

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Saint John's Abbey Publications

Saint John's Abbey

6-1954

Is Marriage Really Holy?

Kilian McDonnell OSB

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, kmcdonnell@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/saint_johns_abbey_pubs



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McDonnell, Kilian OSB. "Is Marriage Really Holy?" *Sign*, 33 (June 1954) 51.

Reprinted with permission.

Is Marriage Really Holy?

by **KILLIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**



WE are all Puritans of degree. Puritanism is something we have not quite succeeded in escaping, for it belongs to our historical past both as Catholics and as Americans. Jansenism was a Puritan heresy which plagued the Church back in the seventeenth century. And then, of course, in the same century, our country was founded by brave Puritan people. Every one of us is a victim of this past, even though it be a remote past.

Next to truth, nothing is so patient and persistent as error. Puritanism has been particularly persistent, persistent to the point of becoming chronic, because it has few of the vices of error and most of the virtues of truth. But one would think that in an age of progress, science, higher education, sex instructions, puritanism would be either dead or dying. Quite the contrary is true.

The Puritan, who is three parts prude and three parts pride, limits his respect to the spirit and feeds on an unhealthy distrust of the body. Because of this distrust, the Puritan could not but have a rather strange concept of marriage. The Puritan says that marriage is divided into two isolated compartments. In the one is the love that husband and wife have each for the other. This, the Puritan says, is the noble part of marriage; this is what is holy and sacred; this is what God really meant by marriage.

In the other compartment is the physical aspect of marriage. This, the Puritan relates with just the proper sense of shocked modesty, is the ignoble side of marriage. It is degrading and debasing, not worthy of a spiritual man. It is not, he would admit, downright sinful, but, he would hasten to add, it is as close as one can come without actually being sinful. God merely tolerates it because He knows of man's weakness. God Himself is quite unhappy about it all and wishes it were otherwise. He did not really intend the physical part of marriage when He created Adam and Eve. But then God has never had much say in this old world of His. Between these

two compartments the Puritan places a rather formidable wall, a great barrier, lest the one contaminate the other.

If we were asked our idea of marriage, we certainly would not give expression to puritanical views. But we would have to admit that back in the recesses of our subconscious there lurk remnants of puritanism. And without our knowing it, these remnants, like guerrillas behind the enemy lines who seem to be both there and not there, have caused more trouble than their size or number would suggest them capable of. They seldom win a battle, but their very presence causes a certain tension.

The Church is very much concerned with the persistence of puritanism; she does not want it hiding even in far corners of our subconscious. She says that all in marriage is holy; and there are no compartments, no barriers. Certainly the love of husband and wife is holy; equally holy is the expression of that love.

She will never let us forget that the union of husband and wife is an image of the union of Christ and the Church. "Let wives be subject to their husbands as to the Lord; because a husband is head of the wife, just as Christ is head of the Church. . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church." Both the union of Christ and the Church and the union of husband and wife are the work of God. And could we dare say that this union of man and woman which looks to the union of Christ and the Church for its meaning can have anything vile or shameful about it?

SOME might say that the Church evidently cannot be very sincere about her condemnation of puritanism, since she forbids both her priests and nuns to marry. Ordinarily she exhorts those called to the priesthood and the religious life to seek the things that are holy. That marriage is forbidden them seems to indicate that marriage is not quite as lofty and sacred as the Church might wish us to believe.

When the Jew of the Old Testament wanted to offer up a sacrifice, he would go into his sheepfold and lead out a sheep. It had to be a sheep that was without defect or blemish; it had to be the best of his flock. This is what he would offer. It is much the same with regard to priests and nuns in the matter of marriage. They take the best they have, the most precious of their natural rights, the power of becoming parents, and this they offer up to God. They do not offer up in sacrifice what is worthless; or what is hardly worth keeping; much less that which is shameful. That would be a sorry sacrifice. No, they offer up the very best. So the fact that priests and nuns do not marry argues mightily for the nobility and sanctity of marriage.

OF all weapons the Church uses against puritanism, none is as effective as her teaching on the sacrament of matrimony. It is, she says, a unique sacrament. All of the other sacraments are quite transitory. They exist only for a short time. But the sacrament of matrimony is a permanent sacrament. Take baptism, for instance. Before the priest begins pouring the water and saying the words, no sacrament exists. After he has poured the water and said the words, no sacrament exists. The effects of baptism remain, but not the sacrament itself.

In the sacrament of matrimony it is different. The sacrament itself remains in existence as long as the two persons live. The sacrament itself is present during the whole of their married life as a fount of grace to which they can go for the spiritual strength they need. For this reason, it is not quite right to say that one receives the sacrament of matrimony on his wedding day; he rather begins the sacrament of matrimony on his wedding day. The husband and wife are a living sacrament, and this both in their love and in the expression of that love.

Though puritanism dies hard, the teaching on the sacrament of matrimony deals it a blow it cannot withstand.