

## MORAL DILEMMAS

### I. The Muddled Marriage

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ONE of the pastoral problems which loom very large in these days is that of the Catholics who, having entered upon a marriage which the Church cannot recognise as such, then find themselves tortured in mind by their consequent separation from the sacramental life of the Church, and long to return to it but see no way of doing so. What is to be done for them? How are they to be advised?

It is as useless as it is heartless to say simply that they have only themselves to blame: that they sinned in contracting a marriage which is no marriage at all, and that the Church will receive them back when, and only when, they renounce it. In practice this is harmful, since it may well drive them completely and finally away from the Church. In theory it is bad theology, because it simplifies what is in reality complex, and refuses to face all the facts of a human situation. Ethics is not an exact science, precisely because its business is with the complexities and untidiness of human action in the concrete; and indeed the ultimate ethical judgment, as to what *A* is to do here and now, is not a question of science merely but of art, the art of prudence. We might well recall here some wise words of M. Maritain: 'Some people imagine that morality measures our actions, not in the light of the just human ends which they ought to be aiming at in the given circumstances, but by a forest of abstract formulae which life must copy like a book. . . . In reality the principles of morals are not theorems or idols: they are the supreme rules governing a concrete activity the aim of which is something to be done in certain definite circumstances, and governing it through more proximate rules and above all through the rules, *which are never set down in advance*, of the virtue of prudence. . . . They do not seek to devour human life; they are there to build it up.'<sup>1</sup>

In the first place, we have to be very cautious in speaking of a situation of this sort as simply the result of the *sin* of

<sup>1</sup> *Humanisme Intégral*, pp. 221-2.

the person concerned. Objectively wrong, yes; but subjectively the action may have been good, or at least, and more probably, have had quite a lot of goodness mixed up in it. There are no doubt some who, faced with a choice between a forbidden marriage and the Church, leave the Church with hardly a qualm and with a serene finality: with them this article is not concerned. Sometimes it can be due to a momentary aberration; sometimes to a period of agnosticism, atheism, communism, which later on is seen to have been itself an aberration. Sometimes the motive is quite simply a very human inability to give up the love and the happiness involved; and sometimes perhaps quite simply an inability to make the other human being concerned suffer—and even where such a tenderness and generosity of heart is but one element in a complex of motivations it must command our respect and sympathy, and, however misguided objectively speaking, must surely do much to redeem the situation in the eyes of God.

None the less, the lover of 'theorems and idols' will argue, the situation is a sinful one, and the only right course of action is therefore to give it up: a refusal to do so will only show that the lament for the lost sacramental life of the Church is in fact insincere. Far from it: the essential fact we have to face is that the situation is one to which there is *no* perfect solution. To continue in it is to sin; but to abandon it may also be to sin. This is most obvious if there are children: who, having been brought into the world, have a right to their parents' love and care, to a home and a family life. But even apart from that, a contract has been entered into, which is none the less a contract because in the eyes of the Church it is not a matrimonial contract. True, there have been moralists who have not shrunk from asserting that a contract which is immoral is therefore invalid, not binding: a supremely abhorrent example of the kind of abstract theorising which pays no attention to the human realities of a human situation, and so falsifies the situation. Contract or no contract, the fact is that one human being has taken upon himself the care and responsibility for another human being, has profoundly changed another human life, and another human heart; and he cannot now simply shuffle out of his

responsibilities or pretend that all this never really happened at all.

You have, then, let us say, a marriage which cannot for one reason or another be put right by the Church, and in which the non-Catholic will not agree to abstinence from sexual intercourse: what is the Catholic to do?<sup>2</sup>

The first thing to be made quite clear is surely this: that the situation necessarily precludes full communion in the Church's life but does not necessarily preclude closeness to God. The contrite heart, we know, God will not despise: it is precisely the contrition which brings the soul close to God.<sup>3</sup> But how, it may be asked, can a soul be close to God if the sin continues? To which the answer is: because though the sin continues, it continues in a deep sense *à contre-cœur*, unwillingly. (To be thus unwilling it is not of course necessary that on another level it should not be desired and enjoyed: the only necessity is that, if conditions permitted, it would in fact be foregone.) The situation here is similar to that of the man who is battling, unsuccessfully, against an habitual failing: and who, though he continues to sin, grows in the love of God by the very fact of his battling for God's sake. But will not this constant contrariety of wills and desires, this division of loyalties, set up an intolerable psychological tension and produce neuroses and so forth? Yes, indeed, it easily may; and it is just here that pastoral care is so necessary.

The situation does not preclude closeness to God: it may indeed produce it; but only if certain conditions are fulfilled.

<sup>2</sup> The pastor cannot of course condone, still less encourage, the continuance of things which are sinful. What he can do, and what if he is a realist he must do, is to accept the facts as they are and then go on from there to see what can be done to make the best of a bad job—or, rather, to bring good out of the evil.

<sup>3</sup> Between the complete apathy of the lapsed Catholic who 'couldn't care less' and the burning longing to return to the sacraments of one who has really found faith and love and been overwhelmed by them, there is of course an infinite variety of degrees of sincerity and insincerity, of fervour and carelessness. It is for the pastor to judge as best he can of each case as it comes to him, and to plan accordingly. In this article, however, we are concerned, as seems right, primarily with those of the depth and strength of whose sincerity and sorrow there is no question.

The first is constant prayer. The prayer of sorrow, of course: sorrow for having created this situation, and for the continuing evil in it; but also, equally, the prayer of acceptance. The situation is due perhaps to a mixture of motives, good and evil; and now it means for you partly great happiness and joy and partly great unhappiness and sorrow; and the texture of your daily life within the situation will be similarly compounded of good and evil: it is this mixture, this untidiness and muddle, that you must put into God's hands—he will not repudiate it, who takes upon himself the sin of the world. Then, having so begged God to have care of it, and at the same time having accepted it back from his hands in the sense of seeing it as something you must live through as your way, however tortuous, to him, you may hope to achieve a certain tranquillity of soul: accepting the joy, simply, as it comes to you, but also not trying to evade the sorrow.

Secondly, it is essential not to be led, by the fact of the one continuing infringement of God's law, into thinking it useless to try to keep God's law in general. On the contrary, the attitude must be: since I am failing in this, at least I will make every effort to do God's will in everything else, and to do it more fully, more perfectly, every day.

Thirdly, the prayer of sorrow must be constantly associated with the thought of God's mercy and with the hope that goes with it. A holy Russian Staretz, praying to be shown the way to humility, was told by our Lord: Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not. And the *Theologia Germanica* explains the first part of the sentence for us: 'Christ's soul must needs descend into hell, before it ascended into heaven. So must also the soul of man. . . . When a man truly perceiveth and considereth himself, who and what he is, and findeth himself utterly vile and wicked, and unworthy of all the comfort and kindness that he hath ever received from God, or from the creatures, he falleth into such a deep abasement and despising of himself, that he thinketh himself unworthy that the earth should bear him, and it seemeth to him reasonable that all creatures in heaven and earth should rise up against him. . . . And it seemeth to him that he shall be eternally lost and damned, and a footstool to all the devils

in hell, and that this is right and just. . . . And therefore also he will not and dare not desire any consolation or release, either from God or from any creature that is in heaven or on earth; but he is willing to be unconsolated and unreleased, and he doth not grieve over his condemnation and sufferings . . . [but only over] his own guilt and wickedness. . . . This is what is meant by true repentance for sin. And he who in this present time entereth into this hell, entereth afterward into the kingdom of heaven.'

Afterward: but it is not a question simply of one state following upon another. The one is the effect of the other. The darkness is creative. It is essential—and this is the fourth point—that this should be made clear. It is here that the way to a fuller tranquillity can be found; but much more than that, it is this above all that brings good out of the evil—and a good, as we shall see, which might never otherwise have been achieved.

To attempt all this is a formidable undertaking, needing all the help available. And is all help from the Church to be denied? It need not be so; and surely ought not to be so. It is just here that a wise and understanding pastor can do so much. Anything that will give a sense of not being wholly cut off from the Church, of not fighting a lone battle, will be invaluable. For instance, the sacrament of penance is unhappily ruled out; but would it not be a great help, in default of it, to go sometimes—and preferably regularly—to a priest and to kneel and pray the prayer of sorrow and receive his blessing? Again, though the sacramental absolution is ruled out, there is no reason why the advice which is so often sought in the confessional need be. And while nothing can be done which might seem to give approval to the situation, there is every reason for giving private encouragement to be faithful to the Mass and the other church services and to prayer.

In ways such as these the people concerned can be helped to turn what otherwise might seem just a hopeless and insoluble muddle into something creative and valuable. Certainly, as their numbers increase more and more so the need of a constructive policy for them becomes more and more imperative. To leave them without help and without hope

is to run the risk of losing them for ever for the Church; to help them with wise and sympathetic guidance and encouragement today may be to produce saints for God tomorrow. For in this valley of tears it is perhaps only rarely that holiness is fashioned out of the radiance of unspoilt innocence, being more commonly, through God's power and mercy, made out of the darkness, the fumbblings, the falls, the tears, the confusions, of hearts which, if they do not for many long years learn to live wisely, at least learn, perhaps despite themselves, to live deeply.

*Felix culpa*, says the Church of the original sin, since out of the evil came so much good which otherwise would not have been possible. And so it can be also of personal sin. Perhaps it may be argued that the Church's pastoral care should be given to those who are faithful, or to those who have not yet heard the Gospel, rather than to those who having heard have rejected. But this is not the emphasis we find in the Gospel itself. Was the elder brother justified when he grumbled at the feastings for the prodigal? Is it unfair to all those who plod heavily but doggedly along all their lives trying to keep the commandments, that the Good Thief should be promised instant paradise? Is it logical that there should be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner doing penance than over ninety-nine who need not penance? Is it right that the flock should be left to fend for itself while the Shepherd goes to search for the one sheep that is lost? Why should it be said of the 'woman who was a sinner' that 'many sins shall be forgiven her because she has loved much'?

*Felix culpa*: the answer is always the same. The prodigal, after his exile and his penury, would love his father and his home far more deeply than his self-satisfied brother who had never left them. If the Good Thief was thus promised paradise it was not in virtue of some abrogation of ordinary divine justice, but because heaven was already in his heart; because he had found on his cross a love which transformed him in a way it would never perhaps have done had he lived a respectable, conventional life. The lost sheep will thereafter cling the more closely to the Shepherd for having known what it means to be lost. St Peter is made the Rock

on which the Church is built, and is three times invited to declare his love for Christ, after having three times denied him, because out of the sin came a creative sorrow which gave him a depth and passion of love for his Master which he would otherwise never have known. And if love covers a multitude of sins it is not in virtue of some sort of divine pretence that the evil is not there, but simply because the evil has, through the power of creative sorrow, become the stuff out of which the love is made: a love which can only be known to those who, having lost God, come to understand—and therefore to long for with all their hearts—what they have lost.

There is one other thing which perhaps may be said. The supreme longing of the Catholic in these cases is that his love of God and his human love may somehow come to be completely compatible. Should he not be told, then, that if in the ways described he keeps close to God, and accepts the suffering he has brought on himself as a form of creative expiation, God in his mercy will make this the means to the end desired: that through it, in the end, his partner may come to share his faith and his love?

‘The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.’ It is surely a supremely important part of the pastoral office today to see that the people who sit in *this* darkness shall, through it, come to see the Light Inaccessible—for them inaccessible in so specially tragic a sense—and shall not lose sight of it until such time as, their problem resolved, God may take them wholly to himself.