Marriage, Christ, and the Church

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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 marriage the souls of the contracting parties are joined and knit together more directly and more intimately than their bodies." The sacredness of Christ sanctions 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. 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 unyieldingness 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 revere marriage reverence a holiness which is not of God.