

# MARRIAGE: THE MYSTERY OF FAITHFUL LOVE

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Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church.

--- St. Paul

THE GREATNESS and sublimity of marriage, the closest and most ultimate of unions, raised by Christ to the dignity of a Sacrament, is revealed at one stroke in the exhortation of St. Paul wherein he compares married love to the love of Christ, the Word made Flesh, for His Holy Church.<sup>5</sup>

## **The greatness of marriage**

No natural human good has been exalted so high in the New Testament. No other good has been chosen to become one of the seven Sacraments. No other has been endowed with the honor of participating directly in the Kingdom of God. This in itself suggests the infinitely precious value already attached to marriage in the realm of nature, the richness and grandeur it unfolds. Before we examine the nature, the meaning, and the beauty of Christian marriage (which St. Paul calls "a great mystery in Christ and the Holy Church"<sup>6</sup>), we shall examine the essence and meaning of marriage in the realm of nature, and its specific character in reference to all other fellowships and communities.

Only in this way can we understand what was so gloriously exalted by Jesus Christ and thus dispel the misinterpretations of the nature of marriage so frequently encountered.

Several passages of Holy Scripture dignify marriage by employing it as an image of the relation between God and the soul. This relation prefigures in an imperfect fashion the perfect model, very much as the Old Testament prefigures the New. Indeed, Christ calls Himself the *spouse of the soul*, and the Song of Songs presents the union of Christ and the soul in the form of a betrothal.

## **Love is the core of marriage**

Why does Holy Scripture choose this particular relationship as an image? It is chosen because marriage is the closest and most intimate of all earthly unions in which, more than in any other, one person gives himself to another without reserve, where the other in his complete personality is the object of love, and where mutual love is in a specific way the theme (that is to say, the core) of the relationship.

Love is also the inmost core of the relation of the soul to God. Unquestionably, we owe adoration and obedience to the eternal King of Glory, the splendor of Everlasting Light. He is our Lord. Our duty here on earth is to serve Him in all things without reserve. Yet, three times He asks St. Peter, "Lovest thou me?"<sup>7</sup> Does not the chief Commandment which contains all the Law and the Prophets say, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, with thy whole soul, with thy whole strength, and with thy whole mind"?<sup>8</sup>

Marriage has been chosen as the image of the perfect union between the soul and Christ because in marriage, likewise, the center and core is love. No other earthly community is constituted so exclusively in its very substance by mutual love.

In friendship, for example, community of thought or spiritual interests and common experiences play a capital part. In the relationship between parent and child, the care and upbringing of their charges holds an essential place. At the root of the child's relationship to the parent is gratitude and obedience due for protection and care.

Of course, family relations, too, can be transfigured only by love, and should be permeated by love. But even though they can only unfold their real meaning on the basis of love and under its banner, the essence and exclusive principle of such relationships is not mutual love.

Subjectively considered, love does not enter so exclusively into the essence of their relations as it does in the case of marriage. Their objective character is not founded in the same way on love nor are they constituted to the same extent for love.

On the other hand, in marriage the fundamental with the subjective attitude and the objective *raison d'être* of the relationship, a relationship which also mysteriously serves to procreate new human beings, is mutual love.

Marriage is the wonderful union of two persons in which is love and by love. Later we shall see that in sacramental marriage this love is elevated to a mysterious communion of love and life in and for Christ. But this presupposes a

unique mutual love, and it is in just this that the married couple glorifies Jesus Christ.

Love is the primary *meaning* of marriage just as the birth of new human beings is its primary *end*. The social function of marriage and its importance for the State are something secondary and subordinate. We shall understand this better if, putting aside for the moment the sacramental dignity of marriage and considering it simply as a natural communion, we recall the specific characteristics of conjugal love.

### **The characteristics of conjugal love**

A widespread error, even in Catholic circles, holds that conjugal love is distinguished from love of friends or love of parents and children merely by its connection with the sensual sphere.

On the contrary, quite independent of sensuality, conjugal love in itself constitutes a completely new kind of love. It involves a unique mutual giving of one's self, which is the outstanding characteristic of this type of love.

### **Conjugal love involves mutual self-giving**

It is true that in every kind of love one gives oneself in one way or another, but here the giving is literally complete and ultimate. Not only the heart but the entire personality is given up to the other. When a man and a woman love each other in this way, they give themselves to each other at the very moment they begin to love.

The man wants to belong to the woman, and her to belong, to him; and the woman wants to belong to the man, and him to belong to her.

All love certainly desires a reciprocity which is free from every shade of egoism; but in conjugal love there is an aspiration not merely for a return of affection in general, but for the unique love whereby the beloved belongs to the lover in an entirely exclusive manner, as he in turn wants to belong to the beloved.

This love tends to a unique union and even partly constitutes it: a community where two persons constitute a closed union which can exist only between them. Conjugal love establishes a relationship in which the regard of each one of the two parties is turned exclusively upon the other.

### **Conjugal love: the most profound *I-thou* relationship**

Relationships between persons actualize themselves under two profoundly different forms: two persons can be united through a common interest, by facing with each other something extraneous to themselves. Together they may take the same attitude toward a person or thing: they may mourn together and rejoice together, may come to a decision together, and may give thanks together.

This may be called a *we* relationship wherein the partners remain side by side, in which they walk side by side - hand in hand, even.

But two human beings can also turn to face one another, and in touching one another, in an interpenetrating glance, give birth to a mysterious fusion of their souls. They become conscious of one another, and making the other the object of his contemplation and responses, each can spiritually immerse himself in the other. This is the *I-thou* relationship, in which the partners are not side by side, *but face to face*.

Of all terrestrial communions, conjugal love is the most pronounced form of an *I-thou* relationship. The beloved person is the object of our thoughts, sentiments, will, hope, and longing. She becomes the center of our life (as far as created goods are concerned). He whose heart is filled with such conjugal love lives not only *with* his beloved but *for* his beloved. Certainly such an *I-thou* relationship in its purest form exists only between the human soul and its heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus. In the last analysis we must live only for Him, and in marriage, too, the two partners live together for Him. But in the realm of created goods, conjugal love means living *for* one another. Compared with all other human relationships, the two partners live in a definite *I-thou* communion.

### **Conjugal love involves a decision**

This giving of self, the specific characteristic of conjugal love (as distinguished from friendship or any other form of love), is also revealed in the decisive character of the words, "I love you." It may not always be easy to say whether someone whom we know well and whom we like very much may at the same time be considered as a friend, and it may be equally difficult sometimes to answer with a simple "yes" or "no" the question whether we like somebody or not. But between love in the conjugal sense and other forms of love there is such a difference that the question whether or not one loves another person in this sense can be answered quite definitely with "yes" or "no."

This love involves a definite decision. By this love we decisively choose a person. The expression "I love you" is

characteristic of this decision. To add anything to those words and to say "I love you very much" or "I love you immensely" would be to lessen the force of the statement. Instead of strengthening, it weakens the meaning of the simple declaration, "I love you."

### **Conjugal love reveals the whole being of the beloved**

The fact also that this love can arise quite suddenly, and even develop to maturity at the first encounter of two persons, emphasizes the typical contrast between this and any other kind of love. In this love, the personality of the beloved is instantaneously revealed as a complete unity. Our eyes are able to penetrate the other much more deeply than in the ordinary way when our glance is distracted by innumerable trifling objects and dulled by a grey everyday atmosphere. This never goes beyond the outer aspect. Just as in supernatural love of our neighbor we penetrate at one glance to that innermost, mysterious essence of the other person in which, through all his imperfections, pettiness, arrogance, and triviality he reflects God, so in natural conjugal love the real individuality of the partner is mysteriously revealed. The deep, secret meaning which permeates all his gifts and talents, the whole rhythm of his being, is disclosed at one glance through all his imperfections. One understands, so to speak, the divine plan underlying the creation of this particular *individuality*, just as in love of neighbor one understands the general meaning, of a free, spiritual person, created by God after His own image in a particular *individual*.

It is true, of course, that all love implies a deeper understanding of the other person, a deeper grasp of his real being which shines but imperfectly through many veils and weaknesses. Nothing is more mistaken than the adage, "Love is blind." Love is that which *gives us sight*, revealing to us even the faults of the other in their full import and causing us to suffer because of them. But conjugal love reveals to us intuitively the whole being of the other in a mysteriously lucid unity. It not only shows us individual praiseworthy traits but also the particular charm of his individuality as a whole, which permeates everything and characterizes the essence of his being - a charm which can only be completely understood by the complementary person and can have its full significance for him alone.

### **Conjugal love is possible only between a man and a woman**

The special character of conjugal love is, furthermore, marked by the fact that this love can only come into being, between men and women and not between persons of the same sex, as is the case with friendship, parental love, or filial love.

It would be quite wrong, however, to reduce this characteristic to the sexual sphere and to say that conjugal love is just friendship plus sexual relations, presupposing a difference of sex. It would be incredibly superficial to consider as a mere biological difference the distinction between man and woman, which really shows us two complementary types of the spiritual person of the human species.

Certainly, man and woman have ultimately but one task, "to be reborn in Christ," and to glorify God by their sanctity. Yet man and woman represent two different types of mankind, both having their respective significance according to the divine plan, and their special value quite apart from their procreative function.

Let us take the example of the male and female saints and consider how they, each in his or her special way, realized the *unum necessarium*, and how at the same time they fulfilled ideally the meaning of their respective natures as men and women. Raising our glance to the Blessed Virgin, we see that she, who of all creatures is most like to Christ, could not possibly be imagined as anything but a woman, and that she, Queen of all Saints, is womanly in the highest and most sublime sense of the word.

No: the difference between man and woman is a metaphysical one. A long time ago the Pythagoreans divined this when they placed male and female among the Categories, although in this, of course, they were not right. The medieval theologians, too, were thinking of this when they raised the question as to whether or not the angels were divided into male and female.

At any rate, for the human species this difference represents two manifestations of the person, analogous - if this comparison be admissible - to the various religious orders, which although they are identical in their aim, represent different ways in the *imitation of Christ*. These two types, man and woman, have a unique capacity for *complementing* each other. Their meaning for one another is something quite unique. They are made one for the other in a special way, and they can, purely as spiritual persons, form a unity in which they reciprocally complement one another. Marital love - involving the gift of one's own person, whose decisive character is that the partners form a couple, an *I-*

*thou* communion, in which the whole personality of the beloved is grasped mysteriously as a unity in spite of all outer obstacles - can exist only between two types of the spiritual person, the male and the female, as only between them can this complementary character be found.

### **Being in love is not infatuation**

Being in love, which many people consider contemptuously as infatuation, constitutes in itself only the climax of this full spiritual grasping of the beloved person, in which the charm of the other being is completely unfolded, the full bliss of the *I-thou* community realized.

Indeed, being in love is so far from contemptible, so far from being a consequence of the Fall of man, that, within the natural order - as Plato points out admirably in his *Phaedrus* - being in love constitutes the only truly awakened state, a state in which we break the fetters of indolence and cease dragging ourselves dully through life. We become exactly the image of our relation to Christ: "My beloved to me, and I to my beloved, who feedeth among the lilies."<sup>9</sup> Thus, being in love is exalted as a figure of the highest and most sublime relationship to the Son of God.

### **Conjugal love is not an illusion**

Let no one object that it is an illusion, an intoxication which passes quickly and which is based only on the external qualities of the other. For there is a superficial and a deep way of being in love, just as there is superficial and deep friendship.

This general possibility of superficiality does not, however, argue against either *being in love* or against friendship. Nor does the fact that one can be mistaken prove anything against the revelation of the character of the beloved, which - as we have seen - is implied in the state of being in love. Who would deny that in spite of the fact that in the life of prayer we come to understand much about the soul and its relation to God, self-deception may nevertheless occur?

### **Love is not sensual desire**

Above all, real *being in love*, even in its superficial form, must never be confused with sensual desire. Being in love always implies a respectful, chivalrous attitude toward the beloved - a certain element of humility even, a melting of the soul, of the rigidity of the ego. A person truly in love becomes tender and even pure. Even when this love is a superficial one and only based on the external qualities of the beloved, these qualities, substituting for and representing the beauty and goodness of the entire personality, elevate the soul of the enamored person into a state of mind in which he overcomes his self-centered heaviness and indolence.

Being in love has nothing to do with mere sensual intoxication; neither has it to do with a satanical fascination nor with the sensual captivation of a Don Juan.

The intention of duration and strict exclusiveness is one of the implications which lie in the very nature of being in love, as well as of marital love. Anyone who says, "I am in love with this person now but I do not know whether I shall like him later on," is not really in love. Even if in reality one were mistaken and one's love were to pass away later, being in love (like marital love) shows clearly the intention of lasting forever and of strict exclusiveness.

### **Being in love is an element of conjugal love**

We shall return later on to this element of duration and exclusiveness in conjugal love. For the moment let us point out that being in love also pertains to conjugal love. This does not mean that it has to persist to the same degree as long as conjugal love lasts, but this being in love must be reactualized at specific moments. Implicitly, conjugal love must always bear this potentiality and show this characteristic. The enormous difference which lies between the being in love which constitutes only a climax of this deep conjugal love, and the being in love which appears as an independent phenomenon, need not be pointed out, nor that its normal function consists in representing the full realization of conjugal love.

Conjugal love is so far from being a compound of friendship and sensuality that, on the contrary, its characteristics, which, as described above, distinguish it from all other forms of love, actually serve as the bridge toward the sphere of sexuality and solely make *possible* an organic union of the two. A compound of friendship and sensuality is repugnant. It would be a juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements, and the sensual sphere would in no way be sanctified by a discordant combination of this kind.

Only in conjugal love, where man and woman are united in a unique communion, where they give themselves to one another in the deepest sense of the word and belong to each other in an ultimate interpenetration of their souls,

does this relation to the sensual sphere become intelligible. Only in this order can the sublime meaning of the sexual sphere be realized in the union of two beings in a complete spiritual-sensual union according to the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: "And they shall be two in one flesh."<sup>10</sup>

### **Polygamy is essentially contrary to conjugal love**

Sometimes one comes across the opinion that polygamy is forbidden only by a positive law of God, and that monogamy is not necessarily rooted in the nature of marriage nor demanded by natural morality. Nothing is more erroneous. Not only actual marriage but conjugal love in itself excludes polygamy. Conjugal love in its essence aims at one person only. The characteristics of complete, mutual self-giving, and of being exclusively turned toward the beloved, as well as the fact that the two partners form a couple, exclude in themselves the possibility that this love can be directed simultaneously to more than one person. Having two or more friends is in no way contrary to the principle of friendship and does not constitute something unworthy. But it is not possible for a man to love two women conjugally. The whole value of the relationship would be destroyed. Strictly speaking, it would indeed be impossible.

### **Conjugal exclusiveness differs from possessiveness**

Moreover, to deduce the essential exclusiveness of conjugal love from the general egoistic possessiveness of man would be quite wrong. The owner of a harem who regards his women as mere chattels in his possession does not want anyone else to interfere. This, of course, is pure egoistic possessiveness. But this harem-owner has not the slightest conception of real conjugal love.

Exclusiveness in conjugal love results from the consciousness that this unique love can only exist between two beings, at least while this love lasts, and that this wonderful union would be destroyed and torn apart if one partner were to love a second person with conjugal love.

And this exclusiveness concerns the person himself as much as the beloved partner, since one's own infidelity causes one as much horror as the infidelity of the other and is felt just as much as the breach and destruction of the union.

### **Marriage is more than conjugal love**

But conjugal love is not yet marriage, although it contains an anticipation of the meaning of marriage. Marriage is a reality in the objective order which is constituted only by a solemn act and presupposes a formal act of the will: the two partners give themselves expressly to each other, fully sanctioning this surrender for their entire lifetime.

The marriage is fully actualized when both partners, in consequence of this act, consummate this surrender in bodily union. Marriage is a communion of objective validity which includes both partners. Once established, it persists as such, regardless of the sentiments or attitudes of the partners, although it imposes specific obligations on them.

The existence of conjugal love between the partners makes marriage desirable and gives it meaning, but does not in itself establish this objective bond.

For among various human experiences (such as love, respect, or joy) there is one kind which is not merely an inner act in respect to another person, but which also *creates* an objective reality independent of the person. Thus, for example, a promise creates an obligation toward another person and the right of demanding fulfillment by that other person. The command of a superior creates an obligation of fulfillment by the subordinate. Absolution by a priest in the name of God creates the actual annulment of our guiltiness. Certain decisions of the legitimate state authority, can become law, and so forth.

### **Marriage creates an objective bond**

In the same way, the act of voluntary surrender of one's own person to another with the intention of forming a permanent and intimate union of love, creates an objective bond which, once established, is withdrawn from the sphere of arbitrary decision of the persons concerned.

We shall see later how this solemn act of marriage attains further an infinitely higher importance and power if it is consciously fulfilled in Christ and if it contains in a way a consecration of both partners to Christ.

The expression *marriage-contract* is not a happy choice of words since marriage differs essentially from any other real contract. Apart from the character of reciprocity, it resembles a contract no more than any promise or any other act of this sort.

The union desired in conjugal love becomes by this act *objectively real in its fullest sense*, and no other earthly communion of love can become objective to such a degree. Both partners now belong wholly to each other. An objective bond unites them: they are no longer *two*, but *one*.

### **Marriage comes about from a free decision**

An extraordinary decision is inherent in the act of marriage. Unlike conjugal love, it does not spring into being of itself, but it is a free act like an act of will (in the stricter sense of the term). It marks, as with religious vows, the beginning of a new *status*. An enormous change suddenly takes place. A sublime creation burgeons which, once it flowers, makes the highest demands on the two partners.

### **Marriage is exclusive and irrevocable**

This decisive character of marriage, on the strength of which a change takes place which removes it beyond the range of our influence, also has a qualitative analogy in bodily surrender. The physical union of husband and wife constitutes such an ultimate intimacy between them that of its essence it is a surrender valid once and for all. It is not merely a passing intimacy which establishes no objective relationship. It implies a definite decision of the highest import. It is truly a *surrender* of one's self to the other and implies essentially the same exclusiveness which we found in conjugal love.

From its very meaning and nature, this act can be consummated with but *one* person, for, according to the words of our Lord, "They shall be two in one flesh."<sup>11</sup> It establishes a tie of such infinite tenderness and such deep proximity, so essentially *permanent*, implying such a radical surrender, that it cannot be repeated with another person as long as the person to whom one has given oneself integrally is alive. All these elements are contained in this deepest union.

But this union only becomes a full reality when it follows as a consequence of the solemn conclusion of marriage. How dreadful therefore, any abuse of this ultimate and most intimate surrender! What a degradation and desecration of the union destined as the ultimate realization of the communion of love which becomes objective through marriage!

### **Love is the meaning of sexual union**

As marriage is, in its nature, principally a communion of love, so the meaning of physical consummation is not restricted to its function as a means of procreation.

Certainly, there is no greater mystery in the natural order of things than the fact that this closest of all unions procreates a human being with an immortal soul (although the soul, in each case, is a direct creation of God), and that this act brings a new being into existence destined to love God and to adore Him, a new being made after His image.

But this primary *end* is not the only *meaning* of the physical act. Subjectively speaking, it is not even its primary meaning.

Its meaning is primarily the realization of the sublime communion of love in which, according to the words of our Savior, "They shall be two in one flesh."<sup>12</sup> Woman, who according to Genesis was made from the flesh of man (a sign which even then indicated the closeness of their relation and designated her as the inseparable mate of man), is really united to man in this way in marriage.

In contrast to the Protestant and Puritan conception, which even subjectively considers procreation as the sole meaning of the physical union, an old Catholic marriage prayer speaks of marriage as "the mystery of love." The Methodist Whitefield proudly asserts that love had nothing to do with his courtship, saying, "God be praised, if I know my own heart at all, I am free of this stupid passion the world calls love." But an old Catholic prayer runs as follows, "O God, at the creation of mankind, making woman from man, Thou hast already ordained that there should be a union of the flesh and of sweet love.... Lord our God, Thou hast created man pure and immaculate and still Thou wishest that in procreation of the generations one be made from the other by the *mystery of love*."

### **Procreation and the communion of love must never deliberately be separated**

That a new human being should issue from it is certainly part of the solemn grandeur of this supremely intimate union. The wonderful, divinely-appointed relationship between the mysterious procreation of a new human being and this most intimate communion of love (which by itself alone already has its full importance), illuminates the grandeur and solemnity of this union.

Thus it is that in order to preserve the reverent attitude of the spouses toward the mystery in this union, this general connection between procreation and the communion of love must always be maintained even subjectively, at least as a

general possibility of this act.

It is difficult to imagine a greater lack of reverence toward God than interfering with this mystery with desecrating hands in order to frustrate this mystery. How terrible to think of man wanting to destroy this unity which God has established so mysteriously, deeming those united in the highest earthly union of love worthy to take part in His creative power. To go against God's purposes through a desecrating interference, perhaps even thus to throw back into the void a being that God had intended to exist - what sacrilegious presumption!

### **Childless marriages may nonetheless fulfill the ideal of marriage**

Yet if for any reason, beyond the sphere of human influence, it becomes evident that procreation is out of the question, the physical union between man and woman still retains its subjective significance and its intrinsic beauty. Is conjugal love in itself not sublime enough to sanctify and justify this union? Is not the reason for the creation of woman stated in Genesis: "It is not good for man to be alone; let us make him a help like unto himself."<sup>13</sup> Can a childless marriage be regarded as a failure, as something that did not fulfill its meaning? Can we justly assert that it would have been better if such a marriage had not been brought to pass? Can it not have its full, divinely-appointed meaning simply as the highest communion of love, and glorify God by this very fact?

When both partners, even though childless, belong to each other in the most perfect conjugal love, in unchangeable loyalty to one another, in imitation of the union of the soul with God, is not the ideal of marriage fulfilled to an even higher degree than in the case of a marriage with perhaps many children, where the partners are unfaithful to each other and desecrate the sacred tie by a lack of love and loyalty? Need marriage become celibate because of the knowledge that there cannot be any children? Is this not a clear indication that marriage is a symbol of the union of the soul with God, that it possesses, as such, a sublime importance and that it exists in the first place for its own sake and not exclusively for the sake of any result that it produces?

### **Every marriage filled with love is fruitful**

On closer examination, we see that every intrinsically fulfilled marriage is fruitful even in the deepest sense of the word. The fact that the closest communion of love between two people produces a new human being mysteriously reflects the fruitfulness of love as such.

For we must not forget that every true love possesses an intrinsic spiritual fruitfulness and that conjugal harbors this spiritual fruitfulness of love quite independently of procreation.

This fruitfulness expresses itself in an *élan* of the soul, which is implied in love, in a new awakening of the Soul which stimulates it to spiritual growth and a higher moral life. It expresses itself in the influence which the spouses unconsciously exert on one another, in the spiritual elevation of one another which their mutual understanding makes possible.

Every marriage in which conjugal love is thus realized bears spiritual fruit, becomes *fruitful* - even though there are no children.

He alone can understand the horror of the sin of promiscuity who has grasped the grandeur and sublimity of bodily union as the full realization of conjugal love, and who realizes that besides the primary *end* of procreation, the primary *meaning* of bodily union lies in the fulfillment of conjugal love.

That which is intended to bring two persons together in the highest, most intimate union, to unite them "in one flesh," - the final actual surrender of one's self - is used by the promiscuous as a source of sensual lust and is thereby ignominiously desecrated. And this desecration remains the same whether or not children result from this sinful union.

The words of St. Paul clearly show that the sin of impurity lies essentially in the abuse of the union which God reserved for the closest Communion between two people: "Or know you not, that he who is joined to a harlot, is made one body. *For they shall be, saith he, two in one flesh.*"<sup>14</sup> Were procreation not only the end but also the *sole meaning* of this union, it would be incomprehensible, in the last analysis, why an illegitimate union should be sinful when children result from it, and a marriage pure and sublime when it serves only the communion of love in a childless marriage.

### **Only marriage justifies physical union**

The justification of this physical union, however, lies not in conjugal love as such, but only in the solemn act of the conclusion of marriage which we mentioned above. Since physical union involves the express and solemn surrender

by which one enters into so ultimate and intimate a union with the other person, it presupposes not only the mere existence of conjugal love but also the solemn conclusion of marriage in which one gives oneself freely and irrevocably to the beloved for the entire lifetime.

### **Love must be nourished in every marriage**

As the communion of love represents the deepest meaning of marriage, love is not only a previous condition of marriage but also a sentiment that both partners must make an object of their will, something that has to be protected and cherished. Love is also a task and a duty for both partners. If marriage is the unique projection of this special conjugal love, then marriage, once established, demands love from both partners - not only neighborly love but also conjugal love.

Each Spouse has a right to the love of the other. To maintain conjugal love in its entire grandeur and purity, in its glow, its depth, and its vital plenitude, is a task that arises for both partners with the conclusion of their marriage.

Because our laziness, our dullness, and our constant falling back into the periphery stultifies our vision, it is difficult always to keep before us in all its same clarity and splendor the image of the other person so wonderfully revealed by love. We should and must fight against this dullness, for it constitutes a sin against the temple which we erected in our marriage.

In a certain sense we are already unfaithful to the other when we cease to see him from within, when we understand no longer the deeper character of his being, but regard him as we would regard other people - from the outside.

For those who consider the specific kind of love which we call conjugal as nothing else than an infatuation, it may be natural for this love to fade in the course of time and leave only friendship. We, however, for whom conjugal love includes a deeper understanding of the other, and for whom it is the divinely-appointed relation in marriage, must fight against a weakening of this love, against this *falling asleep*, just as we must always strive - in an incomparably higher sphere - to keep our love for Jesus unfaithfully awake.

For someone in a religious order, the fulfillment of the rules of the order represents a continuous effort; so, too, marriage demands abstention from all side issues and deviations which are liable to distract attention from the beloved person and destroy the inner concentration which is implied in love.

But this task differs according to the individual character of the marriage. In the supernatural sphere, God gives mankind grace in different measures and demands more from them according to the measure of grace received. (The Gospel gives us the parable of the talents.) So, too, marriage demands more from the husband and wife in the measure that their marriage as such approaches the ideal, and the more they harmonize as characters.

### **Love's task in the best of marriages**

The greater the love which they felt originally for one another and the greater the love which potentially lies in the nature of the combination of the two persons, the more is mutual love demanded of both. If the combination of two people contains the possibility of this ultimate conjugal love, it becomes the duty of both partners, once the marriage is concluded, to strive toward the realization of this ideal.

They must endeavor to develop this highest love. They must avoid everything that could obscure or mar this love (such as the absorption of the husband in his business affairs or of the wife in household duties). But above all, they must beware of an indolent indifference and of simply floating down the stream of everyday habits. Every hour they must recall anew the unspeakably precious gift which God has given in the form of the soul of the beloved. Never must they lose their sense of the wonderful mystery that the other person whom they love loves them, too, that the other lives for them, and that they own something far above all other earthly possessions.

### **Love's task in imperfect marriages**

If, however, the combination of the two characters of man and wife does not offer the possibility for this conjugal love, if such ultimate inner unity cannot be achieved, the task for both partners becomes a different one. When such is the case, this quality of glowing conjugal love is not demanded of them - for the consorts cannot give this love to one another if it is not performed by God in the combination of their two characters. Their task here is to attain the highest communion within the limits of the possibilities of their individual case. They, too, must live for one another and avoid everything that could alienate or in any way separate them from one another. They must try to see each other in

the highest light.

### **Love's task in troubled marriages**

This holds all the more true for an unhappy marriage. If love is completely lacking on one side, or if one partner suffers from the other in every way - let us remember the marriage of St. Monica - the obligation to live up to the objective tie which the conclusion of marriage has created persists, in spite of the fact that the combination of the two partners does not make possible the realization of ideal conjugal love. The one Spouse can only love the other in a particular form of neighborly love - love him because it was with him that the tie of marriage was knit. The task in this special case consists primarily in sacrifice and renunciation and in care for the salvation of the other.

### **Each marriage has its own particular task**

In a word, in each marriage God gives the partners a particular task apart from the obligation *every* marriage contains: mutual love and conjugal faithfulness.

It is, therefore, necessary to understand the particular meaning of each individual marriage, the special call which God makes upon the spouses: the realization of an ideal marriage or the heroic suffering of the cross of an unhappy marriage. The unique, divinely appointed meaning of an individual marriage has to be discovered in each marriage, inasmuch as the task varies according to what appears as the highest attainable possibility in a given combination of two characters.

But this must not mislead us into believing that the objective form of marriage as such does not aim at a subjective fulfillment of a complete union of love, and that all other marriages measured against the divine design of marriage represent failures. Marriage as such does not exist as a trial for the consorts, or to serve as a school of renunciation, but to unite two human beings in boundless love into a complete union and thus, in the most sublime way, to reflect the union between Jesus and the soul.

### **NOTES:**

1-4 are in material not included

5. Eph. 5:25-27

6. Eph. 5:32

7. John 21:15

8. Mark 12:30

9. Song of Sol. 2:16

10. Matt. 19:5

11. Matt. 19:5

12. Matt. 19:5

13. Gen. 2:18

14. 1 Cor. 6:16