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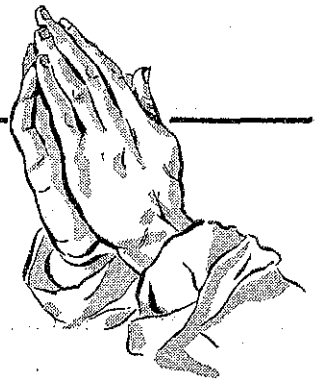

Marriage, Christ, and the Church

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

WHEN a monk, secure in the cloisters of his monastery, is shocked by the abuse of marriage and the number of divorces, people might say that he is too easily shocked. Or they might say that a proper monk is properly scandalized by petty evils. It belongs, they say, to his vocation to weep great tears for little sins. But when a good pagan is scandalized and speaks in crude terms of the crudity to which marriage is subjected, then all men, whether monks or merchants, should take notice.

A number of years ago—and we have scarcely improved since then—Aldous Huxley wrote: "There are certain American cities in which the number of divorces is equal to the number of marriages. In a few years, no doubt, marriage licenses will be sold like dog licenses, good for a period of twelve months, with no law against changing dogs or keeping more than one animal at a time." Not pretty words these.

The Church, quite naturally, is deeply disturbed by the profanation of the sanctity of marriage. To counteract the sacrilegious whimsicality with which marriage is treated, she insists upon the sacred character of marriage. This sacredness is not something that is thrown over marriage, like a beautiful cloak clothing something not so beautiful, but a sacredness which belongs to the inner meaning of marriage.

If you want to understand marriage you must understand the union between Christ and the Church. Christ redeemed His spouse, the Church, and is joined to her so that the two become one. St. Paul is bold enough to apply the text "The two shall become one flesh" to the union between Christ and the Church, understanding it in a spiritual sense. This sublime union between Christ and the Church is the source of holiness in marriage. The marriage of man and woman is a sacrament, a sacred sign. Signs point to things other than themselves and take their meaning from that to which they point. A sign along the road which reads "Chicago—40 miles" points to a city some distance away. Apart from the city of Chicago, the sign has no meaning.

The union of man and woman in marriage is a sacrament, a sign, pointing to the union of Christ and the Church. Apart from the union of Christ and the Church, the sacrament of matrimony has no meaning. So the sacredness of marriage is the very sacredness of Christ and the holiness of His spouse, the Church. To tamper with the sacredness of marriage is to tamper with the sacredness of Christ.

The sacredness of Christ, a sacredness which He himself conferred upon marriage, extends to both the body and the soul. Marriage is not merely a physical union. Pope Pius XI said that "by matrimony the souls of the contracting parties are joined and knit together more directly and more intimately than their bodies." The sacredness of Christ sanctifies this union of souls. Husband and wife bring Christ's sacredness to each other in their mutual love. They are ministers to each other of Christ's grace.

The sacredness of Christ does not stop with the union of souls but touches the union of bodies. The union of bodies as well as the union of souls belongs to the fullness of the sacred sign which points to the union between Christ and the Church. The union of bodies, too, is holy with the holiness of Christ. This the couple with faith never forgets. Because the husband and wife belong to Christ, because it is His holiness and His grace that they minister to each other, they know that it is Christ who begets children through the instrumentality of their bodies. For them the marriage act is never purely physical. St. Ignatius of Antioch said it very well about the year 100: "They who are carnal cannot do spiritual things: neither can they who are spiritual do carnal things . . . But even what you do according to the flesh is spiritual, for you do all things in Jesus Christ."

The Church's understanding of the permanence of the marriage bond, like her understanding of the sacredness of marriage, goes back to the union between Christ and the Church. Sometimes people think that the Church's unyielding attitude on divorce stems from a righteous insensitivity to personal unhappiness. The advice given to persons in marital difficulties, to take up their cross and follow Christ, is considered by some to be a denial that marital tragedy is possible; or if possible, a denial that it is significant.

The Church is unyielding in the matter of the sanctity of marriage. But her unwillingness to put asunder what God has joined has nothing to do with a majestic unconcern for the heart of man. The Church has as much power as God has given her. No more, no less. The Church, though she bleeds with compassion for her children who are in an unhappy marriage, can do nothing. She has no power to break a sacramental marriage bond. She does not have the power because God has not seen fit to give it to her.

Why has God not allowed the Church to break up a sacramental marriage? The permanence of the marriage bond goes back to the union between Christ and the Church. St. Paul teaches that the union between Christ and the Church is such that they become one "flesh," form one person, as it were. Would it be possible, under any imaginable circumstances, to conceive of the Church apart from Christ? What would the Eucharist be without Christ? The priesthood without Christ? The answer to these questions is so obviously in the negative as to make the asking sound ridiculous.

But if the Church cannot be separated from Christ, if the bond of union between Christ and the Church is such that it cannot be broken, neither can the marriage bond between man and woman. The sacrament of matrimony finds its meaning in the union between Christ and the Church. God has joined Christ and the Church so that they are one person, one body. The impossibility of putting asunder the bond between man and woman is the same impossibility of putting asunder Christ and the Church. These are not two impossibilities, but one.

To tamper with the sacredness of marriage is to tamper with the sacredness of Christ. Those who reverence marriage reverence a holiness which is not of man.