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Global Centurms : Chicago
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T-271 D.S.
September 1, 1974

WITNESS ON THE MARRIAGE COVENANT

As an Order, our business is the renewal of human society through the renewal of the structures of society, both secular and, what has been called in the past, ecclesial. Because of the form out of which we as an Order have decided to operate, the family as a social structure looms large in our concern internally and in terms of our external mission.

Several years ago one of our colleagues declared, "Our task is not experimenting with new forms of the family." That is an accurate analysis, I believe. However, it is our business to dramatize the family, as primal community, as a functional missional unit. I want to suggest a block to this aspect of our mission and look at the results through the screen of "covenant."

Several years ago our analysis indicated that in society as a whole and North America in particular, the family had become a powerful tyrant smothering and controlling the creativity of men and women. Recently the seemingly total collapse of the structure called family has thrown aside the burden. However, the reality of the family is still present and it is still a problem. Our job as an Order is to create signs of possibility. Or we are to be a sign of possibility rather than simply reflecting the same ills as those afflicting society. The role of the prophetic community at any time in history is to announce that which is not obvious. The prophetic community announced the reality present in life which is being lost in the immediate and obvious manifestations of human community.

The external form of the family has become putrid and is being set aside for "new forms." What has survived and is still pumping poison into the reality of community is the idealized image of what primal human community should be. We are awakening to discover that the old adage, "romanticism dies hard," is in fact true. The structure has collapsed, but the "idea" of security, dependence, comfort and escape is still deeply residing in our brains and hearts.

The interesting fact is the church recognized this problem many years ago, and self-consciously constructed the celebration of marriage in an objective, decisional form called covenant. The social form of covenant which the church created was rooted in the ontological reality observable and experienced in their lives. God and man exist in a covenant. This covenant was born with the dawn of consciousness, nurtured through the struggle of civilization in various forms (in Western tradition the Hebrew context is the most obvious) and brought to full light in the historical event of Jesus the Christ. Man is related to God whether he decides to honor or ever admit the fact. That relationship exists regardless of man's acts, his attitude or his decision. The covenant is unconditional and final.

The church's question, that is to say, man's question, was one of relation to this final covenant. How does man relate the various human relationships to the final relationship before which he exists? The Christian community named three primal relationships which must be self-consciously understood in relationship to the final covenant, namely, the community of faith, the community of family, and the community of vocation. Each of the primal relationships was marked by an obvious public re-enactment of an individual, private, and internal decision. For joining the church, the public act was Confirmation and First Communion. For vocation, it was Ordination, the Church blessing a man's decision as to his life's work. For the family, it was the public declaration of the covenant between a man and a woman. The dynamics are the same for all three: the dramatization of primal human relations as they relate to God, and the public declaration of the internal decisions. If these public declarations were absent, the internal decision was ineffective and invalid.

I want to look at the covenant of marriage a bit more in detail. The function of the covenant was threefold: ontological, personal, and sociological.

As was mentioned above, the first function of the marriage covenant was a concrete manifestation of an individual decision to live before God, and therefore no human reality. Whatever else "living before God" may mean, it begins with man's awareness of his given human situation. The marriage covenant is a concrete visible symbol of one's decision to live before God, or "the way life is." The most dramatic statement of what the marriage covenant symbolizes is, that when one enters the covenant of marriage he is deciding to be married to God.

Secondly, personally or better stated, in terms of a human personhood, marriage dramatizes the fact that life is decision. When human males and human females reach the age of marriage, which is usually determined by cultural pattern, there is made a generalized decision. Consciously or unconsciously a person decides, "I want to get married." This decision shapes the style and approach which that individual makes to members of the opposite sex. Through patterns and customs or courtship, a second decision is made in relationship to a particular member of the opposite sex. When this decision becomes a mutual one, either between two people or two families, the stage is set for their third decision. (The first two are internal decisions. They may be announced formally or informally, but they remain private or solitary.) The final step is a public declaration. The second decision is personal in that it radically affects the personhood, i.e., individual. The person's fundamental relationships shift; a new history is about to be created. This decision of personhood sets the stage for decision number three.

The third decision is sociological in nature. Centuries ago, man discovered that an internal or personal decision did not come to full manifestation until it was socially dramatized before a representative group of that society.

The church's insight is that the covenant of marriage creates the context within which the human struggle of being male and female came to be enacted. The two individuals' attitudes may shift, their feelings may change, their appreciation of and respect for the other may shift; but the covenant stands as an objective reality within which they can relate humanly to themselves and their relationships.

Within the objective family structures, every human brings ideas, pictures of what he or she wants from marriage. Our parents, our society and culture fill our heads with what marriage should be. All are taught why one gets married and why one does not stay married. The objective reality of the dynamics of human relationships crushes all of these ideas. Human relationships are never what they appear, and human beings change. In the day-in, day-out encounter of one with another, the given ideas come under serious attack.

Usually when someone indicates he or she "has a marriage problem", that individual means his ideal of his marriage has not been realized. The ontological fact is that men and women must deal with what their relationship is, not what it isn't. The covenant holds the individuals together while they decide to be married to the real, not the unreal.

One of the most powerful temptations in the midst of married life is reducing the covenant of marriage to a moral contract. Covenant is not a contract. This is not a judgment or evaluation of better or worse. In some forms of human relationship, a contract is a valid social form. Business, for instance, is usually based on a contractual agreement. Two individuals or groups agree to fulfill a given and mutually agreed upon system of contributing goods or services in return for an agreed-upon portion of the resulting profits. Violation of any portion of the agreement is grounds for breaking the contract and relinquishing of the agreed responsibility.

Such an arrangement in marriage is not adequate to sustain the rigorous struggle of missional engagement nor intimate human relationships. When an individual's most cherished images of "good" marriage are destroyed by the complexity and strain of contemporary life, the temptation is to subtly or overtly convert the marriage covenant into a marriage contract. The contract we negotiate with our spouse, overtly or under the table, is a manifestation of our idealized dream (image) of male-female relations. When a marriage is reduced to "you do x or do not do y, or I will quit," you no longer have a marriage covenant, but a contract. When this happens, you no longer have marriage; you have an affair, an arrangement, a closed-ended agreement.

Covenant is unconditional. Contract has drawn lines beyond which the relationship cannot go. Covenant is manifest freedom; contract is self-imposed slavery. Covenant is open-ended and flexible in order to expand to

include the newness of the future; contract freezes the past and attempts to force tomorrow to be like yesterday. Covenant is context for authentic selfgiving; contract is based on reserve and restraint. Covenant fosters spontaneous, creative risking with the unknown; contract is killed by uncontrolled life. Covenant is foundation from which new patterns and forms are created; contract can only hear the repetitive production of past patterns. Covenant lives and breathes with the spirit of birth, struggle and death ; contract smothers under the burdensome worry of survival. Covenant presupposes a future; contract exists day by day according to the fixed rules of agreement. Covenant is a temporal expression of the eternal; contract is an attempt to make the temporal last forever. Covenant is the only context for authentic self-giving (love) for it presupposes a future; contract is a reduced context in which every attempt at self-giving, regardless of intent, becomes glorification and adoration of the self.

The only solution for the malaise of the family is the reconstruction of the fundamental covenant. Placing a “missional” facade on a covenant which is functioning like a contract will not survive. All the passion and tenderness one could muster will not bolster a contractual covenant. Only covenant can contain the patience and steadfastness which are required for the reconstitution of the external mission and interior relationship.

Genuine human covenant is a fruit of grace, and therefore beyond man's ability to produce and sustain. We cannot transform our marriages, We can only allow them to be transformed by the advent of the Word, Human covenant is a gift, undeserved and unmerited. It is the promise of the Gospel for those who stand in faith before God and forge the future within the covenant they are. The gift of covenant may come and it may not, but regardless of our human evaluation, covenant with God between man and woman will be sustained.

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9/26/74