

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

by Fr. John Ramsay

CHAPTER 14 - MATRIMONY, HOLY ORDER AND THE SACRAMENT OF THE SICK

In this chapter we will deal with the remaining three sacraments. Two of them are VOCATIONAL - or SACRAMENTS OF COMMITMENT - namely: Matrimony and Holy Order. The final one is the ANOINTING OF THE SICK - the Sacrament which prepares us for death and union with God.

MATRIMONY

Marriage itself is a universal institution whereby any man and woman, who are free to marry one another, bind themselves to live together as man and wife for the rest of their lives. Christ, as head of His body the Church, makes it the occasion of further grace for His members, so when they enter upon the contract He makes it a Sacrament – the Sacrament of MATRIMONY. The word ‘matrimony’ comes from two Latin words meaning the office, or duty, of a mother. So, quite simply, matrimony is PRIMARILY for children. The main purpose of matrimony is the raising of a family and the fostering of a loving relationship. The very condition of indissolubility is demanded in order to provide the children of the marriage with the security, love, care and education to which they have a right.

It is only too obvious that the real casualties in a broken marriage are the children. The SIGN of the Sacrament of course is the Exchange of Consent - what is popularly called the “Marriage Vows”. The words are:

“I TAKE YOUFOR MY LAWFUL HUSBAND/WIFE; TO HAVE AND TO HOLD FROM THIS DAY FORWARD; FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE, FOR RICHER, FOR POORER, IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH, TILL DEATH DO US PART.” Words which comprise a clear statement of intent to live with one another UNCONDITIONALLY till death.

One phrase deserves special mention - “to have and to hold from this day forward”. This means the handing over by each to the other of the exclusive right over his or her body which either has the right to ask for and the other the duty to hand over - what St. Paul called the “marriage debt”. This would be the right moment to say that since that right is EXCLUSIVE, nobody at all has the right to dictate to the couple how often or how seldom they USE that right and thus how many children they have. The Church says they must exercise what is called RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD, neither bringing into the world children they cannot provide for, nor selfishly limiting the number in order to raise their own standard of living.

Who administers the Sacrament? The answer to this question often comes as a surprise because it is NOT the priest! The BRIDE and GROOM administer the Sacrament to one another: the priest is merely the official witness. Consequently, if one of the partners is a NON-CHRISTIAN, though they are validly married, NO SACRAMENT IS CONFERRED because an unbaptised person can neither administer a Sacrament nor receive it. MIXED marriages, or marriages between a Catholic and a non-Catholic Christian, are permitted - but not encouraged. The faith of the children is at risk when they see their two parents differ on what is such a vital matter.

People outside the Church often say “the Catholic Church does not allow divorce” as if it were a Church law. The simple truth is that GOD doesn’t allow divorce. Divorce is, therefore, a legal fiction. If a man and woman who are free to marry declare their intention to live together as man and wife for ever, GOD MAKES it SO, and no-one can UNMAKE it. As the words say: “...what God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” The Church merely keeps God’s law and so refuses to “remarry” a divorced person because he or she is still married in God’s eyes. The Church does, however, permit a Catholic whose marriage has broken up to go through a civil divorce to obtain custody and financial provision for the children. He or she cannot of course, marry again since the original marriage stands. (A quick word here on annulment. This is a declaration by an ecclesiastical law court - called a marriage tribunal - that no marriage had in fact taken place. This sometimes occurs when, for example, after rigorous investigation, it is found that one of the parties had defective consent. He or she had said, and been heard to say, “we’ll try it out for a year or two and if it doesn’t work out, we’ll split up.” If this were the case, the consent was defective and there was no marriage. There are, of course, other grounds for annulment.)

In an age when one out of three marriages (even of Catholics) break up, it is worth noting that when God makes the contract of marriage a Sacrament, that means He has provided all that the couple will need to KEEP the contract. The only thing that can break a Christian marriage is when one or both of the parties turns away from God. The Grace of the Sacrament does not guarantee they will “live happily ever after” but it does mean that if they both work at it, they have what they need to make a lasting, loving union until death.

HOLY ORDER

Now let us look at HOLY ORDER. The Catechism states: “Holy Order is the Sacrament by which Bishops, priests and other ministers of the Church are ordained and receive power and grace to perform sacred duties.” In an earlier chapter on the Church I mentioned a ‘chain of command.’ First, there were those who, like Peter, the Rock, received the two powers of consecration and forgiving sins and the power to pass on these powers. These are the bishops, called the successors of the apostles, who enjoy the fullness of the priesthood. Priests, who do not have the *fullness* of the priesthood, have the two powers but cannot pass them on. The SIGNS of the Sacrament are the LAYING-ON OF HANDS by the bishop, the ANOINTING WITH CHRISM of the ordinand’s hands and the HANDING OVER OF THE CHALICE indicating the power to offer Mass. The FORM or words of the Ordination prayer, together with the laying on of hands, confer the power.

When dealing with Baptism, I said that the person being baptised was anointed with chrism to show that they share in the “priestly, prophetic and royal roles” of Christ, their head. This sharing in Christ’s priesthood enables them to share in His sacrifice, uniting their spiritual sacrifices with that of Christ. However, the share in Christ’s priesthood possessed by the priest is essentially different. He shares in Christ’s priesthood in a UNIQUE way - offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice in THE PERSON OF CHRIST. He is the very means by which Christ makes Himself present. The minister of the Sacrament is a bishop - not necessarily the bishop of the Diocese since all bishops as we have seen enjoy the fullness of the priesthood and can pass on the powers they possess.

There has been much talk in recent years of a crisis of identity in the priesthood. Certainly, with the laity being encouraged to accept a greater share in the life of the Church, the priest’s position is not quite so clearly defined as it was in the past. Nevertheless, the Vatican Council spelled out the role of the priest very clearly when it stated that the priest is ordained to: PREACH THE WORD OF GOD, ADMINISTER THE SACRAMENTS and to FORM THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

One final point. It is a grave mistake to think that the priest is just “like anybody else”. He isn’t. Sadly, he may behave “like anybody else”. Perhaps some of the thousands who have left the priesthood allowed themselves to think they WERE just “like anybody else”. But they are in a unique position. They have two great powers which nobody can take from them and, when offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, they are acting in THE PERSON OF CHRIST. The words of Consecration are clear: “This is MY Body... MY Blood” - NOT “This is Christ’s Body... Christ’s Blood”. Christ uses their vocal chords, their hands as the means of making Himself present. You cannot get anything more unique than that!

THE SACRAMENT OF THE SICK

This used to be called “Extreme Unction” which tended to suggest it was given at the “last gasp”. It is intended primarily for those in danger of death from sickness or old age - though it can also be administered to those whose health is seriously impaired. Its purpose is to prepare the person for death or to assist their recovery - if this is what God wills. The preparation for death involves two things. First, it gives the sick person the strength to face death calmly and, secondly, it removes any barriers between the sick person and God by forgiving any sins for which the person is sorry.

If it is to assist recovery then clearly it should be administered as early as possible. People sometimes hesitate to send for the priest for fear of alarming the sick person - “surely she’s not THAT sick, Father!” is often said. This is a twofold error since one effect of the sacrament is to CALM and the other to CURE! The SIGNS, as you might expect, indicate the effects - OIL, the sign of strength, is used to indicate the spiritual strength given to face death calmly. The WORDS “... MAY THE LORD WHO FREES YOU FROM SIN, SAVE YOU AND RAISE YOU UP.” indicate both the forgiveness of sin and the prayer for recovery. Two small points: First, this Sacrament is for those in danger of death from SICKNESS or OLD AGE so it cannot be given, for example, to soldiers just before going into battle or to condemned criminals before execution. Secondly, REAL DEATH is often separated from APPARENT DEATH by quite a bit so those who have “just died” can be anointed.

Finally, I have anointed many people over the years. Some have made really remarkable recoveries. Almost all have rallied for a while – they have not been cured but have shown an immediate improvement in health because they were calmer than before. Then, when the end comes, the calmness remains. Their last journey into the arms of God is peaceful. What more can we ask for than that?