nothing serious could be quantified. He knew that the Church Triumphant was even less persuasive in all its sacramental splendor than the triumphal metaphor around which it was built. He knew that for the great mass of Roman Catholics as well as for the rapidly increasing numbers of men and women outside any Christian denomination, the metaphor struck no resonance. He was aware that it did not make sense. He knew all this because he knew who Jesus was. He read the Bible and he heard the Gospel and he saw what was going on around him. He knew what a Christian was in this world because he himself was such a Christian: a Christian was a pilgrim; the Church was the people of God on pilgrimage.

His choice of this metaphor seemed at first to be somewhat old-fashioned—the number of people going on pilgrimage was definitely declining. And yet when the metaphor was thoughtfully examined, its choice fulfilled admirably the needs of both the church and contemporary man. Its biblical foundation in both the Old and the New

Testaments was firm—it not only recalled such figures as Abraham and Moses, but the apostolic church itself setting out amid the confusions of the Roman world to announce the salvation that Jesus had accomplished.

As for contemporary man, it centered attention not on his frenetic movement as such but on his stance toward life amid material glut and his lack of goals. Its appropriateness in this context bears examination.

The pilgrim travels light. Free of the "Mighty Fortress," quietly departing from the glorious, perfected everlasting triumphal "City of God," the pilgrim becomes the most vulnerable of people. His pilgrimage has a beginning and an end, like human life. On his way, he must live in some kind of equitable balance with man and nature; there is no time for him to exploit his environment for his own gain, since, for a pilgrim, there is no advantage to the accumulation of things; they keep him from doing what he has chosen to do and been called to do. The pilgrim is neither pioneer nor explorer. He knows where he is going, even though the way is not always clear. He does not go on his pilgrimage alone, but in the company of the people of God. He is in no pressing hurry, and he anticipates the episodic nature of his pilgrimage. He can and does stop along the way. Although he is not attached to the world and does not identify with any particular worldly turf, he is in the world and loves it. He does not avoid the people of the world, nor is he unwilling to involve himself in their tribulation and distress, helping where he can. He and his fellow pilgrims have no illusions about their independence. They are aware of their obligation to those who sustain them along the way with food and shelter, and

they give willingly of their energy to the common task of human maintenance.

There is no hierarchy on a pilgrimage. The leadership is shared, the plans for the day are made together, and under the continuing demands of the pilgrimage the special gifts of individual pilgrims begin to manifest themselves. And of course there is the lightheartedness, the urge to celebrate, to anticipate in celebration, the ecstatic goal which beckoned to them in the beginning, but also to celebrate the signs along the way which give assurance of their direction. They do not fail to notice the bushes that burn or the waters that part to let them through. They are not afflicted with the endless busyness of those who imagine that they are building the City of God, but are so concerned with the plumbing that they neglect the mystery and wonder which charges that dimension of life their very busyness precludes their seeing.

The Pilgrim Life

The implications of the pilgrim metaphor for the institutional church are many and obvious. The whole enterprise is reduced to human proportions. There is suddenly ample room for pluralism and more freedom of liturgical expression to meet the shared experience of smaller, more closely knit congregations. What hierarchy remains loses symbolic and metaphorical importance and exists to serve the pilgrim church, rather than to preside over and control the majestic structures of the eternal city. The pilgrim metaphor leads the church at last out of the stasis which, since, Copernicus, has made it increasingly

defensive, clumsy, negative, and vindictive to the eyes of the world outside. For the one who orders and unites the pilgrim church is the Lord who calls it on its way toward him, and those who have responded to his call. To be a pilgrim is to leave the static structures, intellectual and institutional, of the old cosmologies and become one with a process of reality which modern man believes to be true, but which gives this reality meaning and purpose.

A part of the genius of the pilgrim metaphor is its relationship to and judgment of a major and currently uninterpreted trend in the modern world, the trend toward movement as a symptom of modern man's discontent and terror. Throughout the Western world, men and women seem to live increasingly only for the moment of disengagement and escape, whether in the form of a holiday trip or a year abroad, or any of the other purely geographical disengagements. There is a tendency in much current commentary on this phenomenon to interpret it as a flight from reality, as "escapist" with implications of cowardice and an unwillingness to "cope" with life.

Yet these disengagements have begun to take on a reality and special meaning of their own. The escape, for those not already crippled by the depredations made upon their consciousnesses, is one not *from* reality, but *into* it. Families at last freed from their suburban lock-step, making their way across the country in their dippy campers, are discovering a new community along the road. At the first tourist camp they find, to their amazement, that the competitive paranoia of the suburban community has disappeared. Crummy and crowded as the place may be, they discover there people eager to share their lore of

camping experience. These families learn the tight, spare technology of the road very quickly. They learn about "fabulous" places that have not yet been "spoiled," where they can fish and hike or just enjoy the view for a while in surroundings which make beautiful, natural demands upon their ingenuity and begin to define in vivid terms what they had never known or had forgotten. They begin to take pride in leaving a site as they found it. They begin to see the disadvantages of containers, of fancy gear which have no real use. They begin to assess the value of their cars on the basis of performance and even learn with the help of fellow campers to do some of the basic maintenance of their own cars and trailers. Even those who start out with the most elaborate trailers discover many things about the interdependence of human beings and about the human potential for independence. In a word, a reassessment of values has begun.

Their children, for the first time, cease to be annoying dependents and become essential to the enterprise of each day, finding their place in the graceful economy of pitching and striking camp, often showing a particular knack for some aspect of the pilgrim existence, learning skill after skill with hardly any teaching at all, feeling no need to resist with the irrelevant removed. Their natural gregariousness ceases to be an embarrassment and becomes, rather, an advantage in the very open life of the road.

When families such as these return to their suburbs and cities, their discontent with the ugliness, wastefulness, meaninglessness, selfishness, and violence of contemporary life can be profound, even if not articulated. They share the secret suspicion that there is much more to life than

they have been told. They suspect that they have been had, that what is rightfully theirs has been taken away from them, and that what they have been given in return is worthless. They may not yet realize that what they have learned is already a first step toward the reshaping of the environment, and their new consciousness a saving grace for a society in need of new social forms, a new technology, and new institutions.

Pilgrim Marriage

The implications of the pilgrim metaphor for Christian marriage are many and obvious. Probably first and most important is the realization that no marriage based on accumulation of money, things, and status can be anything but catastrophic. Even more important is the understanding that such a marriage is really based on the fear of death, the belief that two people, married to one another, live under a sentence of death which must perforce pervade every moment of their life together that is not filled with things, the sacraments of "success," that great delusion which the industrial states balance against the incessant warning that the "survival" of the world depends upon their skillful playing of nuclear roulette.

Where marriage is understood under the metaphor of pilgrimage there is no illusion that death will be avoided. What changes is the significance of death itself. Death ceases to be punishment or failure or defeat. For those who commit themselves to the Christian pilgrimage, death becomes the final *rite de passage*, a gracious entrance into the mystery toward which the pilgrim has been purpose-

fully moving all his life. In a pilgrim marriage it is possible to resist the temptation toward rigidifying the relationship, for all rigidifying of relationships is a response to fearfulness and defensiveness in respect to the future. A pilgrim's home is not his castle. It is an expansive and hospitable station along the way. Into the pilgrim family are invited fellow pilgrims. There is no fear of being used and exploited because the stuff of the marriage, life itself, energy, is there to be used, to be spent, in assurance of its abundance. The fear of diminishment and loss which drives so many families to accumulate is modified and tempered into an easy prudence, some shrewdness and carefulness to provide enough for the day's journey with some left over for the unexpected guest.

The pilgrim marriage is episodic. It does not strain to remain the same, but is open and responsive to new people and events which must be met as the couple moves not so much through time as with it, understanding the episodic nature of time, its discrete beginnings and ends and new beginnings. For time, understood within the metaphor of pilgrimage, has its own births and deaths, is, in fact, measured by its living content and not by clocks and calendars. For those who hate and fear death, time is always running out in linear decline. The clock is a device to give the illusion of control, to make time, if not stop, at least do what it is told. Under the tyranny of the clock there is never quite enough time for celebration or delight or other useless things. Time is a commodity. Time, we are told *ad nauseam*, is money. It is precisely in its apprehension of time that the pilgrim marriage tests its assumptions about death. The pilgrim couple are passionate and

reckless in their love for one another, holding nothing back, fearless of the inevitable pain and depletion in this kind of passion because they assume the renewal and healing in time's eternal source, in forgiveness, in God in Christ. A couple who have felt and seen their love die and be renewed, find it increasingly hard to believe in the dominion of death. Time itself becomes more and more easily understood as God-given, and not only understood, but accepted gratefully. Where time is the enemy, marriage grows rigid, cold, and flat.

The pilgrim marriage, like the pilgrim church of which it is a faithful member, is never a work of art. It does not abhor ugliness, suffering, discontinuity, or disorder. What beauty it has it discovers, it does not make. Where it is beautiful it reflects whatever beauty is inherent in creation, but it does not settle for a fragile, static exquisite order which, in human relationships, can be achieved only by supreme self-consciousness. The pilgrim delights in beauty, and he may, in moments of playfulness or even as his favorite avocation, give himself to making something beautiful, but not his marriage, or his church, or his life. He does not identify life with art, because he is called to make his life as inclusive as humanity permits. Art is the skillful practice of exclusion.

And finally, pilgrim marriage provides for the rebirth of gratitude in our midst. Gratitude has no place in a society predicated upon function. A machine is not grateful for the smooth running of its parts. Neither is one of its parts grateful to another for doing its job well. If a part doesn't do its job well it is either repaired or replaced. So

too, in industrial society people are useful to one another and the state, or they are not. They are *expected* to be useful, that is their function, and whatever gratitude is expressed to them for their usefulness is a *pro forma* nod to the gentler mores of the past. Within the machine metaphor one neither receives nor feels gratitude.

Where this is most obvious and most appalling is in the love between the sexes. Gratitude in normal human life has its birth in sexual love. Family life prepares a ground for gratitude. Parental love which demands gratitude reduces a child's ability to be grateful. Parental love given, so to speak, as a child's due, opens a child's capacity for gratitude, the most spontaneous and fragile of all human feelings. Yet few people have ever felt an unfeigned and unambivalent gratitude to their parents until after they themselves have fallen in love with another, had the love returned, and known for the first time the overwhelming, spontaneous, unambivalent surge of gratitude which goes with sexual love—or *can* go with sexual love in a truly human society. The gift of another person, totally given, body and spirit become one, is, to anyone not damaged into insanity by the industrial state, an unfailing source of gratitude, of wondrous thanksgiving.

Yet today all that most lovers can expect from one another is an off-hand compliment on their performance. A woman is expected to be sexually useful to a man, and vice versa. Brought up by parents who have themselves been the victims of an ungrateful state and in competition with ungrateful neighbors, and who too often made pitiful, manipulative demands upon their children for gratitude,

the young find gratitude the most painfully blocked of all their emotions. Too often they have not felt it; they do not know that it exists.

The extreme vulnerability of the person in a state of being grateful, vulnerability to rejection, ridicule, and manipulation, does not make gratitude a functional emotion in our society. It is wiser, in a world living under sentence of death, not to permit oneself the luxury of valuing another too much. Indeed, how can a person under sentence of death feel gratitude for anyone or anything? Why should he give thanks? Without the initial gift, the assurance of God's love and his dominion over death, what other gift is worthy of gratitude? Is it really surprising that gratitude itself is dying?

If gratitude is to die utterly, then both marriage and the Church will die along with it. The Church will die because gratitude is the one essential human response in worship. Without gratitude there can be neither celebration nor worship. The central purpose of the Church is lost. As for marriage, gratitude is the transcendent dimension of sexual love which goes beyond pleasure, beyond the institution of marriage, and right to the heart of creation. Remove spontaneous gratitude from the sexual act within marriage and the marriage becomes part of the functional whole of the industrial state, something to be repaired and then, when it is worn out, discarded. Any potential for organic renewal is lost.

Metaphor, in this flat and literal time, is not likely to grasp the lives of large numbers of men and women when it is not fleshed out in sacramental forms. Discovering these forms and working toward their realization, one

hopes, will be the central task of every serious denomination of Christendom, but for the pair who feel drawn to marriage in these fragmented times the pilgrim metaphor has a quiet, cohesive strength of its own. It can make sense out of a marriage's lonely attempt to be serious and make its way through the snares of a society which sees more profit in wrecking it than in supporting it. It can orient a family toward effective action in areas of social change which go unseen by most revolutionaries. It responds faithfully to the ecological mandate under which all humans live. It reduces the enormous complexity and superabundance of choice in which we live to manageable human proportions. It provides corporate and individual hope at a time when any kind of hope is in short supply.

One can decide to go on a pilgrimage at any time. Now would seem as good a time as any.