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Christian Vision of Marriage in the New Testament and Traditions

In every religion, the scriptures form the basis for thought, belief, action and customs. Also in the important area of sex and marriage, specially in the Christian vision, the Scriptures form the basic source of understanding.

Section I

1. Marriage in the New Testament

The central message of the New Testament is love, a love that has the courage of embracing even the enemy and facing death itself for the sake of the beloved. The whole of Christianity is based on the selfless love that has emerged from the heart of a human being called Christ who was at the same time divine. Christ loved men to the point of death and thus formed for himself the Church (the saved community). It is this christian love that is at the heart of the New Testamental teachings on Marriage.

a) Let No Man Put Asunder What God Has Put Together

Referring to the Genesis Ideal of man and woman becoming one flesh Jesus proclaimed the indissolubility of marriage. He did not speak about the procreative finality of conjugal relationships. Questioned about the practice of divorce granted to the Israelites by the Mosaic Laws, Jesus answers that from the beginning it was not so, and that it was only due to the hardness of heart among the chosen people that Moses tolerated such practices (Mt. 19 :1 -9). He then exhorts the people saying "what God Himself has put together, let no man put asunder" (Mt. 19 :6), claiming divine authority for the institution of marriage, and disclaiming the power of any human authority to dissolve marriages that have become 'one flesh'.

b) Did Jesus Make Any Exception to This Principle of Indissolubility ?

The intransigency of Jesus regarding the indissolubility of marriage seems to have an exception in so far as Jesus says "And I say to you who ever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery" (Mt. 19 : 9). Where as the condemnation of divorce is stated in (Mk. 10 : 2-12; Mt. 19 : 3 - 19; Mt. 5 : 31 - 32; Lk. 16 : 18) it is only in Mathew that the restrictive clause is mentioned (except for unchastity). How do we explain this ? Did Jesus mean an exception to the general ruling he had made ? The restrictive clause could have been inserted by the first community itself (Osty) making a precision of the meaning of the words pronounced by Christ, or it could have been introduced by the first redactor of the Mathean Gospel. Liberal exegets have rejected this 'restrictive clause' as inauthentic, while others retain it in their critical editions (Merk, Aland K, Nestle E). The general opinion is that the apparently exceptional clause is in reality no exceptional clause at all. The word 'unchastity' (porneia) is seen to be equivalent to the illegal unions forbidden in Leviticus 18 : 1 - 20. This also seems to be the meaning of 'porneia' mentioned in Acts 15 : 20, 28 - 39 (referring to illegal unions of Leviticus 18 : 1 - 20). In this case the restrictive clause signifies precisely marriages contracted in the grades of forbidden parentage. Mathew reinforcing the law in his own times, around 80 AD, requires of his prosylites to break up the illegal unions, in order to enter into communion with the Christian Community and thus come to the observance of the law of absolute indissolubility of marriage. Thus the illegal unions are dissolved or rather declared as null and void and the separated parties were permitted to marry again, without at the same time doing any harm to the principle of the indissolubility of marriage proclaimed by Christ (J. Bensirven, JJ Von Allmen, P. Bonnard).

c) Fidelity is Demanded by the Marital Commitment

The aspect of the unity of marriage is taken for granted. It is implied in Jesus's statement that man and woman, the two become one flesh. He clearly teaches that one and only man and woman can become marriage partners in a single conjugal union. Added to this is the strict injunction to fidelity on the part of the covenantal partners to each other. "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her ; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she

commits adultery" (Mk. 10 :11-12). Jesus does condemn adultery as infidelity of the couple in covenantal love. He condemns not only adulterous actions, but also adulterous desires (Mt. 5 :28), because the union of 'onefleshness' that takes place between the spouses has its foundation in the human heart.

d) *The Eschatological Finality of Marriage Vs. Religious Virginity*

Marriage is an institution of the temporal and passing world order. Jesus, while he discloses the innate goodness of marriage, also praises celibacy undertaken for religious motives: eunuchs made for the sake of the Kingdom of God (Mt. 19 :12). Those who leave their wives for the sake of the Kingdom are promised hundred fold (Lk. 18 :29 -30). The apparent paradox has to be understood in its proper sense. The sexual life with all that it connotes is not evil in itself. In fact, it is declared by God Himself as something very good. But in all its goodness, the sexual life, belongs to a provisional order of reality and is destined to disappear, because after the resurrection (in the life after death), no one shall take wives or husbands, they shall be like angels in Heaven (Mt. 22 :39). Hence voluntary and perpetual continence anticipates the state into which all will be entering after the resurrection. It has thus an eschatological value. It stands as the sign of the things to come, in the final stages of the world. In the perspectives of the Kingdom to Come, this complete continence is good in itself. Virginity and Marriage are two meaningful and laudable ways of actualising one's human sexuality, which is the gift of God to man.

2. Christian Marriage in the Thought of St. Paul

a) *Pastoral Recommendation of Paul to the Corinthians : 1 Cor. 7.*

A casual perusal of (1 Cor. 7), may give the impression that St. Paul is down grading marriage and extolling celibacy. On the contrary Paul accepts both, marriage and perpetual virginity as two christian vocations, according to the charism that individual Christians receive from God. In Corinth at the time of Paul there were two extreme groups : the libertines who thought that sex was only a biological function with no moral connotation, and the encratites who consider everything material, sex inclusive as evil and hence to be suppressed.

Thus severe asceticism and complete permissiveness were two contrasting characteristics of this community, to which Paul gives his pastoral directives. The words of St. Paul "Because of the temptation to immorality each man should have his wife and each woman her own husband", are not a concessional statement that degrades marriage. It is rather a tender invitation to the rigorous ascetics of Corinth, not to prolong their abstinence too far, and that they should lead their conjugal life. Paul while upholding the dignity of marriage and celibacy, as worthy Christian Vocation, indicates their divergent and complementary character.

b) *Pauline Theology of Marriage in Ephesians 5 : 21-33*

The Genesis narrative placed the reality of marriage in the context of God's Covenant with his people. As God was united with his people so also the first couple were said to be united with each other as one flesh. Paul takes the symbolism further. He compares the reality of marriage to the love of Christ for his Church (Ep. 5 : 32). In Christ, God and Man are wedded together, and the extension of this Christological Synthesis is the Church — the body of Christ which is loved by Christ with unconditional and perpetual love of union. St. Paul says that Christian marriage is the actual participation and actualisation of the reality of love and union that has been achieved between Christ and the Church. He exhorts every one to love his wife as his own body (Ep. 5 : 33) and as Christ loves the Church (Ep. 5 : 25). As Christ and the Church form one body, the married couple also form one body. As Christ and the Church are united indissolubly as are these bound by Christian Marriage. As Christ and the Church are united together in ever progressive love, so are the Christian Couple. Thus Christian marriage is a particular vocation of salvific charity, the building up of the Kingdom of God. Conjugal love is a specification of Christian love, a personal vocation in the area of human sexuality and its fulfilment. What is essential is the internal charity of the couple which penetrates each other's life and is diffused into the family and civil society.

c) *St. Paul On the Dissolution of Christian Marriage*

Christ proclaimed the indissolubility of marriage as of divine institution. But he never said when the marriage breaks. It was St. Paul who speaks of the dissolution of Christian Marriage.

i) *Death Dissolves the Marriage Bond*

Marriage is not made for eternity. It dissolves with the death of one of the partners in conjugal covenant. "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If the husband dies, she is free (1. Cor. 7 : 39). "Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives, but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband" (Rom. 7 : 1-3).

ii) *Dissolution of Mixed Marriages : Pauline Privilege*

St. Paul while treating about mixed marriages where one of the pagan couple becomes a Christian, gives some guidelines for peaceful living. "If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her... "If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever and he consents to live with her she should not divorce him... But if the unbelieving partner desires to separate let it be so ; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. For God has called us to peace." (1 Cor. 7 : 12 - 15).

Section II

3. Christian vision of Marriage in the Traditions of the Church

The present system of marriage in its dogmatic, liturgical, spiritual moral and canonical aspects is the product of a slow process of evolution in the Church, that spreads through a span of almost 2000 years. It would be almost impossible to go into the details right now. Hence we shall concentrate upon four specific stages of its development in St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, the Council of Trent and Vatican II.

a) *Marriage in the Reflections of St. Augustine (343 - 430)*

The beauty of St. Augustine's reflections over marriage lies in this that he collects together the developments so far available to him and enriches them with his own personal, creative, reflections. According to St. Augustine, marriage is good because it constitutes between husband and wife a 'society' (communion), 'an order of charity' founded on the very essence of man and woman themselves, and characterised by the qualities of fidelity and indissolubility. In short marriage is for him "the indissoluble communion of faith". Such marriage is justified in itself even set apart from the purpose of procreation. Virginity

being the fundamental characteristics of the Church, every member of the Church, even the married ones should be virgins — though each one in his own level : the married, the widows and virgins. Virginité for St. Augustine consists in 'integrity' (integrity of the mind through faith, hope and charity) and fecundity (spiritual regeneration) or rebirth through which the sons of Adam become the sons of God.

On the basis of his assumptions St. Augustine justifies the marriages of old people and the sterile ones. He distinguishes between the State of Marriage and the Act of Marriage. State of Marriage is the Bond of Charity ; The act of marriage is the sexual encounters. Because marriage is the Bond of Charity, perfect continence in marriages is perfectly valid. St. Augustine would go so far as to say that the highest way of living out one's sexuality in marriage is through the Vow of Perfect Chastity. This does not annul marriage since marriage is essentially a communion of life and love and distinct from the conjugal act, which does not pertain to the essence of marriage itself.

Speaking about the act of marriage (the conjugal action) St. Augustine says that it finds its justification only in view of procreation and nothing else. Sexuality oriented towards procreation is now no more 'obsequium legis' as in the Old Testamental times, but 'Remedium infirmitatis' or at the most 'Humanum Solatium'. The specific Augustinian synthesis of thought on Christian marriage consists in the triple words : *proles, fides* and *sacramentum* (progeny fidelity, and indissolubility). The bond of conjugal love incarnates in itself although in a minimal way, the very union that exists between Christ and the Church. The union of man and woman in marriage is a real participation in the union of Christ and the Church. Man and woman as husband and wife are called upon to live in such a manner that the great and universal vocation of all men to become the New People of God is realised in the family to the fullest extent.

b) *Marriage in the Reflections of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 74)*

St. Thomas is another giant in the development of systematic theology. According to him the primary end of marriage is procreation and the secondary end of marriage is mutual help of man and woman in life. The unity and indissolubility of marriage are derived from the primary (procreative) and the secondary (unitive) aspects of marriage itself. The secondary end of marriage however could be sacrificed in

preference to the first in some special cases. Thus God permitted the patriarchs and others to practice polygamy for the sake of issues. But divorce since it goes against the primary and secondary ends of marriage is a moral evil and could be tolerated to prevent greater evils (Supplement Q. 67 art 2). St. Thomas places the procreative aspect of marriage in the context of mutual human love sustained by reason (which is the reflection or participation in the eternal law) and not in the biological fusion of two beings as in the case of animals. For him the natural law in the context of marriage morality is the law of enlightened and responsible reason, a personalised law, rather than the biological laws of fixed natures, that pertain to infra-human beings. It was the merit of St. Thomas to see marriage both as secular and a sacred reality (saving reality through which the couple live the mystery of the union of the Church with Christ. Besides, marriage being entered into by way of the marital contract, it has to be subject to positive laws. Because it is the exercise of natural right, it is regulated by the natural law. Because it is a sacrament it is regulated by the divine (ecclesiastical) laws. Because it is a community affair, it has to be regulated by civil laws.

4. Marriage in the Reflections of the Council of Trent

a) The Protestant Preamble

It was Martin Luther (1483 - 1546) who started the Protest Movement within the Church and finally broke from the Church in the year 1520. With regard to marriage he was of the opinion that it is a duty imposed on all by nature and that it is a physical necessity born out of irresistible concupiscence in man. Hence he declares monastic vows of chastity as something against human nature. Then since the ravages of original sin remains in man in spite of Baptism, the Conjugal Act which has its origin in the concupiscence of man, is essentially sinful. But God in his goodness and mercy does not impute this guilt to the spouses. With regard to divorces the protestants were of the opinion that the Scriptures do allow legitimate divorces, and that only the grounds on which these divorces could be granted were not clear. Luther mentions some of the grounds for divorce: adultery (Mt. 5:32), wilful and guilt abandonment of the spouse (1 Cor 7:15), not sharing the marital bed for about ten years, in the case of women who refuse to perform their conjugal duties, in case when one of the spouses is hindered from living Christian life.

Melantone introduced attempted murder as the ground of divorce, Bucer, the incompatibility of character, and Basillio, Monner that of apostasy and heresy. This slippery way leads Luther to go further and assert that bigamy was better than divorce itself. Thus the Protestant trend is set for polygamy when the children failed in the first marriage. The Protestant move has devaluated virginity in favour of marriage denied the sacramental character of marriage to rescue it from the hands of the Pope and left it under the control of kings.

5. The Council of Trent (1545 - 63)

By nature a reactionary council, it acted fast to safeguard to doctrines of the Church regarding marriage in a special way. It proclaimed the sacramental character of marriage, instituted by God and restored by Christ to its prestine glory. It is a sacrament which confers grace and sanctifies the lives of the people. It is characterised by unity, fidelity and indissolubility. Divorce properly called does not exist in the Church. Adultery does not dissolve marriages. It was Trent by its TAMETSI decree 1563 required the presence of a priest for the validity of marriages — thus initiating the 'form of Marriage' in the Catholic Church and preventing clandestine marriages. In fact it is only with *Ne Temere* of 1908 that the 'form' became effective throughout the Latin Church. The sacrament of marriage left the hands of the private individuals, and civil authorities and came into the hands of the Church.

6. The Second Vatican Council (1962 - 65)

Although marriage is treated about in many of its documents, it is specially in *Gaudium et Spes* that a whole section is devoted to it— from art. 47 to art. 52. It does not speak anymore about the primary and secondary ends of marriage. It sees marriage as a community of love open to life. It is called the intimate partnership of life and love open for procreative activity under the title of responsible parenthood. Marriage is not seen to be a contract, but a covenant. The personal and interpersonal dimensions of marriage are stressed over the juridical aspects. It is characterised by unity, fidelity and indissolubility, 'demanded by the good of the spouses, the offsprings, and society.' The Christological and Ecclesiological aspect of indissolubility are not stressed.

Marriage is a sacrament in and through which 'the spouses fulfil their conjugal and familial obligations. They are penetrated with the spirit of Christ which suffuses their whole lives with faith hope and charity'. The sacrament of marriage is seen as a whole manner of communion of life and is maintained in its indissolubility inspite of lack of offspring. Christ abides with them to enable them to love each other as He loves the Church. Vatican II makes a perfect blend of Augustinian (Bond of Charity and Communion of Life), and Thomistic (indissolubility grounded on the good of the spouses, children and society) reflections on marriage, updated to suit the human development of the cultures of modern age which is autonomous and responsible (responsible parenthood).