

The Renovation of the Old Jerusalem

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by Rosemary Haughton

It was time, evidently, that someone should make a thorough study of marriage as an institution in the twentieth century, and do so from a Christian point of view. It was time to look at the way people actually think and live their marriages and consider those of others. It was time to be unsatisfied with the Christian or Catholic label as sufficient indication of what the labelled ones think and feel. It was time to do all this in a way that would make clear to priests (priests both at work and in the process of education) the real nature of the problems they have to cope with in their parishes, and help them to do so with compassion but also with understanding. It is important that this should be done because the state of the institution of marriage in a particular community, and the attitudes and situations that attend it, dictate the structure and growth of that society, form its behaviour in other departments of life, and decide its future for good or ill.

Father Häring is nothing if not thorough.¹ His 488 pages examine every conceivable aspect of marriage and family life from the sociological, theological and practical points of view, and every point he makes is supported by statistics of public-opinion polls (mostly from Germany, Holland and Belgium). And since my final, depressing conclusion at the end of all this hard work is that the book is a monumental disaster I had better begin by saying all the nice things I can find to say, and there are plenty.

Father Häring's motives in writing this book are a real concern and compassion for people – real people. He is not content to label certain actions and opinions as 'wrong' or 'sinful' and exhort the sinners to repentance. He looks for the factors that may mitigate the guilt, and for the virtues that can bring good out of an evil situation. He can warm to the courage of the girl who decides to keep her illegitimate baby, rather than merely condemning the laxity that brought about its conception. He wants pastors to treat their penitents with understanding of their individual stresses or problems, their lack of an education which would make the formation of a Christian conscience likely or possible. He pleads for gentleness and patience and deprecates rule-of-thumb morality.

He knows that it is not enough for the Church to concern itself with the consciences of her children, that their material well-being

¹*Marriage in the Modern World* by Bernard Häring. (Mercier Press 35s.)

cannot be regarded as a 'worldly' and irrelevant matter, that Christian love and life cannot flourish in sub-human living conditions, and that therefore the pastor's concern should extend to the provision of decent housing and even to the encouragement of improved standards of decoration and furnishing, because these things express the attitude to living of a family, and help to form (or de-form) the children's minds. It is true that Father Häring's solemn passages on the importance of beauty and simplicity in the choice of furnishings, especially devotional ones, filled me, personally, with a hastily suppressed impulse to rush out and buy the oldest oleograph of the Sacred Heart that I could find, but this was merely a reaction against a certain smugness of expression, and the point he makes is a perfectly valid one.

The whole book, in fact, shows evidence of a deeply sincere effort to apply the Church's teaching on sexual and social morality with the greatest possible compassion and flexibility. Over and over again Father Häring emphasises his concern that priests who find themselves obliged to condemn a certain course of action should not imagine that this ends their responsibility, but that they should feel an equal obligation to keep in touch with the people concerned and help them in every possible way. The very fact of the existence of this book, which must have involved a daunting amount of research and tabulation before the writing of it could even begin, is sufficient proof of a truly Christian desire to bring salvation to real people, in their real condition, and not merely to work out rules to be applied in more and more detail as varying situations arise. I want to say this very clearly, and to underline it several times, because this is so good and right. But it would be quite wrong to suppose either that this truly compassionate motive is sufficient to give value to the resulting book, or that the deeply unsatisfactory nature of the result is proof of insincerity or coldness in the writer.

The sad fact is that this is a fundamentally dishonest book. The author is utterly honest and sincere in writing it, but he writes it out of a mind formed in such a way that a true interior understanding of the spiritual values indicated by the states of mind and emotion that produce the facts of modern marriage is simply not possible. Father Häring examines with an open and observant mind the existential situation of the institution of marriage, but he does not bring this openness or understanding to bear on the Christian moral teaching which he applies to this situation. He constantly asks: how can we help these real, suffering, limited people to understand and accept the Church's teaching on divorce, mixed marriages, contraception, authority in marriage and family and so on. He never asks: how is the Church's moral teaching, as it has developed historically, actually related to the good news of salvation, and *therefore* to the needs of these people who are blindly, almost hopelessly, groping for God?

Perhaps this is too much to expect. Perhaps it is too soon to ask

anyone to do this in detail and quite openly. (Though Father Schillebeeckx seems to be attempting it, at least in part, if the further volumes of his study of marriage come up to the expectations roused by the first two.) But this is, in fact, what is needed. The sad thing is that Father Häring appears to think that he has done what is necessary, and that no other approach is possible or Christian, and such is his conviction that he is likely to convince a lot of other people as well. It is this, and not what he actually says in detail, which makes this book a real tragedy, in the full sense of the word.

In order to demonstrate both the unsatisfactory nature of Father Häring's approach and perhaps at the same time hint at what a truly constructive approach might be like, I shall have to examine certain themes in the book in some detail. This is not an interesting or stimulating thing to do, because this book is wonderfully boring to read. I am not complaining about this. A very painstaking study, undertaken so that pastors may have detailed and well-informed guidance in their work, is not likely to make lively reading and no one should expect to be entertained. I can only attempt to provide a lightning tour of this enormous structure, in the hope that other people will find sufficient validity in my comments on certain aspects of it to be persuaded to examine the whole, and form their own judgement. Because this is an important book. It is either a supreme example of a forward looking and truly compassionate approach to the modern world, a model on which all such studies could well form themselves, or it is a dead end, a courageous but futile attempt to inject life into a corpse. The future of the Church depends on which alternative finally comes to be regarded by Catholics as the true one.

In the study of each aspect of the huge subject of marriage Father Häring says so much that is sane and true, and shows such a strenuous effort at objectivity, that the grinding awareness of his basic failure is like a physical pain. There is a long section on various aspects of the uses and abuses of sociology, especially in relation to moral theology, and it is full of perceptive and helpful remarks that suddenly slide off into unjustified assumptions. Thus: 'The constantly increasing criticism of unjust laws, or of their exaggerated conformity to sociological trends, together with the moral arguments advanced in legislatures, are an indication that it is only rarely that the sense of justice, i.e. the awareness that law and justice have unalterable claims, is completely extinguished. But in the field of law sociologism maintains, rashly and on the basis of limited research, that positive law is in general nothing but the reflection of social behaviour and not, or at least only partially, a genuine embodiment of the objectively valid sense of justice'. This assumes that 'social behaviour' is itself un-influenced by the sense of law and justice. But the 'sense of law and justice' is what people work out, more or less explicitly, from the 'feel' of their relationships or their attempt to live humanly in their particular circumstances. It is their greater or lesser success in discovering what does or does not

enable people to grow and love that makes them react (emotionally, first, but always embodying their emotions in reasons) to certain kinds of attempted legislation in a positive or negative way. Social behaviour does influence positive law, and must do so, because both express the feelings of a particular society about the nature and needs of human beings. The sense of justice may be 'objectively valid' but its validity extends deep into human nature, far beyond the possibility of final and complete tabulation, and its objectivity does not mean that it can ever be embodied in absolute positive law.

The same false antithesis turns up in many places, and indeed it is a symptom of what is wrong with the whole book. It sometimes seems that Father Häring cannot quite believe in the power of the Spirit in man. 'Even if sociologists can demonstrate that the majority of peoples allow their moral outlook and their general philosophy to be dictated by social factors, and that rules can be formulated to express this dependance, this in no way affects the fundamental validity of the norms and truths as such'. True. Why should it affect it? But why keep on treating norms and truths as if they were separate influences, injected into human beings from outside their normal framework of development? He goes on: 'There still remains the question whether man, and more especially the responsible elite, could not even in given environmental conditions have exerted themselves more and shown greater integrity and thus penetrated more deeply into the truth, and whether they are not themselves wholly or partly responsible for the social conditions unfavourable for the perception of truth.' It is assumed all the time that truth is something exterior to man, yet surely truth, the final honesty or integrity of the Spirit, is that which makes man, that by which he is made in the image of God. So it is in himself that man discovers truth, but that spirit of truth in himself can only be released, discovered, by grace – which means the activity of love gradually breaking down the defences of life in the flesh, into which state are all men born. And love, the activity of the spirit, can only work, even exist, in relationships (and that is really a tautology). But relationships, their success or otherwise, the compensation for their inadequacies and the attempt to control the results of their failures, are what make up the 'environmental conditions' which 'condition' the response to truth of 'even the elite'. Certainly man can refuse to respond to the Spirit, but this refusal comes about because the Spirit in man, from which alone the response can come, is somehow blocked or distorted in its activities by the emotional condition of the person concerned – and physical conditions have a lot to do with this. A sufficient awareness of *being loved* is the thing that can break through and release the activity of the love (truth – the spirit of God) in man, and this is why the normal way of salvation is the preaching of the gospel of Christ. To read this book, one would imagine that the Incarnation need never have happened. All that was needed would be certain moral norms that people

might perceive if they really tried. Yet even to say this is unjust, because the whole book is an attempt to bring the love of God to people who need it. But how can one apply grace from outside, like lipstick?

This inability to trust the work of the Spirit is shown even more clearly in the parts of the book which deal with aspects of sexuality. So much justice and common-sense, so much lack of real empathy. To Father Häring, the modern emphasis on the importance of sexual harmony in marriage is 'a merely temporary mode of thought', and certainly his opinion is justified in that this emphasis can unbalance the appreciation of the relationship as a whole. But it is normal for a newly discovered or understood aspect of life to seem to be, for a while, the solely important one, and its value is not diminished because it is later integrated into a wider context. The same thing happened with papal infallibility, but Father Häring presumably does not regard this doctrine as 'a merely temporary mode of thought'. Father Häring disposes neatly of the (mostly ill-understood) controversy over the 'ends of marriage', and indeed he was among the first to banish this bogey, but he cannot see any particular value in the sexual relationship except as 'a part of the experience of an inward family love common to all mankind'. This is the sort of half-truth which is easily exploited. 'The stronger and purer this sense of family is, the more is the directly sexual love of the spouses subdued, but also the freer are their charitable impulses'. But this 'subduing' of sexual love really means that the relationship is developing naturally, growing and opening outwards as it should do. It is not 'subdued', but empowered, and the 'charitable impulses' are the natural and proper result of sexual love that forms and expresses and increases a true community in the Spirit, which is, of course, 'diffusivum sui'. Since Father Häring cannot trust the Spirit in man he naturally cannot trust it in its sexual expression. This leads to the fundamental dualism which inspires such apparently obvious remarks as this: 'The family should not only be the greatest nursery of real human love, but in it, too, should flourish a supernatural love coming from God and leading back to him'. *Ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est*. There is no 'should' about it. If this human love is 'real' then it *does* come from God and lead back to him.

It is interesting that in one of the best and most sensible parts of the book, that on the structure of the family, the relationship of husband and wife and children as a community, this dualism vanishes, and this is so because here the discussion is simply about human beings and their functions in relation to each other in the community of love. The discussion of the historical conditions underlying St Paul's recommendations about the place of woman, and the recognition of the differences in approach that may and should be made when girls receive the same education as boys and have often held responsible jobs before marriage, show the author at his most comfortable and

helpful. He looks carefully, judges fairly, trusts to the love and responsibility of man and woman to discover and express in their circumstances the means of growth in grace which, in other times and places, have been discovered and expressed in very different ways. For all its obvious miseries and blindness the ethos of the modern world can, apparently, be trusted here, when informed by the charity of Christ.

All this respect for the work of grace in modern marriage vanishes, however, from the large section of the book which deals with 'The Attitude to Children'. This is, of course, the part of the book to which everyone is going to turn, and no doubt it is the part of this review that deals with it on which most readers will concentrate. This is not as unfair as it sounds, because this subject of family limitation always exposes with uncomfortable accuracy the hidden feelings of writers and preachers about sexuality in general.

Throughout this long book the author strives conscientiously for objectivity. He backs up his remarks with quotations from sociologists and statistical tables, and constantly points to circumstances that tend to modify traditional attitudes. When he is at ease with his subject, as in sections on housing or the uses and abuses of state powers in relation to marriage and the family, he expresses himself without exaggeration or rhetoric, though throughout the book there is a tendency to dogmatise. But in the chapters dealing with birth control the objectivity is no longer real. Ease and confidence are replaced by that infallible symptom of uneasiness and fear – the use of highly emotive words in a quasi-scientific and objective context. If I still needed to be convinced that the division between 'responsible parenthood' and 'contraception' does *not* coincide with the difference between the 'safe period' and 'artificial' contraceptives, I *would* be convinced by Father Häring's feverish attempts to convince himself that it *does*.

There seem to be two underlying causes for Father Häring's intransigence. One is an inability to see the sexual relationship as a developing one. This was already clear in the passage quoted about the 'subduing' of sex to family love. He has failed to see how procreation is the opening out of the relationship, not the substitution of a new and higher one for the original, inadequate one. In the chapter on 'The Attitude to Children' he says 'Loveless intercourse – even if it be for the purpose of begetting children – must accordingly be designated as profoundly shameful from the overall point of view of marriage and human sexuality and as "unnatural" from the personal point of view – contrary to the natural expression of marriage. The child can never be the object of coldly calculated expediency'. But there may be an intense desire for children even when the couple find themselves suspicious and estranged, and it may be that the child will, in the end, humanize and heal the relationship. Situations, even emotional ones, are not fixed, but unfold into new ones, and at *any* point in this

unfolding divine love can enter and give life. Besides this curious inability to sense the striving of the spirit in the unfolding of human relationships, however bizarre, there seems to be in this author a not uncommon inability to feel the quality of a good sexual relationship as something whose outgoing love grows through its sexual expression, regardless of whether or not children are born. He feels very strongly the loveliness of generosity and courage in the marriage relationship, and the proof of this in the way the couples will shoulder burden of a big family happily and with zest. He understands and feels compassion for those who cannot stand the strain of a large family and must decide to limit it for the sake of the family as a whole. But he cannot see, or at least cannot feel, that whether or not children are born, the impulse to self-discovery in the spirit, the traffic of love, can be and generally should be expressed in completed intercourse, though not *only* in this way. He cannot help feeling, in spite of everything, that actual intercourse is to some extent a permissible indulgence, and not of the essence of the relationship. I think he would strenuously deny this, and he tries very hard not to feel this way, but in spite of all his efforts it is a feeling that keeps on breaking through.

I don't want to exaggerate or overstate the case. A great deal of what he says about contraception is true. It *can* do harm, psychologically if not physically. But the fact that the arguments put forward here are not based on an objective assessment of the situation is clear enough. Listen: 'The heartless and calculating expediency that wants to keep down the number of births at any price' (Is it 'heartless' to consider the 'expediency' of avoiding the vicious circle of too many children, not enough food, not enough strength to work and produce more food, but only still more children?) 'is suitably met by the use and spread of unnatural practices in preventing births'. No doubt it is unnatural to control the number of births, but the phrase so used is intended to rule out these practices simply by applying an emotive label to them, not by showing that they do, in fact, do greater harm than uncontrolled fertility. (I'm not saying this could not be shown, only that he doesn't show it.)

Listen again: 'If the motivation is personal and selfish satisfaction, the choice of means is decided on the "technical" suitability: it should be easy and cheap.' We are left to assume that if the means are 'easy and cheap' the people employing them must be selfish. (What 'personal' means in this context I don't know. Should the motivation be 'public' satisfaction? Or does it mean that those who use contraceptives are likely to be inconsiderate of their partner's sexual needs?) Father Häring quotes de Lestapis with approval: 'The surrender of control of sexuality and love to a mechanical device means nothing less than lowering them to the sordid level of utilities.' First of all contraceptive devices do not control love but only one aspect of its sexual expression. They control one *result* of sexuality, and in the case of mechanical contraceptives they may *add* a certain element of

constraint to intercourse, but this is variable and often absent, though possibly its absence is due to a degree of acquired insensitivity. Secondly the use of the word 'sordid' is yet another attempt to avoid the need for proof by the use of an emotive adjective. Why is utility sordid? The physical body is a utility in sexual intercourse. Is it therefore sordid? Perhaps that is an unfair question because in spite of all assertions to the contrary it may be that the answer drawn from this book might be 'yes'. And in fact it is probably the right one. Sordidness is a useful characteristic of sex – part of its utility, in fact. But the trouble here is that the author doesn't want sex to be sordid, and to him the best way of keeping it unsordid is to keep calculation (cold) out of it, whether for children or against them. But on the whole sex is calculated when it is loving. It is selfish promiscuity that takes no trouble, that doesn't care what the other person feels like. People who love each other think about their love-making, and take time and trouble over it, and above all they think about each other. If part of the trouble they have to take is care to avoid conception when this might damage the marriage or the family as a whole then certainly this is calculated but hardly 'cold'. And if it is sordid so much the better. Getting all airy and angelic about sex is a besetting sin of modern theologians when they write on the subject. If sex can be sacramental and marvellous it is precisely because it is first of all earthy, rather funny, and – sordid. (Also, of course, definitely a utility).

Father Häring condemns abortion and sterilization which he regards as the inevitable results of the use of contraceptives – an argument one has heard before, though one would imagine that if their use does lead to a rise in the abortion rate the answer is not less contraception but more efficient contraception – and he goes on to describe the ill effects of Unnatural Methods of Birth Control. A lot of what he says is true. People – especially women – *do* suffer a good deal psychologically from the use of mechanical contraceptives, and this is a fact which should not be overlooked too easily by enthusiasts. On the other hand oral contraceptives do not seem to produce these effects, though they may be criticized for medical reasons.

But while a whole list of neuroses can be blamed on mechanical contraception, or even more on abortion and sterilization, Father Häring does not mention the much more formidable list that can be traced with far greater certainty to unwanted pregnancies, or the fear of them. We can legitimately need to, and even have a duty to, limit our families, and this Father Häring recognizes. He was one of the first and stoutest champions of 'responsible parenthood' and for this we owe him a debt of gratitude. But he seems to have allowed his enthusiasm for it to cloud his judgement a little, and this is sad, because his anxiety for the true holiness of marriage is so clear and so touching, even when one is most maddened by his blind patches. We want to be 'responsible parents', but we must keep cold calculation

and the sordid level of utilities out of our lovely marriages. What are we to do?

Of course it's the safe period. Let it be said at once that the safe period, properly understood and practised, *is* safe, and the silly remarks about it are made by people who haven't studied the subject properly. It is unsafe when used with insufficient instruction and care – not enough calculation, in fact. Its disadvantages are *not* due to its 'unsafeness' but to the sometimes very long period of continence it imposes, which can often be three weeks in every month, and in many cases more.

Listen again: 'Coldly calculated birth control seeks the "simplest" way, the mechanical way, which demands the least possible effort . . . Just as collaboration with God's creative love cannot simply be left to uncontrollable instinct, there can be no truly responsible parenthood by means of some patent solution which would free the spouses from the necessity of self-control and *from the need to spiritualise their instincts.*' (My italics). The argument has shifted. It is not the calculation which is wrong, now, but just sex. (So sordid). What about couples who, because of low fertility, may have intercourse any time they like and still produce only one or two children? Are they unspiritual? I wish Father Häring were married, then he would know that self-control in marriage is not another word for sexual continence, and that sacrifice in a relationship does not mean only doing without sex but the basic business of giving up one's own will which every Christian has to tackle. Illness, fatigue, financial worry, personal tensions, crying babies – these things help to dig away the layers of personal selfishness, if they are accepted with love. It is a long, uphill struggle, and one of the things that keeps the couple climbing, and climbing together, is the renewal of their love in sexual intercourse, from which they draw strength and comfort and unity and the courage to face sacrifice.

But that's alright, says Father Häring, they needn't think the Church expects them to live 'like brother and sister' during the period of fertility. 'Intimate caresses and a *spiritualised sexual attraction* should, on the contrary, help to protect and keep alive marital fidelity and the constant will to be at the service of life'. (My italics). Honestly, words fail me. In another passage the wife is carefully instructed that even if her husband, because of 'permissible caresses', 'experiences complete physical satisfaction' she needn't worry, it wasn't her fault. This is a real give-away. If Father Häring can really equate an accidental private orgasm with 'complete physical satisfaction' then he clearly regards the wife's role in sexual intercourse as no more, physically, than that of a private prostitute. The element of mutuality that belongs to real satisfaction doesn't, apparently, matter. (And I suppose confessors will now be tormented by a further range of scruples. Please, Father, what are 'permissible' caresses during the fertile period? Was this or that action outside 'the bounds of holy

discipline' ? – another of the euphemisms employed here.) It seems to me that this sort of thing is far more likely to encourage selfishness than contraceptive intercourse, not to mention the strain on the wife who, according to Father Häring, must bear the burden of seeing that her husband does not go too far, or at least of trying to 'educate his conscience' if he does. Here is one more passage, about behaviour which is 'a compromise between a fundamentally pleasure seeking attitude to sex, the habitual flight from risk, and respect for the moral demands of society, though the latter are felt as purely external conventions'. If you substitute 'Church' for 'society' it might be a description of the state of mind likely to be fostered in couples who follow the advice just quoted and use 'permissible' though 'intimate' caresses. But actually this passage is concerned with sex education of children, and is about the habit of 'petting'. In other words what he condemns as a selfish 'demand for pleasure without risk' in the teenage context he recommends as 'responsible' for married people.

The fact is, he can't help confusing pleasure with selfishness, satisfaction with solitary enjoyment, and it is this attitude that still makes it so hard for many people to think sanely about contraception. Contraception (even the safe period) can be used for selfish reasons, but if people are selfish it is because they are afraid, afraid to venture, to take the risk of loving—which is always painful. And they are afraid because they have not been loved enough to give them the courage they need. So the work of Christians is to give them love, not forbid contraceptives. When people love they want children, within the limits of their particular situation. They *mind* not having them, and it costs them more to have to do without than it would cost them to make the much lauded 'sacrifices' involved in rearing them. The calculation involved in avoiding conception (by whatever method) is hurtful, and all this talk of 'coldness' and 'utility' is the result of ignorance of what married people feel about each other. But it will be hard for Catholic theologians to realise this as long as they go on thinking of pleasure and love as separate by nature, and as long as they fail to realise the real function of sex in the marriage relationship – the liberation of the spirit which is love.

Having said all this, it must be repeated that this book is a labour of love, and a considerable achievement. If it were mean and bad and ungenerous it would not be so tragic. And it must also be said that this author's patches of blindness are due to the way he has been taught to think and see, a way which has worked very well for a long time. It has ceased to be adequate only because the Spirit seems to have adopted different methods of getting through to people, or rather because we are becoming more willing to recognise that these methods exist and work towards sanctification. Father Häring is still trying to repair and clean up the Holy City as it has long been, he wants to make it a good place for twentieth century people to live in. He, and others, are working hard to do this, and are having a certain

success, and it may well be that this is both necessary and right, at least for a time. On the other hand many people can't or won't live in it, even when renovated, with proper plumbing and electric light. Many Catholics see this, and long to build a new City. In the long run they are right. But people often prefer their slums. Before we condemn Father Häring and his modernization programme, it may be as well to notice that it isn't enough to march out to build the New Jerusalem, under hoardings of elegantly abstract design, and lay it out to a perfect Marxist plan to fit the needs of the New Man. We may find that the Man isn't New enough, and that the beautiful city remains unpopulated because he really prefers the old, narrow streets and sooty walls, which he knows. There is a way out of the dilemma, and it is not, I think, Father Häring's way. For all his flexibility, he is still, basically, trying to apply the solutions of former centuries to this one. He has brought to modern marriage not the good news of Christ but the methods by which earlier Christians have applied it to their own circumstances. He tries not to do this, and he thinks he hasn't done it, because he applies the traditional interpretations to real people, not to an abstraction of human nature. This definite advance conceals the failure to go to the roots in thinking about the morality of Christian marriage. He is still implacably dogmatic. He applies 'ought's' and 'should's' with complete confidence to every situation. And the reason for this is, I think, a lack of trust, a failure of hope. But hope is a difficult virtue. It involves patience and humility and a willingness to fail. It is more satisfying to lay down the law. And this law can be the old Law, modified, according to Father Häring's liberal mind, or the new Law, as full of confidence as champagne is of bubbles, and just as intoxicating. Both are tempting, because both seem to offer a way of building the Kingdom of Heaven without the difficulty of really loving real people.