

I JOHN TAKE THEE MARY

A BOOK OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

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4 • What Makes It Christian?

MONOGAMOUS MARRIAGE IS THE JOINING OF ONE MAN AND one woman by their free consent and, presumably, for life. But this contract can take place in a number of religious settings and contexts, or it can be strictly a civil transaction in the presence of a judge or a justice of the peace. There is no difference in the legality of the contract in any of these cases; but there is a difference in the nature and degree of responsibility assumed and there is a difference in the resources the couple may draw upon to strengthen and guide their marriage. None the less the question is a fair one: What makes it Christian?

In a real sense there is no such thing as "Christian marriage" as a thing in itself. The state usually so described is a marriage of two Christians to one another. That which makes such a union a Christian one is the same faith and practice which makes a Christian out of any man or woman. This is contrary to the popular notion that a marriage is a Christian one because it takes place in a Christian church building or is performed by a Christian minister. A Christian marriage could be contracted before a justice of the peace, if it were so intended and lived out, and doubtless this has happened. The heart of the matter is the nature and

implications of the contract and the *intention* of the man and woman who enter into it.

First, let us look at it in a wide view, then narrow it down to some of the personal implications. The history of marriage shows many variations in form and structure. However in any and all of these it appears to be a response to our need for companionship, for love, for completion and, in a larger context, a response to our need for a stable society. Christians would say that marriage was provided by God in the natural order for these reasons. An anthropologist might observe that in the long development of life on this earth there emerged finally among the higher mammals male and female species which came to be known as human beings, and therefore the possibility of human community and communities. A Christian anthropologist would agree, but might add that he believes this process to be presided over by God the Maker of all things, to be in fact God's will.

The Doctrine of Creation

No one can consider the theology, the God-relationship, of Christian marriage without considering the doctrine of creation. God made everything that is, and declared it good. But there has been a Fall. We have only to look within ourselves to discover that we are not naturally good. No matter how much we try to make a good impression—sometimes to the extent of fooling even ourselves pretty thoroughly, because we agree to be fooled—we know that we are not good. We know that our motives are always mixed, that our first love is always ourselves. We may use different words to describe the fact that we live in a fallen world, but we know about the fact. Christians know that they live in a fallen

world; they also know that it is a world to which the possibility of restoration is offered. Christians know that, since marriage is a part of the order of creation ordained by God, it, too, participates in the Fall no less than other institutions. This means three things: first, that by nature alone we cannot fulfill our obligations as marriage partners; secondly, that marriage requires and is subject to restoration; and, thirdly, that Christian marriage is essentially a sacramental relationship. The first of these truths gives the lie to the adequacy of the romantic dream. The second indicates the necessity and the actuality of a redeemer who knows all about us and our helplessness, and who involves himself compassionately with us where we are. Thirdly, the sacramental relationship means that this man and this woman represent nothing less than the grace of God to each other.

The biblical mythology describing the making of the world and of man is of course the creation story in *Genesis*. Mythology is not untruth; it is a way of speaking the truth in symbols—such as universal man and universal woman—when that is the only way or the best way in which to do it. We have already spent some time pointing out the romantic myth presupposed by our soap-opera approach to marriage. Thoughtful people have remarked upon the myth of the happy savage presupposed by the Kinsey reports. The biblical myth of creation means, among other things, that there is a responsible relationship between man and his creator and, therefore, between man and man or man and woman. The myths by which we live condition our judgment and our choices much more than we know or like to admit.

The *Genesis* story tells us that God, after making the physical world, made man and woman with equality and at the same time. "And God said, Let us make man in our own im-

age, after our likeness . . . So God created man in his own image . . . male and female created he them." (*Genesis* 1:26,27) This is a later passage than the "rib" one and it was from this that Jesus quoted, even though he lived in a culture (as did these writers) in which women were regarded legally as property.

Some sense and a lot of nonsense has been written about the superiority of men to women. For many centuries in the East women have been chattels and in some places they still are; while in the Western world women were long regarded as the "weaker sex," to be admired, protected, and treated generally as second-class citizens. Recently the opposite line has been defended, and by men as well as women. It is pointed out that women are stronger (subject to fewer diseases, live longer), that they are emotionally more stable (fewer suicides, fewer mental patients), that they can do a number of jobs better and faster (handling small parts in the airplane industry, for instance). These and other similar observations may well be true at any given time, and many of them reflect cultural changes in our society. They are certainly interesting but I doubt that they are basic to our present inquiry. What is basic is the primary observation by this writer in *Genesis* that God created human beings in two orders, to love, fulfill, and complete each other. We shall think more about some of the cultural differences and tensions in a later chapter.

The average couple about to get married think of themselves and their marriage as different. They know, theoretically at least, some of the folklore about dangers and pitfalls and necessary adjustments, but they find these things difficult to apply to their own situation. Ordinarily this is not a feeling of self-conscious arrogance so much as it is a grati-

tude for good luck. And the state of being in love leads one to discover goodness, beauty, wisdom, and assorted perfections in the person of the beloved. This is not "bad"; in fact it is inevitable. But it is inadequate. As a starting place for natural man it is a part of the order of nature, but without some suspicion of the fall of man, it might be compared to driving an automobile on a busy street with one's eyes tightly closed.

Similarly, it is a part of our human nature to regard ourselves as adequate persons. Each of us begins life as the center of attraction. Each secretly considers himself his own authority in judging other people. We excuse ourselves elaborately and carefully when we are found in the wrong. As time goes on practice makes us more skillful at concealing our faults and in displaying our virtues winningly, even "modestly"! The truth-telling of judgment usually comes quietly. I can recall vividly a small incident from a number of years ago when I was torpedoed quite unintentionally by a soft-spoken little girl, my middle child, who was then about five years old. All washed and ready for bed she came downstairs to say goodnight. I was on my knees looking for a book on the bottom shelf when she walked softly toward me on little flannel feet, put her hand lightly on my shoulder and said with the deliberateness of childhood, "I have come to the conclusion that you are a very good man." What a blow! What a shattering, devastating blow! The naked exposure of trust. One feels like disappearing through the floor saying, "My darling child, I wish to God I were." At such a moment the cheapness of one's life is painfully clear. The easy lies, the pretenses, the strut and pose, the fear of the truth, the slipperiness, all are as if brilliantly lighted on a stage. We do not look at such a scene very long, it is too un-

settling. Neither do we forget it entirely. And many of us are willing to admit at least some of the truth about us to ourselves, though we might defend ourselves with some vigor if another person said the same things about us. Gradually, as we begin to grow up a little, we begin to discover some lacks in our sufficiency, some deep needs in our supposed adequacy. We may even, in our hard-won little store of wisdom, come to the point where we know that we are fools and that if anyone loves us at all it is a gift and not a deserving. We may come to the moment of truth when we realize that the essence of the human situation is that no man can deliver himself or justify himself or forgive himself. If we are to be delivered, justified, or forgiven, it will have to be by someone other than ourselves, someone who is ready, willing, and able. This is the heart of the Christian religion, that God who made the world also redeemed it; that God entered his own creation in the person of Christ the Lord and bought it back by taking our place; that Christ, the adequate man, the free man, restores us to adequacy and to freedom in himself.

No Power of Ourselves

The central truth of a Christian marriage is the fact of Christ, God's redeeming action in the human situation. Whatever our bright hopes and good intentions, we are simply unable to cope with our "fallenness" by ourselves. Our self-love is too strong, and too subtle. One of our contemporary poets says, "Everywhere I go, I go too, and spoil everything." The "fall of man" occurs in every marriage; in a sense the marriage is not real until after that event. To some extent we all marry "ideal" mates, partly as an exten-

sion of our own egos. The problem is that of accepting ourselves the way we are before we can accept another person the way he or she is. And here is the fact of Christ, the man-in-God who comes, by his self-offering, to heal the breach between man and God, between man and man, and between a man and himself.

One of the great watersheds of Christian thought stands out clearly here. One side of this divide pretends that there is some course of action, some way of keeping a set of rules, by which a man can make himself morally desirable to God, can achieve righteousness, can in a sense save himself. This point of view turns up under various names through the centuries, and it dies hard. It is a vanity and a blasphemy. No man can make himself pleasing to God by doing things or by not doing things. The good news is much better than that. The Christian faith is an act of trust in a person who loves us, saves us, dies for us, not because we are good but because *he* is. The motive for God's action, if we can use such a word, is God's nature, nothing else. We cannot earn God's love (or anyone's) or deserve it. It is a gift. It is *the* gift.

It is Christ who accepts us the way we are—to the extent of dying in our place, not only in some far-off geography of time but right now, and again and again. Does this sound strange and unreal? Perhaps an illustration may help. There was once a young couple who had been married three years and had one child. We had talked together about Christian marriage and I had officiated at their wedding but had seen them only once or twice since then because they had moved to another community. Then some time later they stopped in on their vacation to tell me this story. It seems that they had gone through the usual period of adjust-

ment, but for some unknown and annoying reason the little misunderstandings never seemed to get really settled. So they went along. The child was born; and for a while their lives were sufficiently different so that the pattern was broken. But after a while they seemed to settle back into it again with steadily recurring little flare-ups. Then came the night of the big row. There had been many little ones—too many—but this one was different. They took up battle stations and threw heavy stuff which they meant to land. When the smoke of this verbal battle had cleared somewhat the young wife went silently upstairs. She sat on the bed and thought. She took her time getting ready for bed, hoping her husband would come up and that somehow life would go on. He did not. She waited a bit longer, then when she could not stand it another minute she walked quietly half way down the stairs to see what was going on. The young man was writing something on his lap. The rest of the story is in their own words.

"Are you coming to bed, John?"

"When I get damned good and ready."

(*A pause.*)

"What are you doing, John?"

"I don't think it would make you very happy if I told you."

(*Then, in that tone.*) "John, I am asking you. What are you doing?"

"OK, you asked me. I'm making a list of the things you do that gripe the hell out of me!"

The girl came down the rest of the stairs to confront her husband, her eyes round with astonishment. "Why John, do you have a list too?"

Then after a long moment the miracle began to happen. She stood in front of her husband, looking down at him,

knowing something important for the first time. "John," she said in quite a different voice, "I have just discovered something."

"Yeah? What is it?" said John, not too interested.

"I have discovered," she said evenly and with just a touch of amazement, "that I like you the way you are."

Very slowly John raised his head and looked deeply into his wife's eyes to see if she was telling the truth. She was. All the anger went out of him, all the annoyance, all the hurt. He stood up and took her in his arms dropping his list behind her on the floor. Then he carried her upstairs.

What they had come to say was that that was the night they got married. They had been living in the same house for three years and they had produced a child, but that was the night of the real marriage, the real acceptance.

As one begins to accept the miracle of his acceptance in Christ (often by way of another quite ordinary person), even so he begins to see himself in scale, perhaps even with a little humor. Then one begins to be able really to "meet" another person, one's husband or wife for instance, to whom one may have been married for years. The power to do this, whether we know it or not, is the power of God the creator. He who makes new—revealed, demonstrated, made available in Christ the Lord.

To be quite practical, this means at least two things. It means that there is a Christian community. Just as this marriage is important to the civil society of which it is a part, so it is important to the Christian society of which it is a part, the Church, the Body of Christ. But with a difference. The interest of the state is merely horizontal, here and now, while the Church is interested in this man and this woman not only now but for all eternity. When the newly married couple be-

come working members of the Church in the place where they have gone to live, they join themselves not only to their fellow saints and sinners in that place but to all Christians in every place, and to the whole company of heaven. One might say that this is the newly married couple's expression of their baptism. This is the frame, this local worshipping community, in which their hopes and plans will be worked out, their mistakes made, their turning points reached. Here they will be supported in love by the brethren, here they will receive the bread of life.

This means, secondly, that because of the compassion of the Lord supporting them they can afford to be wrong. Otherwise it is too costly. It is one thing to be proved wrong, damaging to the pride and frequently resulting in hardness of heart. It is quite another thing to be willing to be wrong, knowing that one is loved. To put it another way, a Christian can afford to be forgiving because he knows himself to be forgiven. This is why the parties to this marriage represent nothing less than the grace of God to each other. It is still an adventure, a life to be lived without guarantees, but it is a good companionship in all of the departments of living, and one based on a deeper companionship in the Lord.

Christian marriage is an actuality as well as an aspiration. It happens. And when it does happen it is not an accident; it is a living relationship, creative and free, built consciously on a common love and worship of God as He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ and in the people of God. It is the union of two souls and bodies who can dare to be joyful because they accept the fact of their redemption; who can endure loneliness and fear for a season because they know that the risen Christ is at one with their humanity; who can live in forbearance and good humor and can die in peace because they

know that there is a God who made them and holds them and is their life.

When this man and this woman stand before the altar and say *I John take thee Mary*, it is as if each of them were holding his life in his hands, saying, *You take it; I want you to have it, all of it, forever, and with no strings attached.* Later on both of these persons will be able to give more than they can at this moment but my concern now is with what is received. It is a joy, a wonder, a trust, a responsibility. A life relationship with an unknown future has been committed to another person, willingly and gladly. And that is what has been received.

The Christian . . . Is in Love

We have thought about the words of the betrothal promises: love, comfort, honor, keep. We might consider briefly the added meaning of these words for Christians. When the Church uses the word love in the marriage service, the image produced in the minds of the assembled people is more likely to be shaped by Hollywood than by St. Paul's hymn to love which we know as chapter thirteen in his first letter to the Corinthians. St. Paul knew nothing of chapters and verses when he was pouring out his heart to the young church at Corinth, but he did know how his whole world had been seized and turned around by a loving God, and he had to say so. In phrase after phrase, in one of the great pieces of writing in any language, this God-filled man describes what love *does*, but he does not once mention how love *feels*. "Charity suffereth long, and is kind," says the familiar version. "Love has good manners," translates a contemporary version. Still another says, "There is nothing love cannot face." This is

love as a motive, not a feeling. It is grown-up love which is not at the mercy of a whim or a mood. It is—and this is the real meaning—a reflection however imperfect of the love of God for us, which is clean, straight, complete good will. God loves us not because we are so lovable but because He is so loving. When one's husband or wife is silly or angry or sulky or coldly distant, it takes more loving and more strength to be kind, to have good manners, or to face it, than does the rare romantic moment when all the world is golden and all one's geese are swans. We know about this tough, generous, lasting sort of love (which makes romantic love possible as a by-product) because God shows it to us in the person of Jesus Christ. It is difficult for us to grasp the idea of unconditional love because our love is so conditioned by another person's response. But God loves us without condition, without bargaining, without "let or hindrance." The Christian, by definition, is "in love." Christian marriage is one of the settings in which this love can be lived out, in bright days and in dark ones.

So with the other words. Each has a Christian dimension, a depth, which the world at large does not know. God himself is called the Comforter, the Holy Spirit who strengthens and encourages. God honors every child of his with respect for that person as an end in himself, his essential dignity as a man. And God keeps us in all our ways in this life and for eternity. He will never let us go. In the state of Christian marriage the generosity, the steadiness, the givenness of God's attitude toward us is reflected back to God, as far as we are able, and in him to the man or woman we love.

When in the marriage vows we commit ourselves to one another "in the sight of God and in the face of this company," and receive each other's self-offering, we make our-

selves responsible for the other's growing room. Many people will wish the newly married couple happiness. It is a good wish and an easy word but it is not a very tall word. There will be many times without happiness but not necessarily without love. In fact it is often in the unhappy times that love is really known for what it is. The marriage commitment is deep and lasting. These persons are promising to help each other to grow up into the best person that each can be—free, honest, loving, whole. And both the giving and the receiving are done as a reflection of the gracious way in which God gives himself to us and receives us.

The preface to the Solemnization of Matrimony in The Book of Common Prayer has an interesting phrase to describe Christian marriage: "signifying unto us the mystical union which is betwixt Christ and his Church," an allusion to the part of the fifth chapter of the *Epistle to The Ephesians* (5:20-33) which is the appointed Epistle when the Holy Communion is celebrated at a marriage. Mystical union is the Church's way of saying that more is involved here for Christians, both in responsibility and resource, than in a civil contract or a social convention. Any individual Christian is "in Christ"; this is his new being. In the Holy Communion we pray that we may "dwell in him, and he in us." Here in this sacrament of Christian union these two Christians commit themselves to God and to each other in Christ. There is a sacred welding of this man and this woman in which God is involved.

In a Christian marriage the added dimension is our knowledge of God's compassionate involvement in the person of Christ in the everyday stuff of living and dying and being born again which happens many times. Whatever loneliness or fear or frustration we may feel—and we do—God knows

about it and shares it. Martin Buber says that love is the revealing by two people of the "thou" to one another. This is possible because God has revealed himself in a person, a life, which we can share. God reveals himself constantly through the people of God. We know about him in Christ but he touches us by way of the flesh and blood people with whom we live. So in the circle of a Christian marriage these two people of God may reveal his love to each other more fully and freely than in any other human relationship.

Note:

A word needs to be said, I think, about marriages which are not Christian in any formal or technical sense but which seem to be good ones none the less. It would be dishonest to pretend that they do not exist, though honest enough to wonder how such people meet tragedy. But a marriage can be godly without the parties to it knowing the source of its goodness, just as many of the aspects of what we call, somewhat loosely, "Western Civilization" are based upon a Christian knowledge of God and man and the relationship between them. We should be grateful when we see a good and creative marriage outside of the Christian community. God is not limited by our limitations or by our understanding of his workings or by the boundaries of the Church. At the same time we are responsible for what we know and believe. We are grateful for our knowledge of the resources within the Christian family because we know that we need all the help we can get, and we are eager that these resources may be known by our friends.

5 • The Practice of Religion

"THE FUNCTION OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IS THAT TWO PEOPLE may become, *in fact*, one, for the purpose of witnessing to the Christian life and of bringing up children in that life. It is to create a union between two people which will be characterized by such mutual interdependence that it will be, by definition, indissoluble. The nature of Christian marriage is nothing less than salvation. 'A type of the mystical union between Christ and His Church' is more than just a phrase—the Christian married life carries within it all of the marks of the redemptive life of our Lord. The married person lives a life of atonement and self-oblation, and the extent to which he destroys self will be the measure of the success of his marriage. The sacrifices of Christ for his Church are made again and again by mate for mate. In the marriage relationship the 'matter' of the sacrament of marriage is found in a life together which is redeemed and redeeming."

These words were written a few years ago by a former student of mine, the Reverend Richard E. Byfield, and will serve as a transition from our concern of the last chap-

ter with the nature of Christian marriage to the concern of the present one with how we practice it.

The Third Guest

The burden of our thought thus far is that God has provided the institution of marriage which is now a part of the fallen creation, but subject to restoration and wholeness in Christ. God never leads us by a lie. He will always tell the truth about us, sometimes by way of a profound silence, but he is always gracious, always courteous. He waits to be invited into our lives as a welcome guest. Our lives are kept open by courtesies. In a deep sense our wife or our husband is our guest for life. This is our most important person, the one we have asked to share our bread and our tears, our nights and our days. So as we would prepare our heart and our home for a beloved guest, so should we prepare for every home-coming of this man, this woman.

In most marriages that I know anything about this attitude is not usually the most noticeable after the first bloom. Not that one sets out to be discourteous; one just forgets to notice or takes for granted or assumes. After a while we tend to save our pretty looks for strangers. We need the third guest. We need the God who made us and who loves us more than we love each other, more even than we love ourselves. We shall always have God's good will; we need to invite his company. If it is true, as Christians believe, that God is our primary and sustaining lover, then the most intelligent thing we could do would be to invite him into our marriage. How does one do this? Speaking generally, there are two ways: public and private, outside and inside.

In the Body of the Church

Let us think first of the public occasion and practice, then of the private. The marriage service is a public one because it is important to the public. No couple can be joined in marriage without at least two witnesses who are required to sign documents stating that they heard the words spoken. The Church feels this way too; a marriage is an act of the Church as well as an act of these individuals. Hopefully, these persons have been brought up in the household of faith, learning by living as well as by precept the nature of that faith and life. Now they come as members of the Church's household, the body of Christ in the world, to start a new life together with the Church's blessing and with the prayers of the Church family. In a way that we shall explore further, this marriage may be thought of as a little church, a small exhibit of the whole Christian society in which these people minister to each other, to their children, relatives and friends, in the name of the Lord. My former student says, "nothing less than salvation." Salvation is safeness, the safeness of being loved, sustained, held. This is what we receive from the Lord and what as members of his body, the Church, we offer to one another.

So it seems right that the wedding of two Christians should take place in the body of the church with the congregation assembled in the customary place of worship. The introduction (rubric) to the marriage service in *The Book of Common Prayer* says, "At the day and time appointed for Solemnization of Matrimony, the Persons to be married shall come into the body of the Church, or shall be ready in some proper house, with their friends and neighbours . . ." This

direction has an interesting history. In English practice all Church marriages must take place in church unless conditions are so extraordinary as to justify a special dispensation called Archbishop's License. (For example, the fact that one of the parties to the marriage is bedridden.) Such was the practice when the Church of England first came to this country. In Colonial times, however, church marriages were often impossible because of the lack of churches; so that by the time the first American Prayer Book was published in 1790 the phrase "some proper house" was added out of practicality.

In our times the matter turns upon appropriateness. People sometimes want to be married at home because it is so "homey," or in the garden for romantic reasons, or in a hotel ballroom so that the picture-taking and the reception can begin at once and without transportation problems. There was a time not very long ago, one hopes now happily outgrown, when otherwise sensible people got married in submarines, airplanes, swimming pools, and subways.

Church people will wish to be married in church primarily because it is "home" for the faith community of which they are members. Here is the familiar scene, warm in the mind from many visits for many reasons. Here the important steps in one's own religious life were taken. Here one has grown up with his own family in the larger family of the gathered community. Here one has fought some of his own battles in the silence of his own prayers; here one has thought some of the thoughts that will stay with him always. Here one has been a part of the witnessing, praying congregation at the time of other people's marriages. And even though we have become a nation on wheels, the Church is the Church wherever one finds it. It is still "home" though it

may be at the other side of the country, or of the world, from one's native heath.

Apart from the appropriateness of a wedding in church, it is much easier to manage. Whether a small wedding in a chapel, or one with many participants in a much larger place, the business of entrances and exits, the ability of the people to participate by seeing what is going on, the dignity of the whole proceeding—all are done better in church. There is something about the determined playing of the wedding march on the living-room piano, with a nervous glance over the shoulder to see if the timing is right, which smacks of the amateur theatrical.

Even small marriages need to have rehearsals so that people will know their parts and the event go off smoothly. And it is a help on the wedding day itself to be able to put one's whole mind (or as much of it as possible) on the real meaning of the occasion. When the moment finally comes, it is a solemn one. The bridegroom looks down the aisle to see a vision appear on her father's arm and wonders if he will be able to say anything at all. He will be comforted if he has already practiced his lines. Such simple things as knowing where to stand and when to move from one place to another can free the whole wedding party to make their best contribution to an occasion they will remember for years to come.

Documents

Some of the documents can be filled out at the time of the rehearsal, without the clergyman's signature of course, further freeing the day itself from these formalities. The number of necessary papers will differ slightly from state to state, but there will always be the marriage license and the parish

register. In the Episcopal Church the bride and groom are required to sign a Declaration of Intention, giving their assent to the Church's understanding of the nature and purpose of Christian marriage. The words are good ones and will bear quoting: "We, A.B. and C.D. desiring to receive the blessing of Holy Matrimony in the Church, do solemnly declare that we hold marriage to be a lifelong union of husband and wife as it is set forth in the Form of Solemnization of Holy Matrimony in The Book of Common Prayer. We believe it is for the purpose of mutual fellowship, encouragement, and understanding, for the procreation (if it may be) of children, and their physical and spiritual nurture, for the safeguarding and benefit of society. And we do engage ourselves, so far as in us lies, to make our utmost effort to establish this relationship and to seek God's help thereto." It is the custom in many places for the newly married couple to be presented with the marriage service, in booklet form, which was actually used at their wedding. It is a convenient and attractive form in which to keep the marriage lines and one which can be reread from time to time.

The Holy Communion

It is most appropriate that the Holy Communion be celebrated in connection with the marriage, and for this purpose a proper Collect, Epistle, and Gospel are provided in the Prayer Book. There are two ways to do this. The bride and groom, and any members of the wedding party or the family whom they invite, may come together at some agreeable time on the morning of the wedding day for a nuptial celebration. It is a meaningful occasion for members of the household of faith to gather quietly in the presence of the

Lord for the first step in the new life together of this man and this woman on their day. There is also the advantage of a familiar act, and one of which they know some of the significance.

The other way is to combine the marriage service and the Holy Communion. There are variations in practice, but the general procedure is for the betrothal to take place after the wedding march (if any), at the foot of the chancel steps, followed by the movement of the wedding party to the altar rail, as usual, for the completion of the marriage ceremony. Then follows the service of Holy Communion with the newly married couple and their attendants kneeling at the altar rail and being the first to make their communions. Many feel that this liturgical practice is the best witness that the Church can make to what it believes about Christian marriage. Sometimes the bride and groom participate in bringing to the altar the vessels and the bread and wine to be used in the service. There is no reason why the marriage service cannot be used in connection with the regular parish eucharist, together with a sermon on the nature of Christian marriage. A reception in the parish hall after such a wedding may well contain an element which many wedding receptions lack.

Newly married people enjoy celebrating "anniversaries"—a week, a month, six months today! There is no better way to celebrate these glad days than to meet again at the altar—the family table—where this marriage began, and to offer in the Holy Communion one's hopes and plans and dreams. The Lord who "adorned and beautified with his presence and first miracle that he wrought (at the wedding) in Cana of Galilee," will understand and bless this man and this woman in their needs. And as the days and years roll

on they will come again and again, later with their children, to this place of refuge and strength.

The Church Which Is in Thy House

After the festivities are over and the couple have come to live in their own place, wherever it may be, they are a new unit, a husband and wife, a potential family. It is as such that they attend the local church and become a part of its life. They may do so as regular worshippers, returning prayer and praise for their blessings, drawing strength for their needs. Or, added to that, they may become involved in the program of the parish, finding expression for their abilities and interests. It is no news that this can be overdone. Someone has observed that there is no substitute for religion like church work! It seems beyond argument that many young couples, especially in suburbia, do become engrossed in the busy-work aspects of church organization, to the detriment of their own religious life and that of the local church. There will always be real needs to be met and genuine calls for help to be heard and heeded; but the deep need of this new family is quietly to become itself. It is easy for us to confuse our priorities, to make a sort of religion of being busy about the church building or its concerns, and in doing so to lose sight of the real reason for its being there—to be a tabernacle in the wilderness for souls on pilgrimage. It is easy for the Church to become indistinguishable from the other exhibits of our culture which surround it. There is a necessary relationship here or the Church cannot speak to the world around it; but by the same token the world can speak to the Church so effectively that its values become

those of the world. It may be that this new couple already know some of these things, not only for their own good but for the benefit of some of their contemporaries as well.

Apart from the public expression of their life as a new unit of society, a new family with duties and responsibilities and problems and joys, these people have a private life which is their own. Whatever they do in the world will be a reflection of who they are as individuals and what their private world together is like. This private life will have many facets, but for Christians an important part of it will be religious. Reference has been made to "the church which is in thy house," an expression used by St. Paul in one of his letters. This is the heart of the matter. The larger church is made up of individuals and of "house-churches" where the practice of religion from day to day shapes the life and defines the purposes of the people of God. One has a house or an apartment with a street and a number where the life goes on—bed and board, gaieties and griefs, special events and daily humdrum. But within those walls, for people who have stood before an altar and made their promises in the sight of God, is a church, a small but important worshipping community. There is an exchange between the life of the larger church and the life of the church at home; each needs and complements the other.

With every newly married couple there will be some variation in the practice of private prayer. One may have stopped saying his prayers after he left "mother's knee," and in his young adulthood have rightly outgrown that practice without ever having discovered anything better to put in its place. Some do not have even that much to remember. Others will have grown in their understanding and practice of the life of prayer as they have grown in other ways. Almost

everyone will have prayed, even though rarely, in his own emergencies. The average couple will have had some prayer discipline thrust upon them when very young, and some will have persisted; but for most the practice of private prayer will not seem a necessity.

Here, beginning with the day of the wedding, is an opportunity to grow together, and to grow up together, in a way which no other can supply. Whatever their practice may have been as individuals, when these two people kneel down together the first night after they have married each other, they are beginning an adventure of faith which may become the most important thing in their common life. On the first night they might well say the Lord's Prayer together aloud, then silently say whatever is on their minds. As a man and woman in love they will ask God's blessing on their marriage. Each will be wordlessly thankful for his remarkable good fortune in having married this wonderful person who might so easily have married someone else. One can think of many reasons for loving his new wife, or her new husband; the reasons are so obvious. But one can think of no reason why this person among millions should love him, or her, except that it is so. It seems a miracle. A silent prayer may be breathed that one may become worthy of this person who thinks one is better than he is. This is the way God treats us, as if we were better than we are, and it is our hope of becoming so.

And so the adventure of prayer begins in this household. It will go well at first because it is an adventure and a new way of sharing two lives. But if they persist they will come to a desert. Everyone who has ever tried to pray regularly knows about that desert. It is wide and dry. Nothing grows there. The whole business seems like meaningless motion and, if one were simply on his own, this might well be the

end of the adventure. For many it has been. But now there is a difference, a double difference. First, one has a companion on the journey. There are two crossing the desert this time and they are walking together. They may remark upon the scenery, or lack of it, but neither is alone any more. The other difference is that the two are likely to move at different degrees of awareness at different times. So one, being dry and standing still, may be refreshed by the other's movement and discovery. And the discovery can be talked about. We sometimes act as if the practice of prayer were so personal that it could not be discussed in a normal way by normal people. Certainly it is true that private prayer is a personal encounter and that little can be said about it even if one were so minded. Certainly it is true that as one grows toward God even a very little, increasingly more of his life becomes a part of his religious life in a way difficult to describe. But it is also true that this married couple who wish to share with each other as much of their separate lives as they can, may find in the adventure of prayer together one of the deepest sources of their self-understanding and their understanding of one another.

People who live together closely are bound to have differences of opinion, not because they are those particular individuals but because they are human beings. Each of us has quirks that annoy, or habit patterns which seem obviously sensible to us but strange indeed to another. All of us have our bad days. On such occasions a small difference of opinion is liable to become suddenly much larger than it has any right to be. Tempers rise, hearts harden, words are spoken, doors slam, silence is thick and heavy. Who has not known such times to some degree? Sometimes they just get themselves over with. The wind goes down and the sea is

calm again. Sometimes they persist and rankle, becoming fuel for future fires. Again, there are no guarantees; but if these same people were to say their prayers together that night because it was their custom, the likelihood of the continuance of the little storm would be greatly decreased. They would have met at a level so simple and open and honest that the difference of opinion which started the whole thing off would have disappeared—or at least it could be talked about. The third guest would have been invited.

Many troubles can be handled, if not "solved," if people have a place where they can meet and be themselves. A few years ago a young woman, married to an apprentice machinist, wrote me a letter illustrating this. Not long after the marriage, her husband lost his job because of a strike and was unable to find another. It was not long before their savings were used up and they had to leave their apartment. There was no place for them to go except the home of the bride's parents. Never an ideal situation, this one was complicated by the fact that the young wife's brother, who also lived at home, resented their moving in. They had never hit it off very well. Frequent references were made to the fact that, though he did not have the education of the other man, he *did* have a job. This went on for a number of weeks, at times narrowly missing actual battle, when a settlement was made in the strike situation and machinists were once again sought after. The girl wrote quite simply that she and her husband had agreed that their being able to move out with as little emotional damage as they had and to set up housekeeping on their own again was due to the fact that they said their prayers together at night. It was their shelter and their citadel. The troublesome brother could not scale the walls here, and from that safe place they could meet the next day's de-

mands of job hunting and temper-keeping; they could even salvage occasional scraps of humor, knowing they were held.

Sometimes there are deep troubles. When the bride and groom drive away from the reception in a shower of rice and confetti, their future seems bright with promise. They are young, eager, attractive. They are also vulnerable. No one knows what lies in the path ahead; but none of us escapes being hurt, sometimes badly. More often than not we do not know about other people's serious trouble, since we all turn our best face to the world. The real question is, with what resources do we meet our problem when it comes? No person has more faith than he can summon in an emergency. No one can draw money from the bank which is not there in his name. If, day by day, this man and this woman have come quietly into the presence of God who knows our joys, our disappointments, and our sorrows, when the bad time comes they will have a known friend in whom to meet. The trouble will be just as bad; but there will be a way of absorbing it, as our hurts and hates are absorbed by a loving Lord.

It happens more often than not, when children in a family come to the point when it is good for them to begin to learn to pray, that they do so at "mother's knee" because there is no better place available. But how good for the child if he were to discover that the practice of prayer in his home was as natural as the other things that normally go on in homes; that his father and mother have been doing this for years as an important part of their life together. Such a child would not have to begin saying his prayers as if he were the only person in the world doing so; he would grow up in a household where prayers together were a normal part of a normal day. And as he and his brothers and sisters came

along, they would be included in this family activity, and their special concerns and important events shared with those of their parents as conversation is shared at the table. It could be the parents' best gift to their children.

Casting our minds into the future, there will come a time when one of the partners in this marriage will be left alone, perhaps for some years. In a way, the better the marriage the greater the sense of loss. The passage of time does help, yet the loneliness is still there. So one prays to a loving God—remembering the good years, knowing that though our loved ones are absent from us, no one is absent from God.

It is never too late to learn to pray. A young lawyer friend of mine, married and the father of four lively children, told me once that in his opinion the "dark night of the soul" is not at three o'clock in the morning for a desert saint, but about five-thirty p.m. on the commuting train for home. A hard day at the office *versus* a hard day on the home front, each combatant waiting to tell his story first, to enlist the sympathy so rightly deserved. Bill says he learned to pray on that train, really pray, for the first time in his life—to hold his peace, to listen, to be open and loving. And so, from him, did his wife. No halos appeared and nothing was changed—no *thing*—but two people were.

Prayer goes on all the time; we do not initiate it, we join it. When we have stated times for our prayers together, not by the clock but by events such as bedtime or breakfast, we are more likely to say them. Then we begin to pray during the daily round and, eventually, our lives themselves become an offering.