

THE NUPTIAL MASS

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TRADITION has always surrounded marriage with ceremony and feasting even among the most primitive races and countries. Being the climax of human love it is not surprising to find this very natural instinct expressing itself thus. This tradition has almost inevitably found its way into the christian mode of life and the liturgical spirit of the Church.

Mere love of pageantry is not a sufficient explanation of the full ceremonial of christian marriage. The Nuptial Mass, which should always form part of any full christian marriage, has a much deeper significance and reason, especially for the parties concerned. It is not just a kind of luxury, something added to fill out and prolong the festivities, still less should it ever be the privilege of the rich. It is more than an adornment or a frill, for it is deeply concerned with the very essence of marriage. The Church never acts from mere whim but always with a very definite set purpose, and she has seen fit to bestow the nuptial blessing at the very heart of the Mass. The reason for this is surely that charity which is 'the bond of union' is the central idea of both the Mass and marriage.

Natural and supernatural love are here blended into one. The natural is in fact totally supernaturalised in the sacrament and the sacrifice, and thereby acquires an altogether deeper meaning. The priest stands for the dispenser of God's sacraments and it is his office to minister. To administer a sacrament is therefore to participate in a very true sense in the eternal priesthood of Christ. In the sacrament of matrimony the ministers are the persons contracting the marriage, they administer the sacrament to one another and thus share in this priesthood. Moreover, the Mass is the sacrifice of infinite love, and matrimony the sacrament of human love. That the two should be closely associated in the full ceremonial of marriage is therefore not surprising. But the secret of this close association would seem to be the intimate connection between love and sacri-

fice. Wherever love is to be found there must there also be sacrifice.

With the promise of lifelong fidelity that bride and bridegroom make begins the life story of fresh sacrifice. To make a new home entails inevitably the abandonment of the old. It is no mere negative turning away from the old home that fed them and brought them up but the embracing of a new life and a new home. So it is fitting that as their very first act of fidelity implies sacrifice so their first joint act should be to offer *The Sacrifice*, to unite themselves with the sacrifice of Christ which must henceforth be the inspiration and model of their new life together. In their mutual administration of the sacrament of matrimony they took upon themselves, as it were, the character of priests, so also together they enter the sanctuary for the first and last time to be united as closely as possible with the priest in the sacrifice of the Mass. This solemn moment is unique for the bride for it will be the only time in her life that she will be allowed to attend Mass in the sanctuary. At the moment of the *Pater Noster*, the christian prayer, the Church bestows on her the solemn blessing of a bride, praying that God will make her union fruitful and calling upon God to grant her all those virtues so fitting and necessary to her new life as a wife. To be a mother will bring further sacrifices of time and convenience, of effort and suffering if she is to carry out properly and to the full her maternal duties. Only a mother can know a mother's love.

Again the notes of love and sacrifice sound in harmony. Small wonder that the Church has coupled the infinite love of Christ on Calvary with the supreme love of motherhood. But Mary stands on Calvary as more than the perfect mother; she stands as the supreme example of faithfulness, a thing forgotten in marriage today. The words of the marriage promise 'for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health' could not be more perfectly exemplified for she stood there at the foot of the cross till death did part her from here divine Son. It was on Calvary that Christ committed his mother to the care of Saint John, and it is in the Nuptial Mass that the Church further commits the bride to the care of her husband, a care which

must be no less tender and affectionate than the care Saint John lavished on Mary. It was on Calvary that Christ assumed the full responsibility for the sins of the whole human race, and paid with the last drop of his precious Blood the price of those sins. As by his sacrifice he set the example of responsibility to the world, so in this same sacrifice the newly wed must assume their responsibilities as he did without reserve. Calvary is the example of obedience unto death, and this is the lesson which the Church wishes to teach husband and wife by making Calvary a part of their wedding feast.

These are surely some of the reasons for which the Church has made the Mass a part of the marriage ceremony. It is no chance ornament to the ceremony, no mere pageantry, but a very deliberate and purposeful action on her part. Love must give if it is true love, and love must therefore sacrifice. The whole sacramental system of the Church is built up on symbolism, and the symbolism surely is clear enough. The Epistle and Gospel sum up so perfectly the teaching of the Church on marriage. The Epistle proclaims in unmistakable terms the duties of marriage, and the Gospel underlines in equally unmistakable words the permanence of the contract. No marriage really seems complete without this homily on married life, and therefore no true christian marriage is really complete unless it includes the Mass which expresses so clearly the mind of the Church which is the living teaching voice of God. *Deus qui incepit ipse perficiat*. Marriage united to Calvary is begun by God and he will see to its perfect accomplishment.