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Marriage: A Vocation

An Aid to Marriage Preparation

By

John A. O'Brien Ph.D.

There is a widespread impression that a vocation means a call to only the religious life. That indeed is a vocation, and a sacred one, but it is not the only one. Marriage, too, is a vocation, and a high and holy one. There is also the vocation to the single life: to serve God and souls while living in the world.

Those called neither to the religious nor the matrimonial life can feel sure that God has called them to the holy Apostolate of living in the world and winning souls, thus extending Christ's Kingdom in the hearts and minds of men. Every human soul is precious and dear to God and every life can be one of high dedication to the Master's cause. Many single people in the world wearing the garb of laymen and women, are doing in a measure the work of priests and nuns.

Such lay persons often have opportunities of influencing people whom a religious world never meet. They win many churchless people for Christ and do a world of good by their missionary zeal and by the edifying example of their own devout lives.

The Religious Life

The vocation to the religious life is, of course, the highest and the holiest of all. Fortunate indeed are those individuals into whose ears Christ whispers a summons to leave all things and follow Him to be His divinely chosen ambassadors to men. That call comes as a gift of God; like all gifts, it can be accepted or rejected without sin. No one is bound to accept a gift.

The generous acceptance of the summons leads to the Priesthood, Brotherhood or Sisterhood, with the vows of chastity and obedience, and quite frequently the vow of poverty. The religious life is one of sacrifice and self-denial. It has, however, distinct compensations, chief of which is the joy of being close to God, of sharing intimately in His love and of being His agents in bringing His saving truths and the precious fruits of the Redemption to human souls. God is not outdone in generosity and they who make a great sacrifice will reap a great reward.

The Popes Speak

Having pointed out the vocations to the religious life and to the single life in the world, we come now to the exposition of marriage as a vocation, and a lofty and sacred one. Too frequently marriage has been treated as a purely secular enterprise, stripped of its religious and divine character. In an address to the superiors of various religious orders and communities, His Holiness, Pope Pius XII, requested them in their work of recruiting vocations to the religious life not to do so by belittling the dignity or the holiness of the married state. That state is ordained by God, as the Holy Father pointed out, and we must keep its divine character ever before the minds of those who aspire to it.

In his Encyclical on *Christian Marriage*, Pope Pius XI thus stresses the dignity of the married state: "How great is the dignity of chaste wedlock may be judged best from this, that Christ Our Lord . . . not only ordained it in a special manner as the principle and foundation of domestic society and therefore of all human intercourse, but also raised it to the rank of a true and great sacrament of the New Law, restored it to the original purity of its divine institution, and accordingly entrusted all its discipline and care to His spouse, the Church."

“To take away from man,” continues His Holiness, “the natural and primeval right of marriage laid down in the beginning by God Himself in the words ‘Increase and multiply,’ is beyond the power of any human law. Therefore the sacred partnership of true marriage is constituted both by the will of God and the will of man. From God comes the very institution of marriage, the ends for which it was instituted, the laws that govern it, the blessings that flow from it; while man, through generous surrender of his own person made to another for the whole span of life, becomes, with the help and cooperation of God, the author of each particular marriage, with the duties and blessings annexed thereto from divine institution.”

In accordance with the expressed mind of the Supreme Pontiff we propose to set forth the sacred and divine character of the vocation of marriage so that all who enter this holy state will understand the high mission to which God has called them. They will thus be prompted to enter this state in a spirit of dedication, determined faithfully to fulfill the duties of the family life, upon which depend both the temporal welfare of society and the eternal welfare of immortal souls. We address our words not only to youth looking forward to mar-

riage, but also to parents, teachers and all concerned with the direction of youth.

The Vocation of Most People

It is the married state to which God summons the overwhelming majority of mankind: they are charged with a mission of supreme importance—the conservation of the human race.

For entrance into the Priesthood Christ instituted the sacrament of Holy Orders. For entrance into the family life He instituted the Sacrament of Matrimony. That, too, as Saint Paul tells us, is “a great sacrament.” It elevates a man and woman to a lofty dignity and makes them God’s co-workers in the propagation of the race.

Love, courtship and marriage are so often treated in a spirit of levity that it is worthwhile to point out that they are part of a divine plan. This is disclosed with simple beauty in Genesis. Almighty God has created man and given to him dominion over all living things.

Not Good To Be Alone

Sovereign of Paradise that Adam was, richer than any man in material wealth and in the chaste beauty of nature’s virgin landscape, there still remained, in spite of it all, a void and emptiness that rested like

a sombre pall upon his lonely heart. Then out of the heavens the voice of Almighty God is heard: "It is not good for man to be alone: let us make him a helpmate like unto himself."

When Adam gazes upon the face of Eve, his eyes behold a new beauty and a loveliness which nothing in all the vast pagentry of nature can duplicate or rival. The emptiness in his heart vanishes: in its place he feels a new and a strange emotion stirring within him. Life takes on a new meaning, a fresh significance.

Moved by a divine impulse, he plights his deathless troth to Eve. There under the white canopy of the virginal sky, in the morning of life, in the presence of the priesthood of nature, Adam seals his vow with the first kiss of love. With prophetic vision into the unwritten future Adam, inspired by God, proclaims the law for all his progeny: "Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh."

God's Plan

It is the great mystery of human love which makes two hearts beat as one. It is a sacred flame; for it is kindled by a spark from the eternal and uncreated love of God. God created a helpmate to be a

companion for man, a promoter of his happiness and a protector of his virtue. Fashioned by the Almighty hand as the complement to man's incomplete nature, woman has been endowed by God with that divine forgetfulness of self that finds its happiness in ministering to the happiness of man. She increases the joy of victory and softens the sting of defeat. In short, the chief happiness on this earth is found in the bosom of the Christian home.

Some twenty-five years ago, a young man, whom I was instructing in the Catholic Faith, said to me: "Father, when the clock in our office registered five, I was always at my wit's end to devise ways of passing the evening. I was restless at the club-rooms, tired of the movies, bored at the taverns. Then the prospect of returning to a lonely empty room, night after night, became a nightmare. After I married and God blessed us with a child, I could scarcely wait for the clock to strike five, so anxious was I to get to my wife and child.

"I learned the hard way," he continued, "that man can't find happiness . . . alone. It's contrary to nature, contrary to God's plan. Now that I've achieved the great joys of conjugal love and fatherhood, I can truthfully say that I am just beginning to live."

An Echo

As I listened to him, I thought I could hear an echo of the words of Almighty God: "It is not good for man to be alone."

In creating man, male and female, God instituted marriage to the dignity of a Sacrament, making it specifically the Sacrament of the laity who administer it to each other, independently of the priesthood; for it is the conjugal consent of two spouses which alone renders their union an image of the union of Christ and His Church.

Thus it is that the general priesthood, conferred in baptism, finds in marriage its loftiest and noblest expression. "The matrimonial domain," points out Karl Adam, "is the only one within the Body of Christ in which sacramental grace is poured forth from the fullness of grace of Christ's humanity directly upon the members without priestly mediation." Hence, marriage and priesthood complement each other.

Start In School

Since the majority of our youth do not go to college we must prepare them for the sacred vocation of marriage while they are in high school. That training must of course be amplified and intensified for those who go to college. Such courses, carefully integrated with their other studies and

with the Church's liturgical and sacramental life, should begin in the freshman year in high school and extend through the senior year.

The new interests which adolescence awakens in youth can be correlated with the gradual unfolding of God's plan for the use of the divine endowment of sex to people earth with good citizens and heaven with saints. In this way the curiosity and the questioning which puberty inevitably occasions can be intelligently answered instead of being bypassed or detoured with evasive replies. The dignity and the sanctity of the sexual endowment stand out luminously when the divine plan for its use in the framework of the family is set forth with simplicity and reverence.

Co-Partners With God

Coming from the pure lips of a Religious, such an explanation will enable the young to see God's plan for consecrating husband and wife in the great Sacrament of Matrimony as His fully accredited ambassadors in the conservation of the race. Thus are they made co-partners of the Most Blessed Trinity in the sublime task of bringing into existence a human being dowered with an immortal soul.

How edifying and inspiring is the re-

flection that God, infinite, omniscient and omnipotent, operates only through the consecrated agency of human parents, into whose blended flesh and blood He breathes an immortal soul, constituting it a distinct personality precious beyond all price. Such an explanation will fill them with reverence for their bodies as temples of the Holy Ghost; it will vaccinate their young minds against both prurience which stems from legitimate curiosity, unsatisfied, and obscenity which stems from a distortion of the truth—the tearing of sex from its framework in the family life.

Worthy of Note

Two things here are worthy of note. First, the act of human procreation implies not only the *cooperation* of God, as does every human act, but His *direct creative* cooperation. Second, as a result of His direct and immediate participation, God is nowhere more intimately present than in the act of married love. In that sacred relationship God's presence interpenetrates their very being as water interpenetrates the pores of an immersed sponge.

“Nowhere else,” points out Father Mersch, S.J., the learned theologian of Louvain, “is His activity so immediate.” We are speaking only of His presence and activity in the

natural order and are prescinding, of course, from His presence in the tabernacle of our altars and in the heart of the person who receives Holy Communion.

A Great Sacrament

By its very nature love is a sacred thing, an element of natural religion; and it is peculiarly fitting that in revealed religion the consummation of love in marriage should be elevated by Christ to the dignity of a Sacrament. That is why St. Paul calls it a "great sacrament." It places upon the shoulders of its recipients a mantle of holiness, indicating henceforth their partnership with God. Well has it been said:

A partnership with God is motherhood.

What strength, what purity, what self-control,

What love, what wisdom, should belong to her

Who helps God fashion an immortal soul.

In a lecture at Bucknell University during the annual Religion in Life Week, we had just completed the exposition of marriage as a sacred vocation. The hall was packed with students, young men and

women of every faith, eager to get a correct insight into the deeper nature of that union to which most all of them were looking with high hopes and anxious hearts.

A Question

“Dr. O’Brien,” said a young man, “I have followed with great interest your presentation of the dignity, beauty and holiness of marriage and of the conjugal relationship. But there’s one thing I have some difficulty in understanding.”

Then he hesitated as if he were somewhat embarrassed in disclosing it.

“What is that, my young friend? Any question asked with reverence is in order,” I assured him, “so have no hesitance in stating your difficulty.”

“Well,” he said, “if we call the same physical act when performed before marriage a heinous sin, how does the mere wedding ceremony suddenly convert it into a beautiful and noble action?”

The Answer

“Because marriage,” we replied, “raises two single and separate individuals into a new status and dignity, makes them husband and wife and thus confers upon them the right to engage in a relationship of

love which engenders offspring. Outside marriage, the relationship is meaningless, harmful and destructive of moral character: within marriage, it is the fulfillment of God's plan for the procreation of the race. It has meaning, purpose, dignity, joy and holiness. In other words, matrimony has changed it from a sinful and socially destructive relationship to a divine relationship, planned by God Himself and essential for the conservation of the race."

"Thanks," said the young student, "that throws a new light on it for me . . . it shows me how matrimony changes the moral and spiritual significance of the act, even though physically it remains the same."

Regrettable Condescension

Sometimes young people, who have been taught to keep their purity unblemished and who have tried earnestly to do so, tend almost unconsciously to look with misgivings and even with aversion upon the conjugal act which marriage entails. Even after marriage they think of it as somewhat degrading—a necessary but regrettable condescension to the animal side of their nature. Such a misconception poisons the spring of conjugal love and, if the attitude is persisted in, the stability of the

marriage, to say nothing of its joy and rapture, is threatened.

“Father,” a young man wrote us recently, “my bride of a month is a graduate of a Sisters’ Academy. There she got the idea that the act of union with a man is debasing. She shudders at the suggestion of it as something essentially immoral. Her attitude is wrecking our marriage . . . and if she keeps this up . . . it will be on the rocks before long.”

The Remedy

Here again the remedy lies in making clear the profound difference in status, rights, privileges and duties which the Sacrament of Matrimony creates. Young persons must recognize that after marriage they belong to one another. In that most intimate union they must be one in mind, heart, body and soul.

In His infinite wisdom God has devised this union as the means not only of producing offspring but also of deepening their love and their sense of identification with each other. The pleasures and joys of the conjugal relationship are God’s rewards for the faithful fulfillment of the duties of marriage and the bearing of its many burdens.

Such then is the conception of marriage

which must be gotten into the minds of young people as soon as possible. This great germinal truth will unfold, as their minds develop, and will enable them to assimilate all the further items of information which will help them to prepare for Christian family living.

Important Items

What are some of these items? Briefly these: The contents of the Encyclical on *Christian Marriage* should be presented in simple language and discussed with care and thoroughness. There should be a discussion of such practical matters as family budgeting, relationships with in-laws, harmony and cooperation among all the members of a family, the necessity of excluding the angry word and discussing all differences of opinion in a spirit of understanding and good will, the factors which make for disruption and strife, family prayers, especially the family rosary, and the enthronement of the Sacred Heart in every home and the practice of receiving Holy Communion each Sunday as a family unit.

The meaning and purpose of courtship must be explained. It is designed by God and nature to enable young people to find congenial mates. Social mingling of young people under wholesome auspices should be

promoted and encouraged; it aids them in acting naturally and in appraising members of the other sex in a less romantic but more realistic manner. Pathetic indeed is the lot of the teen-ager whose parents and teachers ignore this divinely implanted hunger and never lift a finger to assist a youngster to meet congenial members of the opposite sex.

Psychic Scars

Believe it or not, we have met graduates from Catholic colleges, both men and women, who never had a single "date" and who in conscience felt at a loss as to how to be at ease and talk naturally with those of the other gender. They were immensely handicapped and had developed shy complexes which stood out as the psychic scars of an emotionally starved adolescence. We could not but wonder if their parents and teachers had entirely forgotten the time when they too were young and reached out hungrily for a touch of sympathy, understanding and love.

The qualities to look for in a mate should be indicated. Here the importance of common religious faith should be stressed; we should set forth the Church's ideal of a Catholic home where parents teach their children not only by precept but also

by example. The Church's legislation requires her members to find their life partners among those of their own Faith because she knows from long and bitter experience that mixed marriages not infrequently lead to indifference, loss of Faith and the neglect of the religious education of the children.

Promote Friendship

Furthermore the number of marriage failures is much greater in the case of mixed marriages. We should not be content, however, merely to discourage mixed marriages, but we — teachers, parents, pastors and people — should do everything within our power to promote wholesome acquaintance and friendship, which lead to marriage.

Here we have been notoriously weak. Our young people rightly complain that while they often hear warnings against mixed marriages, they seldom see anything done to assist them in achieving the Church's ideal of a Catholic marriage. Such has been the burden of letters which have come to us from all parts of the country over the last forty years. We should like to place their appeal before their teachers and all the others charged with their guidance in order that constructive meas-

ures may be taken to remedy a truly deplorable situation.

Blind Spot

The blind spot from which our vision suffers is costing us dearly in headaches, heartaches and in the mounting tide of mixed and bad marriages. Since 92.7% of men and 93.5% of women marry, it follows that if our young people are not enabled to make reasonably abundant social acquaintanceships among their own, they will marry others. Indeed, approximately one-third of all marriages involving Catholics are mixed marriages; and of these 40% are invalid. Such is the finding of Father J. L. Thomas, S.J. who conducted a careful survey of 100,000 families in the East and Midwest.

There are two additional considerations which should prompt us to vigorous action. The first is this: Recent investigations as to where married people first met their partners show that the school outranks all other places. Thus in a study of 9,081 marriages, Dr. Paul Popenoe found that more partners met by going to school than by any other way. Introduction by friends in the ordinary course of social life was second in importance, while meetings in the course of business ranked third. "The

results," concludes Dr. Popenoe, "show that for educated people, the educational system is now the principal matrimonial agency."

Where Couples Meet

The results of his investigation are summarized in the following table:

Place of First Meeting of Educated Married Couples

PLACE	NO.	PER CENT
Educational System	2297	25.3
Homes of Friends	1656	18.2
Business Contact	1143	12.9
Church and Church Social Organizations	927	10.2
Propinquity	867	9.5
Private Recreation	747	8.2
Travel, Vacation, Resort	638	7.0
Commercial Recreation	345	3.7
Miscellaneous	251	2.7
Pick-Ups	210	2.3
	9081	100.0

The Study Shows

The study shows likewise that marriages between schoolmates were far happier and more successful than the general average. This was further corroborated by an investigation conducted by R. S. Hall and published under the title, *Marriages Made*

In College. This study shows that only one marriage in every 75 contracted by young men and women attending the same college ended in divorce.

The second consideration which should prompt us to special effort to promote acquaintance among Catholic young people is this: Most of the teachers in our Catholic secondary schools are religious, vowed to celibacy. It is only natural that we tend to reflect in our teaching the kind of training which we ourselves received. While excellent for those intending to enter the religious life, such training must obviously be considerably modified to render it suitable, practical and helpful for those planning on the family life.

The importance, beauty and holiness of the vocation of fatherhood and motherhood must be stressed and specific instruction must be provided to enable them to make their marriages happy and successful. Though frequently ignored or passed over with a few glittering generalities, this subject is more important than Latin, algebra, or geometry and ranks alongside religion itself. It should not be discussed in a vacuum but — at least in the upper years — against the background of the actual experiences of young people mingling in a friendly manner with those of the opposite sex.

A Mother Speaks

Here we would like to quote from a letter recently received from a Catholic mother who states the case with admirable clearness and logic. "The problem of finding a Catholic mate," she writes, "which you discussed in a recent magazine article, is a problem to which many of us have given much thought. I myself am married to a non-Catholic and often wish it were otherwise. But for the unmarried women it is not too late for them to locate a Catholic mate.

"I believe a lot of this goes back to our Catholic high schools. This is where the problem begins for we all know that the habits formed in our early years carry through into later life. From my own experience, and I only graduated from high school in 1938, I know that such is the case. While we were in high school we were forbidden to date — not in so many words, but any couple caught 'going together' were expelled from school. And there were no joint social activities. As a result we turned to the non-Catholics. We attended the dances, games and parties at the public school instead.

"It is significant to note that out of a class of 28, 14 boys and 14 girls, the record stands as follows:

GIRLS

Nun	1
Unmarried	1
Married Catholics	2
Married Non-Catholics	10

BOYS

Unmarried	4
Married Catholics	3
Married Non-Catholics	7

“Seventeen mixed marriages and only five Catholic marriages! That isn’t a very good record for a class from a Catholic school, is it? I am glad to note, however, that at the present time, this same school has weekly dances for the high school students and other activities to encourage them to mix with Catholics. This is the first step to promote Catholic marriages. Now I think it is time that another step be taken to keep them close to the Church *after* graduation. Why can’t something be done for them?”

Achieve The Ideal

That mother is right. We should leave no stone unturned until we have provided youth with such abundant opportunities for social acquaintance that every young man and woman, who wishes to marry is able to find a congenial Catholic partner. Anything short of that ideal should fill us with divine discontent.

In short, preparation for the vocation of marriage and for the work of strengthening, stabilizing and spiritualizing Catholic family life must begin in our schools. The lessons which our pupils learn in the schools will be carried back into their homes and will exercise a wholesome influence there. Moreover, such pupils will have before them the ideal to which they will aspire as well as a knowledge of practical details which will enable them to make the homes, which they will establish, houses of God and gateways to Heaven.

They will be homes founded on the unshakable rock of Christ's teachings, homes of which we can truthfully say: "And the rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew; and they beat upon that house, and it fell not; for it was founded on a rock." That home will stand like the Rock of Gibraltar because we will have prepared its makers for the holy vocation to which they are summoned in the words inspired by God Himself: "Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh." The more closely they are united in mind, heart, body and soul, the greater will be the stability of their marriage and the greater, too, will be their love and happiness.

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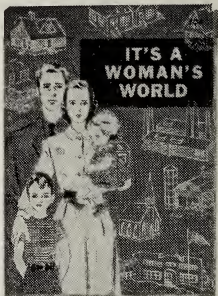
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