

STRUCTURE OF RELIGIOUS CHASTITY (II)

OSWIN MAGRATH

VIRGINITY AND PERFECT CONTINENCE

Christian chastity and purity, therefore, look towards God, and by a development in this direction can become a new virtue, that of vowed virginity or perfect and perpetual continence. Virginity consists in the will to abstain totally from sex for God, the will to be immune from sexual pleasure. It is destroyed by deliberate consent to such pleasure, though restored by penitence, in the sense that there can return a will to remain virgin and to have remained virgin, though the fact of indulgence cannot be done away with. Bodily integrity is not essential. Perfect perpetual continence is the same will to abstain from all use of sex, but only in the future, in those who take the vow after voluntary experience of sex. While those who take the vow before any such experience can reiterate their former good will even after losing the virtue, and so regain its formal element in the will, though not the material element of never having experienced sex, those who vow after such experience cannot will virginity, except as a might-have-been.

The purpose of both virginity and perfect perpetual continence is the same. In the first place it is ascetical: to free from the bondage of concupiscence and the life of the instincts and the avoidance of occasions of sin and imperfection; secondly it aims at undividedness, in so far as it renounces marriage's inevitable dividedness between God and the human partner, and avoids the establishment of a bond with the world; thirdly its aim is contemplative, to make life with and for God direct.

Since these virtues consist, in their negative aspect, in a renunciation of marriage, and since it is a teaching of faith that religious virginity or continence is better than marriage, light will be thrown on the positive nature of these virtues by considering the goods of marriage and the way in which they surpass it. Marriage is a normal means of perfection. It frees from pride and self-sufficiency by surrender to an-

other human being; from love of worldly goods by causing their renunciation for the good of spouse and family; from the love of bodily pleasure by controlling it and demanding self-denial from love of another. It frees love of our neighbour, and so prepares the way for freeing love of God. The vow of chastity must, if it is truly better than marriage, include all these good things in a higher degree. Hence it is not mere continence through temperament, dislike, laziness, pride or independence; nor yet for the sake of an occupation with which marriage is incompatible; nor even continence accepted as the will of God for an individual. The vow of chastity is positive surrender to God and a marriage with God. Such surrender can be far more total than that made to another human being, and so far more perfecting and liberating from self; for the surrender of marriage, while liberating, involves also an alienation of the body and of much personal liberty to the partner, and so limits and narrows; whereas surrender to God perfects and widens everything. Again the renunciation of worldly goods and bodily pleasures can be more total, for marriage involves the use of both, while religious chastity can renounce sex pleasure utterly and worldly goods much more completely. And the positive gift made to God by love is limitless; whereas that made to the marriage-partner must necessarily have many limits. The vow of chastity is, therefore, more perfect than marriage precisely because it contains in a more perfect form all the good things of marriage. It is a greater means of perfection, since it obliges to the practice of acts of greater perfection.

The religious must therefore beware of seeking compensation again in the things renounced: a void is created by the renunciation of earthly love which must be filled with divine love. Otherwise it will be filled with lesser things: if not with lust, at least with pride, ambition, love of worldly goods, affection for human beings, intellectual pride or work treated as an end.

THE GIFT OF FEAR

The virtues which directly control sexual pleasure are perfected and strengthened by the effects of the gift of fear. This gift of the Holy Ghost in itself looks towards the

greatness and majesty of God, his awesomeness and power to punish evil. The spirit of man in consequence draws back into its own nothingness in an act of reverence or fear. In the face of the divine Majesty all created glory and pleasures seem as nothing, as things which draw away from the supreme good and risk God's fatherly anger. Poverty of spirit, counting the goods of the world as nothing beside God, and the beatitude of mourning, withdrawing from the pleasures given by creatures, are the result. Hence the gift of fear is the motive force behind perfect chastity. Reverence for the divine Majesty leads to the abandonment of the greatest pleasures of this life and the joys of marriage, as being nothing in the presence of infinite goodness, as tending to separate from God, if not by sin, at least in a lesser degree by a certain dividedness, which ill accords with the sense of the divine greatness and its absolute demands. The very activity of the gift of fear, in the presence of the majesty of God, causes the appetite for pleasure to contract and weaken, since fear and reverence are contrary to pleasure, and so produces temperance and chastity. So that the gift immeasurably strengthens the choice of perpetual chastity, giving it a divine motive under the action of the Holy Spirit, and calming the urge to pleasure by reverence for the presence of God in the temple of the body.

RELIGION

Virginity (or perfect perpetual continence) is only constituted a distinct virtue from ordinary chastity if it is combined with the virtue of religion by a vow. The renunciation of so great and good a means of perfection as marriage is only a good and virtuous thing in itself, if it is made because the very fact of so doing is the securing of a greater good. This good is the gift of the person to God, in which all the good things of marriage are attained in a more perfect form. By total renunciation of sex for God the person is given to him; the person is the 'matter' of the vow. Only by marriage can one human person give himself totally to another; by the renunciation of marriage for God the person is given even more totally to him. So that the vow of chastity is a true spiritual marriage with God, and like the

sacrament is an image of the marriage between Christ and the partner, and not only in the person of another baptised human being. By the vow the virtue of chastity is altered in itself and becomes another virtue: it is no longer merely control of sex in relation to the person's life-purpose (such as is even the case where sex is renounced for a work in life which is manifestly God's will); but it is total renunciation of the voluntary use of sex, a renunciation that can only be made to and for God and by a vow.

The vow of chastity also has a public aspect, no longer as a donation of the individual, but as a consecration by the Church. The religious state as a whole is such a consecration; but the vow of chastity is specially so since it constitutes a visible setting aside of the person for God in a way which the other vows do not, owing to the nature of the good renounced. The setting aside of a religious by the Church is a sacramental of a permanent kind, a consecration or setting aside for God. It confers a certain spiritual reality in virtue of the Church's act, and a special capacity to receive the graces required for such a state. The religious is set aside by the Church as a sign of all the absolute rights and claims of God over his creatures; as a member of a body segregated in order to perform worship and intercession for the whole Church and to perform works of mercy on behalf of the whole body; and as a visible embodiment of the sanctity of the Church.

This consecration is made visible by the public religious profession, and especially by the vow of chastity which is the most incompatible with a life in the world. The donation of the individual and the consecration by the Church which solemnises it admits today of different degrees of permanence and totality: the ancient consecration of virgins is almost disused, but there is the solemn vow, which gives the very right to use sex and invalidates marriage attempted, and the simple vow which renounces only the use of sex, and makes marriages illicit. But in both cases there is the total renunciation of all use of sex and marriage. The public vow of chastity is strictly speaking a vow of perfect and perpetual continence. Continence means not the virtue chastity as such, but merely *de facto* control of passion so

that it does not overcome the will, without that full domination of the sensitive appetites which virtue implies. The vow is, therefore, a promise to perform in perpetuity acts of continence, and these of their nature tend to develop the true virtue of chastity in life-long practice. It is a promise to tend to perfect chastity by definite means, namely those which a religious life in continence necessarily enforce.

CHARITY

Since the purpose of the vow of chastity is to set the person free to love God perfectly, charity is, so to say, its obverse. Before the Fall, and probably in a state of pure nature, marriage would have been the normal and most direct way to God, and perpetual continence not virtuous nor leading to virtue. But now, when the life of grace and its possibilities is combined with fallen nature and its weaknesses, there is no doubt that to renounce marriage in order to live wholly for God is a more perfect state. It means not a lesser but a greater love. It is not the state of the old bachelor or old maid, whose heart easily grows hard and torpid, and love dull and deadened, while self-love dominates: on the contrary it must lead to fuller love of God and of man.

The renunciation of marriage frees from the narrow circle of the family, and makes it possible to love all God's children, giving the freedom of the whole family to God. It includes far greater labours, sacrifices and devotedness than marriage. Just as the dilemma of our Lady's vow of virginity and motherhood was solved by her being given a child who was God, so is the religious given God's children, to serve whom does not distract from God but brings closer to him. The love that exists in marriage and family life is thus incomparably widened and perfected; this love should keep the heart warm and open, and exclude pre-occupation with self, depression, seeking after pleasure and comfort, petty affection and favouritism.

This love finds its first and chief field in the religious community, where charity and all the domestic virtues can be practised with a greater perfection and more thorough unselfishness than in marriage. The practice of the social

forms of charity within the community is the normal and natural means by which charity grows to perfection. This family life is the exchange, a hundredfold better, which is received for the family life renounced, and the Church does not normally allow her consecrated members to live outside community life. Only the person already perfect is able to lead a perfect life of charity with God alone as a hermit. Normally the wise safeguards of enclosure, prayer, penance and community life are necessary to preclude reversal to a lower ideal. Only in the case of religious sent to the Missions does the Church make an easy and habitual exception, and this is because the benefit of community life, which consist primarily in the compulsion there is to practise charity, is supplied in a still higher degree in missionary life, and replaces the normal safeguards and means of perfection.

The centre of the life of vowed chastity is, therefore, charity, love of God and the neighbour for God, and love of the neighbour as a means to love of God, so that its outwardly negative characteristics are submerged in its positive value of love, donation and consecration.



A LAY CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

A REPORT GIVEN AT THE SEPTEMBER CONFERENCE

THE aim of this community is described in the provisional Rule as 'A school of the Lord's service composed of men, women and children, engaged in farm and craft work, having all things in common and holding to the counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, that in all things God may be glorified'. The membership at the present time is twelve adults and eleven children, made up of four families and four single men and women.

The community was started in 1940 as a political experiment by a small group of young people holding pacifist and socialist convictions. They felt that society was disintegrating from within and that the way back to a more creative life was through a different economic structure and the discovery of a new pattern of human relatedness. Possessions were