

5

The Mystery of Love

"This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the Church" (Eph. 5:32)

In the Orthodox Church matrimony is a sacrament. It may be asked why, of the many "states" of human life, in the great variety of man's vocations, only this "state" has been singled out and understood as a sacrament? Indeed, if it is simply a divine *sanction* of marriage, the bestowing of spiritual help to the married couple, a blessing for the procreation of children—all this does not make it radically different from any other act for which we need help and guidance, sanction and blessing. For a "sacrament," as we have seen, implies necessarily the idea of transformation, refers to the ultimate event of Christ's death and resurrection, and is always a sacrament of the Kingdom. In a way, of course, the whole life of the Church can be termed sacramental, for it is always the manifestation in time of the "new time." Yet in a more precise way the Church calls sacraments those decisive acts of its life in which this transforming grace is *confirmed as being given*, in which the Church through a liturgical act identifies itself with and becomes the very form of that Gift. . . . But how is marriage related to the Kingdom which is to come? How is it related to the cross, the death and the resurrection of Christ? What, in other words, makes it a sacrament?

Even to raise these questions seems impossible within the whole "modern" approach to marriage, and this includes, often enough, the "Christian" approach. In the numberless "manuals of marital happiness," in the alarming trend to make the minister a specialist in clinical sexology, in all cozy definitions of a Christian family which approve a moderate use of sex (which can be an "enriching experience") and emphasize responsibility, savings and Sunday School—in all this there is, indeed, no room for sacrament. We do not even remember today that marriage is, as everything else in "this world," a fallen and distorted marriage, and that it needs not to be blessed and "solemnized"—after a rehearsal and with the help of the photographer—but *restored*. This restoration, furthermore, is *in Christ* and this means in His life, death, resurrection and ascension to heaven, in the pentecostal inauguration of the "new eon," in the Church as the sacrament of all this. Needless to say, this restoration infinitely transcends the idea of the "Christian family," and gives marriage cosmic and universal dimensions.

Here is the whole point. As long as we visualize marriage as the concern of those alone who are being married, as something that happens to them and not to the whole Church, and, therefore, to the world itself, we shall never understand the truly sacramental meaning of marriage: the great mystery to which St. Paul refers when he says, "But I speak concerning Christ and the Church." We must understand that the real theme, "content" and object of this sacrament is not "family," but love. Family as such, family in itself, can be a demonic distortion of love—and there are harsh words about it in the Gospel: "A man's foes shall be those of his own household" (Mt. 10:36). In this sense the sacrament of matrimony is wider than family. It is the sacrament of divine love, as the all-embracing mystery of being itself, and it is for this reason that it concerns the whole Church, and—through the Church—the whole world.

2

Perhaps the Orthodox vision of this sacrament will be better understood if we begin not with matrimony as such, and not with an abstract "theology of love," but with the one who has always stood at the very heart of the Church's life as the purest expression of human love and response to God—Mary, the Mother of Jesus. It is significant that whereas in the West Mary is primarily the *Virgin*, a being almost totally different from us in her absolute and celestial purity and freedom from all carnal pollution, in the East she is always referred to and glorified as *Theotokos*, the Mother of God, and virtually all icons depict her with the Child in her arms. There exist, in other words, two emphases in mariology, which, although they do not necessarily exclude one another, lead to two different visions of Mary's place in the Church. And the difference between them must be kept in mind if we want to understand the experience of the veneration of Mary which has always been that of the Orthodox Church. We hope to show that this is not so much a specific "cult of Mary," as a light, a joy, proper to the whole life of the Church. In her, says an Orthodox hymn, "all creation rejoices."

But what is this joy about? Why, in her own words, shall "all generations call me blessed"? Because in her love and obedience, in her faith and humility, she accepted to be what from all eternity all creation was meant and created to be: the temple of the Holy Spirit, the *humanity* of God. She accepted to give her body and blood—that is, her whole life—to be the body and blood of the Son of God, to be *mother* in the fullest and deepest sense of this world, giving her life to the Other and fulfilling her life in Him. She accepted the only true nature of each creature and all creation: to place the meaning and, therefore, the fulfillment of her life in God.

In accepting this nature she fulfilled the *womanhood* of creation. This word will seem strange to many. In our time the Church, following the modern trend toward the "equality of the sexes," uses only one-half of the Christian

revelation about man and woman, the one which affirms that in Christ there is neither "male nor female" (Gal. 3:28). The other half is ascribed again to an antiquated world view. In fact, however, all our attempts to find the "place of woman" in society (or in the Church) instead of exalting her, belittle woman, for they imply too often a denial of her specific vocation as woman.

Yet is it not significant that the relation between God and the world, between God and Israel, His chosen people, and finally between God and the cosmos restored in the Church, is expressed in the Bible in terms of marital union and love? This is a double analogy. On the one hand we understand God's love for the world and Christ's love for the Church because we have the experience of marital love, but on the other hand marital love has its roots, its depth and real fulfillment in the *great mystery of Christ and his Church*: "But I speak concerning Christ and the Church." The Church is the Bride of Christ (" . . . for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ"—2 Cor. 11:2). This means that the world—which finds its restoration and fulfillment in the Church—is the bride of God and that in sin this fundamental relationship has been broken, distorted. And it is in Mary—the Woman, the Virgin, the Mother—in her response to God, that the Church has its living and personal beginning.

This response is total obedience in love; not obedience *and* love, but the wholeness of the one as the totality of the other. Obedience, taken in itself, is not a "virtue"; it is blind submission and there is no light in blindness. Only love for God, the absolute object of all love, frees obedience from blindness and makes it the joyful acceptance of that alone which is worthy of being accepted. But love without obedience to God is "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 Jn. 2:16), it is the love claimed by Don Juan, which ultimately destroys him. Only obedience to God, the only Lord of Creation, gives love its true direction, makes it fully love.

True obedience is thus true love for God, the true re-

sponse of Creation to its Creator. Humanity is fully humanity when it is this response to God, when it becomes the movement of total self-giving and obedience to Him. But in the "natural" world the bearer of this obedient love, of this love as response, is the woman. The man proposes, the woman accepts. This acceptance is not passivity, blind submission, because it is love, and love is always active. It gives life to the proposal of man, fulfills it as life, yet it becomes fully love and fully life only when it is fully *acceptance* and *response*. This is why the whole creation, the whole Church—and not only women—find the expression of their response and obedience to God in Mary the Woman, and rejoice in her. She stands for all of us, because only when we accept, respond in love and obedience—only when we accept the essential womanhood of creation—do we become ourselves true men and women; only then can we indeed *transcend* our limitations as "males" and "females." For man can be truly man—that is, the king of creation, the priest and minister of God's creativity and initiative—only when he does not posit himself as the "owner" of creation and submits himself—in obedience and love—to its nature as the bride of God, in *response* and *acceptance*. And woman ceases to be just a "female" when, totally and unconditionally accepting the life of the Other as *her own life*, giving herself totally to the Other, she becomes the very expression, the very fruit, the very joy, the very beauty, the very gift of our response to God, the one whom, in the words of the Song, the king will bring into his chambers, saying: "Thou art all fair, my love, there is no spot in thee" (Ct. 4:7).

Tradition calls Mary the *new Eve*. She did what the first Eve failed to do. Eve failed to be a woman. She took the initiative. She "proposed," and she became "female"—the instrument of procreation, "ruled over" by man. She made herself, and also the man whose "eve" she was, the slaves of her "femininity" and the whole of life a dark war of sexes in which "possession" is in fact the violent and desperate desire to *kill* the shameful lust that never dies. But Mary "took no initiative." In love and obedience

she expected the initiative of the Other. And when it came, she accepted it, not blindly—for she asked “how shall this be?”—but with the whole lucidity, simplicity and joy of love. The light of an eternal spring comes to us when on the day of annunciation we hear the decisive: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word” (Lk. 1:38). This is indeed the whole creation, all of humanity, and each one of us recognizing the words that express our ultimate nature and being, our acceptance to be the bride of God, our betrothal to the One who from all eternity loved us.

Mary is the *Virgin*. But this virginity is not a negation, not a mere *absence*; it is the fullness and the wholeness of love itself. It is the totality of her self-giving to God, and thus the very expression, the very quality of her love. For love is the thirst and hunger for wholeness, totality, fulfillment—for virginity, in the ultimate meaning of this word. At the end the Church will be presented to Christ as a “chaste virgin” (Cor. 11:2). For virginity is the goal of all genuine love—not as absence of “sex,” but as its complete fulfillment in love; of this fulfillment in “this world” sex is the paradoxical, the tragic affirmation and denial. The Orthodox Church, by celebrating the seemingly “nonscriptural” feasts of Mary’s nativity and of her presentation in the temple reveals, in fact, a real faithfulness to the Bible, for the meaning of these feasts lies precisely in their recognition of the Virgin Mary as the *goal* and the *fulfillment* of the whole history of salvation, of that history of love and obedience, of response and expectation. She is the true daughter of the Old Testament, its last and most beautiful flower. The Orthodox Church rejects the dogma of the Immaculate Conception precisely because it makes Mary a miraculous “break” in this long and patient growth of love and expectation, of this “hunger for the living God” which fills the Old Testament. She is the gift of the world to God, as is so beautifully said in a hymn of the nativity:

Each of thy creatures brings thanksgiving unto Thee;
The angels offer the sun,

The heavens its star,
The wise men their gifts,
The shepherds their marveling . . .
And we—the Virgin Mother.

And yet it is God alone who fulfils and crowns this obedience, acceptance, and love. "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee. . . . For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Lk. 1:35—37). He alone reveals as Virgin the one who brought to him the totality of human love. . . .

Mary is the *Mother*. Motherhood is the fulfillment of womanhood because it is the fulfillment of love as obedience and response. It is by giving herself that love gives life, becomes the source of life. One does not love *in order* to have children. Love needs no justification; it is not because it gives life that love is good: it is because it is good that it gives life. The joyful mystery of Mary's motherhood is thus not opposed to the mystery of her virginity. It is the same mystery. She is not mother "in spite" of her virginity. She reveals the fullness of motherhood because her virginity is the fullness of love.

She is the *Mother of Christ*. She is the fullness of love accepting the coming of God to us—giving life to Him, who is the Life of the world. And the whole creation rejoices in her, because it recognizes through her that the end and fulfillment of all life, of all love *is to accept Christ*, to give Him life in ourselves. And there should be no fear that this joy about Mary takes anything from Christ, diminishes in any way the glory due to Him and Him alone. For what we find in her and what constitutes the joy of the Church is precisely the fullness of our adoration of Christ, of acceptance and love for Him. Really, here is no "cult of Mary," yet in Mary the "cult" of the Church becomes a movement of joy and thanksgiving, of acceptance and obedience—the wedding to the Holy Spirit, which makes it the only complete joy on earth.

3

We now can return to the sacrament of matrimony. We can now understand that its true meaning is not that it merely gives a religious "sanction" to marriage and family life, reinforces with supernatural grace the natural family virtues. Its meaning is that by taking the "natural" marriage into "the great mystery of Christ and the Church," the sacrament of matrimony gives marriage a *new meaning*; it transforms, in fact, not only marriage as such, but all human love.

It is worth mentioning that the early Church apparently did not know of any separate marriage service. The "fulfillment" of marriage by two Christians was their partaking together of the Eucharist. As every aspect of life was gathered into the Eucharist, so matrimony received its seal by inclusion into this central act of the community. And this means that, since marriage has always had sociological and legal dimensions, these were simply accepted by the Church. Yet, like the whole "natural" life of man, marriage had to be *taken into the Church*, that is, judged, redeemed and transformed in the sacrament of the Kingdom. Only later did the Church receive also the "civil" authority to perform a rite of marriage. This meant, however, together with the recognition of the Church as the "celebrant" of matrimony, a first step in a progressive "desacramentalization." An obvious sign of this was the divorce of matrimony from the Eucharist.

All this explains why even today the Orthodox rite of matrimony consists of two distinct services: the betrothal and the crowning. The betrothal is performed not inside the Church, but in the vestibule. It is the Christian form of the "natural" marriage. It is the blessing of the rings by the priest and their exchange by the bridal pair. Yet from the very beginning this natural marriage is given its true perspective and direction: "O Lord our God," says the priest, "*who hast espoused the Church as a pure Virgin* from among the Gentiles, bless this Betrothal, and unite

and maintain these Thy servants in peace and oneness of mind."

For the Christian, *natural* does not mean either self-sufficient—a "nice little family"—or merely insufficient, and to be, therefore, strengthened and completed by the addition of the "*supernatural*." The natural man thirsts and hungers for fulfillment and redemption. This thirst and hunger is the *vestibule* of the Kingdom: both beginning and exile.

Then, having blessed the natural marriage, the priest takes the bridal pair in a solemn procession *into the church*. This is the true form of the sacrament, for it does not merely symbolize, but indeed *is* the entrance of marriage into the Church, which is the entrance of the world into the "world to come," the procession of the people of God—in Christ—into the Kingdom. The rite of crowning is but a later—although a beautiful and beautifully meaningful—expression of the reality of this entrance.

"O Lord and God, crown them with glory and honor!" says the priest after he has put crowns on the heads of the bridal pair. This is, first, the glory and honor of man as king of creation: "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue and have dominion . . ." (Gn. 1:25). Each family is indeed a kingdom, a little church, and therefore a sacrament of and a way to the Kingdom. Somewhere, even if it is only in a single room, every man at some point in his life has his own small kingdom. It may be hell, and a place of betrayal, or it may not. Behind each window there is a little world going on. How evident this becomes when one is riding on a train at night and passing innumerable lighted windows: behind each one of them the fullness of life is a "given possibility," a promise, a vision. This is what the marriage crowns express: that here is the beginning of a small kingdom which *can* be something like the true Kingdom. The chance will be lost, perhaps even in one night; but at this moment it is still an open possibility. Yet even when it has been lost, and lost again a thousand times, still if two people stay together, they are in a real sense king and queen to each other. And

after forty odd years, Adam can still turn and see Eve standing beside him, in a unity with himself which in some small way at least proclaims the love of God's Kingdom. In movies and magazines the "icon" of marriage is always a youthful couple. But once, in the light and warmth of an autumn afternoon, this writer saw on the bench of a public square, in a poor Parisian suburb, an old and poor couple. They were sitting hand in hand, in silence, enjoying the pale light, the last warmth of the season. In silence: all words had been said, all passion exhausted, all storms at peace. The whole life was behind—yet all of it was now *present*, in this silence, in this light, in this warmth, in this silent unity of hands. Present—and ready for eternity, ripe for joy. This to me remains the vision of marriage, of its heavenly beauty.

Then secondly, the glory and the honor is that of the martyr's crown. For the way to the Kingdom is the *martyria*—bearing witness to Christ. And this means crucifixion and suffering. A marriage which does not constantly crucify its own selfishness and self-sufficiency, which does not "die to itself" that it may point beyond itself, is not a Christian marriage. The real sin of marriage today is not adultery or lack of "adjustment" or "mental cruelty." It is the idolization of the family itself, the refusal to understand marriage as directed toward the Kingdom of God. This is expressed in the sentiment that one would "do anything" for his family, even steal. The family has here ceased to be for the glory of God; it has ceased to be a sacramental entrance into His presence. It is not the lack of respect for the family, it is the idolization of the family that breaks the modern family so easily, making divorce its almost natural shadow. It is the identification of marriage with happiness and the refusal to accept the cross in it. In a Christian marriage, in fact, three are married; and the united loyalty of the two toward the third, who is God, keeps the two in an active unity with each other as well as with God. Yet it is the presence of God which is the death of the marriage as something only "natural." It is the cross of Christ that brings the self-sufficiency of nature to

its end. But "by the cross joy [and not 'happiness!'] entered the whole world." Its presence is thus the real joy of marriage. It is the joyful certitude that the marriage vow, in the perspective of the eternal Kingdom, is not taken "until death parts," but until death unites us completely.

Hence the third and final meaning of the crowns: they are the crowns of the Kingdom, of that ultimate Reality of which everything in "this world"—whose fashion passeth away—everything has now become a sacramental sign and anticipation. "Receive their crowns in Thy Kingdom," says the priest, as he removes them from the heads of the newlyweds, and this means: make this marriage a growth in that perfected love of which God alone is the end and fullness.

The common cup given to the couple after the crowning is explained today as a symbol of "common life," and nothing shows better the "descramentalization" of marriage, its reduction to a "natural happiness." In the past this was communion, the partaking of the Eucharist, the ultimate *seal* of the fulfillment of marriage in Christ. Christ is to be the very essence of life together. He is the wine of the new life of the children of God, and communion in it will proclaim how, by getting older and older in this world, we are growing younger and younger in the life which has no evening.

As the wedding service is completed, the bride and bridegroom join hands and follow the priest in a procession around the table. As in baptism, this procession in a circle signifies the eternal journey which has begun; marriage will be a procession hand in hand, a continuation of that which has started here, not always joyful, but always capable of being referred to and filled with joy.

Nowhere is the truly universal, truly cosmic significance of the sacrament of matrimony as the sacrament of love,

expressed better than in its liturgical similitude with the liturgy of ordination, the sacrament of priesthood. Through it is revealed the identity of the Reality to which both sacraments refer, of which both are the manifestation.

Centuries of "clericalism" (and one should not think of clericalism as a monopoly of the "hierarchical" and "liturgical" churches) have made the priest or minister *beings apart*, with a unique and specifically "sacred" vocation in the Church. This vocation is not only different from, it is indeed opposed to all of those that are "profane." Such was, such still is the secret spring of sacerdotal psychology and training. It is not accidental, therefore, that the words "laity," "layman" became little by little synonymous with a lack of something in a man, or his *nonbelonging*. Yet originally the words "laity," "layman" referred to the *laos*—the people of God—and were not only positive in meaning, but included the "clergy." But today one who says he is a layman in physics acknowledges his ignorance of this science, his nonbelonging to the closed circle of specialists.

For centuries the clerical state was exalted as virtually a "supernatural" one, and there is a slight connotation of mystical awe when a man says: "People should respect the clergy." And if someday a science which has been long overdue—pastoral pathology—is taught in the seminaries, its first discovery might be that some "clerical vocations" are in fact rooted in a morbid desire for that "supernatural respect," especially when the chances of a "natural" one are slim. Our secular world "respects" clergy as it "respects" cemeteries: both are needed, both are sacred, both are out of life.

But what both clericalism and secularism—the former being, in fact, the natural father of the latter—have made us forget is that to be *priest* is from a profound point of view the most natural thing in the world. Man was created priest of the world, the one who offers the world to God in a sacrifice of love and praise and who, through this eternal eucharist, bestows the divine love upon the world. Priesthood, in this sense, is the very essence of manhood, man's creative relation to the "womanhood" of the created

world. And Christ is the one true Priest because He is the one true and perfect man. He is the new Adam, the restoration of that which Adam failed to be. Adam failed to be the priest of the world, and because of this failure the world ceased to be the sacrament of the divine love and presence, and became "nature." And in this "natural" world religion became an organized transaction with the supernatural, and the priest was set apart as the "transactor," as the mediator between the natural and the supernatural. And after all, it does not matter too much whether this mediation was understood in terms of magic—as supernatural powers—or in terms of law—as supernatural rights.

But Christ revealed the essence of priesthood to be love and therefore priesthood to be the essence of life. He died the last victim of the priestly religion, and in His death the priestly *religion* died and the priestly *life* was inaugurated. He was killed by the priests, by the "clergy," but His sacrifice abolished them as it abolished "religion." And it abolished religion because it destroyed that wall of separation between the "natural" and the "supernatural," the "profane" and the "sacred," the "this-worldly" and the "other-worldly"—which was the only justification and *raison d'être* of religion. He revealed that all things, all nature have their end, their fulfillment in the Kingdom; that all things are to be made new by love.

If there are priests in the Church, if there is the priestly vocation in it, it is precisely in order to reveal to each vocation its priestly essence, to make the whole life of all men the liturgy of the Kingdom, to reveal the Church as the royal priesthood of the redeemed world. It is, in other terms, not a vocation "apart," but the expression of love for man's vocation as son of God and for the world as the sacrament of the Kingdom. And there must be priests because we live in *this world*, and nothing in it is the Kingdom and, as "this world," will never become the Kingdom. The Church is in the world but not of the world, because only by *not* being of the world can it reveal and manifest the "world to come," the beyond, which alone reveals all things as *old*—yet new and eternal in the love of God.

Therefore, no vocation in *this world* can fulfill itself as priesthood. And thus there must be the one whose specific vocation is *to have no vocation, to be all things to all men*, and to reveal that the end and the meaning of all things are in Christ.

No one can take it upon himself to become a priest, to decide on the basis of his own qualifications, preparation and predispositions. The vocation always comes from above—from God's ordination and order. The priesthood reveals the humility, not the pride of the Church, for it reveals the complete dependence of the Church on Christ's love—that is, on His unique and perfect priesthood. It is not "priesthood" that the priest receives in his ordination, but the gift of Christ's love, that love which made Christ the only Priest and which fills with this unique priesthood the ministry of those whom He sends to His people.

This is why the sacrament of ordination is, in a sense, identical with the sacrament of matrimony. Both are manifestations of love. The priest is indeed married to the Church. But just as the human marriage is taken into the mystery of Christ and the Church and becomes the sacrament of the Kingdom, it is this marriage of the priest with the Church that makes him really *priest*, the true minister of that Love which alone transforms the world and reveals the Church as the immaculate bride of Christ.

The final point is this: some of us are married and some are not. Some of us are called to be priests and ministers and some are not. But the sacraments of matrimony and priesthood *concern* all of us, because they concern our life as *vocation*. The meaning, the essence and the end of all vocation is *the mystery of Christ and the Church*. It is through the Church that each one of us finds that the vocation of all vocations is to follow Christ in the fullness of His priesthood: in His love for man and the world, His love for their ultimate fulfillment in the abundant life of the Kingdom.