

Catholic Marriage or Bourgeois Marriage

Thomas Storck

Sometime around the year 1970 I read, in that reliable index of the middle American mind, *Readers' Digest*, a story about an engaged couple who, for some reason that I do not remember, were unable to get married right away. The female half of this couple was discussing their plight with a friend, an older woman as I remember, and the young woman told her something like this. "I want him right now, all of him." (Actually she was *not* referring primarily to sex.) Her older, but not wiser, companion replied something like this, "Well, why not? Go ahead; one day it's wrong and the next day it isn't." These words very well sum up the entire bourgeois American attitude toward marriage and sex—one day sex is wrong and the next it isn't. Marriage is merely a piece of paper granting from society the right to engage in sex.

I am neither a Carthusian buried for years in some mountain hermitage nor have I recently returned from outer space. I realize that for most people today such a license is no longer seen as a necessary prelude to sex. Far from it. But I suggest that part of the reason for the sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies is that the image of marriage that was implicitly held up before American eyes was precisely this bourgeois image—an image of marriage that neither appealed to our emotions nor satisfied our reason. If this was all there was to marriage, why not embrace free love?

The essence of what I am calling "bourgeois marriage" is this: people fall in love and want to live with each other and have sex, but this is not nice to do unless society approves. Society makes you get a license and go through a wedding ceremony and then it's okay. If you don't get along you can get a divorce and then you can't have sex until you get married again, and then it's okay again, but if you're not married it's not nice. This, I submit, was more or less the popular attitude toward marriage in the United States through even the early 1970s, and in certain circles perhaps it still is. What people rightly found dissatisfying in such a notion was that there was really no reason at all for marriage. Since marriage was not considered a binding lifetime commitment, what difference was there between a married couple and an unmarried couple? The only difference was the piece of paper—the marriage license—and the subsequent ceremony.

Whether that ceremony was religious or merely civic made little difference, because both were socially acceptable. Marriage was simply a convention which presumably appealed to the older generation as a way to control and limit youth's access to sex. One day you had the license, the day before you didn't—how could there possibly be any great difference between the two? One can see the point. If what is important about marriage is being in love and making some kind of private commitment to each other, then, indeed, there is no reason to "wait until marriage," because the couple already has done everything important, everything necessary to cement their relationship. The public ceremony seems to be simply unnecessary baggage—a mere conventional obligation which is done only to obtain society's approval.

Now there is a certain amount of truth in this feeling, the feeling that the couple themselves establish the relationship, not their parents, or the Church or anyone else. But a little background about the reason for the marriage ceremony will show why it is important and why it is necessary for the community's well-being, not a mere convention imposed for the sake of parents and other elders.

Marriage according to the natural law is a contract between a man and a woman establishing a lifelong covenant, and, like all contracts, it is made by the parties themselves. The man and the woman establish the contract. Even in Christian marriage, the man and woman confer the sacrament on each other. The priest does not marry them; they marry themselves. So the dictates of the natural law, and even the requirements of the sacrament itself, are fulfilled if a couple exchanges their vows to each other—privately it may be, on a park bench, in the back seat of a car, in bed! But though the natural law is fulfilled by such vows pronounced *in good faith*, it is obvious that there would be room for huge abuses if such a system were the regular way we contracted our marriages. In the Middle Ages the Church had to contend against exactly such an arrangement. Although the Church required couples to be married in a religious ceremony, she nevertheless considered these private marriages, known as clandestine marriages, to be valid, although illicit. Thus a couple who exchanged their vows on a moonlit night on an empty beach, assuming they meant what they said, were really married, though they had sinned against a law of the Church in the

manner of making the contract. But they were still married, just as much as if they had exchanged their vows before the pope in St. Peter's. But as an earlier writer noted,

But though these marriages, which were called "clandestine," were valid, they were attended with many evils and abuses. It was comparatively easy for a man to repudiate his obligations, and desert his wife and children; it was difficult to establish with certainty the validity of these contracts, since there was no competent person present to make enquiries regarding the freedom of the parties to marry and the absence of diriment impediments.

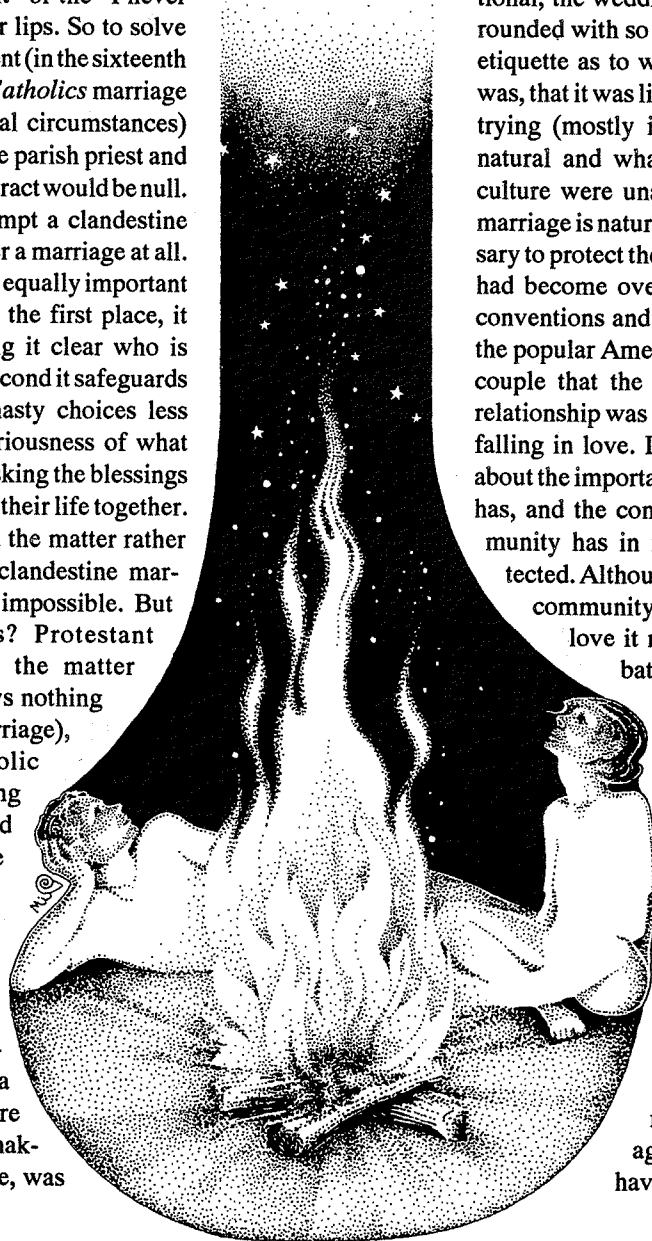
Even apart from case of intentional deception, one can imagine many a couple waking up the next morning and regretting what had been done in the heat of passion, and then how easily the "I never said it" or the "I never meant it" would come to their lips. So to solve this problem the Council of Trent (in the sixteenth century) made a law that *for Catholics* marriage (except for some very unusual circumstances) had to be contracted before the parish priest and witnesses—otherwise the contract would be null. Not only was it a sin to attempt a clandestine marriage; now it was no longer a marriage at all.

From this we can see two equally important reasons for the ceremony. In the first place, it safeguards society by making it clear who is married to whom, and in the second it safeguards the individuals by making hasty choices less likely, bringing home the seriousness of what one is about to do, as well as asking the blessings of almighty God as they begin their life together. So for Catholics Trent settled the matter rather well, by not just outlawing clandestine marriages, but by making them impossible. But what about non-Catholics? Protestant churches, without thinking the matter through clearly (the Bible says nothing about how to initiate a marriage), simply followed the Catholic Church in establishing wedding ceremonies as the norm. And from this Protestant practice the popular American mind was formed on the subject. But the reason for this norm was never made clear to most people. Neither the fact that *by the natural law* simple exchange of consent suffices for a marriage, nor the fact that there are ample reasons to justify making public ceremonies the rule, was

understood by the average American. And so the rule of "waiting until marriage," like most rules of true (as well as pseudo) morality in the United States became merely a convention, justified only by the fact that society said it must be so. Like the conventions that women shave their legs and men their faces, pre-marital abstinence was simply another way that proper people behaved. And when in the 1960s young people began questioning the conventions of American life, there was no one around to say, "Look, you're right, you the couple do establish the marriage covenant, but for important reasons (which can be enumerated), it is necessary for the good of the community to have a public ceremony *before* the marriage (and hence the right to sexual relations) begins." Here were actual reasons to observe pre-marital chastity. And even if these reasons might not satisfy all the critics, at least they were real and solid arguments.

In addition to becoming something purely conventional, the wedding ceremony had become surrounded with so many conventions and rules of etiquette as to what a socially proper wedding was, that it was little wonder that those who were trying (mostly in vain) to sort out what was natural and what merely conventional in our culture were unable to recognize the fact that marriage is natural and a public ceremony necessary to protect the community, because marriage had become overlaid with so many bourgeois conventions and false requirements. Moreover, the popular American mind had already told the couple that the really important part of their relationship was their private and individualistic falling in love. Little or nothing was ever said about the important social function that marriage has, and the consequent interest that the community has in insuring that marriage is protected. Although the sixties professed to value community highly, in matters of sex and love it not only continued but exacerbated the American tendency to see only one's private good and private interests.

Now I admit that the community's legitimate interest in marriage and sex is not a very romantic way of approaching the subject. And, if nothing else, Americans are very romantic. One the whole, we will excuse adultery, divorce, desertion of children, if only it can be portrayed romantically enough. I remember a movie I saw years ago, about a woman who was having an affair with a rich man.





Since she hadn't seen him in several months, she took up with another fellow, and the script depicted their relationship as very romantic. Meanwhile, the rich man had divorced his wife in order to marry the woman, but when he returned for her, he found his place taken. The movie did not portray the original adulterous relationship very romantically (nor did it condemn it either) and it certainly did not portray the rich couple's marriage at all. Promises, trust, a stable family—all that meant nothing to the movie writers, let alone any notion that society at large had any right to a say-so about our friendly foursome. Yet if one reflects for a minute about the purposes of sex and of the family, it should be easy to see that they are very much bound up with the purposes of society at large. The human race cannot be continued without sex, and it cannot be continued in a healthy manner without the family. Despite our obvious and legitimate personal interests in both sex and the family, we would do well to remember that, whatever personal fulfillment we gain in either, we are at the same time fulfilling some very important needs of the community. In fact, I would say that God has made the fulfillment

of those community needs the means whereby we complete part of our own personalities in marriage and the family, and one of the means whereby we can make ourselves less selfish and more fit for Heaven. But if it were not for its community purposes, such a thing as sex simply would not exist. Angels do not need to reproduce, and doubtless in some other way God has provided for them to complete their personalities. Sex and marriage exist to continually recreate the human race, the state, the Church—God in His graciousness has also made them a method for great satisfaction on a personal level. But since the inherent end of sex and marriage, the built-in end, as it were, pertains to the community, it is by that end that our sex and our marriages must be judged. This is why, for example, contraception is always wrong, no matter how much we imagine that on a personal level it might enhance a relationship. We have no right to rob either sex or marriage of its orientation toward the community.

None of this should be alarming to a Catholic. After all, we are supposed to value community more than our individualistic Protestant brethren. But as Catholics dwelling in America, do we have much of that Catholic ideal in our sex and marriages? In the sixties it was the style to shun fancy, socially correct weddings. Lately I have heard of couples who will postpone their wedding for months, even a year, in order to be able to rent the right hall and have a big, fancy reception. Of course they have no intention of postponing the sexual part of their relationship. Since that is seen as purely personal, it can begin any time they want, and since the wedding celebration also is seen as purely personal, that can be set any time they can manage to schedule the socially correct accompaniments. But if a couple understands the need to put off sex and their joint life until they are truly married, then they might not care so much about whether they are able to secure the right hall for their reception.

I suppose it is unreasonable to expect every young couple in love to be thinking primarily about the important social purposes of marriage. But because this is so, laws, rules and social conventions become doubly important for the health of the community. The convention that unmarried couples should not live together helped protect the community as long as it was in force. But if the community cannot explain the reason for the convention, does not even know if there is a reason, then it cannot expect it to endure. Like the two women with whose conversation I began this article, a society that does not have good reasons why it does what it does will soon conclude that its practices mean nothing. After all, "one day it's wrong and the next day it isn't."

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